

A NOBEL MEMORIAL PRIZE LAUREATE IN ECONOMICS WHO HAS INSPIRED ME:

The Story of How My Family Survived the Second World War

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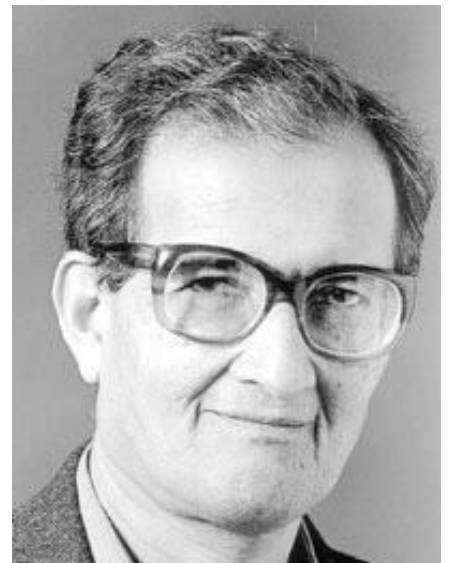
Growing up as a Malaysian in the twenty-first century, a part of Generation Z, we are oftentimes oblivious to the privileges we have. Malaysia continues to be one of the biggest economies in Southeast Asia, with the third largest gross domestic product (GDP) at purchasing power parity (PPP) per capita within the region, at \$27,627 according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). At the same time, Malaysia is one of the few nations consistently recognised as an NIC¹ by economists.

Despite this, a mere two generations ago, my nation was not the pride it is today. I remember as a child, when I would visit my grandmother (on my mother's side), she would tell me vivid stories of how she, as a teenager lived through the Japanese occupation of Malaya. 'Ammachi', as I affectionately called her, would detail how she had to dress as a boy or hide in the unlikeliest of places when the Japanese would visit their village. Of course, back then, she did not make known to me what horrors would occur throughout the occupation.

There was one story in particular that I still hold onto, as it was that poverty that my parents experienced growing up as well. British Malaya prior to the occupation was heavily dependent on the import of rice, more than 50% of rice was imported to meet the demand of the population; the plantations of rubber and palm oil were seen as more profitable by the British since the nearby Burmese, also under the British, was already the biggest single rice exporter in the world. During the war, food was at its lowest. In the rural village she was in, ammachi and her family would grow tapioca to barely subsist. The shortage of food was at its peak during the occupation of the Japanese, and it hit my father's side tragically, as my would-be aunt passed from malnutrition at the most dire of the period.

Stories such as these grounded me in reality with the privileges I grew up with. Although many years later, these stories, experiences, of my own family mere decades ago unsurprisingly led me to identifying with Amartya Sen, the Nobel Memorial Prize Laureate in Economic Sciences in 1998, an identification further strengthened to our common culture, him being the only ever Indian to have been a recipient.

Amartya Sen's work in welfare economics continues to be one of the biggest inspirations behind my interest in the field of economics. One of his most revolutionary contributions, the capabilities approach, fascinates me in how in a world of economics



Official Nobel Prize Portrait of Amartya Sen
Image source:
http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/economic-sciences/laureates/1998/

¹ NIC, an abbreviation of Newly Industrialised Country, a status of which a country's level of economic development is held to be in between that of first world and developing classifications.

that emphasises negative freedom² and utilitarianism³, Amartya manages to inject a dimension of ethicality into the field that one can rarely come across.

This is particularly of note in his economic theory of capabilities as an alternative to the utilitarian approach in welfare economics. His proposed approach is untraditional in that its key measurement of an individual's well-being lies in the capacity or capability of the individual (positive freedom). As such, the capability of an individual is made up of combinations of functionings, the various literal acts or conditions that enable such a capability. For example, the capability to live is dependent on functionings such as obtaining nourishment and safe shelter.

Sen's approach instigates a different outlook on the food crisis faced not just by my family, but throughout the Asia Pacific during the war. The easiest conclusion would be that the Japanese occupation led to a shortage of food due to ties to trade being cut off from the Allied blockade and submarine campaign in the Pacific War. However, it can't simply be reduced to just a shortage of food, as the Japanese controlled Burma amongst other major rice producers.

Prior to the war, in the world economy, British Malaya was the largest producer of tin, and the second largest producer of rubber, among other things. The growth of the economy and government revenue was dependent on these various industries, alongside the service sector for these industries and communities.

Table 8.3. ESTIMATED MALAYAN RUBBER PRODUCTION, 1942-4 (metric tons)

	<i>Pre-war average (1935-41)</i>	<i>1942</i>	<i>1943</i>	<i>1944</i>
Production	442,000	109,000	97,900	136,500
Export	434,384	81,500	26,500	15,000
Domestic consumption	n.a.	n.a.	38,400	88,000

Source: OSS, R&A No. 2589, *The Rubber Industry of Southeast Asia: An Estimate of Present Conditions and Anticipated Capabilities*, 16 Dec. 1944, pp. 6, 10. The consumption figures for 1943 and 1944 are "highly speculative".

Figure 1: Estimated Malayan Rubber Production (The Japanese Occupation of Malaya, 1998)

During the occupation, the Japanese had no need for the amounts Malaya had been producing and production had been restricted. Industries that once relied on exports now had to rely mainly on the domestic market. Visibly, the crisis and malnutrition was due to factors beyond food shortages. With reference to Sen's explanation of the Bengal famine of 1943,

² Negative freedom refers to freedom from external restraint on one's actions, non-interference.

³ Utilitarianism is an ethical theory where the favoured action is to maximise peoples' satisfaction (utility).

prices of food in Malaya skyrocketed due to factors all connected to the war including hyper-inflation, panic buying and the Japanese military acquisition. This was coupled with almost the exact same social and economic factors Sen argues was a major cause of starvation in the Bengal famine: wages and income was declining as unemployment rose over the trade blockade by the Allied forces and the restrictions and policies by the Japanese, food prices rose, and the food distribution by the Japanese was heavily miscalculated and mismanaged.

As with Sen's approach, the emphasis was not on the lack of negative freedom upon rural communities akin to my family and many others to obtain food, but the lack of positive freedom to do it. Many rural Malaysians, the country as a whole, did not have the capability to sustain themselves, as many functionalities lacked; major functionalities such as nourishment and sanitation, as well as specific ones such as the lack of communication or transportation to other towns with food.

Clearly, there was a connection I had between the stories of the struggles of my family, Indian immigrants in Malaysia during political and economic turmoil, and Amartya Sen's own life experiences as an Indian during the Bengali famine and his contributions to welfare economics through theories like the capabilities approach. But this historical relation was not the only driving force behind finding him an inspiration; I've always had an interest in many world issues, social, political and economic, especially those that which affect the developing world, but it was Sen's views and arguments that further helped fester the budding passion in these issues.

Sen's wholly different outlook on development inspired me in ways more than simply reading about economics online. In Malaysia, secondary schools are divided into two streams, arts and sciences. Even now, especially as a rural child, I was expected to go into the sciences stream since I had the grades to, as being in the arts stream was seen as disadvantaged. Although there was a science class that did have economics, it was at the sake of Biology. I ended up teaching myself Economics with the resources I had, doing the British IGCSEs as a private candidate.

It went beyond just Economics, I further took and self-studied Development Studies and Environmental Management; subjects I never thought of taking prior to this growing interest. The subject of Development Studies, and learning of the various factors affecting the development of the third world today and the solutions to various issues had me drawing inspiration from Sen yet again. Based on his book 'Development as Freedom', Sen proposes five specific types of freedoms of which a person's capability is comprised of:

- a) Political freedoms
- b) Economic facilities
- c) Social opportunities

- d) Transparency guarantees
- e) Protective security

What is commonly held, a belief I too had, was that these freedoms were the successes of the developed world, the ends of development a nation can obtain. Sen, however, argues that a developing nation is obligated to work on increasing real freedoms as well; development as freedom. These freedoms are not just a guarantee, an eventual outcome, of developed nations, but the means of development as well for a nation to truly progress.

Of course, the capabilities approach, among other contributions Sen has made in welfare and development economics, led to the start and advancement of the Human Development Report⁴ (HDR) and Human Development Index (HDI)⁵.

Sen's wider perspective led to a pride in my own nation as well. As a second-generation immigrant, I strongly identify as a Malaysian first and foremost. I take pride in my nation being consistently categorised as a Newly Industrialised Country (NIC)⁶, egoistic to some sense, yet further fortified by having the highest HDI of the list of NICs as shown in Figures 2 and 3.

Yes indeed, I cannot deny my being oblivious to the privileges I have sometimes, growing up in this era of growth and technological progress. However, I do try my hardest to know the happenings of the world, and to give back to the society I grew up in. In his book 'Development as Freedom', Amartya Sen states in his capabilities approach that an agent is an individual that acts or brings about change. I am an 'agent' of my own, to my community. To not let the people of my country, the poor and disenfranchised, suffer the lack of functionings, of capabilities, that my family once did; volunteering in any little way I can as a teenager, to tutor underprivileged children or provide food to the poor, to recycle and to support and speak up for those without a voice. That is why Amartya Sen is a Nobel Prize Laureate in Economics that has inspired me.

⁴ The HDR is an annual report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) first released by Amartya Sen and Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq that ranks nations on various economic and social indices

⁵ The HDI, also by Sen, is contained within the HDR and is a composite statistic of life expectancy, education, and per capita income.

⁶ An NIC is a socioeconomic classification given to countries regarded as not being fully developed, but are undergoing rapid economic growth or have had economies that outpaced similar developing countries.











Region	Country	GDP (PPP) (international billions of dollars, 2016 IMF) ^[7]	GDP per capita (PPP) (international dollars, 2016IMF) ^[8]	Income inequality (GINI) 2008–09 ^{[9][10]}	Human Development Index (HDI, 2016) ^[11]	Real GDP growth rate as of 2015	Sources
Asia	 Malaysia	863.3	27,267	46.2	0.789 (high)	4.7	[3][4][5]
Transcontinental	 Turkey ^[a]	1,988.3	24,912	39	0.767 (high)	4.0	[3][4][5]
North America	 Mexico	2,406.2	18,938	48.3	0.762 (high)	2.5	[2][3][4][5]
South America	 Brazil	3,216.1	15,242	54.7	0.754 (high)	-3	[2][3][4][5]
Asia	 Thailand	1,164.9	16,888	40	0.740 (high)	3.5	[2][3][4][5]
Asia	 China	21,291.4	15,399	45.3	0.738 (high)	6.8	[3][4][5]
Asia	 Indonesia	3,032.1	11,720	36.8	0.689 (medium)	4.8	[3][4][5]
Asia	 Philippines	832.50	7,254	46.1	0.682 (medium)	6.5	[2][3][4][5]
Africa	 South Africa	761.9	13,225	63.1	0.666 (medium)	1	[3][4][5]
Asia	 India	7,965.2	6,616	35.1	0.624 (medium)	7.6	[3][4][5]

Figure 2: Malaysia compared to other NICs (Wikipedia, 2016)

HDI rank	Human Development Index (HDI)	Life expectancy at birth	Expected years of schooling	Mean years of schooling	Gross national income (GNI) per capita	
	Value	(years)	(years)	(years)	(2011 PPP \$)	
	2015	2015	2015 ^a	2015 ^a	2015	
HIGH HUMAN DEVELOPMENT						
52	Belarus	0.796	71.5	15.7	12.0	15,629
52	Oman	0.796	77.0	13.7	8.1 ^m	34,402
54	Barbados	0.795	75.8	15.3	10.5 ⁿ	14,952
54	Uruguay	0.795	77.4	15.5	8.6	19,148
56	Bulgaria	0.794	74.3	15.0	10.8 ^c	16,261
56	Kazakhstan	0.794	69.6	15.0	11.7 ^f	22,093
58	Bahamas	0.792	75.6	12.7 ^k	10.9	21,565
59	Malaysia	0.789	74.9	13.1	10.1	24,620

Figure 3: Malaysia on the actual Human Development Index (Human Development Report, 2016)

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