



## Full Length Review Article

### CONSCIOUSNESS- RAISING AND THE HUMAN CAPABILITIES

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#### ABSTRACT

The capabilities approach is a list of capabilities based on an individual's ability to 'function in a fully human way.' This strand brings the approach closest to a narration of the various virtues of which only a human being is capable of, and not an animal or a beast. These virtues are essential for ethical progress, a move which also alienates itself from the tradition, different types of which hamper the development of the human being. Virtues are important for ethical progress and are therefore accountable for a conception of the human good or human flourishing. A critique of local tradition forms an important part of this very virtue-ethics position, and an approach aimed at presenting a critique of these traditions has to depart from this position, if at all it wants to do away with religious fanaticism, boulders that come in way of gender parity and improvement etc. A clearer example closest to Suparna and Sarah's approach is an analysis by Nussbaum, on SEWA women who gained confidence after watching videos of women doing things which they are otherwise forbidden to do. As she says, "the experience of watching these videos helps them make choices for their future, also increasing their sense of possibility and worth."

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#### INTRODUCTION

Consciousness-raising as a specific political practice is directed toward challenging the dominant ideas. Consciousness-raising processes provide women the opportunities to reflect, consider the various options, and make decisions. The process of social transformation involves long-term changes in confidence and courage for individuals. This is also specifically vital for poor low caste women who have little experience with self-assertion. "Capability building creates a potential for collective protest for change in social relations, such as caste and gender<sup>1</sup>." The capability approach to a person's advantage is concerned with evaluating it in terms of his or her actual liberty to achieve various valuable functionings as a part of living. The capability of a person reflects the alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve, and from which s/he can choose one collection. The approach is based on a view of living as a combination of various 'doings and beings', with quality of life to be assessed

in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings<sup>2</sup>. What the author is trying to raise, we assume is that there is something called 'functioning as being' reflected in the following- 'beings and doings'- which leads to a difference in terms of the ability to function and the requirements for performing the function. Reflected as this is in one of her statements that 'human beings have widely varying needs for resources, and any adequate definition of who is 'better off' and 'worse off' must reflect that fact<sup>3</sup>'. The above model of human functioning raises, explains Subramaniam, the following three propositions<sup>4</sup>: the first proposition is the extension of Sen's conceptualization of capability building to achieve valuable functionings to include the institutional and organizational resources as well as collective ideas available for effective action; the second proposition concerns the 'processes' that individuals experience within groups; the courage to articulate and share experiences, as well as make decisions; the third proposition suggests a link between the individual and the collective. Rather than developing on each

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid p 5

The author's assumption is based on the Amartya Sen's claim that resources are nothing more than the sources with an important role to play in human functioning. And functioning represents the various parts of a human personality that enables one to perform (or assists in managing) certain things. This is what the

Capabilities approach is all about.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid 7

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 6-7

<sup>1</sup> Subramaniam, Mangala, Capability Building as Potential to Protest Gender and Caste Injustice: Poor Women in Rural India, *Theory in Action*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (January 2009).

of the three described, we dwell into the last of the three propositions, as it is this which leads more directly towards the functioning of a being that has its direct correlation with the consciousness raising programme. The third concept is mediated by the denomination of protest, which gives an individual the capability to protest. With this comes into being the collective consciousness, with a social aim. Individually one can, says Subramaniam, question the status quo, the existing norms and collectively, these individual actors can participate actively in decision-making processes that go a long way in bringing long term social change.

The following few examples from different sources throw light on efficiency of consciousness raising programmes. Consciousness-raising as an exercise involves different mechanisms that prove instrumental in reaching a particular goal. We begin with (and rely only on) few examples, unique in their ways, from Latin American world. Thomas J La Bella has said that the history of Latin America as well as the Caribbean is full of examples which magnify the innovative tradition of the country. One of the most primary amongst this category is the consciousness raising programmes. By confronting family, education, labor and social problems and by generating their own formulations of reality and community activity, the participants are expected to achieve heightened or transformed consciousness<sup>5</sup>. For the author consciousness rising is often associated with studying the various forms of oppression and formulating ways and means as alternatives for the securing a just society<sup>6</sup>.

Karen Mokate<sup>7</sup> has understood the consciousness raising as a part of participatory mechanisms being developed by the state. The better one is able to get over these forces, the better is the all round social development of the individual. The author has also prepared a table elucidating on the various kinds of barriers to women's development, thereby also offering various devices to overcome these barriers. The first part of Nussbaum's book '*Sex and Social Justice*' deals with the contestation between the demand for religious liberty and demand for upholding existing laws within various religious traditions. In the Indian context Nussbaum has relied on the very famous Shah Bano case to present a clearer picture of the contradictory situation, situation wherein government actors play a pacifying role thus siding with the representatives of the conservative upholders of religious laws. There are various such international examples given by the author to highlight the lag in public policy making. It is important to bring to light these international issues, as without these we will fail to acknowledge and understand the kinds of inequalities,

<sup>5</sup> Bella, J La Thomas, From Consciousness Raising to Popular Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, Comparative Education Review, *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (May 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Bella through this article has tried to invoke the meaning of consciousness raising as an activity in which the social reality of each oppressed or the subordinated class is effectively reflected. And the forum that is being used to highlight this reality is open discussions. In these discussions every person discusses on the problems s/he had to face, thus leading also to a better understanding of different kinds of issues affecting a segment.

<sup>7</sup> Mokate, Karen (ed), *Women's Participation in Social Development- Experiences from Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean*, Free Hand Press (2004).

atrocities that religion often promote<sup>8</sup>. The approach to studying this discourse is incomplete without a reference to the kinds of violations individual rights suffer, evident as this is once again from the kind of discrimination Shah Bano suffered during her fight for alimony. The problems get manifold in a country like India where there exists regional variations along with political and cultural differences. Then there is another situation where religions attain political mileage, thus becoming a very important source of political power<sup>9</sup>.

The case of India and Bangladesh present the most interesting case as they are countries with liberal constitution though the constitutional order allowed the religions to 'take part charge of the legal system'<sup>10</sup>. This further leads to a divisive political order. What best clarifies this statement is this quote: decisive action on untouchability has created a solid social consensus in the next generation; indecisiveness on civil law has made the question of uniform code a political football for fractious and self-interested actors. At this point it is virtually impossible for liberals and feminists to support a uniform civil code, given that the cause of the code is now championed by the BJP as part of their projected assault on the equality of Muslim citizens<sup>11</sup>. Allowing groups (religious) to operate when it comes to devising the course of law definitely runs the risk of violating the rights of those individuals who are not and can't be a part of this grouping<sup>12</sup>. In Shah Bano case the groups tried hard to prevent her from receiving the monthly maintenance<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Nussbaum, Martha, *Sex & Social Justice*, Oxford University Press (1999), p 85.

Another reason for this concern is the fact that these kinds of issues do not always receive the kind of attention they require to achieve success in terms of condemning such beliefs and practices. Nussbaum as a liberal is trying to condemn these systems of practices, shaped as these are without any liberal motivations (tradition). Western liberals also, according to her, have failed to take appropriate action against this because of 'political hopelessness', emanating from the lack of support they sense for these concerns (though these liberals do not hesitate in criticizing secular governments that perpetuate such atrocities yet calmness prevails when it comes to raising voice against the religious leaders and groups). At the moment we do not aim to elaborate on the sort of linkage Nussbaum has tried to establish between liberalism and religious tolerance. Our concern here is to state the positive role that public policy can play in putting an end to the religious fanaticism.

<sup>9</sup> This kind of fight for political gains apart from violating human rights also lead us, says Nussbaum, to criticize the concept of human being because it is they who put up this fight for corrupt political aspirations. But the task at hand is to see in what ways these influences come in the way of safe and secure human rights.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 104

This has led to the prevalence of religious codes in the Constitution which should be reformed in order to be in conformity to Fundamental Rights enshrined in the constitution. Within these religious codes there are family codes which in every possible way deny rights to women. Shah Bano's situation reflects, within this very context, her worst situation, as being a Muslim denied her the right to approach other court of law. Her situation would have been different had she been a Hindu, says Nussbaum. There is also a denial of equal liberty of conscience which pervades one to define oneself as an atheist or theist.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid 106

<sup>12</sup> Similar thing happened in Sareetha's case in Andhra Pradesh when the Supreme Court, after nullifying Judge Choudhary's order defending equal rights, upheld the Hindu Marriage Act. Or even the privilege, clarifies Nussbaum, given to religion over non religion, in the US, where there are religious reasons for exemption from military service. Jews are also refused entry in some Catholic Churches.

<sup>13</sup> There are also eminent people within these traditions who support a constitutional order binding on all the citizens of the state. Example Muslim lawyer Chowdhary Hyder Hussain who, in as early as 1949, argued for a uniform civil code, thus calling the separate code a part of British system; or Muslim jurist M C Chagla who enumerated on the binding character of a

It is necessary to invoke the category of sex equality enshrined in the constitution in order to evade these violations. Failure to address the above also leads to a denial of equal liberty of conscience along with a violation of basic rights.

“I am not very happy myself with taking rights as the starting point. The notion of a basic human right seems to me obscure enough and I would rather come at it from the perspective of basic human capabilities. I would prefer capabilities to do the work, and if we are going to have a language or rhetoric of rights, to have it delivered from them, rather than the other way round, commented Bernard Williams on Sen’s 1987 Tanner Lectures<sup>14</sup>.”

There is great diversity when it comes to the theory on rights. For Nussbaum the best way of understanding rights theory is through combined capabilities<sup>15</sup>. Various rights are considered as capacities to function. This also makes the practical implementation of the various rights possible, unlike a situation where the rights exist simply on paper. This definition is important in one more sense. Rights as sources of capability to function also make possible the enactment of choice and autonomy in individual’s life. Thus there is an emphasis on individual liberty made possible by the implementation of rights with choice and autonomy as its central principle. The language of rights as capabilities is interesting when seen as per Nussbaum’s analysis because the latter’s analysis makes it possible to consider rights as a set of mechanism dealing directly with individual’s sphere of choice<sup>16</sup> (unlike the illiberal notion which presents rights simply as a set of things to be worked upon).

“Thus the primary role for the capabilities account remains that of providing political principles that can underlie national constitution; and this means that practical implementation must remain to a large extent the job of citizens in each nation<sup>17</sup>.” This quote reiterates the often repeated strand about the importance of the language of rights in public discourse. The language is important to put pressure on the government that does not give rights to the citizens to which they are entitled. This situation is more horrifying for women of

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constitutional legal system on each and every citizen of the country irrespective of the religion, other differences (Nussbaum).

<sup>14</sup> Nussbaum Martha, *Women and Human Development- The capabilities Approach (The Seeley Lectures)*, Cambridge University Press (2001) p 97.

The quote by Bernard Williams at best for Nussbaum presents the uncomplicated view on the relationship between rights and capabilities, an issue which she has herself addressed in this book.

<sup>15</sup> One view treats rights as the basis of rationality, sentience; another deals with the relationship between

rights and duties; for the third group rights are sources of either group rights or individual rights. There are

many more views like this thus making the sphere of rights a complicated sphere. As a result of this many complicated theoretical situation rights are themselves assumed as complex and unclear.

<sup>16</sup> Rights as direct have been discussed (by Nussbaum) as dealing with fundamental rights which guarantee

to every individual the rights to, let’s say choose by virtue of being a human being. These fundamental

rights are urgent set of functions which lay claim on the equality of human beings to function with full

capability.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid 105

various countries including India, who are denied the capability to function. The universal conception of capabilities with its stress also on the system of rights is an excellent guide to solve this problem. Reliance on this approach also gives the deprived sections control over their livelihood, thus enabling full human functioning. The case in point is of Vasanthi and Jayamma, both of whom were denied capabilities, the resultant being that they even lost a conception of the self. Jayamma suffered a lot more than Vasanthi, but in the end it was Jayamma who did better. Why? Because Jayamma was never taught to be timid, docile, submissive, thus she appeared stronger, aware also about issues. This contrasting example at best explains the meaning of capabilities and its importance in human lives<sup>18</sup>. The GNP per capita in countries never takes into account these kinds of existing rights violations or inequalities<sup>19</sup>. The calculation process always ignores the quality of life, which includes within itself various sources of human good like health and health services, access to education, freedom, infant mortality, gender relations etc<sup>20</sup>. One of the better ways to interrogate on this deprivation is interviewing people, asking them how satisfied they are with their current education status, state of health etc. This argument beings both human function as a capability, which is also universal, and the particular perception of the person together<sup>21</sup>.

The example will explain this better. There was in Bangladesh a literacy campaign in the eighties. The agency involved in the programme at first distributed adequate literacy materials to women, with cooperation from local government, assuming this measure to be sufficient enough to withhold the existing inadequacies. But all this to no avail because the situation demanded much more than this, there was a need to go deep down the system to get a magnified picture of the particular situation. Over the years the situation changed as now they started mingling with the local women trying to assess the particularities of their situation. Various cooperatives were being set up to present an efficient picture of the situation which further made possible the realization of their capabilities. The particular perception here is the ways and methods this group devised to analyze the situation of women, which in the beginning failed but gained heightened success in the later stages.

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<sup>18</sup> While the government did not do much for Vasanthi, Jayamma received tremendous support from the government. The reason may be that she was aware of her rights but the other wasn’t. Irrespective of this the government has to bring within its sphere of work these issues, issues that simply deny an individual a conception of a self as well as importance of health, nutrition. Today even Vasanthi is an enlightened woman aware about different issues.

<sup>19</sup> The criterion used for evaluating the standard of lives is simply the presence of more money and resources, while factors like access to various social sector services are absolutely ignored. This judging and evaluation leads to an improper analysis hampering those who will to study, including policy makers and social scientists, this phenomenon.

<sup>20</sup> Nussbaum, Martha (1992), *Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism*, *Political Theory*, Volume (20) 2.

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