



## **Amartya Sen writes: Overcoming a pandemic may look like fighting a war, but the real need is far from that**

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Written by **Amartya Sen** | Updated: April 8, 2020



The ways and means of getting displaced migrant labourers back to their homes, and making arrangements for their resettlement are also challenging issues that call for careful listening rather than inflexible decisions without proper consultation. (Express photo by Vishal Srivastav)

We have reason to take pride in the fact that India is the largest democracy in the world, and also the oldest in the developing world. Aside from giving everyone a voice, democracy provides many practical benefits for us. We can, however, ask whether we are making good use of it now when the country, facing a gigantic health crisis, needs it most.

First a bit of history. As the British Raj ended, the newly established democracy in India started bearing practical fruits straightway. Famines, which were a persistent occurrence throughout the history of authoritarian British rule, stopped abruptly with the establishment of a democratic India. The last famine, the Bengal famine of 1943, which I witnessed as a child just before Independence, marked the end of colonial rule. India has had no famine since then, and the ones that threatened to emerge in the early decades after Independence were firmly quashed.

### **Opinion | Lockdown trade-offs in a young country call for wide public deliberation**

How did this happen? Democracy gives very strong incentives to the government to work hard to prevent famines. The government has to respond promptly to people's needs because of a combination of public discussion and elections. However, elections alone could not do it. Indeed, democracy is never understandable only as a system of free elections, which are intermittent, often with a big gap between one and the next, and which can be swayed by the excitement that the immediate political context generates. For example, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who was trailing badly in the polls before the Falklands War in 1982, got a huge bump from the war (as ruling governments often do) and comfortably won the general elections that followed, in 1983.

Also general elections in the parliamentary system are primarily about getting a majority of seats in the lower house of parliament. There is no formal rule about the interests or rights of minorities in the voting system. Given that, if all people were to vote according to their own personal interests, an election would not have been a strong saviour of famine victims, since only a small minority of people actually starve in any famine. However, a free press and open public discussion

makes the distress and dangers faced by the vulnerable poor substantially known and understood by the public at large, destabilising the standing of a government that allows such a calamity to happen. Of course, the government itself, since it may also be run by people and parties capable of human sympathy and understanding, may be directly influenced by what they learn from the information and analyses emerging from public discussion.

Even though only a minority may actually face the deprivation of a famine, a listening majority, informed by public discussion and a free press, can make a government responsive. This can happen either through sympathy (when the government cares), or through the antipathy that would be generated by its inaction (when the government remains uncaring). John Stuart Mill's analysis of democracy as "governance by discussion" helps to identify the saviour of the threatened famine victim, in particular a free press and unrestrained discussion.

### **Opinion | Tourism and hospitality sector will need to remake itself after COVID-19**

Tackling a social calamity is not like fighting a war which works best when a leader can use top-down power to order everyone to do what the leader wants — with no need for consultation. In contrast, what is needed for dealing with a social calamity is participatory governance and alert public discussion. Famine victims may be socially distant from the relatively more affluent public, and so can be other sufferers in different social calamities, but listening to public discussion makes the policy-makers understand what needs to be done. Napoleon may have been much better at commanding rather than listening, but this did not hamper his military success (except perhaps in his Russian campaign). However, for overcoming a social calamity, listening is an ever-present necessity.

This applies also to the calamity caused by a pandemic, in which some — the more affluent — may be concerned only about not getting the disease, while others have to worry also about earning an income (which may be threatened by the disease or by an anti-disease policy, such as a lockdown), and — for those away from home as migrant workers — about finding the means of getting back home. The different

types of hazards from which different groups suffer have to be addressed, and this is much aided by a participatory democracy, in particular when the press is free, public discussion is unrestrained, and when governmental commands are informed by listening and consultation.

In the sudden crisis in India arising from the spread of COVID-19, the government has obviously been right to be concerned with rapidly stopping the spread. Social distancing as a remedy is also important and has been rightly favoured in Indian policy-making. Problems, however, arise from the fact that a single-minded pursuit of slowing the spread of the disease does not discriminate between different paths that can be taken in that pursuit, some of which could bring disaster and havoc in the lives of many millions of poor people, while others could helpfully include policies in the package that prevent such suffering.

### **Opinion | Fake news in the time of coronavirus: Why it's time to practice information hygiene**

Employment and income are basic concerns of the poor, and taking special care for preserving them whenever they are threatened is an essential requirement of policy-making. It is worth noting in this context that even starvation and famines are causally connected with inadequacy of income and the inability of the impoverished to buy food (as extensive economic studies have brought out). If a sudden lockdown prevents millions of labourers from earning an income, starvation in some scale cannot be far off. Even the US, which is often taken to be a quintessential free enterprise economy (as in many ways it indeed is), has instituted income subsidies through massive federal spending for the unemployed and the poor. In the emergence and acceptance of such socially protective measures in America, a crucial part has been played by public discussion, including advocacy from the political opposition.

In India the institutional mechanism for keeping the poor away from deprivation and destitution will have to relate to its own economic conditions, but it is not hard to consider possible protective arrangements, such as devoting more public funds for helping the poor (which gets a comparatively small allocation in the

central budget as things stand), including feeding arrangements in large national scale, and drawing on the 60 million tons of rice and wheat that remain unused in the godowns of the Food Corporation of India. The ways and means of getting displaced migrant labourers back to their homes, and making arrangements for their resettlement, paying attention to their disease status and health care, are also challenging issues that call for careful listening rather than inflexible decisions without proper consultation.

Listening is central in the government's task of preventing social calamity — hearing what the problems are, where exactly they have hit, and how they affect the victims. Rather than muzzling the media and threatening dissenters with punitive measures (and remaining politically unchallenged), governance can be greatly helped by informed public discussion. Overcoming a pandemic may look like fighting a war, but the real need is far from that.

***This article was first published under the title "Listening as governance" The writer, a Nobel laureate in economics, is Thomas W. Lamont University Professor and professor of economics and philosophy at Harvard University***