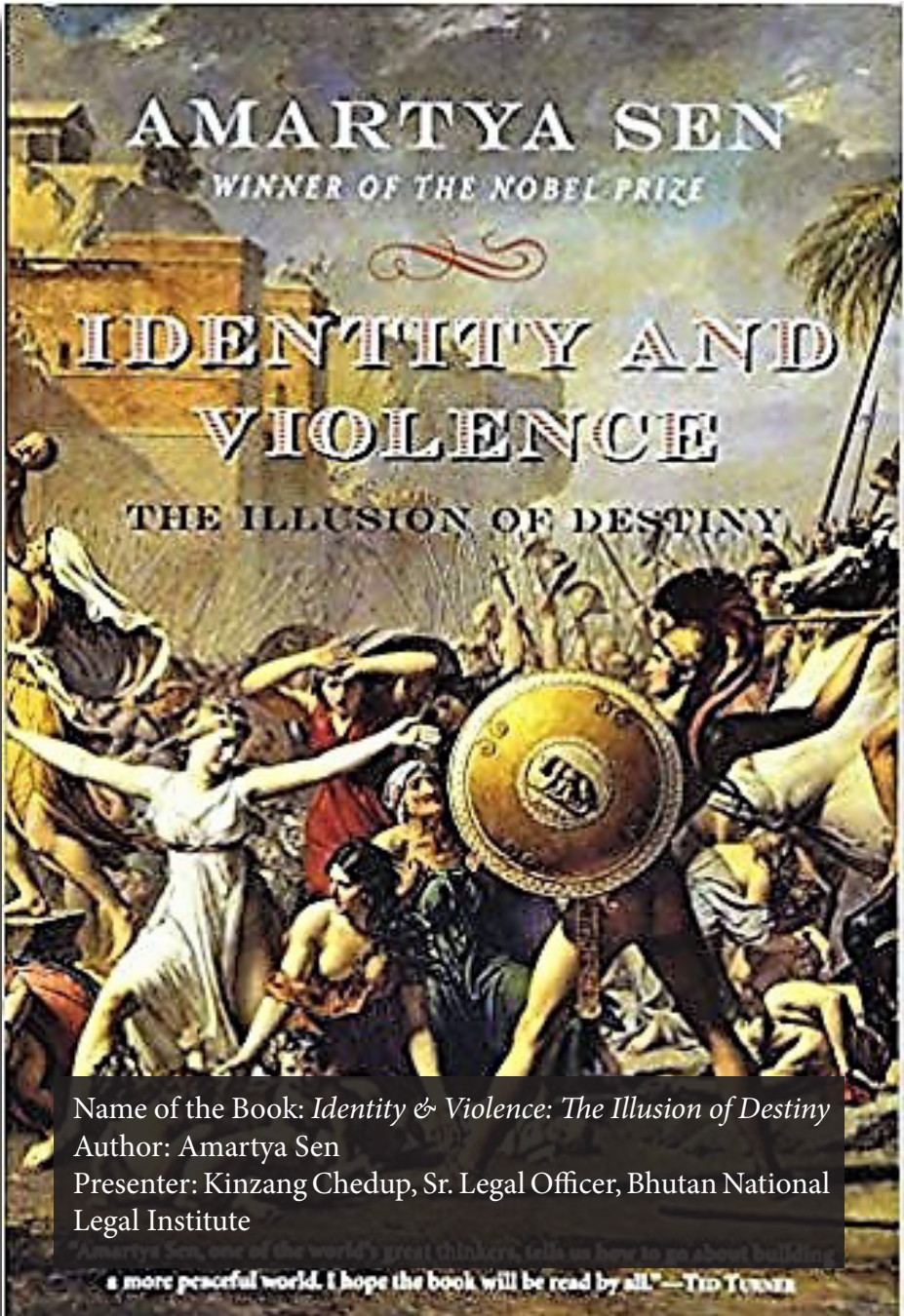


55th Session (30 November 2018)



Name of the Book: *Identity & Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*

Author: Amartya Sen

Presenter: Kinzang Chedup, Sr. Legal Officer, Bhutan National Legal Institute

a more peaceful world. I hope the book will be read by all. —Tito Terenzi

Synopsis of the Book

The Book is a reflection of individual and group identities that perpetuate difference in our society. Identities such as citizenship, nationalities and race allows different persons to identify themselves based on their nationality, race, religion - which then form the basis of how they see themselves - distinct from others. The book delves into different identities and deconstructs how identities lead to different personalities and assumption.



Profile of the Author

Amartya Kumar Sen was born on 3 November 1933. He is an economist and philosopher, who since 1972 has taught and worked in India, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Amartya Sen has made contributions to welfare economics, social choice theory, economic and social justice, economic theories of famines, and indices of the measure of well-being of citizens of developing countries. He is regarded as the greatest

Indian economist of all time and one of the leading intellectual thinkers across the world. He is a Fellow and former Master of Trinity College, Cambridge and was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 1998 and India's Bharat Ratna in 1999 for his work in welfare economics. In 2017, Amartya Sen was awarded the Johan Skytte Prize in Political Science^[6] for most valuable contribution to Political Science.



Profile of the Presenter

Kinzang Chedup is a Legal Officer at the Bhutan National Legal Institute. He studied Law from Osmania University, Hyderabad and completed his Masters from the University of Vienna, Austria.

Discourse

The book discusses how human beings assume multiple identities based on our nationality, race, religion - which then form the basis of how we see ourselves - distinct from others. While we have the freedom to choose our own identities, he says that there are constraints that limit freedom to choose. The author argues that our 'small boxed' identities perpetrate violence and conflicts. The book also dwells on multiculturalism and plural human identities. Sen argues against 'civilizational partitioning' and single identity that fosters violence such as polarization of religion leading to a single identity. He believes that religion should be mere declaration of faith and we should adjust to plural identities through reasoned and coexist-able choice. Sen says that describing oneself as 'the other' positions ourselves with non-convergent thinking and ideas. This leads to the concept of 'West and anti-West' leading to violent reactions. He is of the view that globalization leads to unequal distribution of wealth, which is enforced through trade barriers, that ultimately retards advancement of science and technology. According to the author, 'globalization' should defuse confrontation of divisive identities and generate fair and reasoned outcomes. Amartya Sen has never limited himself to the domain of pure economics. Indeed most of his recent works have dabbled with questions in philosophy and broader social issues rather than economics. The book *Identity and Violence* is an excellent effort to address the crucial question of Identity and its relation to violence. The book is essentially a collection of a series of lectures delivered by Amartya Sen on the subject at various venues around the world since 2000. It is written in a lucid and persuasive style. The issue of Identity and violence has great contemporary relevance with the proliferation of identity related violence all over the world, sometimes in the form of religious fundamentalism, sometimes ethnic conflict or race riots. The author cites numerous examples from Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sudan, Al Qaeda, Abu Ghuraib prison, to his own childhood experience of Hindu-Muslim riots where identity has role in fomenting violence. Identity or sense of belonging is based on to some extent shared history and sense of affiliation. Identity can be both inclusive and also exclusive. Sen argues that it is often the singular emphasis on one aspect of plural identity that breeds violence. "A Hutu

labourer from Kigali may be pressured to see himself only as a Hutu and incited to kill the Tutsis, and yet he is not only a Hutu, but also a Kigalian, a Rwandan, an African, a labourer and a human being”. Sen deals with some of the facets of such singular identities that are a source of violence in the world. He argues for recognition of plural and diverse identities which all individuals have and reemphasises the role of reason and choice so that an individual can decide his identity. Throughout this book Sen time and again emphatically champions the role of reason and choice in Identity and emerges as a true advocate of democracy and liberty. The central argument of this book is that Conflicts (ethnic, cultural, social) are sustained by illusion of a singular identity that appears preordained to the subject. The imposition of singular identity leads to the miniaturization of people. He contradicts the ‘singular and overarching system of partitioning used by both advocates and opponents of violence’. Sen critically analyses many themes such as Multiculturalism, Fundamentalism, Globalization, Terrorism, stereotyping of identity and brings forth the problem of Singular Identity which accentuates violence. ‘Conceptual disarray, and not just nasty intentions, significantly contributes to the turmoil and barbarity we see around us’. In the process the book becomes a scathing criticism of all theories and practices that foster singularity such as Communitarianism and Cultural theorists. Although Sen does not deny the influence of Community or Culture in shaping identity he is uncomfortable with the deterministic tone of such theories, which leaves no space for choice or heterogeneity. He reaffirms his argument with the example of Lord Byron whose love for Greece and native England coexists in many of his writings. He is critical of the identity disregard in classical economics which champions the rational man guided only by self-interest and the emphasis on singular identity as in Communitarian or Cultural theories. ‘The omnipotence of culture and combined with the idea of dominant power of culture makes us imaginary slaves of illusory forces’. He illustrates the important role of culture over our thought and perception often exhibited through racist jokes or grand theories such as brown mans burden on white mans shoulder. He also treats culture not as a decisive component but just like social, economic, political influences which

Zaad Mahmood work in tandem. While discussing culture Sen examines the concept of multiculturalism which has found immense currency worldwide. Amartya Sen is not in favour of wholesale repudiation of multiculturalism. However he argues that multiculturalism often deteriorates into cultural conservatism where diversity is achieved at the cost of human freedom to choose or plural monoculture where different cultures coexist with minimal interaction. The merit of diversity must depend on how diversity is brought about and sustained. He believes that allowing free choice can enhance cultural diversity. Sen is critical of British multiculturalism as it reflects a vision of Britain as a federation of communities rather than a nation with diversities. The federational view of society gives priority to community or religion overlooking other affiliations. Sen is in favour of inclusionary multiculturalism celebrating cultural diversity with the freedom of choice and action. Sen points out the conceptual inadequacy evident in Round Table Conference of 1931 when the British viewed Gandhi as just a leader of the Indian Hindu Upper Class. Gandhi refused such a view emphasizing that he represented India and Indian with diverse identities. Although the book becomes repetitive at times, it is a wonderful effort to clear the intellectual inadequacies in dealing with the issue of Identity. Sen is a true humanist and his conclusion about the poor being the victims of violence makes him an articulate and insightful champion of the dispossessed

