

# Human Rights and Asian Values

Amartya Sen



Sixteenth Morgenthau Memorial Lecture  
on Ethics & Foreign Policy

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Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs  
170 East 64th Street, New York NY 10021-7478

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Printed in the United States of America  
ISBN 0-87641-151-0  
\$5.00

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*Morgenthau Memorial Endowment Fund, 1996-97*

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## Introduction

About 50 years ago, a little-known professor at the University of Chicago was laboring away in relative obscurity, finishing up the manuscript of a book that would change the study of international relations. That professor was Hans J. Morgenthau and his book was *Politics Among Nations*. Born in Coburg, Germany in 1904, Morgenthau escaped fascism by leaving Germany in the 1930s, taking teaching appointments first in Switzerland, then in Spain. After short stints at Brooklyn College and the University of Kansas, he finally settled in Chicago.

As an emigré in the 1930s, Professor Morgenthau was acutely aware of the failures of liberalism in that decade, particularly its failure to stand up to the exigencies of power. His theory of political realism, outlined in *Politics Among Nations*, flowed from his life experiences. “Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics,” he wrote, “power is always the immediate aim. The struggle for power is universal in time and space and is an undeniable fact of experience.”

Yet Morgenthau’s message extended beyond this insight. He had a deep and abiding interest in the limitations of power. He offered extended analyses of international morality and the role of ethics, mores, and law in international life.

In *Politics Among Nations* itself, and particularly in his later books and essays published in the 1960s and 1970s, Morgenthau spent considerable time and energy exploring the connection between power and principle: “In order to be worthy of our lasting sympathy,” he wrote, “a nation must pursue its interests for the sake of that transcendent purpose that gives meaning to the day-to-day operation of foreign policy.”

Every year the Carnegie Council sponsors the Morgenthau Memorial Lecture to honor the memory of Hans Morgenthau, to

further his legacy, and to create a permanent home for the discussion of ethics in foreign policy. We have been fortunate over the years to have the support of his family, his friends, and his students in this cause.

Our speaker this evening is well known for his pioneering work in the area of morality and politics. Trained in both economics and philosophy, Amartya Sen is probably best known for his work on political economy and human rights. Among his books are *Collective Choice and Social Welfare*, *Inequality Reexamined*, and *On Ethics and Economics*.

Professor Sen was born in India and educated in Calcutta and at Cambridge University. He has held university appointments in India, England, and the United States and is currently Lamont University Professor and Professor of Economics and Philosophy at Harvard University.

Professor Sen's chosen topic, "Human Rights and Asian Values," challenges us on philosophic, economic, and cultural grounds. Professor Sen is uniquely qualified to accept the challenge, and I thank him for doing so.

*Joel H. Rosenthal*  
President  
Carnegie Council on  
Ethics and International Affairs

# Human Rights and Asian Values





*Amartya Sen*

In 1776, just when the Declaration of Independence was being adopted in this country, Thomas Paine complained, in *Common Sense*, that Asia had “long expelled” freedom. In this lament, Paine saw Asia in company with much of the rest of the world (America, he hoped, would be different).

Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her as a stranger and England hath given her warning to depart.

For Paine, political freedom and democracy were valuable everywhere, even though they were being violated nearly everywhere too.

The violation of freedom and democracy in different parts of the world continues today, even if not as comprehensively as in Paine’s time. There is a difference, though. A new class of arguments has emerged that denies the universal importance of these freedoms. The most prominent of these contentions is the claim that Asian values do not give freedom the same importance as it is accorded in the West. Given this difference in value systems, the argument runs, Asia must be faithful to its own system of political priorities.

Cultural and value differences between Asia and the West were stressed by several official delegations at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. The foreign minister of Singapore warned that “universal recognition of the ideal of human rights can be harmful if universalism is used to deny or mask the reality of diversity.”<sup>1</sup> The Chinese delegation played a leading role in emphasizing regional differences and in making sure that the prescriptive framework adopted in the declarations made room for regional diversity. The spokesman for China’s foreign ministry

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in W. S. Wong, “The Real World of Human Rights” (mimeographed, 1993).

even put on record the proposition, apparently applicable in China and elsewhere, that "individuals must put the state's rights before their own."<sup>2</sup>

I shall examine the thesis that Asian values are less supportive of freedom and more concerned with order and discipline than are Western values, and that the claims of human rights in the areas of political and civil liberties are, therefore, less relevant in Asia than in the West. The defense of authoritarianism in Asia on grounds of the special nature of Asian values calls for historical scrutiny, to which I shall presently turn. But there is also a different line of justification that argues for authoritarian governance in the interest of economic development in Asia. Lee Kuan Yew, the former prime minister of Singapore and a great champion of "Asian values," has defended authoritarian arrangements on the ground of their alleged effectiveness in promoting economic success. I shall consider this argument before turning to historical issues.

### **Asian Values and Economic Development**

Does authoritarianism really work so well? It is certainly true that some relatively authoritarian states (such as South Korea, Lee's own Singapore, and post-reform China) have had faster rates of economic growth than many less authoritarian ones (including India, Costa Rica, and Jamaica). But the "Lee hypothesis" is, in fact, based on very selective information, rather than on any general statistical testing of the wide-ranging data that are available. We cannot take the high economic growth of China or South Korea in Asia as proof positive that authoritarianism does better in promoting economic growth, any more than we can draw the opposite conclusion on the basis of the fact that the fastest-growing country in Africa (and one of the fastest growers in the

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in John F. Cooper, "Peking's Post-Tiananmen Foreign Policy: The Human Rights Factor," *Issues and Studies* 30 (October 1994): 69; see also Jack Donnelly, "Human Rights and Asian Values," paper presented at a workshop of the Carnegie Council's Human Rights Initiative, "Changing Conceptions of Human Rights in a Growing East Asia," in Hakone, Japan, June 23-25, 1995.

world) is Botswana, which has been a oasis of democracy in that unhappy continent. Much depends on the precise circumstances.

There is, in fact, little general evidence that authoritarian governance and the suppression of political and civil rights are really beneficial in encouraging economic development. The statistical picture is much more complex. Systematic empirical studies give no real support to the claim that there is a conflict between political rights and economic performance.<sup>3</sup> The directional linkage seems to depend on many other circumstances, and while some statistical investigations note a weakly negative relation, others find a strongly positive one. On balance, the hypothesis that there is no relation between the two in either direction is hard to reject. Since political liberty and individual freedom have importance of their own, the case for them remains untarnished.

There is also a more basic issue of research methodology here. We must not only look at statistical connections, we must also examine the causal processes that are involved in economic growth and development. The economic policies and circumstances that led to the economic success of East Asian economies are by now reasonably well understood. While different empirical studies have varied in emphasis, there is by now a fairly well-accepted general list of “helpful policies,” among them openness to competition, the use of international markets, a high level of literacy and school education, successful land reforms, and public provision of incentives for investment, exporting, and industrialization. There is nothing whatsoever to indicate that any of these

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<sup>3</sup> See, among other studies, Robert J. Barro and Jong-Wha Lee, “Losers and Winners in Economic Growth,” Working Paper 4341, National Bureau of Economic Research (1993); Partha Dasgupta, *An Inquiry into Well-Being and Destitution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); John Helliwell, “Empirical Linkages Between Democracy and Economic Growth,” Working Paper 4066, National Bureau of Economic Research (1994); Surjit Bhalla, “Freedom and Economic Growth: A Vicious Circle?” presented at the Nobel Symposium in Uppsala on “Democracy’s Victory and Crisis,” August 1994; Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, “Democracy and Development,” presented at the Nobel Symposium in Uppsala cited above; Adam Przeworski et al., *Sustainable Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Robert J. Barro, *Getting It Right: Markets and Choices in a Free Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

policies is inconsistent with greater democracy and had to be sustained by the elements of authoritarianism that happened to be present in South Korea or Singapore or China.<sup>4</sup> The recent Indian experience also shows that what is needed for generating faster economic growth is a friendlier economic climate, rather than a harsher political system.

It is also important to look at the connection between political and civil rights, on the one hand, and the prevention of major disasters, on the other. Political and civil rights give people the opportunity to draw attention forcefully to general needs and to demand appropriate public action. The response of a government to acute suffering often depends on the pressure that is put on it, and this is where the exercise of political rights (voting, criticizing, protesting, and so on) can make a real difference. I have discussed elsewhere the remarkable fact that in the terrible history of famines in the world, no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press.<sup>5</sup> Whether we look at famines in Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, or other countries with dictatorial regimes, or in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, or in China during the period 1958 to 1961 with the failure of the Great Leap Forward (when between 23 million and 30 million people died), or currently in North Korea, we do not find exceptions to this rule.<sup>6</sup>

While this connection is clearest in the case of famine prevention, the positive role of political and civil rights applies to the prevention of economic and social disasters in general. When

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<sup>4</sup> On this see also my joint study with Jean Drèze, *Hunger and Public Action* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), Part III.

<sup>5</sup> Amartya Sen, "Development: Which Way Now?" *Economic Journal* 93 (1983) and *Resources, Values and Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984, 1997); see also Drèze and Sen, *Hunger and Public Action*.

<sup>6</sup> Although Ireland was a part of democratic Britain during its famines of the 1840s, the extent of political dominance of London over the Irish was so strong and the social distance so great (well illustrated by Edmund Spenser's severely unfriendly description of the Irish as early as the sixteenth century) that the English rule of Ireland was, for all practical purposes, a colonial rule. The separation and independence of Ireland later on simply confirmed the nature of the division.

things go fine and everything is routinely good, this role of democracy may not be badly missed. It comes into its own when things get fouled up, for one reason or another. Then the political incentives provided by democratic governance acquire great practical value. To concentrate only on economic incentives (such as the market system provides) while ignoring political incentives (such as democratic systems are equipped to provide) is to opt for a deeply unbalanced set of ground rules.

### **Asia as a Unit**

I turn now to the nature and relevance of Asian values. This is not an easy exercise, for various reasons. The size of Asia, where about 60 percent of the total world population lives, is itself a problem. What can we take to be the values of so vast a region, with such diversity? There are no quintessential values that apply to this immensely large and heterogeneous population, that differentiate Asians as a group from people in the rest of the world.

The temptation to see Asia as one unit reveals, in fact, a distinctly Eurocentric perspective. Indeed, the term “the Orient,” which was widely used for a long time to mean essentially what Asia means today, referred to the direction of the rising sun. It requires a heroic generalization to see such a large group of people in terms of the positional view from the European side of the Bosphorus.

In practice, the advocates of “Asian values” have tended to look primarily at East Asia as the region of particular applicability. The generalization about the contrast between the West and Asia often concentrates on the land to the east of Thailand, even though there is an even more ambitious claim that the rest of Asia is also rather “similar.” For example, Lee Kuan Yew outlines “the fundamental difference between Western concepts of society and government and East Asian concepts” by explaining, “When I say East Asians, I mean Korea, Japan, China, Vietnam, as distinct from

Southeast Asia, which is a mix between the Sinic and the Indian, though Indian culture also emphasizes similar values.”<sup>7</sup>

In fact, however, East Asia itself has much diversity, and there are many variations between Japan and China and Korea and other parts of East Asia. Various cultural influences from within and outside this region have affected human lives over the history of this rather large territory. These diverse influences still survive in a variety of ways. To illustrate, my copy of Houghton Mifflin’s international *Almanac* describes the religions of the 124 million Japanese people in the following way: 112 million Shintoists and 93 million Buddhists. Buddhist practices coexist with Shinto practices, often within the same person’s religious makeup. Cultures and traditions overlap over wide regions such as East Asia and even within specific countries such as Japan or China or Korea, and attempts at generalization about Asian values (with forceful—often brutal—implications for masses of people in this region with diverse faiths, convictions, and commitments) cannot but be extremely crude. Even the 2.8 million people of Singapore have vast variations in their cultural and historical traditions, despite the fact that the conformism surrounding Singapore’s political leadership and the official interpretation of Asian values is very powerful at this time.

### **Freedom, Democracy, and Tolerance**

The recognition of heterogeneity in Asian traditions does not, in any way, settle the issue of the presence or absence of a commitment to individual freedom and political liberty in Asian culture. It could be argued that the traditions extant in Asia differ among themselves, but nevertheless may share some common characteristics. It has been asserted, for example, that the treatment of elderly members of the family (such as aged parents) is more supportive in Asian countries than in the West. It is possible to argue about this claim, but there would be nothing very peculiar if similarities of this or other kinds were to obtain across the diverse

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<sup>7</sup> Fareed Zakaria, “Culture Is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew,” *Foreign Affairs* 73 (March/April 1994): 113.

cultures of Asia: diversities need not apply to every field. The question that has to be asked, rather, is whether the Asian countries share the common feature of being skeptical of freedom and liberty, while emphasizing order and discipline. The advocates of Asian particularism often—explicitly or by implication—make this argument, which allows for heterogeneity within Asia, but asserts that there is a shared mistrust of the claims of liberal rights.

Authoritarian lines of reasoning often receive indirect backing from modes of thought in the West itself. There is clearly a tendency in the United States and Europe to assume, if only implicitly, the primacy of political freedom and democracy as a fundamental and ancient feature of Western culture—one not to be easily found in Asia. A contrast is drawn between the authoritarianism allegedly implicit in, say, Confucianism and the respect for individual liberty and autonomy allegedly deeply rooted in Western liberal culture. Western promoters of personal and political liberty in the non-Western world often see this as bringing Western values to Asia and Africa.

In all this, there is a substantial tendency to extrapolate backwards from the present. Values spread by the European Enlightenment and other relatively recent developments cannot be considered part of the long-term Western heritage, experienced in the West over millennia. Indeed, in answer to the question when and under what circumstances “the notion of individual liberty . . . first became explicit in the West,” Isaiah Berlin has noted, “I have found no convincing evidence of any clear formulation of it in the ancient world.”<sup>8</sup> This diagnosis has been disputed by Orlando Patterson, among others.<sup>9</sup> Patterson points to features in Western culture, particularly in Greece and Rome and in the tradition of Christianity, that indicate the presence of selective championing of individual liberty. The question that does not get adequately answered—indeed, it is scarcely even asked—is whether similar elements are absent in other cultures. Isaiah Berlin’s

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<sup>8</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), xl.

<sup>9</sup> See Orlando Patterson, *Freedom*, Vol. I: *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).



thesis concerns the notion of individual freedom as we now understand it, and the absence of “any clear formulation” of this can coexist with the support and advocacy of *selected components* of the comprehensive notion that makes up the contemporary idea of individual liberty as an entitlement of everyone. Such components do exist in the Greco-Roman world and in the world of Christian thought, but we have to examine whether these components are present elsewhere as well—that is, in non-Western cultures. We have to search for parts rather than the whole—both in the West and in Asia and elsewhere.

To illustrate this point, consider the idea that personal freedom for all is important for a good society. This claim can be seen as being composed of two distinct components, to wit, (1) *the value of personal freedom*: that personal freedom is important and should be guaranteed for those who “matter” in a good society, and (2) *equality of freedom*: that everyone matters and should have similar freedom. The two together entail that personal freedom should be guaranteed, on a shared basis, for all. Aristotle wrote much in support of the former proposition, but in his exclusion of women and slaves did little to defend the latter. Indeed, the championing of equality in this form is of quite recent origin. Even in a society stratified according to class and caste—such as the Mandarins and the Brahmins—freedom could be valued for the privileged, in much the same way freedom is valued for non-slave men in corresponding Greek conceptions of a good society.

Another useful distinction is between (1) *the value of toleration*: there must be toleration of diverse beliefs, commitments, and actions of different people, and (2) *equality of tolerance*: the toleration that is offered to some must be reasonably offered to all (except when tolerance of some will lead to intolerance for others). Again, arguments for some tolerance can be seen plentifully in earlier writings, without that tolerance being supplemented by equality of tolerance. The roots of modern democratic and liberal ideas can be sought in terms of constitutive elements, rather than as a whole.

## Order and Confucianism

As part of this analytical scrutiny, the question has to be asked whether these constitutive components can be seen in Asian writings in the way they can be found in Western thought. The presence of these components must not be confused with the absence of the opposite, namely ideas and doctrines that clearly *do not* emphasize freedom and tolerance. Championing of order and discipline can be found in Western classics as well as in Asian ones. Indeed; it is by no means clear to me that Confucius is more authoritarian in this respect than, say, Plato or St. Augustine. The real issue is not whether these non-freedom perspectives are *present* in Asian traditions, but whether the freedom-oriented perspectives are *absent* there.

This is where the diversity of Asian value systems becomes central, incorporating but transcending regional diversity. An obvious example is the role of Buddhism as a form of thought. In Buddhist tradition, great importance is attached to freedom, and the part of the earlier Indian theorizing to which Buddhist thoughts relate has much room for volition and free choice. Nobility of conduct has to be achieved in freedom, and even the ideas of liberation (such as *moksha*) have this feature. The presence of these elements in Buddhist thought does not obliterate the importance for Asia of ordered discipline emphasized by Confucianism, but it would be a mistake to take Confucianism to be the only tradition in Asia—indeed even in China. Since so much of the contemporary authoritarian interpretation of Asian values concentrates on Confucianism, this diversity is particularly worth emphasizing.

Indeed, the reading of Confucianism that is now standard among authoritarian champions of Asian values does less than justice to the variety within Confucius's own teachings, to which Simon Leys has recently drawn attention.<sup>10</sup> Confucius did not recommend blind allegiance to the state. When Zilu asks him "how to serve a prince," Confucius replies, "Tell him the truth

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<sup>10</sup> Simon Leys, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Norton, 1997).

even if it offends him.”<sup>11</sup> Those in charge of censorship in Singapore or Beijing would take a very different view. Confucius is not averse to practical caution and tact, but does not forgo the recommendation to oppose a bad government. “When the [good] way prevails in the state, speak boldly and act boldly. When the state has lost the way, act boldly and speak softly.”<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, Confucius provides a clear pointer to the fact that the two pillars of the imagined edifice of Asian values, namely loyalty to family and obedience to the state, can be in severe conflict with each other. The governor of She told Confucius, “Among my people, there is a man of unbending integrity: when his father stole a sheep, he denounced him.” To this Confucius replied, “Among my people, men of integrity do things differently: a father covers up for his son, a son covers up for his father, and there is integrity in what they do.”<sup>13</sup>

Elias Canetti has pointed out that in understanding the teachings of Confucius, we have to examine not only what he says, but also what he does not say.<sup>14</sup> The subtlety involved in what is often called “the silence of Confucius” has certainly escaped the modern austere interpreters in their tendency to assume that what is not explicitly supported must be implicitly forbidden. It is not my contention that Confucius was a democrat, or a great champion of freedom and political dissent, but there is reason enough to question the monolithic authoritarian image of him that is presented by the contemporary advocates of Asian values.

### **Freedom and Tolerance**

If we shift our attention from China to the Indian subcontinent, we are in no particular danger of running into hard-to-interpret silence; it is difficult to outdo the Indian traditions of speaking at length and arguing endlessly in explicit and elaborate terms.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 14.22, p. 70.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 14.3, p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 13.18, p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Conscience of Words* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979); see also Leys, *The Analects of Confucius*, xxx-xxxii.

India not only has the largest religious literature in the world, it also has by far the largest volume of atheistic and materialistic writings among the ancient civilizations. There is just a lot of literature of all kinds. The Indian epic *Mahabharata*, which is often compared with the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, is in fact seven times as long as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together. In a well-known Bengali poem written in the nineteenth century by the religious and social leader Ram Mohan Ray, the real horror of death is described thus: "Just imagine how terrible it will be on the day you die,/ Others will go on speaking, but you will not be able to respond."

This fondness for arguing, and for discussing things at leisure and at length, is itself somewhat in tension with the quiet order and discipline championed in the alleged Asian values. But in addition, the content of what has been written indicates a variety of views on freedom, tolerance, and equality. In many ways, the most interesting articulation of the need for tolerance on an egalitarian basis can be found in the writings of Emperor Ashoka, who in the third century B.C. commanded a larger Indian empire than any other Indian king in history (including the Moghuls, and even the Raj, if we leave out the native states that the British let be). He turned his attention in a big way to public ethics and enlightened politics after being horrified by the carnage he saw in his own victorious battle against the king of Kalinga (now Orissa). Ashoka converted to Buddhism and helped to make it a world religion by sending emissaries abroad with the Buddhist message. He also covered the country with stone inscriptions describing forms of good life and the nature of good government.

The inscriptions give a special importance to tolerance of diversity. For example, the edict (now numbered XII) at Erragudi puts the issue thus:

A man must not do reverence to his own sect or disparage that of another man without reason. Depreciation should be for specific reason only, because the sects of other people all deserve reverence for one reason or another.

By thus acting, a man exalts his own sect, and at the same time does service to the sects of other people. By acting contrariwise, a man hurts his own sect,

and does disservice to the sects of other people. For he who does reverence to his own sect while disparaging the sects of others wholly from attachment to his own, with intent to enhance the splendour of his own sect, in reality by such conduct inflicts the severest injury on his own sect.<sup>15</sup>

These edicts from the third century B.C. emphasize the importance of tolerance, both in public policy by the government and in the behavior of citizens to each other.

On the domain and coverage of tolerance, Ashoka was a universalist and demanded this for all, including those whom he described as "forest people," the tribal population living in pre-agricultural economic formations. Condemning his own conduct before his conversion, Ashoka notes that in the war in Kalinga, "men and animals numbering one hundred and fifty thousands were carried away (captive) from that kingdom." He goes on to state that the slaughter or the taking of prisoners "of even a hundredth or thousandth part of all those people who were slain or died or were carried away (captive) at that time in Kalinga is now considered very deplorable [by him]." Indeed, he proceeds to assert that now he believes that even if a person should wrong him, that offense would be forgiven "if it is possible to forgive it." He describes the object of his government as "non-injury, restraint, impartiality, and mild behaviour" applied "to all creatures."<sup>16</sup>

Ashoka's championing of egalitarian and universal tolerance may appear un-Asian to some commentators, but his views are firmly rooted in lines of analysis already in vogue in intellectual circles in India in the three preceding centuries. It is interesting, however, to consider another author whose treatise on governance and political economy was also profoundly influential. I refer to Kautilya, the author of *Arthashastra*, which can be translated as the "economic science," though it is at least as much concerned with practical politics as with economics. Kautilya, a

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<sup>15</sup> Translation in Vincent A. Smith, *Asoka* (Delhi: S. Chand, 1964), pp. 170-71.

<sup>16</sup> *Asokan Studies*, pp. 34-35, edict XIII.

contemporary of Aristotle, lived in the fourth century B.C. and worked as a senior minister of Emperor Chandragupta Maurya, Emperor Ashoka's grandfather, who had established the large Maurya empire across the subcontinent.

Kautilya's writings are often cited as a proof that freedom and tolerance were not valued in the Indian classical tradition. Two aspects of the impressively detailed account of economics and politics to be found in *Arthashastra* might tend to suggest that there is no support there for a liberal democracy.

First, Kautilya is a consequentialist of quite a narrow kind. While the objectives of promoting the happiness of subjects and order in the kingdom are strongly backed up by detailed policy advice, he depicts the king as a benevolent autocrat, whose power is to be maximized through good organization. Thus, *Arthashastra* presents penetrating ideas and suggestions on such practical subjects as famine prevention and administrative effectiveness that remain relevant even today, more than two thousand years later; yet at the same time, it advises the king how to get his way, if necessary through the violation of freedom of his opponents and adversaries.

Second, Kautilya seems to attach little importance to political or economic equality, and his vision of good society is strongly stratified according to lines of class and caste. Even though the objective of promoting happiness, which is given an exalted position in the hierarchy of values, is applied to all, the other objectives have clearly inegalitarian form and content. There is an obligation to give the less fortunate members of the society the support that they need to escape misery and enjoy life—Kautilya specifically identifies as the duty of the king to “provide the orphans, the aged, the infirm, the afflicted, and the helpless with maintenance,” along with providing “subsistence to helpless women when they are carrying and also to the [newborn] children they give birth to.”<sup>17</sup> But recognizing that obligation is very far from valuing the freedom of these people to decide how to

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<sup>17</sup> *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, translated by R. Shama Sastry (Mysore: Mysore Printing and Publishing House, 8th edition, 1967), p. 47.

live—tolerating heterodoxy. Indeed, there is very little tolerance in Kautilya, except for the upper sections of the community.

What do we conclude from this? Certainly, Kautilya is no democrat, no egalitarian, no general promoter of everyone's freedom. And yet, when it comes to the characterization of what the most favored people—the upper classes—should get, freedom figures quite prominently. Denial of personal liberty of the upper classes (the so-called Arya) is seen as unacceptable. Indeed, regular penalties, some of them heavy, are specified for the taking of such adults or children in indenture, even though the slavery of the existing slaves is seen as perfectly acceptable.<sup>18</sup> To be sure, we do not find in Kautilya anything like the clear articulation that Aristotle provides of the importance of free exercise of capability. But the importance of freedom is clear enough in Kautilya as far as the upper classes are concerned. It contrasts with the governmental duties to the lower orders, which take the paternalistic form of state assistance for the avoidance of acute deprivation and misery. Still, insofar as a view of the good life emerges from all this, it is an ideal that is entirely consistent with a freedom-valuing ethical system. The domain of that concern is narrow, to be sure, confined to the upper groups of society, but this limitation is not wildly different from the Greek concern with free men as opposed to slaves or women.

I have been discussing in some detail the political ideas and practical reason presented by two forceful, but very different, expositors in India in the third and the fourth centuries B.C. because their ideas have influenced later Indian writings. I do not want to give the impression that all Indian political commentators took lines of approach similar to Ashoka's or Kautilya's. Quite the contrary. Many positions taken before and after Kautilya and Ashoka contradict their respective claims, just as others are more in line either with Ashoka or with Kautilya.

For example, the importance of tolerance—even the need for universality in this—is eloquently expressed in different media, such as Shudraka's drama, Akbar's political pronouncements, and

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<sup>18</sup> See R. P. Kangle, *The Kautilya Arthashastra*, Part II (Bombay: University of Bombay, 1972), chapter 13, section 65, pp. 235–39.

Kabir's poetry, to name just a few examples. The presence of these contributions does not entail the absence of opposite arguments and recommendations. Rather, the point is that in their heterogeneity, Indian traditions contain a variety of views and reasonings, but they include, in different ways, arguments in favor of tolerance, in defense of freedom, and even, in the case of Ashoka, in support of equality at a very basic level.

### **Akbar and the Moghuls**

Among the powerful expositors and practitioners of tolerance of diversity in India must be counted the great Moghul emperor Akbar, who reigned between 1556 and 1605. Again, we are not dealing with a democrat, but with a powerful king who emphasized the acceptability of diverse forms of social and religious behavior, and who accepted human rights of various kinds, including freedom of worship and religious practice. Such rights would not have been easily tolerated in parts of Europe in Akbar's time.

For example, as the year 1000 in the Muslim Hejira calendar was reached in 1591-92, there was excitement about it in Delhi and Agra (not unlike what is happening right now as the year 2000 in the Christian calendar approaches). Akbar issued various enactments at this juncture of history, and some of these focused on religious tolerance, including the following:

No man should be interfered with on account of religion, and anyone [is] to be allowed to go over to a religion he pleased.

If a Hindu, when a child or otherwise, had been made a Muslim against his will, he is to be allowed, if he pleased, to go back to the religion of his fathers.<sup>19</sup>

Again, the domain of tolerance, while religion-neutral, was not universal in other respects, including gender equality or equality between younger and older people. The enactment went on to argue for the forcible repatriation of a young Hindu woman to

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<sup>19</sup> Translation from Vincent A. Smith, *Akbar: The Great Mogul* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917), p. 257.



her father's family if she had abandoned it in pursuit of a Muslim lover. In the choice between supporting the young lovers and the young woman's Hindu father, old Akbar's sympathies are entirely with the father. Tolerance and equality at one level are combined with intolerance and inequality at another level, but the extent of general tolerance on matters of belief and practice is quite remarkable. It is interesting to note, especially in light of the hard sell of "Western liberalism," that while Akbar was making these pronouncements on religious tolerance, the Inquisition was in high gear in Europe.

### **Theories and Practice**

It is important to recognize that many of these historical leaders in Asia not only emphasized the importance of freedom and tolerance, they also had clear theories as to why this was the appropriate thing to do. This applies very strongly to both Ashoka and Akbar. Since the Islamic tradition is sometimes seen as being monolithic, this is particularly important to emphasize in the case of Akbar. Akbar was, in fact, deeply interested in Hindu philosophy and culture, but also took much note of the beliefs and practices of other religions, including Christianity, Jainism, and the Parsee faith. In fact, he attempted to establish something of a synthetic religion for India—the Din Ilahi—drawing on the different faiths in the country.

There is an interesting contrast here between Ashoka's and Akbar's forms of religious tolerance. Both stood for religious tolerance by the state, and both argued for tolerance as a virtue to be practiced by all. But while Ashoka combined this with his own Buddhist pursuits (and tried to spread "enlightenment" at home and abroad), Akbar tried to combine the distinct religions of India, incorporating the "good points" of different religions. Akbar's court was filled with Hindu as well as Muslim intellectuals, artists, and musicians, and he tried in every way to be nonsectarian and symmetric in the treatment of his subjects.

It is also important to note that Akbar was by no means unique among the Moghul emperors in being tolerant. In many ways, the later Moghul emperor, the intolerant Aurangzeb, who violated many of what would be now seen as basic human rights of Hindus,

was something of an exception.<sup>20</sup> But even Aurangzeb should be considered in his familial setting, not in isolation. None of his immediate family seems to have shared Aurangzeb's intolerance. Dara Shikoh, his elder brother, was much involved with Hindu philosophy and had, with the help of some scholars, prepared a Persian translation of some of the *Upanishads*, the ancient texts dating from about the eighth century B.C. In fact, Dara Shikoh had much stronger claims to the Moghul throne than Aurangzeb, since he was the eldest and the favorite son of their father, Emperor Shah Jahan. Aurangzeb fought and killed Dara, and imprisoned their father for the rest of his life (leaving him, the builder of the Taj Mahal, to gaze at his creation in captivity, from a distance).

Aurangzeb's son, also called Akbar, rebelled against his father in 1681 and joined hands in this enterprise with the Hindu kingdoms in Rajasthan and later the Marathas (though Akbar's rebellion too was ultimately crushed by Aurangzeb). While fighting from Rajasthan, Akbar wrote to his father protesting his intolerance and vilification of his Hindu friends. The issue of tolerance of differences was indeed a subject of considerable discussion among the feuding parties. The father of the Maratha king, Raja Sambhaji, whom the young Akbar had joined, was no other than Shivaji, whom the present-day Hindu political activists treat as a superhero, and after whom the intolerant Hindu party Shiv Sena is named.

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<sup>20</sup> The exponents of contemporary Hindu politics in India often try to deny the tolerant nature of much of Moghul rule. That tolerance was, however, handsomely acknowledged by Hindu leaders of an earlier vintage. For example, Sri Aurobindo, who established the famous ashram in Pondicherry, specifically identified this aspect of the Moghul rule (*The Spirit and Form of Indian Polity*, Calcutta: Arya Publishing House, 1947, pp. 86-89):

The Mussulman domination ceased very rapidly to be a foreign rule. . . . The Mogul empire was a great and magnificent construction and an immense amount of political genius and talent was employed in its creation and maintenance. It was as splendid, powerful and beneficent and, it may be added, in spite of Aurangzeb's fanatical zeal, infinitely more liberal and tolerant in religion than any medieval or contemporary European kingdom or empire.

Shivaji himself took quite a tolerant view of religious differences. As the Moghul historian Khafi Khan, who was no admirer of Shivaji in other respects, reports:

[Shivaji] made it a rule that wherever his followers were plundering, they should do no harm to the mosques, the book of God, or the women of any one. Whenever a copy of the sacred Quran came into his hands, he treated it with respect, and gave it to some of his Mussalman followers.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, a very interesting letter to Aurangzeb on the subject of tolerance is attributed to Shivaji by some historians (such as Sir Jadunath Sarkar, the author of the classic *Shivaji and His Times*, published in 1919), though there are some doubts about this attribution (another possible author is Rana Raj Singh of Mewar/Udaipur). No matter who among Aurangzeb's contemporaries wrote this letter, the ideas engaged in it are interesting enough. The letter contrasts Aurangzeb's intolerance with the tolerant policies of earlier Moghuls (Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan), and then says this:

If Your Majesty places any faith in those books by distinction called divine, you will there be instructed that God is the God of all mankind, not the God of Muslims alone. The Pagan and the Muslim are equally in His presence. . . . In fine, the tribute you demand from the Hindus is repugnant to justice.<sup>22</sup>

The subject of tolerance was indeed much discussed by many writers during this period of confrontation of religious traditions and the associated politics. One of the earliest writers on the subject of tolerance was the eleventh-century Iranian Alberuni, who came to India with the invading army of Sultan Mahmood of

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<sup>21</sup> *The Oxford History of India*, 4th edition, translated by Vincent Smith, edited by Percival Spear (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 412.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 417-18.

Ghazni and recorded his revulsion at the atrocities committed by the invaders. He proceeded to study Indian society, culture, religion, and intellectual pursuits (indeed his translations of Indian mathematical and astronomical treatises were quite influential in the Arab world, which in turn deeply influenced Western mathematics), but he also discussed the subject of intolerance of the unfamiliar.

In all manners and usages, [the Hindus] differ from us to such a degree as to frighten their children with us, with our dress, and our ways and customs, and as to declare us to be devil's breed, and our doings as the very opposite of all that is good and proper. By the bye, we must confess, in order to be just, that a similar depreciation of foreigners not only prevails among us and the Hindus, but is common to all nations towards each other.<sup>23</sup>

The point of discussing all this is to indicate the presence of conscious theorizing about tolerance and freedom in substantial and important parts of Asian tradition. We could consider many more illustrations of this phenomenon in writings from early Arabic, Chinese, Indian, and other cultures. As was argued earlier, the championing of democracy and political freedom in the modern sense cannot be found in the pre-Enlightenment tradition in any part of the world—the West or the East—so we have to look at the constituent components of this compound idea. The view that the basic ideas underlying freedom and rights in a tolerant society are “Western” notions, and somehow alien to Asia, is hard to make any sense of, even though that view has been championed by both Asian authoritarians and Western chauvinists.

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<sup>23</sup> *Alberuni's India*, translated by Edward C. Sachau, edited by Ainslie T. Embree (New York: Norton, 1971), Part I, Chapter I, p. 20.

## Intervention Across National Boundaries

I want to turn now to a rather different issue, which is sometimes linked to the debate about the nature and reach of Asian values. The championing of Asian values is often associated with the need to resist Western hegemony. The linking of the two issues, which has occurred increasingly in recent years, uses the political force of anticolonialism to buttress the assault on basic political and civil rights in postcolonial Asia.

This linkage, though quite artificial, can be rhetorically very effective. For example, Lee Kuan Yew has emphasized the special nature of Asian values and has made powerful use of the general case for resisting Western hegemony to bolster the argument for Asian particularism. The rhetoric has extended to the apparently defiant declaration that Singapore is "not a client state of America."<sup>24</sup> That fact is certainly undeniable, and is an excellent reason for cheer, but the question that has to be asked is what the bearing of this fact is on the issue of human rights and political liberties in Singapore, or any other country in Asia.

The people whose political and other rights are involved in this debate are not citizens of the West, but of Asian countries. The fact that individual liberty and freedom may have been championed in Western writings and even by some Western political leaders can scarcely compromise the claim to liberty and freedom that people in Asia may otherwise have. As a matter of fact, one can grumble, with reason, that the political leaders of Western countries take far too *little* interest in issues of freedom in the rest of the world. There is plenty of evidence that the Western governments have, by and large, tended to give priority to the interests of their own citizens engaged in commerce with the Asian countries and to the pressures generated by business groups to be on good terms with the ruling governments in Asia. It is not so much that there has been more bark than bite; there has in fact been very little barking either. What Chairman Mao had once described as a "paper tiger" has increasingly looked like a paper mouse.

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<sup>24</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, June 13, 1995, p. 4.

But even if this had not been the case, and even if Western governments really had tried to promote political and civil rights in Asia, how could that possibly compromise the status of the rights of Asians? In this context, the idea of “human rights” has to be properly spelled out. In the most general form, the notion of human rights builds on our shared humanity. These rights are not derived from the citizenship of any country, or the membership of any nation, but taken as entitlements of every human being. They differ, thus, from constitutionally created rights guaranteed for specified people (such as, say, American or French citizens). For example, the human right of a person not to be tortured is independent of the country of which this person is a citizen and thus exists irrespective of what the government of that country—or any other—wants to do. A government can, of course, dispute a person’s *legal* right not to be tortured, but that will not amount to disputing what must be seen as the person’s *human* right not to be tortured.

Since the conception of human rights transcends local legislation and the citizenship of the person affected, it is not surprising that support for human rights can also come from anyone—whether or not she is a citizen of the same country as the person whose rights are threatened. A foreigner does not need the permission of a repressive government to try to help a person whose liberties are being violated. Indeed, in so far as human rights are seen as rights that any person has as a human being and not as a citizen of any particular country, the reach of the corresponding *duties* can also include any human being, irrespective of citizenship.

This basic recognition does not, of course, suggest that everyone must intervene constantly in protecting and helping others. That may be both ineffective and unsettling. There is no escape from the need to employ practical reason in this field, any more than in any other field of deliberate human action. I have discussed elsewhere the nature of the necessary scrutiny,

including the assessment of rights and their consequences.<sup>25</sup>

Ubiquitous interventionism is not particularly fruitful or attractive within a given country, or across national boundaries. There is no obligation to roam the four corners of the earth in search of liberties to protect. The claim is only that the barriers of nationality and citizenship do not preclude people from taking legitimate interest in the rights of others and even from assuming some duties related to them. The moral and political examination that is central to determining how one should act applies across national boundaries and not merely within each realm.

### **A Concluding Remark**

The so-called Asian values that are invoked to justify authoritarianism are not especially Asian in any significant sense. Nor is it easy to see how they could be made into an Asian cause against the West, by the mere force of rhetoric. The people whose rights are being disputed are Asians, and no matter what the West's guilt may be (there are many skeletons in many cupboards across the world), the rights of the Asians can scarcely be compromised on those grounds. The case for liberty and political rights turns ultimately on their basic importance and on their instrumental role. This case is as strong in Asia as it is elsewhere.

I have disputed the usefulness of a grand contrast between Asian and European values. There is a lot we can learn from studies of values in Asia and Europe, but they do not support or sustain the thesis of a grand dichotomy. Contemporary ideas of political and personal liberty and rights have taken their present form relatively recently, and it is hard to see them as "traditional" commitments of Western cultures. There are important antecedents of those commitments in the form of the advocacy of tolerance and individual freedom, but those antecedents can be found plentifully in Asian as well as Western cultures.

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<sup>25</sup> Amartya Sen, "Rights and Agency," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 11 (1982); "Liberty and Social Choice," *Journal of Philosophy* 80 (January 1983); "Well-Being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984," *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (April 1985).

The recognition of diversity within different cultures is extremely important in the contemporary world, since we are constantly bombarded by oversimple generalizations about “Western civilization,” “Asian values,” “African cultures,” and so on. These unfounded readings of history and civilization are not only intellectually shallow, they also add to the divisiveness of the world in which we live.

Authoritarian readings of Asian values that are increasingly being championed in some quarters do not survive scrutiny. The thesis of a grand dichotomy between Asian values and European values adds little to our comprehension, and much to the confusion about the normative basis of freedom and democracy.



## About the Author

Amartya Sen is Lamont University Professor and Professor of Economics and Philosophy, Harvard University. In January of 1998 he will become Master of Trinity College, Cambridge. Born in India, Professor Sen studied at Presidency College in Calcutta and at Trinity College, Cambridge. He taught at the Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, 1963–71; at the London School of Economics, University of London, 1971–77; and at Oxford University, 1977–87 (first as Professor of Economics and Fellow, Nuffield College, and then as Drummond Professor of Political Economy and Fellow, All Souls College). He has held many visiting professor appointments, including at MIT, Stanford, Berkeley, and Cornell.

Professor Sen addresses issues of rights and the social impact of economic decisions in his books, from *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* (1970) to *Inequality Reexamined* (1992). His works on the causation and prevention of famines include *Poverty and Famines* (1981) and (with Jean Drèze) *Hunger and Public Action* (1989). Many of his works have been translated into several languages, most notably *On Ethics and Economics* (1987).

Professor Sen has received more than thirty honorary degrees. He has served as President of the International Economic Association, the American Economic Association, the Indian Economic Association, and the Econometric Society.

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