

# Amartya Sen

## “Property and Hunger” (1988)



Born 1933 (in present-day West Bengal).  
Ph.D. in Economics (Trinity College, Cambridge).  
Professor of Philosophy and Economics at Harvard  
University.  
Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998 for his work in  
welfare economics.

# Thinking About Famine

## **THREE POSSIBLE DIAGNOSES OF FAMINE:**

(1) Too many people (Malthus, Hardin, Ehrlich)

**Solution:** Let the people starve.

(2) Untapped food-growing potential (Cornucopians)

**Solution:** Grow more food.

(3) Distorted valuation of rights (Sen)

**Solution:** Re-think how we value rights.

# Thinking About Rights

We previously considered **kinds** of rights, classifying them as *in personam* or *in rem*, and as positive or negative (active & passive).

Now, Sen is considering the **status** of rights in general, and whether different kinds of rights have different statuses. Sen introduces a new distinction: **rights as goals**.

# Three Ways We Value Rights

## RIGHTS AS...

- (1) Instrumentally valuable (utilitarian view)
- (2) Intrinsically valuable, as **constraints**  
— typically negative rights, and they are **inviolable**
- (3) Intrinsically valuable, as **goals**  
— typically can be violated in deference to more important goals (i.e., **not** inviolable)

How do we value property rights?

As intrinsically valuable, but not inviolable; to be waived or abridged if they interfere with more important goals.

# Historical Famines

**Irish famine of 1840s.** Food moved from Ireland to England (because of land ownership).

**Great Bengal famine of 1943.** The food supply was not bad, and was in fact much higher than the two previous years (when there was no famine). Three million died, mainly in rural areas, due to economic shifts that affected the purchasing power of rural people.

**Ethiopian famine of 1973.** The average per capita food was adequate. A local drought in the Hollo province robbed those farmers of food and income. In fact, some food moved out of the province.

**Bangladesh famine of 1974.** This famine occurred in a peak food year. Inflation was outrunning wages. Several occupation-groups lost their jobs.

# Where do rights come from?

**Property rights** ... have been championed for a long time and are thoroughly institutionalized and protected by law.

**The right not to be hungry** ... is a relatively recent idea.

**Amartya Sen:** “The right not to be hungry is not asserted as a recognition of an institutional right that already exists, as the right to property typically is. The assertion is primarily a moral claim as to what *should* be valued, and what institutional structure we *should* aim for, and try to guarantee if feasible.”

# The Poor are Irresponsible!

**“People need to take more responsibility for their well-being and that of their families.”**

**But...** Who is responsible when

- **World coffee prices plummet, and now you can't sell your only cash crop and so can no longer buy food?**
- **Energy prices rise, suddenly making fertilizer inputs for your crops unaffordable?**
- **Changes in weather (too little rain/too much rain) destroy several seasons of crops in a row?**

**[Changes affecting entire economic sectors or geographic regions]**