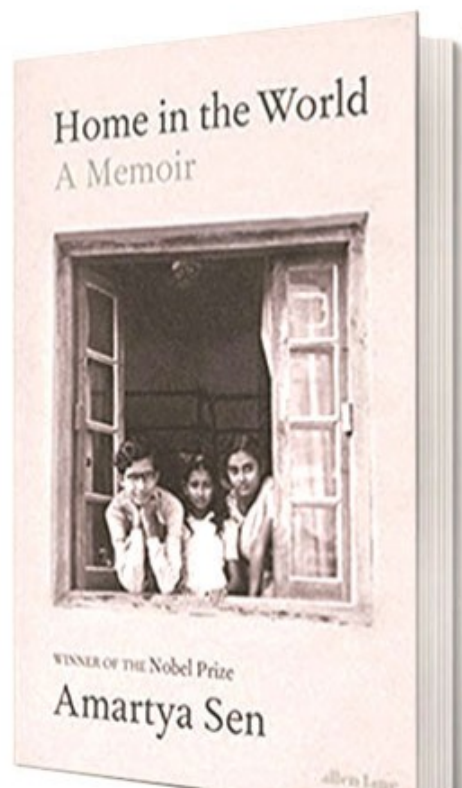


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NEWAGE

Amartya Sen's agony

Abdul Bayes | Published at 12:00am on April 07, 2022



Amartya Sen and his *Home in the World*. — The Financial Express

IN HIS riveting autobiography *Home in the World*, Amartya Sen provides an account of his achievements in life rallied around subjects that he was reasonably comfortable with. Interestingly enough, in the biography, he also mentioned about his 'misfortunes' in which he had 'no skill whatever'. It would therefore be pertinent to point out to our readers the domains of his 'comparative disadvantage'.

It starts with practical demonstrations in schools. It is well-known that the school in Santiniketan, where he was sent to study, had put emphasis on both theoretical and practical learning. There he discovered his serious deficiency in carpentry when his classmates could make beautiful small boats managing to bend wooden planks in the required way but he 'could not progress beyond making a primitive soap-holder, and even that was not an object of beauty'.

Another area of Amartya Sen's sordid performance was singing — a very important subject in the Santiniketan curriculum. Of course, he had been an ardent admirer of music since childhood, but, disconcertingly, he himself could not sing at all. But the music teacher Kanika Bandopadhyay — a wonderful singer whom they called Mohordi — did not accept his deficiency in music and even rejected it as an excuse on the part of Amartya Sen to abstain from showing up in music classes. That music teacher also consoled him saying, 'Everyone has a talent for singing, it is just a matter of practice'.

Encouraged and uplifted by her kind words, Amartya Sen embarked upon some quite serious practice wondering the fact that he was sure about his efforts, but wondered what he was achieving. However, after a month or so of practice, Mohordi tested his performance again and then with a defeat looming large on her face, told him 'Amartya, you need not come to the music classes'. Pitted against this pale performance of his in music, Amartya Sen now recollects that Santiniketan produced many specialists in Rabindra Sangeet (Tagore songs) including, among others, Nilima Sen, Suchitra Mitra and Rezwana Choudhury (Bannya) from Bangladesh. Anyway, that failure perhaps could not fuel his frustration further when he says, 'I remain very glad that it is possible to enjoy music without having to produce it oneself'.

In the realm of sports, for which Santiniketan was generous to leave a lot of time, his performance was no less pathetic. The favourite game for the boys was football in which he had no skill, 'I was no magician with the hockey stick either. But I could play badminton with pass-grade skill and my record in cricket was close to adequate. I was tolerable batsman, but not a bowler, and I was quite hopeless in fielding.'

His bravery batsmanship needs a bit broad view. While arriving in Santiniketan during Puja vacation, he had a time to join practice sessions of a cricket team of his age by the courtesy of his maternal cousin Baren, who introduced him with the captain of the team. When the captain bowled to him to test his batting skill, the ball that Amartya Sen hit struck him hard on his nose causing a lot of bleeding. 'While nursing his injury, I heard the captain tell Baren da, "your brother can certainly join my team, but tell him to aim at the boundary, not at the bowler's nose"'. He promised to do so and celebrated his entry into the life of his new school.

But seemingly there was some light shown at the end of his long tunnel of sports career when he once became champion in sack race on the day of India's independence, on August 15, 1947. Since the only sport offered on the celebration was sack race, 'I had the extraordinary experience of emerging as the sports champion on that momentous day. That prize was the peak of my athletic glory.'

After independence, Amartya Sen had the opportunity to join National Cadet Corps — a voluntary military training for the civilians — which, in his words, was an opportunity for him to reveal another inaptitude. His military life was allegedly a dismal failure not so much on account of his incapability of doing the assigned jobs as it was to the inability of listening to the lectures delivered by officers commanding the participants including Amartya. Immediately after joining they were offered a lecture entitled 'The Bullet' by a Subadar Major. He told the trainees that 'the bullet accelerates after leaving the rifle and then, after a while, it starts to slow down, and that it is best to hit the object to be struck when the bullet is travelling at its maximum speed'. At that point Amartya Sen raised his hand and offered some Newtonian mechanics to the Subadar Major arguing that the bullet could not possibly accelerate after leaving the rifle since there is no new force to make it gain velocity.

The Subadar gave a fiery look at him and said, 'Are you saying I am wrong?' Amartya Sen was going to say yes, but refrained on the plea that the bullet could possibly accelerate if its rotatory movement could somehow be converted into a linear forward movement. The Subadar cast an angry glance and said, 'Rotatory movement? Is that what you are saying?' But before Amartya Sen could clear the muddled point, he ordered him to raise his arms above his head, with the unloaded rifle held high, and run around the field five times.

If that was an inauspicious beginning, the ending wasn't good either when Amartya Sen fell from the fire pan to the fire with subsequent developments. Eighteen of them had written a letter of protest to the same Subadar Major complaining that there was too much drill and too little rifle practice. He called them to his house and clarified that any letter signed by more than one person is considered by the military to be a mutiny. 'So,' he said, 'I have two options. Either you can withdraw the letter and I will tear it up, or I shall have to send you all to be court-marshalled.' Frightened by the upcoming fire, fifteen of the complainants withdrew their names (one of them later explained that being court-marshalled he meant being summarily tried and shot).

The Subadar Major told Amartya Sen and his associate 'mutineers' that he would report to the higher authorities, but would dismiss them immediately 'without honour and without waiting for the official punishment to be communicated.'

Amartya Sen laments, 'I have not yet heard from the higher authorities, but that was the end of my military career.'

Abdul Bayes is a former professor of economics and vice-chancellor, Jahangirnagar University; currently an adjunct faculty, East West University.

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Editor: **Nurul Kabir**, Published by the Chairman, Editorial Board ASM Shahidullah Khan on behalf of Media New Age Ltd. 30 Tejgaon Industrial Area, Dhaka-1208 Phone: 880-2-8170450-56 (PABX), Fax: 880-2-8170457

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