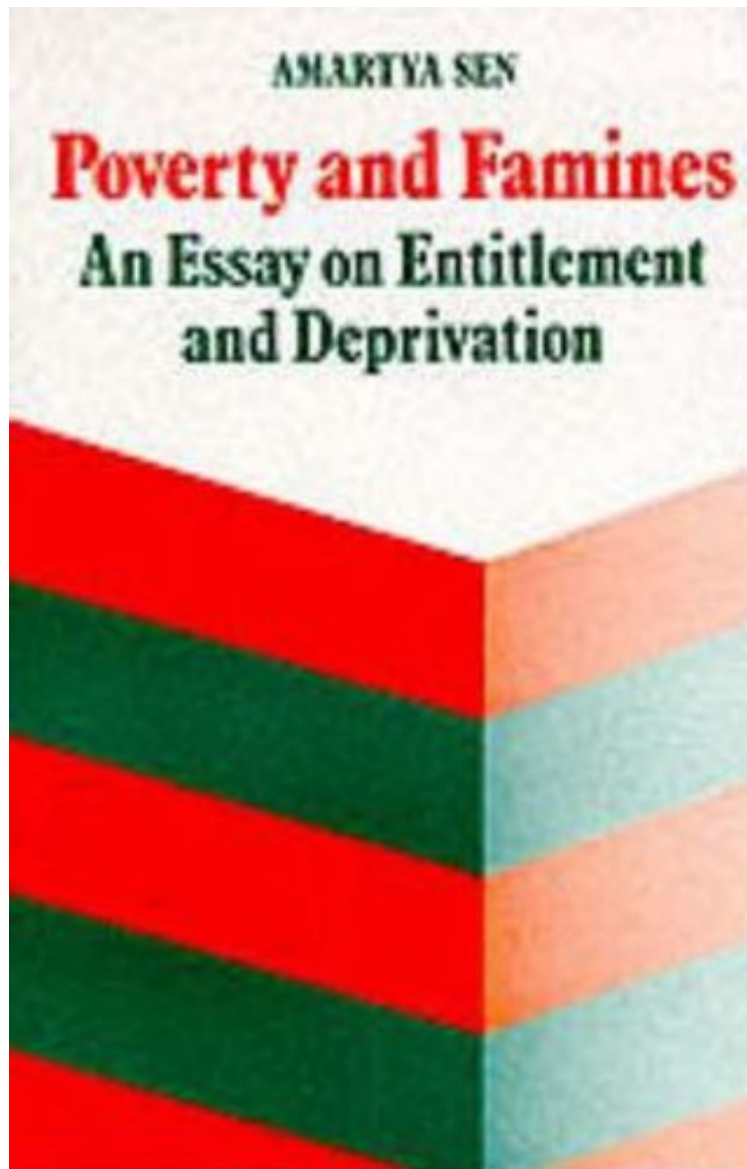


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Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation

Amartya Sen

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Amartya Sen : Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation:

34 of 36 people found the following review helpful. A deeply enlightening insight into the dark world of poverty By A Customer Hunger and poverty are not regional or national issues any more. This book literally changed the way people thought about famines and hunger, according to Robert Solow. Human beings are deprived of food in many ways. Sen points out that food availability decline is only one possible cause of occurrence of a famine. Famines can occur even

if the food output is sufficient in a region, for example in a situation when certain groups of people become richer and purchase more food leading to a steep rise in the prices, while the poor find the food increasingly unaffordable. Sen conceptualizes these issues in the framework of entitlement and ownership. Obviously, a person gets starved when his 'exchange entitlement set' is a null set, i.e., he owns nothing worth exchanging for bundles of food. A famine occurs when a large number of people in a country or a region suffer from such entitlement failures at a same time. In the second chapter, Sen discusses two alternative methods to measure poverty - the Income method and the Direct method. Both methods essentially represent two alternative conceptions of poverty analysis. The inequality approach to poverty is also found to be very common. Can poverty analysis be put into a policy framework? Sen answers this question in the negative pointing out its difficulties. Sen says that a policy definition is based on a fundamental confusion. But at the same time, Sen fails to answer the question of how then the problem can be solved. Famine Enquiry Commission of 1945 had argued that the famine was due to cyclones, floods, fungus diseases, loss of Burma rice, etc., etc. The essence of these theses was that the famine was mainly an outcome of a food shortage. Sen in his analysis of the famine contests this. Point by point, with the use of statistics on food production and other parameters, he states that although there was a decline in food output in Bengal in 1943, it cannot be accepted as a prime cause as there was a still higher decline in food output during 1941 which did not cause any famine. The per capita food availability in 1943 was also higher than that in 1941. The major cause of the famine was the inability of the British government to forecast the shortfall in food. Sen uses his own 'entitlement theory' to describe the famine. The major cause of the famine was shrinkage of the E-mappings for individuals resulting from spiraling food prices and the prevailing inequalities among the population. The situation was not different in the case of the Ethiopian famine of 1972-74. There also there was not any evidence of a major shortfall in the food output; in fact Sen argues that there was indeed a slight increase in the food output vis-a-vis the preceding years during the famine years. The overall consumption of food at the peak famine period was actually normal. But the purchasing power of the people was low resulting in inability to command food from outside. As in the Bengal famine, the highest casualties were among the agricultural workers. But in contrast with Bengal famine, the food prices rose only very little in Ethiopia and were not very different from those prevailing during the pre-drought periods. Sen explains this phenomenon by understanding it in terms of the entitlement failures of various sections of the Ethiopian population. The next case study is that of Sahel famine in Africa during 1968-73. This resulted in the decline of food availability that eventually led to the famine. An analysis of region wise food output revealed that in the regions where the output was low, the effect of the famine was actually lower comparatively. Firstly, it makes the farmer more dependent on the market forces for his basic food requirements. When one has an ability to command food in the market legally, then market approach may work. Sen's major argument in the whole book is that against the popular feeling that famines are caused only due to the decline in availability of food (the FAD approach). He puts in a number of arguments against it citing specific case studies of the above famines. Arnold (1988) pointed out that there were a number of famines in history which were actually caused by food output decline and thus to project entitlement as the major cause of famines was incorrect. Patnaik says that the entitlement approach, while rejecting the FAD theory, takes an unduly short run view of food availability. While agreeing that during famine periods food availability is a major issue, she argues that the long term trend in per capita food availability is also of utmost importance, which Sen does not consider in his entitlement approach. These trends could set the stage for famines even though famines do not thereby become inevitable. There are arguments following Devereux's words that one can not discuss famines without constantly taking into account the aggregate supply of food (Bowbrick, 1986). There are some other major authors also who have come out against the entitlement approach of Sen for that there is nothing 'new' in Sen's approach (Srinivasan, 1983; Mitra, 1982). Poverty and Famines have remained to haunt the dreams of many underdeveloped countries. The issues, as the book, still live on. As Castro lamented at Rome - "The bells that are presently tolling for those starving to death everyday will tomorrow be tolling for all mankind if it did not want, or did not know, or if it could not be sufficiently wise, to save itself".

References
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Mitra, Asok., (1982) "The Meaning of Meaning", *Economic and Political Weekly (Reviews)*, 27 March.
Patnaik, Utsa., (1991) "Food Availability Decline and Famines-A Longer View", *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 19.
Srinivasan, T.N., (1983) "Review of Sen", *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 65.46

52 people found the following review helpful. An opinion on merits and demerits of Entitlement Approach
By A Customer
Poverty and Famines: An essay on Entitlement and Deprivation
The Nobel Laureate (1998) Amartya Sen needs no introduction. But poverty and starvation are better known than he is. Better still, the author is in full realisation of this fact. So, no self-elevating adjectives or poignant criticism can be found in the book. The book focuses on starvation in general and famines in particular. At the very outset, Amartya comes out to be a Keynesian in approach rather than a classicist. As his critics would put it - "This paper is not concerned with long-term food policy". This is true to some extent but the author here is trying to fit in a jigsaw puzzle with two or more puzzles thrown in at once. The book can be further divided into three parts for reading purposes: * For layman [Chapter 1-5,10] * Case Studies [Chapter 6-9] * For the erudite economist [Appendix A-D] This is what sets the book apart - a simple treatment of such a complex subject! For an

issue as basic as hunger, you do require a simple treatment that masses can understand and not only a Master at some reputed economic school. The first and second section can be read by anyone slightly concerned with the word - Poverty while appendices are for the more learned. Chapter I introduces the elementary concepts of his approach to starvation - "The Entitlement Approach". He clearly distinguishes between the food availability and the relationships between a person and the food available. According to him, a person can get food to which he is legally or socially entitled. He can exchange his owned entitlements for other entitlements. Thus, even if plenty is available in author's words - "Starvation is seen as the result of his inability to establish entitlement to enough food". The second and the third chapter deal with concept of poverty, its identification and aggregation. He presents various methods of poverty evaluation and a critique of each- 1. The most usual head count method (i.e. relative number of poor) 2. Biological and nutritional approach (i.e. minimum amount of nutrition required). The aggregation is dealt with by advocating the axiom of "Ranked Relative Deprivation". This deals with the relative poverty amongst the 'poor'. Chapter III brings out the difference between starvation and famines. It sets a stage for discussion of famines in particular. He distinguishes both on - 1. Time Contrast (Long term and Short Term) 2. Group Contrast (Endemic and Specific Community) Chapter IV critically examines the entitlement approach with explanations of endowment and exchange. He examines the limitations of entitlement approach. The author seems to be very much aware of this e.g. '...some transfers that include violation of entitlement approach as looting'. The Case Studies cover the- * Bengal Famine of 1943 * Ethiopian famine of 1972-4 * Sahel Drought and Famine of 1968-73 * Famine of Bangladesh in 1974. The case studies chosen are of widely different nature and lend credit to his work. He goes about justifying the entitlement approach both in times of low food availability and adequate food availability. The Bengal famine case has been taken to illustrate the failure of FAD (Food Availability Decline). From the data of Famine Inquiry Commission of 1945, he proves that actually per capita availability rose about 9% form 1941-43. Since rural workers were as a community affected the most, exchange entitlement could have been a reason. The 'class-basis of destitution' further corroborates the food entitlement approach. The causes of sharp movements of exchange entitlements in this case can be briefed as- 1. Printing of currency leading to inflationary pressures 2. Speculation and Hoarding (A typical Keynesian!) 3. 'Indifferent' winter crop 4. Prohibition of cereal export 5. An uneven expansion of income and purchasing power 6. Impoverishment of groups not directly related to food production He further examines the bad policy of Bengal govt. at that time. The policy was largely FAD approach based and believed in merely creating supplies of food in the affected region, which, obviously, did not help much. The critics have strongly challenged the validity of Famine Commission report (Sen too is aware of that) and actually contend that crop availability was less than that reported (a large upward bias). This hits at the root of his analysis as he works on the initial analysis that there was actually a rise in food available. Also, the critics lay claim to inefficiency of PDS used to funnel the food into Bengal. To quote- "...and what was put on the market vanished without a ripple". They further proved that the inflation was pretty much the same throughout India. So why this should have only hit Bengal. Sen has neglected the infrastructural breakdown. The Ethiopian Famine, again, according to him proved the validity of entitlement approach, as there was little price rise of commodities. But in Sahel famine decrease in food availability was the causal factor. Sen analysed region wise food output to declare that the effect of famine was actually lower in food deprived areas. The approach of Sen seems to be of a short-term nature but does, indeed, subtly propose a long-term vision too. The focus of govt. should not only be to concentrate on food availability but as Sen points out towards ensuring no sudden changes in exchange entitlements. He advocates govt. intervention in these situations (Keynesian approach!). The critics who oppose the above may please note that that at no time does he propose to completely eliminate the FAD approach. Rather, in opening lines of Chapter I he says- "Starvation is characteristic of some people not having enough to eat. It is not the characteristic of there being not enough to eat. While the latter can be a cause of the former, it is but one of many possible causes". In conclusion, the book is a must read for everyone. This is a simply written book with lots of conviction and healthy refute of the theories he disposes of. 10 of 14 people found the following review helpful. This book shows how the famine cycle works. By Jose SampaA very persuasive account of the famine problem is displayed by Nobel Laureate Dr. Sen. Contrary to all expectations, is a very readable book, because all the formulas and elaborate economic theories are confined to the appendix section. Before the appendix, Dr. Sen displays the famine cycle in many parts of the world during this century and highlighth the Bengala famine during World War II. Also, he explains the causes and effects of the famine cycle on each case presented. So, if you want to know how a famine is "made" and "administrated" this is the book you must have.

This book focuses on the causes of starvation in general and famines in particular. The traditional analysis of famines is shown to be fundamentally defective, and the author develops an alternative analysis.

"[The] best book on famine available--important theoretical perspective, good case-study material."--Barbara D. Miller, Cornell University"Embodies the best tradition of social science....Empirical and rational, yet neither virtue is pushed to the point where human beings are forgotten."--The Economist"A truly seminal book....[Has] helped to shift the attention of policy-makers and international organizations away from excessive concentration on food production

to broader issues of 'food security.'"--International Affairs
From the Back Cover
The main focus of this book is on the causation of starvation in general and of famines in particular. The author develops the alternative method of analysis--the 'entitlement approach'--concentrating on ownership and exchange, not on food supply. The book also provides a general analysis of the characterization and measurement of poverty. Various approaches used in economics, sociology, and political theory are critically examined. The predominance of distributional issues, including distribution between different occupation groups, links up the problem of conceptualizing poverty with that of analyzing starvation.
About the Author
Amartya Sen is at Harvard University.