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Article

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### HUMAN DIGNITY, SOCIAL INEQUALITY, AND THE CAPABILITY APPROACH IN AMARTYA SEN'S PHILOSOPHY

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#### Abstract

Against dominant development paradigms that equate human well-being with income growth or resource accumulation, Amartya Sen advances a normative vision centered on substantive freedoms and human agency. Although Sen does not explicitly theorize human dignity as a foundational concept his capability approach is a framework for evaluating well being ad development, This study argued that dignity is implicitly embedded in his understanding of capability, agency, and freedom. Human dignity, on this account, is realized not merely through formal rights or material resources but through the genuine ability of individuals to lead lives they have reason to value. The article conceptualizes social inequality as disparities in capability sets rather than as differences in income or utility. It demonstrates how structural factors such as gender discrimination, poor health systems, educational deprivation, and political exclusion systematically undermine human dignity by restricting individuals' opportunities for functioning and participation. By foregrounding heterogeneity and context-specific conversion factors, Sen's framework offers a more ethically sensitive account of inequality that acknowledges diverse human needs and social conditions. The article concludes by highlighting the policy and ethical implications of Sen's philosophy for development practice, social justice, and human rights discourse, particularly in contexts marked by deep and persistent inequalities.

**Keywords:** Human Dignity, Social Inequality, Capability Approach, Freedom, Amartya Sen.

#### Introduction

Amartya Sen's philosophy links human dignity and social inequality through his Capability Approach. He argued that true inequality is a deprivation of people's fundamental freedoms and opportunities to live lives they have reason to value. In this context he shifts the focus of

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incapability from traditional metrics like income to the actual abilities individuals possess. Contemporary debates on human dignity and social inequality have intensified in response to the paradoxical coexistence of unprecedented global wealth and enduring, and in many contexts deepening, forms of deprivation and exclusion. While economic globalization and technological advancement have generated significant aggregate growth, they have also exposed structural inequalities that challenge the assumption that economic progress necessarily translates into human well-being (Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2022). Within philosophical, ethical, and policy-oriented discourses, human dignity has emerged as a central normative concern, invoked to contest social arrangements that reduce individuals to mere instruments of production or consumption. Increasingly, scholars have argued that social inequality should be understood not merely as income disparity but as a multidimensional phenomenon involving unequal access to health, education, political participation, and social recognition (Sen, 1999).

Amartya Sen's core philosophical argument, the Capability Approach, redefines development and well-being not by income or utility, but by people's real freedoms (capabilities) to achieve valuable functionings (like being healthy, educated, or participating in community). He critiques utilitarianism for ignoring individual differences and resource-focused views (like Rawls') for overlooking conversion issues (e.g., how disability affects turning resources into functionings). Sen argues development should expand these real freedoms, emphasizing individual agency, choice, and the ability to lead flourishing lives. The primary objective of this study is to critically examine the relationship between human dignity and social inequality through the lens of Amartya Sen's capability approach. Specifically, the article seeks to: (i) elucidate the implicit conception of human dignity embedded in Sen's philosophy; (ii) analyze social inequality as a disparity in capability sets rather than merely in income or resources; and (iii) assess the ethical and policy implications of Sen's framework for addressing persistent inequality in contemporary societies.

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

**Human Dignity: Philosophical and Ethical Perspective:** Human dignity remains a core concept across moral philosophy, human rights theory, and critical social thought, yet its meaning is contested in current academic literature. Analyses in contemporary philosophy emphasize both intrinsic worth and social recognition as essential dimensions of dignity. In recent scholarship, human dignity is defined as an inherent moral worth that belongs to all persons by virtue of their humanity and grounds fundamental ethical and political duties (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2024). This foundational understanding resonates with long-standing philosophical accounts and incorporates contemporary concerns about social identity, recognition, and relationality. Under this view, dignity is not only a static metaphysical quality but also entails dynamic social norms that govern how persons ought to be treated within communities (Killmister, 2020). Contemporary philosophical literature further distinguishes intrinsic dignity the idea that every human being has worth regardless of circumstances from social recognition dignity, which emerges through social norms, institutional practices, and mutual respect. Recognition dignity emphasizes that societal practices and structures either affirm or violate human dignity by enabling or obstructing the realization of a person's self-worth in social contexts. In this respect, human dignity functions not merely as an abstract ideal but as a normative criterion for assessing social practices and injustices (Gilabert, 2024). This dual perspective responds to concerns that dignity can become hollow if treated purely as a metaphysical attribute divorced from real-

world inequalities. By foregrounding social recognition, contemporary theorists highlight the importance of social participation, voice, and respect as constitutive of dignity in ways that intersect with structural disadvantages.

### **Social Inequality**

Social inequality refers to systematic disparities in the distribution of opportunities, resources, and social conditions that shape individuals' life chances. Recent scholarship underscores that inequality is multidimensional, encompassing economic, social, political, and cultural dimensions. These forms of inequality are interdependent and often mutually reinforcing in ways that are not reducible to simple income differences. Contemporary analyses emphasize that "inequality of what?" is a central question for social theory and policy, with answers that highlight opportunity sets and substantive freedoms rather than resources alone. Following the capability approach, inequality is best understood as deprivation of opportunities specifically, unequal access to capabilities, which are the real freedoms individuals have to pursue lives they value. This view challenges resource-based and utility-based metrics by shifting the focus from what people possess to what they can actually do and be (capabilities), thereby capturing the normative significance of inequality as a barrier to human dignity and freedom.

### **Core Concepts and Structure of Sen's Capability Approach**

**Functionings and Capability:** When evaluating well-being, Sen argued that the most important thing is to consider what people are actually able to be and do. The commodities or wealth people have or their mental reactions (utility) are an inappropriate focus because they provide only limited or indirect information about how well a life is going. Sen illustrated his point with the example of a standard bicycle. This has the characteristics of 'transportation' but whether it will actually provide transportation will depend on the characteristics of those who try to use it. It might be considered a generally useful tool for most people to extend their mobility, but it obviously will not do that for a person without legs. Even if that person, by some quirk, finds the bicycle delightful, we should nevertheless be able to note within our evaluative system that she still lacks transportation. Nor does this mental reaction show that the same person would not appreciate transportation if it were really available to her. The Capability Approach focuses directly on the quality of life that individuals are actually able to achieve. This quality of life is analyzed in terms of the core concepts of 'functionings' and 'capability'. In Sen analysis Functionings are states of 'being and doing' such as being well-nourished, having shelter. They should be distinguished from the commodities employed to achieve them (as 'bicycling' is distinguishable from 'possessing a bike'). Capability refers to the set of valuable functionings that a person has effective access to. Thus, a person's capability represents the effective freedom of an individual to choose between different functioning combinations – between different kinds of life – that she has reason to value. In later work, Sen referred to 'capabilities' in the plural (or even 'freedoms') instead of a single capability set, and this is also common in the wider capability literature. This allows analysis to focus on sets of functionings related to particular aspects of life, for example, the capabilities of literacy, health, or political freedom. The capability approach, originally developed by Amartya Sen and further refined by subsequent scholars, constitutes a normative framework for evaluating human well-being, social arrangements, and development outcomes. In recent scholarship, the approach is increasingly recognized as a flexible yet robust alternative to income-based, utility-based, and resource-centered

models of social evaluation, particularly in contexts marked by persistent inequality and dignity deficits (Robeyns, 2023; Sen, 2020).

### **Freedom as both the Means and End of Development**

A defining feature of Sen's capability approach is its conception of freedom as both the primary means and the ultimate end of development. In this view, development is not reducible to economic growth or institutional expansion but consists fundamentally in the enlargement of human freedoms political, social, economic, and cultural (Sen, 2020). Freedoms function instrumentally by enabling individuals to pursue valued goals and intrinsically by constituting an essential component of a dignified human life. Recent scholarship highlights the continued relevance of this dual conception of freedom in assessing development policies and social justice claims. Empirical studies demonstrate that economic growth without corresponding expansion of political freedoms, social protections, or access to public goods often exacerbates inequality and undermines human dignity (UNDP, 2023). By contrast, policies that prioritize health, education, democratic participation, and social security tend to expand capability sets in ways that enhance both individual agency and collective well-being. Understanding freedom as an end also situates the capability approach within broader ethical debates about human dignity. Freedom, as substantive opportunity, affirms individuals as agents capable of practical reasoning and choice, rather than passive recipients of welfare or policy interventions (Nussbaum, 2023).

### **Valuation: Which Functionings Matter for the Good Life?**

Sen argues that the correct focus for evaluating how well off people are is their capability to live a life we have reason to value, not their resource wealth or subjective well-being. But in order to begin to *evaluate* how people are performing in terms of capability, we first need to determine which functionings matter for the good life and how much, or at least we need to specify a valuation procedure for determining this. One way of addressing the problem is to specify a list of the constituents of the flourishing life, and do this on philosophical grounds (Martha Nussbaum does this for her Capability Theory of Justice). Sen rejected this approach because he argued that it denies the relevance of the values people may come to have and the role of democracy (Sen 2004b). Philosophers and social scientists may provide helpful ideas and arguments, but the legitimate source of decisions about the nature of the life we have reason to value must be the people concerned. Sen therefore proposes a social choice exercise requiring both public reasoning and democratic procedures of decision-making. One reason that social scientists and philosophers are so keen to specify a list is that it can be used as an index: by ranking all the different constituents of the flourishing life with respect to each other it would allow easier evaluation of how well people are doing.

Sen's social choice exercise is unlikely to produce collective agreement on a complete ranking of different functionings, if only because of what Rawls called the 'fact of reasonable disagreement'. But Sen argues that substantial action-guiding agreement is possible. First, different valuational perspectives may 'intersect' to reach similar judgments about some issues, though by way of different arguments. Second, such agreements may be extended by introducing 'ranges' of weights rather than cardinal numbers. Sen does suggest that in many cases a sub-set of crucially important capabilities associated with basic needs may be relatively easily identified and agreed upon as urgent moral and political priorities. These 'basic capabilities', such as education, health, nutrition, and shelter up to minimally adequate levels, do not exhaust the resources of the capability approach, only the easy agreement on what counts as being scandalously deprived. They may be particularly helpful

in assessing the extent and nature of poverty in developing countries. However, taking a basic capability route has implications for how the exercise of evaluating individuals' capability can proceed, since it can only evaluate how well people's lives are going in terms of the basics.

### **Evaluation: What Capability do People have to Live a Good Life?**

Evaluating capability is a second order exercise concerned with mapping the set of valuable functionings people have real access to. Since it takes the value of functionings as given, its conclusions will reflect any ambiguity in the valuation stage. Assessing capability is more informationally demanding than other accounts of advantage since it not only takes a much broader view of what well-being achievement consists in but also tries to assess the freedom people actually have to choose high quality options. This is not a purely procedural matter of adding up the number of options available, since the option to purchase a tenth brand of washing powder has a rather different significance than the option to vote in democratic elections. For example, Sen argued that the eradication of malaria from an area enhances the capability of individuals living there even though it doesn't increase the number of options those individuals have (since they don't have the 'option' to live in a malarial area anymore). Because the value of a capability set represents a person's effective freedom to live a valuable life in terms of the value of the functionings available to that individual, when the available functionings are improved, so is the person's effective freedom.

The capability approach in principle allows a very wide range of dimensions of advantage to be positively evaluated ('what capabilities does this person have?'). This allows an open diagnostic approach to what is going well or badly in people's lives that can be used to reveal unexpected shortfalls or successes in different dimensions, without aggregating them all together into one number. The informational focus can be tightened depending on the purpose of the evaluation exercise and relevant valuational and informational constraints. For example, if the approach is limited to considering 'basic capabilities' then the assessment is limited to a narrower range of dimensions and attempts to assess deprivation – the shortfall from the minimal thresholds of those capabilities – which will exclude evaluation of how well the lives of those above the threshold are going. In Sen's (Sen 1999, 70-71) argument the Capability Approach can be used to examine the underlying determinants of the relationship between people and commodities, including the following:

- i. Individual physiology, such as the variations associated with illnesses, disability, age, and gender. In order to achieve the same functionings, people may have particular needs for non-standard commodities such as prosthetics for a disability or they may need more of the standard commodities such as additional food in the case of intestinal parasites. Note that some of these disadvantages, such as blindness, may not be fully 'correctable' even with tailored assistance.
- ii. Local environment diversities, such as climate, epidemiology, and pollution. These can impose particular costs such as more or less expensive heating or clothing requirements.
- iii. Variations in social conditions, such as the provision of public services such as education and security, and the nature of community relationships, such as across class or ethnic divisions.
- iv. Differences in relational perspectives. Conventions and customs determine the commodity requirements of expected standards of behaviour and consumption, so that relative income poverty in a rich community may translate into absolute poverty in the

space of capability. For example, local requirements of 'the ability to appear in public without shame' in terms of acceptable clothing may vary widely.

- v. Distribution within the family – distributional rules within a family determining, for example, the allocation of food and health-care between children and adults, males and females.

The diagnosis of capability failures, or significant interpersonal variations in capability, directs attention to the relevant causal pathways responsible. Note that many of these interpersonal variations will also influence individuals' abilities to access resources to begin with. For example, the physically handicapped often have more expensive requirements to achieve the same capabilities, such as mobility, while at the same time they also have greater difficulty earning income in the first place. In sum, Sen's core argument is that social arrangements should be evaluated not by aggregate wealth or average utility, but by the extent to which they expand the "substantive freedoms" of all people. In his distinction between Capabilities and Functionings, he explained the later in terms "doings and beings" of a person (e.g., being well-nourished, having shelter, participating in the community). While the former refers to the real opportunities or the "feasible set" of these functionings from which a person can choose. In his analysis of human dignity Sen emphasizes that individuals have different abilities to convert resources into actual well-being due to factors like age, gender, genetics, social background, and location. Recognizing this diversity is crucial for any theory of social justice.

### **Human Dignity in Sen's Thought**

Human dignity occupies a significant, though largely implicit, place within Amartya Sen's philosophical framework. Unlike theories that explicitly foreground dignity as a foundational moral principle, Sen's approach embeds dignity within a broader evaluative concern for freedom, agency, and the conditions that enable individuals to lead lives they have reason to value. This implicit treatment has generated extensive scholarly discussion, particularly regarding whether Sen's capability approach can adequately ground normative claims about dignity and justice in the absence of an explicit dignity doctrine. Sen deliberately refrained from offering a formal or metaphysical definition of human dignity. His reluctance stems from a broader methodological commitment to pluralism and public reasoning, which resists grounding ethical evaluation in a single, comprehensive moral doctrine (Sen, 2020). Instead of positing dignity as an abstract intrinsic property, Sen situates normative concern within observable and assessable conditions of human life - namely, the presence or absence of substantive freedoms.

### **Dignity as Capability, Agency, and Freedom**

Within Sen's framework, dignity is most plausibly understood as grounded in capability, agency, and freedom. Capabilities represent the real opportunities individuals possess to achieve valued ways of being and doing, while agency reflects their ability to pursue goals they have reason to value (Sen, 2020). Contemporary interpreters emphasize that dignity, on this account, consists not merely in survival or minimal welfare but in the possession of genuine choices and meaningful participation in social life (Nussbaum, 2023). Freedom plays a dual role in the conception of dignity. Substantive freedom is intrinsically valuable because it affirms individuals as autonomous agents, and it is instrumentally valuable because it enables the pursuit of other capabilities. Recent analyses highlight that when individuals are denied freedom through poverty, discrimination, or political exclusion, their dignity is

compromised even if basic needs are met (UNDP, 2023). Thus, dignity is violated not only by overt coercion or humiliation but also by social arrangements that systematically restrict agency and choice.

### **Respect for Persons Through Enabling Substantive Freedoms**

Sen's account of dignity places particular emphasis on respect for persons as agents rather than passive recipients of aid or policy interventions. Respect, in this sense, is expressed through social, political, and economic arrangements that expand individuals' substantive freedoms and enable their participation in shaping collective outcomes (Sen, 2020). This approach challenges paternalistic models of development that prioritize outcomes without regard for choice or voice. Recent ethical scholarship underscores that enabling substantive freedoms constitutes a practical expression of respect for human dignity, especially in contexts of structural inequality (Robeyns & Byskov, 2023). Policies that improve access to education, healthcare, political participation, and social security do more than enhance welfare; they affirm individuals' standing as equal members of society whose lives and choices matter. From this perspective, dignity is realized through institutional arrangements that support agency, rather than through abstract declarations alone. Sen's implicit conception of dignity differs in important ways from both rights-based and explicitly dignity-centered ethical frameworks. Rights-based approaches typically ground dignity in the possession of universal human rights and emphasize legal protection and entitlement (Habermas, 2020). While Sen acknowledges the importance of rights, he argues that formal recognition alone is insufficient if individuals lack the actual capabilities to exercise those rights meaningfully (Sen, 2020). Similarly, dignity-centered capability theories - most notably Martha Nussbaum's - explicitly ground the capability approach in a thick conception of human dignity and propose a fixed list of central capabilities necessary for a life worthy of human respect (Nussbaum, 2023). Sen diverges from this position by resisting definitive lists, favoring democratic deliberation and contextual judgment. Recent comparative analyses suggest that while Nussbaum's approach offers greater normative clarity, Sen's open-ended framework provides greater flexibility and sensitivity to pluralism (Robeyns, 2023). Taken together, Sen's treatment of dignity can be understood as relational, practical, and freedom-centered. Rather than anchoring dignity in abstract moral status alone, his approach evaluates social arrangements by their capacity to expand human agency and substantive freedoms. This conception provides a powerful normative lens for assessing social inequality, particularly in societies where formal rights coexist with profound capability deprivation.

### **Human Dignity and Freedom**

For Sen, human dignity is intrinsically linked to the ability to exercise agency and make reasoned choices about one's own life. A life without basic capabilities - such as the ability to be healthy, educated, and participate politically is one marked by deprivation and a lack of dignity.

- i. **Poverty as Capability Deprivation:** Poverty is seen not merely as a lack of income, but as a deprivation of basic capabilities. Living without access to clean water, food, healthcare, or education hinders people's ability to function and live with self-respect.
- ii. **Agency and Self-Respect:** The capability approach values individual agency and the freedom to pursue goals one has reason to value, not just the satisfaction of needs. The ability to form a conception of the good and reflect on one's life plan is a key aspect of a life with dignity.

- iii. **Social and Political Freedoms:** Civil and political rights are not secondary to economic development; they are essential instruments for promoting economic security and human dignity. A free press and democratic accountability, for example, empower citizens to demand public action and prevent disasters like famines.

### **Social Inequality through the Lens of Capabilities**

Amartya Sen's capability approach provides a normative framework for understanding social inequality as a matter of unequal substantive freedoms rather than merely differences in income or material resources. This perspective shifts attention from traditional economic measures to the actual opportunities available to individuals to lead lives they have reason to value (Sen, 2020; Robeyns, 2023). Inequality, on this view, is expressed in terms of unequal capability sets the differential ability of individuals and groups to achieve valued functionings due to variations in social, economic, political, and environmental conditions.

### **Inequality as Unequal Capability Sets**

Inequality is most appropriately assessed through the lens of capabilities, as these reflect what people can do and be in practice. Two individuals with similar incomes may experience vastly different life outcomes if their access to education, health, or political participation is constrained. Recent research emphasizes that measuring inequality requires examining the range of options genuinely available to people, which captures both deprivations and freedoms (UNDP, 2023; Nussbaum, 2023). This approach foregrounds opportunity inequality rather than merely resource or outcome inequality, revealing structural disadvantages that conventional metrics often obscure.

### **Gender, Disability, Education, and Health Inequalities**

Empirical studies highlight that inequalities are highly differentiated across social dimensions such as gender, disability, education, and health. Women, persons with disabilities, and marginalized ethnic groups frequently face systemic barriers that restrict their capabilities, from limited access to education and employment to exclusion from political participation and healthcare (World Bank, 2022; Robeyns & Byskov, 2023). In the health sector, for example, unequal access to quality care and nutrition directly constrains individuals' ability to function, reinforcing intergenerational cycles of deprivation. Similarly, educational inequalities limit future capabilities and agency, undermining both individual dignity and broader societal development (UNICEF, 2023). Recognizing these disparities underscores the moral imperative of assessing inequality through the capability lens.

### **The Role of Social Arrangements and Institutions**

Social arrangements and institutions play a central role in either mitigating or exacerbating inequality. Structural factors such as labor market policies, legal frameworks, social norms, and governance practices determine how resources and opportunities are converted into real capabilities (Sen, 2020; Robeyns, 2023). Institutions that fail to ensure equitable access to education, healthcare, or political participation systematically disadvantage certain groups, while inclusive institutions can enhance freedoms and promote social justice. The capability approach therefore directs attention to the institutional and systemic determinants of inequality, highlighting that ethical evaluation of social arrangements must consider their impact on human freedoms and dignity.

### **Public Reasoning and Democratic Participation as Corrective Mechanisms**

Sen emphasizes that addressing capability-based inequalities requires public reasoning and participatory democratic processes. Deliberative engagement enables communities to identify relevant capabilities, prioritize collective action, and hold institutions accountable for inequalities (Sen, 2020; Byskov, 2021). Democratic participation ensures that policies respond to lived realities rather than abstract models of welfare, allowing marginalized groups to influence decisions that affect their opportunities. Contemporary scholarship underscores that participatory mechanisms are not only instrumental for reducing inequality but also intrinsically linked to the realization of human dignity, as they recognize individuals as agents capable of shaping their own lives (Robeyns & Byskov, 2023; UNDP, 2024). Through this lens, social inequality is understood as a deprivation of substantive freedoms shaped by structural arrangements, systemic barriers, and the differential capacity to convert resources into valued functionings. Addressing inequality therefore entails not merely redistributing resources but actively expanding the capability sets of disadvantaged groups and fostering social and institutional environments that enable equitable participation and agency.

### **Toward an Integrated Account of Dignity and Equality**

Building on the preceding analyses of human dignity and social inequality, an integrated account situates both concepts within the framework of Amartya Sen's capability approach, emphasizing their mutual reinforcement in normative evaluation. Such an account underscores the ethical and policy significance of ensuring that all individuals possess the substantive freedoms necessary for a life of dignity.

### **Synthesizing Dignity and Capability as Mutually Reinforcing Concepts**

Human dignity and capabilities are conceptually and practically intertwined. Dignity, when understood relationally, is realized through the possession and exercise of substantive freedoms, which are captured by the notion of capability (Sen, 2020; Robeyns, 2023). Conversely, capabilities are normatively significant because they expand the conditions under which individuals can live lives consistent with dignity (Nussbaum, 2023). Contemporary scholarship highlights that treating dignity and capability as mutually reinforcing allows for a more nuanced assessment of inequality: individuals are not simply evaluated by material possessions or formal rights, but by the real opportunities available to them to exercise agency and participate meaningfully in social life (Byskov, 2021; UNDP, 2024). This integration also addresses critiques of both concepts when used separately. Dignity-focused frameworks risk abstraction if they ignore the material and institutional conditions necessary for its realization, while capability-centered approaches may understate the moral and symbolic significance of human worth. By synthesizing the two, scholars and policymakers can anchor social evaluation in both practical freedom and moral respect, yielding a robust framework for justice-sensitive development (Robeyns & Byskov, 2023).

### **Normative Foundations for Reducing Inequality**

The integrated framework provides a normative foundation for interventions aimed at reducing social inequality. Inequalities are morally significant not merely because they reflect differences in wealth or status, but because they restrict individuals' substantive freedoms and thereby compromise dignity (Sen, 2020; World Bank, 2022). Ethical reasoning, grounded in both capability and dignity, supports policies that expand access to education,

health, political participation, and social protections, particularly for historically marginalized groups. Recent empirical analyses confirm that such capability-enhancing interventions yield both human and social development gains, reinforcing the moral imperative to prioritize freedom and agency in policymaking (UNDP, 2024; UNICEF, 2023).

### **The Role of Ethics in Economic and Social Policy**

Ethics plays a central role in shaping economic and social policies that promote both dignity and equality. Policies guided solely by efficiency, growth, or utilitarian calculations often fail to address capability deprivation or the social conditions necessary for human flourishing. By contrast, an ethics-informed approach foregrounds agency, participatory decision-making, and equitable opportunity, ensuring that policy outcomes are not only materially beneficial but also morally legitimate (Robeyns, 2023; Nussbaum, 2023). Contemporary debates emphasize that ethical evaluation should inform the design of institutions, regulatory frameworks, and public programs, particularly in pluralistic societies, so that individuals' dignity is respected and substantive inequalities are actively mitigated (Sen, 2020; Byskov, 2021). Synthesizing dignity and capability provides a coherent theoretical and practical lens for addressing social inequality. It grounds normative claims in both the moral worth of persons and the real freedoms they can exercise, thereby offering an ethically robust foundation for development, social policy, and justice-oriented governance.

### **Addressing Social Inequality**

Sen argues that severe social inequality, often rooted in systemic barriers like racial and gender disparities, distorts power dynamics and hinders overall human development. In order to solve the problem of social inequality, he focused the role social institution and adaptive performance.

- i. **Role of Institutions:** He emphasizes the need for public policy and institutions to actively support the expansion of capabilities for all citizens, particularly the most vulnerable. This involves moving beyond formal rights to ensuring the actual, effective freedom for people to function well.
- ii. **Challenging Adaptive Preferences:** Sen highlights the problem of "adaptive preferences," where disadvantaged people adjust their desires and aspirations to their limited circumstances, which can mask the true extent of inequality. A focus on objective capabilities rather than subjective satisfaction helps to address this issue.

In summary, Amartya Sen's philosophy makes the case that social inequality is fundamentally an affront to human dignity because it deprives individuals of the *real freedom* to live fulfilling lives. True social justice requires ensuring an equal opportunity (capability) for all people to achieve the functionings they value.

### **Conclusion**

This article has examined the complex relationship between human dignity and social inequality through the lens of Amartya Sen's capability approach, highlighting both the theoretical and practical significance of integrating these concepts. The analysis began by clarifying human dignity as a concept encompassing both intrinsic worth and social recognition, and social inequality as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing economic, social, political, and cultural disparities. Drawing on Sen's framework, the study demonstrated that dignity is best understood as realized through substantive freedoms and

human agency, while inequality should be evaluated in terms of unequal capability sets rather than income alone.

The discussion of the capability approach emphasized the centrality of functionings, capabilities, and freedom as both the means and ends of development, highlighting the critical role of human agency and broad evaluative space in assessing well-being and justice. The article further explored the ways in which social arrangements, institutional structures, and participatory democratic processes shape capability distribution and, by extension, the realization of dignity. By situating dignity implicitly within capabilities and freedoms, Sen provides a framework for ethical evaluation that bridges moral philosophy, development studies, and social policy. The integrated account of dignity and equality presented in this article demonstrates how normative claims about justice can be grounded in both the moral worth of persons and the practical opportunities available to them. This approach underscores the ethical imperative for policies and institutions that expand capabilities, reduce structural inequalities, and enable meaningful participation in social and political life. In terms of scholarly contribution, the study advances understanding of human dignity as relational and practice-sensitive, offers a nuanced interpretation of social inequality as capability deprivation, and situates Sen's thought within contemporary debates on development ethics and social justice. By linking dignity, agency, and capabilities, the article provides a robust theoretical foundation for analyzing inequality and guiding policy interventions aimed at fostering equitable and dignified human development.

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