

Revisiting 'The Argumentative Indian'

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WHEN Samuel Huntington declared "West was West before it was modern" (in his well-known book The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order), he was not referring to the geographical invariance of the Western world, which is obviously true by definition. He was rather asserting a couple of propositions about global history. These propositions present a contrast between the West and the rest of the world, and together they amount to a bold claim of cultural and intellectual superiority of the West.

The first proposition says that certain cultural traits and social practices that are valued in the modern world -- for example, respect for individual rights and liberties, democratic ideals, and the

common view states that democratic values -- interpreted broadly to mean respect for critical thinking, opportunities for open public debate on matters of common interest, and tolerance towards opposing beliefs -- are primarily a Western contribution to the world.

Riding on this view, a section of the West goes on to claim superiority of Western culture as compared to the East (a school of thought typified by, say, Huntington). At the same time, a section of the East also proclaims that democracy is an alien concept which belongs to the West, but unlike the Western protagonists they do not see this as a sign of cultural inferiority of the East. Instead they claim superiority of "Asian values," of which an important element is deference to authority -- the very antithesis of democracy (a position typified by,

section of this movement "it is difficult to have patience with its intellectual beliefs and public proclamations" (p.52), but he nonetheless considers it important to take on the intellectual arguments on their own turf. The reason why this debate is important for him is that Hindutva is the very antithesis of his central thesis that the East is no less open to democratic values than the West. The utter lack of respect that Hindutva shows to the diverse traditions in Indian history that do not fit into their severely circumscribed conception of India is contrary to the democratic values of respect for pluralism that Sen insists is as much a part of Indian heritage as that of the West.

He is, therefore, keen to demolish the historical basis of Hindutva's vision of India, and he does so through an amazing combination of passion, reason and erudition. An entire chapter of his book (essay 3 entitled "India: Large and Small") is devoted to marshalling facts and arguments against the conception of India espoused by the Hindutva movement, with reverberations of those arguments being felt in the rest of the essays as well.

As in the context of the global theme discussed earlier, in the Indian context too Sen is simultaneously engaged in a battle against two fronts -- internal and external. While the proponents of Hindutva represent the internal front, an external front opens up as their limited view of India finds echo in the writings of Western cultural

influence that Islam, Buddhism and other religions have had on the very idea of India, whose reflections can be seen even today in social and personal lives of the Indians.

Citing an example from day-to-day life, Sen narrates with evident delight that "when a Bengali Hindu does religious ceremonies according to the local calendar, he or she may not be aware that the dates that are invoked in the calendrical accompaniment of the Hindu practices are attuned to commemorating Muhammad's journey from Mecca to Medina, albeit in a mixed lunar-solar representation." (p.332)

The distorted vision of ancient India that Hindutva offers has two characteristic features: (a) it tries to blot out the rich heritage in Indian history that has emanated from religions other than Hinduism, and (b) even with regard to Hinduism it espouses a particularly rigid and intolerant version ignoring the existence of others strands that are more accommodating of reason, dissent, and respect for others. In both these respects, Hindutva militates against the democratic values of tolerance and mutual respect that often underpinned the Indian tradition, as Sen demonstrates by citing from ancient Hindu texts and giving examples of rulers and intellectuals from Muslim, Buddhist and other religious traditions as well as from atheist and agnostic traditions in India.

In highlighting the tradition of tolerance and respect for democratic values in Indian history, Sen

a few prominent exceptions -- basically tolerant attitudes" (p.59). What he finds particularly impressive in "...Akbar's defense of a tolerant and pluralist society is his focus on the role of reasoning in choosing this approach. Even in deciding on one's faith, one should be, Akbar argued, guided by 'the path of reason' (rahi aql) rather than led by 'blind faith' " (p.76).

Sen also notes that in his personal life Akbar remained a good Muslim (as certified by Islamic scholars at the time of his death) despite experimenting with din-ilahi, but he did so by applying reason (p.289). It is this rationalist aspect of Akbar's legacy that is of paramount importance to Sen, as it constitutes one of the main empirical foundations of his thesis that the primacy of reason in public and private conduct is not a monopoly of Western civilisation.

Sen makes special mention of two great emperors (neither of whom was a Hindu) -- Asoka (a Buddhist) and Akbar (a Muslim). With regard to Akbar, it is well-known that in recognition of the religious and cultural diversity of India he was not only keen to establish the priority of tolerance but also laid the foundations of a secular legal structure and of religious neutrality of the state.

Not surprisingly, one finds a profusion of references to Akbar throughout the book.

In order to fully appreciate the place of Akbar in Sen's framework of argument, it is important to note not only what he said about Akbar but also what he did not say. There is a tradition in Indian historiography that tries to pose a contest between Akbar and Aurangzeb -- two of the greatest of Moghal emperors -- with one group championing Akbar and the other Aurangzeb. Sen had nothing to say on this contest -- he never compared Akbar with Aurangzeb in terms of who was the greater emperor. Except to make the well-known point that Aurangzeb was one of the least tolerant of Muslim emperors, he never made Aurangzeb a part of his agenda. After all, since he wanted to show that the Islamic tradition in India was as open to the democratic ideal as the West, it wouldn't have served his purpose to dwell at length on Aurangzeb.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that there was no duplicity or hypocrisy involved in ignoring Aurangzeb either. Sen was not engaged in the project of offering a balanced assessment of any particular religious tradition, by considering the negatives along with the positives. He accepted that all religions -- including Christianity -- have been misused over the course of history by self-serving rulers, but his point was that these misuses do not nullify the fact that in all religions and cultures in the civilised world one can find instances where the rulers and the people have cherished democratic values. This argument necessarily required a strategy that would highlight the rational and tolerant side of all religions instead of the opposite. It is in consonance with this strategy that he chose to highlight Akbar and ignore Aurangzeb.

Secondly, although Sen made several references to Akbar's failed attempt to create a synthetic religion called din-ilahi, he never tried to posit it as a religion in contrast to Islam, let alone claim superiority of the former. He sees din-ilahi as an enlightened Muslim emperor's attempt to accommodate alternative views within the polity for the sake of promoting harmony and the social good. For both Akbar and Sen, it was more of a political philosophy than a religion: "...din-ilahi (along with integrated calendar) ... reflected a constructive search for an overarching unity combined with a firm acknowledgement of plurality" (p.41). The fact that the

attempt was a muddled one and was doomed to fail because of internal inconsistencies is immaterial to what Sen was trying to achieve, namely, to illustrate the point that the Eastern culture -- in this instance, the Islamic part of the Eastern culture -- was infused with the rationalist democratic and tolerant spirit long before that spirit flourished in the West in the post-Enlightenment period.

Underlying these attempts by Sen to prove the existence of rationalism throughout the history of India is a deeper philosophical concern that has relevance on a global scale. The concern relates to the question: can a world riven by conflicts and mistrust between nations, between religious and ethnic groups, each with different cultures and value systems, ever learn to live in peace and harmony? Amartya Sen belongs

Amartya Sen belongs to a school of philosophy that firmly believes that if such peace and harmony is to be achieved reason must play a critical role in enabling the peoples of the world to understand each other, to learn to respect the differences that will necessarily exist, and to discern the threads of a common humanity that bind us all despite the differences.

privileging of reason over blind faith -- have deep roots in the antiquity of Western civilisation. The second, contrasting, proposition maintains that the rest of the world has no comparable history of cultivating these "modern" values. He is of course not alone in making such claims. Many other Western scholars have asserted that these are predominantly, perhaps even uniquely, Western values.

There is not much difficulty in accepting the first proposition. Roots of many of the modern ideas that blossomed in the wake of European Enlightenment can indeed be found in the classical era of Western civilisation -- for example, in the writings of Aristotle and in the practice of Athenian democracy. There is, however, a good deal of difficulty with the second, which denies the existence of similar roots in the history of non-Western civilisations. Amartya Sen's compendium of essays The Argumentative Indian is the first systematic and comprehensive attempt to confront the tendency to characterise the values of democracy, reasoning, etc. as quintessentially and uniquely Western. In this book and other related writings, Sen marshals an extraordinary range of facts and analysis in support of his counterattack.

Other scholars have also engaged in this debate from time to time, but in a fragmentary way. What makes this book so special, however, is not just the comprehensiveness of Sen's analysis, but the fact that, unlike others, he is simultaneously engaged in a two-pronged battle -- one external and one internal. The external battle is against the likes of Huntington and other cultural supremacists in the West.

The internal battle, which is really the distinguishing feature of the book, is against tendencies closer to home -- tendencies that appear to take a position of confrontation vis-à-vis Western culture and yet concede, either explicitly or by implication, that the values of democracy and rationalism are indeed unique to the West. The nature of this two-pronged battle can be best illustrated by referring to a couple of recurring themes that run through the book. One of these themes is global in nature and the other is more immediately Indian but with wider implications.

The global theme relates to contemporary debates on cultural separatism that has been inspired by ideas such as "clash of civilisations" and "Asian values." In this debate, two groups of protagonists hold a common view -- but from two entirely opposite perspectives. This

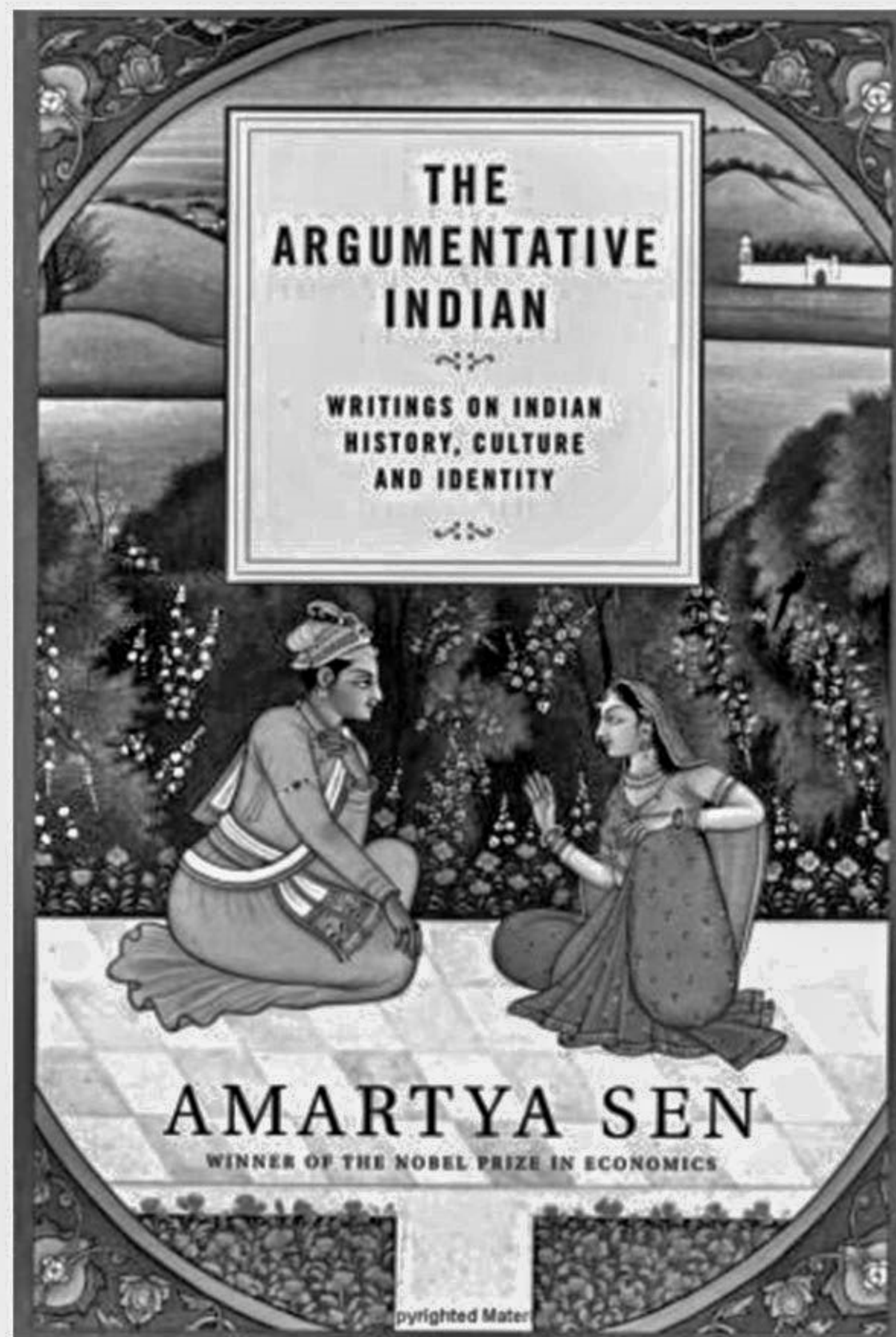
say, Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore). So the debate rages about which culture is superior, but the common premise of both sides of the debate is an acceptance of the idea that democratic values are alien to the Eastern culture.

It is this common premise that Sen has tried to contest -- opposing both the cultural supremacists of the West (the external battle) and the self-serving proponents of Asian values in the East (the internal battle). His main thesis is that democratic values, underpinned by the rationalist approach, are common to all great civilisations in the world -- their manifestations may be different in different places and times, and they may also have been suppressed from time to time by despotic rulers, but the democratic spirit has always been part of the genius of people all over the civilised world. The Argumentative Indian and related writings of Sen offer an elaborate defense of this thesis, by citing examples from all the great civilisations of the East, based on the three great Eastern religions -- namely, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.

The Indian theme (albeit with wider implications) revolves around the alarming rise of intolerance and obscurantism in Indian society that has been unleashed in recent times by the Hindutva movement. Like other liberals in India and outside, Sen has denounced in the strongest possible terms the political and communal violence wrought by this movement -- in particular for the role the movement played in instigating the riots in Gujarat and the destruction of Babri mosque. He has written extensively against these abominations in various newspapers and most cogently in his book Identity and Violence the Illusion of Destiny (which has also been translated in Bangla as Parichiti O Hinsa by Ananda Publishers, Kolkata).

But he has done much more than that -- he has taken on the arguments advanced by the Hindutva intellectuals to justify their vision of Hinduism and India, and demonstrated them to be based on a very narrow as well as distorted interpretation of Indian history. His principled stance against the Hindutva movement has earned him open antagonism from the activists of Sangh Parivar; even books have been written accusing him of Hindu bashing (e.g., Amartya Sen's Hindu Bash written by V. S. Sardesai and published in 2008 by Readworthy Publications Limited).

While engaging in this debate, Sen confesses that in view of the atrocities being committed by a



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theorists such as Samuel Huntington who also describe India in exactly those terms -- as a Hindu civilisation, ignoring the diversity and pluralism of Indian history.

Sen challenges this tendency to classify global cultures in primarily religious terms. His point is not to deny the indisputable fact that religion did play a role in shaping all major cultures in the world but to argue that defining a culture exclusively in terms of the religion of the numerical majority of the population that share that culture is to miss much that goes towards creating a cultural milieu. Thus, to describe India as a Hindu civilisation is to be blind to the enormous

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But the reason why Sen singles out Akbar is not just his tolerance because he finds this to be a common enough trait among the Muslim rulers of India in general; as he observes: "...the conquering Muslim rulers, despite a fiery and brutal entry, soon developed -- with