

REPLY ON PUBLISHED ARTICLE

ETHICAL AND ECONOMIC PROBLEMS WITH ELAHI'S PAPER 'FAD: SEN-BOWBRICK ENCOUNTER AND CONCEPTUAL COMPLEXITY'. A REPLY

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ABSTRACT

Elahi's paper 'FAD: Sen-Bowbrick Encounter and Conceptual Complexity' (Elahi, 2023) concluded that 'the controversy concerning Sen's FAD criticism seems more a semantic matter than an intellectual one'. Nothing could be further from the truth. My critique is confined to the causes of the Bengal famine of 1943. Amartya Sen's explanation is that there was adequate food in Bengal in 1943, but for various reasons, including a wartime boom and inflation, some people ate so much more than normal that there was not enough food for the rest and there was a famine in which millions died. I presented a vast amount of evidence that there was a major fall in the supply of the main food, rice. A famine was allowed to happen because the major decision makers chose to believe, without any evidence or contrary to the evidence, or pretended that they believed, that there was adequate food in Bengal. I presented thirteen distinct, independent, refutations of Sen, and showed that he had systematically misstated his facts. The argument is on fact, not semantics. Sen, unable to challenge the facts or economic analysis, used diversion, obfuscation and abuse to draw attention away from them – what Elahi calls 'semantics'.



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I. INTRODUCTION

Elahi's paper 'FAD: Sen-Bowbrick Encounter and Conceptual Complexity' (Elahi, 2023) concluded that 'the controversy concerning Sen's FAD criticism seems more a semantic matter than an intellectual one'. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The 'Sen-Bowbrick encounter' is confined to the causes of the Bengal famine of 1943. Amartya Sen's explanation is that there was adequate food in Bengal in 1943, but for various reasons, including a wartime boom and inflation, some people ate so much more than normal that there was not enough food for the rest and there was a famine in which millions died. He mentioned other factors like speculation. These people returned to normal consumption in December 1943 for reasons he does not explain. I presented a vast amount of evidence that there was a major fall in the supply of the main food, rice, creating a food crisis that was possibly manageable by importing food from other provinces but might require imports from abroad. A famine was allowed to happen because the major decision makers chose to believe, without any evidence or contrary to the evidence, that there was adequate food in Bengal, and other causes of the famine such as speculation could be handled without additional food, so they restricted or refused supplies to Bengal. Some may have pretended to hold these beliefs for political reasons or for personal gain. Decision makers choosing to believe this at key times include the self-governing, elected government of Bengal which, under the Government of India Act, had the responsibility for food supply, the Viceroy (Lord Linlithgow, but not his successor), the governments of the provinces which produced surplus food (notably Punjab), the other provincial governments and the British Government. Millions died. I see no way in which these different explanations can be dismissed as a 'semantic matter'.

1.2 Refutations of Sen

I have presented thirteen rigorous, formal, evidenced, refutations of Sen's theory of the Bengal Famine (1986).¹ Seven of these refuted his theory in its entirety, while six refuted large chunks of it. These refutations are independent: even if one could be disproved, the rest would remain unchallenged. I have also shown that he had systematically misrepresented the evidence in his sources in more than thirty instances, always in a way that would support his theory. Neither Sen nor anyone else even attempts to rigorously disprove the refutations and my evidence of Sen's misrepresentation of facts: this strongly suggests that they are correct.

It is a matter of concern that Elahi suppresses this, the core of the Sen-Bowbrick dispute. It is also a matter of concern that he cites Bowbrick (2020) without mentioning that it lists people who produced evidence over the last 82 years challenging the myths that Sen later produced as his own contribution, such as the Famine Inquiry Commission (1945), Tauger (2003; 2006; 2009) Dewey (Patwari and Chaukidar: subordinate officials and the reliability of India's agricultural statistics., 1978), Goswami (1990), Dyson and Maharatna (1991), Dyson (1991; 1996) Basu

¹ Note that this was published in Food Policy, not in The Journal of Peasant Studies, as Elahi says in his Abstract.

(1986; 1984) as well as reviews of the refutations by the Indian statistics profession by Das (1949) and Tauger².

I have discussed elsewhere evidence that has emerged since 1986. (Bowbrick P. , Toxic Famine Research and how it suppresses its critics, 2020; Bowbrick P. , Falsehoods and Myths in Famine Research – The Bengal Famine and Daoud, 2022a) Some is particularly relevant:

1. The rice supply figures used by Sen are now totally discredited, being even worse than I thought: a wide range of evidence from different sources agrees that the supply was much lower than he claimed, possibly less than half as much. Sen had chosen to believe the highest guess mentioned in his sources and to ignore the criticisms of this guess in his sources.
2. Mahalanobis, the world-famous statistician who invented the statistical crop measurement for small farms introduced after the famine, a system adopted around the world, pointed out that the official forecasts had been so obviously wrong, so often, that nobody had believed statistics indicating an emergency. In particular, the 1940/41 crop was grossly understated. *'In fact, the official estimate had been quite low on several occasions in previous years, for example, in 1913-14, 1914-15, 1918-19, 1926-27, 1927-28, 1935-36, and in 1940-41, only two years earlier, was only 16.48 crores of maunds (60.43 lakhs of tons) [6.14 million tonnes] which was much lower than the estimate for 1942-43 and fell short of the ten-year average by nearly 27%, and yet nothing untoward had happened. It was, therefore, not unnatural on the part of the Government of Bengal to take the view that the official estimate for 1942-43 was unduly pessimistic as on many previous occasions. The cry of wolf had been so often raised in vain in the past that it was not surprising that everyone was caught unawares when the wolf really did come'* (Mahalanobis, 1943, p. 4). This means that Sen's frequent assertion that the 1940-41 crop was *at least* 11% higher than the 1942-43 crop is untenable.
3. The Director of the Census said that the three censuses before the famine each had their problems and were not comparable (Government of India, 1946, pp. 3, 24; Bowbrick P. , 2022a). It cannot now be claimed, therefore, that Bengal's population growth rate suddenly doubled in the decade before the famine as was the consensus (and as both Sen and I believed), nor can census data be used to estimate famine deaths, as Sen believed.
4. Binay Ranjan (B.R) Sen took personal responsibility for key errors that allowed the famine to happen. He was the official responsible for famine relief in the Bengal Government up to September 1943. He later became Director-General of Food for all India, averting a potentially worse famine in 1946, and became a very effective Director General of FAO. He accepted the very strong criticisms of the Bengal Government made by the Famine Inquiry Commission and he was complimentary about the Commission. He said, 'Since I was responsible for emergency relief why did I allow things to get so far out of hand without protest? Why did I not cry out louder when the *aman* crop failed and ask for planned supplies from other provinces?' (Sen B. R., 1982, pp. 48-49, 53)

² I should be pleased to share my personal archive on the Bengal famine with anyone interested.

5. I formally refuted Sen's unevidenced claim that speculation was a cause of the famine (1986), but I have since spelt it out in much more detail (Bowbrick P. , Speculation as a cause of famine - a dangerous myth, 2022).
6. Experience of inflation, even massive hyperinflation, over the last 80 years does not suggest inflation causes famine, let alone that an 18% wartime inflation would cause famine.

II. ARGUMENT AND DISCUSSION

2.1 Distraction, diversion and abuse

Sen had no answer to my criticisms, so he did not respond to them but diverted attention from them by discussing something else entirely. This strategy is commonly adopted by people who have no answer to criticisms, It is considered unethical by the academic publishing industry's Committee on Publication Ethics, COPE (2021) which requires, therefore, that replies to criticism

1. Must be on the subject.
2. Must have evidence or data to support the claims made.
3. Must focus on the substance of the article it is responding to.
4. Must not contain personal abuse. Personal abuse can be an effective form of diversion and is considered unethical for this and other reasons.

COPE says that journals should not publish replies which do not comply.

There are two ways of lying: one is to make false statements (*suggestio falsi*); the other is to suppress the truth (*suppressio veri*). Diversion is a form of *suppressio veri*.

I have examined Sen's replies forensically and at length in Toxic Famine Research and How it Suppresses its Critics (2020) which Elahi cites. 1. Sen's replies are not 'on the subject' but ignore the thirteen refutations and the misrepresentations of the evidence. 2. They do not have evidence or data to support Sen's claims. Sen's quotations (1986, 1987) do not meet academic or professional standards. They are not referenced. Most are a few words from a sentence, and there are nearly no complete sentences, and fewer still quotations of the two or three sentences or the whole paragraph which may summarize an argument. He quotes just a few words from a sentence, without any context, theory or analysis. He does not analyse their relevance. 3. They do not focus on the substance of my article, but are purely diversionary, drawing attention from my criticisms. 4. They are full of personal abuse.

2.2 Impossible food consumption

Some of my refutations are so clear that Sen just ducks them.

'His basic premise is, "In a poor community take the poorest section, say, the bottom 20% of the population and double the income of half that group, keeping the money income of the rest unchanged. In the short run prices of food will now rise sharply, since the lucky half of the poorest group will now fill their part-filled bellies. While this might affect the food consumption of other groups as well, the group that will be pushed towards starvation will be the remaining half of the poorest community which will face higher prices with unchanged money income. Something of this nature happened in the economy of Bengal in 1943". (Sen, 1980b, P 618)

This change in income did not in fact take place. If, however, 10% of the population had increased their consumption from 14oz per day to 17oz per day (see Table 2), this would have caused a 1.8% change in total demand. Sen does not explain how a 1.8% change in total demand could cause famine affecting the whole population' (Bowbrick P. , 1986, pp. 45-46).

It is clearly false. I went on to show that his further claims required that a small number of people ate perhaps six times as much as their normal intake, which is clearly impossible: try it. This shows beyond question that his whole explanation is impossible. He does not try to challenge me; he does not even try to invent some semantic wriggle: he passes over it.

I have discussed elsewhere (1988, 2008; 2022a; 2024) and particularly (2020) other problems with Sen's unevicenced claims on this.

2.3 Sen's diagnosis is the Bengal Government's

I showed,

'The main thrust of Sen's argument is that the Bengal government adopted the FAD approach. As a result, it failed to adopt the policy measures necessary to prevent inflation and redistribution; it failed to recognize the famine when it occurred, and it failed to take the necessary measures to deal with it. The sources are agreed that this is untrue. Like Sen, the government believed that there was no real shortage (until, when the famine reached its peak, they had to recognize that there was a major shortage). They had virtually the same views on famine causation: inflation, speculation and hoarding. They recognized the need for measures to deal with shifts in purchasing power and acted accordingly, adopting the measures that Sen recommends. In fact, both Sen's diagnosis and his remedies were put to the test by the Bengal government. The result was a famine in which three million people died.' (Bowbrick P. , 1986, pp. 70, 71)

This formally refutes Sen's theory of the 1943 famine in its entirety. Sen does not challenge it: it is unchallengeable. Instead, he uses a diversionary tactic. He ridicules my English, the perfectly correct English of a native English speaker (1986, p. 125). This is diversion and abuse and is unethical.

2.4 Defining the analytical language to be used

Clearly a lot of Sen's errors arise from his use of undefined concepts that change from publication to publication, from paragraph to paragraph, from sentence to sentence, even within sentences. Rigor demands that I should use consistent concepts throughout the analysis:

'The language of normal economic theory will be used, rather than that of Sen's entitlement theory. There are several reasons for this. First, Sen himself used this language when dealing with the Bengal famine, with his occasional mentions of entitlement declines, etc, being external to his analysis. Second, we are concerned with what happened, rather than with the labels put on the effects. Third, the use of the value-loaded vocabulary of entitlement would confuse people who are not familiar with it, or who do not agree with it. Finally, discussions have made it clear that different people interpret his entitlement theory in quite different ways' (Bowbrick P. , 1986, pp. 105-6).

The importance of this is emphasized by the fact that there is now considerable literature on the different versions he presents, and the many different interpretations people have drawn; indeed Elahi confirms that 'different people interpret his entitlement theory in quite different ways' and cites others in his support. In his replies Sen makes no attempt to provide a single interpretation of the theory, or to specify the different ways in which it is used in different publications of his.

Similarly, he uses a range of different definitions of 'FAD' in his writing and uses it as a term of abuse (Bowbrick P. , 1986, pp. 109-110). See also Bowbrick 'Entitlement and food availability decline (FAD)– the use of fraud and abuse in famine economics' (2022). Elahi also discusses at some length the various contradictory definitions of 'FAD' by Sen.

With so many different concepts in his own writing, he can and does respond to any critic using any one of these concepts by saying that he has used the word 'entitlement' or 'FAD' in another way elsewhere. This is unethical. His (1986) references to entitlement theory are obfuscation and diversion: I did not discuss it.

Clearly the 'entitlement' and 'FAD' belief systems are garbled and internally inconsistent, and, when applied, have shown themselves unable to deal with facts or identify impossibilities. In spite of my drawing attention to this, he brings them to the fore in his reply, not admitting that there are various interpretations of his work, not attempting to remove conflicts, not even attempting to be consistent in his reply, if nowhere else. This is pure diversion.

2.5 Shortage

Sen and others use the word 'shortage' with different, sometimes very different, meanings in the same publication, sometimes in the same paragraph. The result is an incoherent, garbled, meaningless analysis. Accordingly, I defined the word and used it with this meaning throughout my analysis of the 1943 famine. This is rigour. It identified errors and confusions in Sen's and others' analysis. This was not what Sen wanted – it showed for example that 'By definition, a redistribution famine of the type Sen describes can only occur if there is no shortage or, perhaps, if there is a first degree shortage - if the shortage is any worse, there is a famine anyway' (Bowbrick P. , 1986, p. 107), which implies his theory largely irrelevant. Accordingly, he criticized me for not using one of his meanings, not stating which one. He made no effort to show that my analysis was wrong or that my definition was wrong. This is pure distraction.

2.6 The argument is confined to the 1943 Bengal Famine

I was careful to confine the analysis to the causes of the 1943 Bengal Famine. Sen, unable to challenge the analysis, diverted the discussion to famines in Africa where conditions were very different. and to discussions of his ever-changing FAD beliefs. It is surprising that Elahi should introduce his own and Sen's discussions of famines in Africa and Bangladesh: they have no relevance.

2.7 Abuse

We learn in nursery school that personal abuse is not a valid argument, and that people resort to personal abuse only when they have nothing to support their argument. The message is repeated throughout our education. Accordingly, it was my view, that of my professional colleagues, that of my academic colleagues, that Sen had no defense at all to my many refutations, and there was nothing more to be said. the journal's editor said,

'While I was at pains to ensure that he had the opportunity to respond to your arguments, I was not at all happy with the way in which he did. I did not think he was helping his case by sinking to snide remarks and these were edited out. Sen insisted that many of these asides were reinstated. I don't think Sen can really answer your criticisms so he is trying to mock them.' (Blackman, 1986)

Sen has used rants, personal abuse and abuse of the evidence to attack other critics of his explanation for the 1943 famine - see for example, Nolan P. , (1991); Sen A. , (1991); Nolan & Sender, (1992); Sen A. , (1992); Nolan P. , (1993); Sen A. , (1993). Sometimes he combines abuse with new falsehoods as when replying to Bowbrick (1985; 1986; 1987), to Tauger's (2011) criticisms, and to Mukerjee's attack on Churchill (Mukerjee, Madhusree, reply by Amartya Sen, 2011). See Bowbrick (2020; Bowbrick P. , Entitlement and food availability decline (FAD)– the use of fraud and abuse in famine economics', 2022) [which Elahi cites] for a detailed analysis of this.

It is unacceptable, therefore, that Elahi propagates Sen's abuse – assertions about me and my work not supported by any evidence – by quoting it verbatim e.g. 'He characterised the critique as an affluent combination of conceptual confusions, empirical misstatements and systematic misrepresentations of his views. (Sen, 1986).' (Elahi, 2023, p. 67).

2.8 Systematic misrepresentation of Sen's views?

Elahi quotes Sen's unevicenced claim that I systematically misrepresented his views. I have no idea what Sen's views were or are, nor do I care: I am only concerned with what he had written which may be quite different. I have no doubt that if I had got this wrong, Sen would have cited my words and produced evidence that I was wrong, as academic practice and COPE ethics require. He was unable to do so.

Elhai quotes Sen's (1986) claim 'Bowbrick's discussion of famines in general and of the Bengal famine in particular is rendered rather chaotic by his persistent confusion between 1) availability decline over time and 2) supply inadequacy and shortage at a point of time.' Sen, of course, gives no examples to support this odd claim, so it is abuse and diversion. My analysis is orthodox, but Sen has no expertise in the powerful economic theory we use to analyse complex agricultural markets and sectors – agricultural marketing, agricultural market economics and agricultural statistics. Indeed, as his many errors show, he has difficulty in applying even basic economics.

2.9 Catching them red-handed

Economists, accountants and police officers find that if they catch someone red-handed, with overwhelming evidence against them, and no possible defence the offenders often try the ultimate diversion, accusing them of lying. So it is with Sen. Is this the ultimate in semantics, defining anything inconvenient as a lie?

III. SEMANTICS: THE CONCLUSION

Clearly semantics do not influence the facts of the case. The facts are incompatible with everything Sen says. Semantics only come into the encounter because Sen uses changing and idiosyncratic definitions to distract and divert the reader.

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