Is a Mission of Charity also a Mission of Freedom?
A Critical look at Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity
Emma Graham

Introduction

India is one of the densest countries in the world, with over one billion people, and is projected to be the world’s largest nation by 2030.\(^1\) This growing state has faced issues of colonialism and poverty that have been extreme barriers to national development. As it is now, the annual GDP per capita in India is $\text{PPP} \ 2,753\(^2\) which is staggering when compared to the Canadian annual GDP per capita of $\text{PPP} \ 35,812.\(^3\) While GDP may not be the best tool of measurement for determining the success of development, it is a useful tool when discussing the disparity of income between those in the Global South and those in the Global North. Along with this low GDP, over 1/3 of the population lives below the poverty line and 40% of the population is illiterate.\(^4\) Many attempts have been made by political, social and economic theorists to alter the reality of the poverty in India, with varying amounts of success. One of these theorists is Agnes Gonxhe Bojaxhiu, a woman more popularly known by the name she took after entering the Loreto sisterhood of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother Teresa.

Canonized as a Saint in the Roman Catholic Church in September 2016, Mother Teresa is world-renowned for her embodiment of Catholic ethics and piety. However, this woman was more than a religious icon: she was an intelligent woman who had an agenda to alleviate poverty in one of the most destitute areas of the world, Calcutta (Kolkata) India. This paper will attempt to discern whether the actions taken by Mother Teresa and her organization, the Missionaries of

---
\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^4\) Ibid.
Charity, were successful in bringing about true development to those in the Calcutta, West Bengal region. To do this, I will critique Teresa’s program using the international development plan outlined by Amartya Sen in his 1999 work, *Development as Freedom*. I will use Sen’s idea of “development as freedom” as a measuring stick with which to critique and evaluate the theory developed by Mother Teresa. First, I will outline the key facets of her development theory and how they were applied. Next, based on the political, social and economic outcomes of Teresa’s program, I will determine the validity of her plan. Finally, I will use Amartya Sen’s theory for *Development as Freedom* to gauge the success of Teresa’s theory.

**A Woman on a Mission: The Experience behind the Theory**

In 1928 Mother Teresa sailed from Dublin, Ireland, where she had just completed her novitiate with the Loreto Sisters, to Calcutta, India where she began work at St. Mary’s High School. At this time, India was still a British Colony, and Calcutta was the centre of trade and business for European commercial interests. However, this supposed prosperity that grew from colonial involvement in the growth of industry came to a halt in 1947. On August 15, 1947, the British Indian Empire set up a partition dividing West Pakistan from East Pakistan (today Bangladesh), in turn defining India and Pakistan as two separate nations. The partition not only affected the lives of those who depended on raw materials but also all the displaced Hindu refugees who fled the bloodshed filling the new state of Pakistan, by crossing the partition into India. Calcutta became the major holding place for these refugees. The government of West-Bengal was unprepared for this enormous growth of population and had no plans for

---

infrastructure or support for these new people. This lack of government assistance led thousands to squat in the streets, and throughout the 1950’s Calcutta’s landless population faced exponential growth.\(^9\) Thousands of acres of land became forcibly occupied by these squatters, causing land owners to hire thugs to defend their property line, resulting in a split between the well-off and devastatingly poor that became more visible than ever.\(^10\)

Though Mother Teresa arrived in Calcutta in 1928, it would not be until September of 1946, one year before the partition, that she would receive a second “calling” that would lead her to abandon her cloistered position and forge a new path for development for the poor in Calcutta. In the compiled personal writings of Mother Teresa, \textit{Come Be My Light}, she wrote of this experience as a call to suffer alongside the poor and destitute in India and to bring the Missionaries of Charity (which had yet to be created) to the people, in loving service.\(^11\) At this point Teresa began her true mission for relieving poverty and humbling herself and her new order to offer charity and companionship with the outcasts from society. The road was not easy, as she had to plead her case to the archbishop in order to be released from her vows and it would not be until December of 1948 that she would begin her life as an “Indian among Indians” living on the streets of Calcutta with 5 rupees as her sole resources.\(^12\) It was through these experiences of the first 38 years of her life that Mother Teresa formulated her plan for development and the order of Missionaries of Charity, which this paper will seek to discover in greater detail.

\textbf{Development through Radical Charity: The Theory}

In 1948, Mother Teresa’s following of former students and other young women was recognized by the Catholic Church, given the name “Missionaries of Charity”. It was at this time

---

\(^10\) Ibid., 72.
\(^12\) Egan, \textit{Such a Vision of the Streets}, 37.
that the members of this order took on a fourth vow, on top of Obedience, Poverty and Chastity, "to give wholehearted, free service to the very poorest."\(^{13}\) The heart of Mother Teresa’s movement came down to the conception of seeing the poor as people who have an abundance of strength and goodness to bring to the world, rather than as ‘others’ who need to be pitied.\(^{14}\) This radical view of the poor and of poverty had a huge impact on how the members of the Missionaries of Charity conducted their work. One woman who had the opportunity to spend some time with the Missionaries of Charity as a nurse noted that what Mother Teresa and the other Missionaries of Charity give are not only medical services and physical materials, but compassion, love and a kind of service that exceeds that of a slave.\(^{15}\) This is an important facet of Teresa’s plan for development because, unlike like many other social programs, to Teresa each person was important and an individual, rather than a statistic. While her program is rooted completely in Catholic theology and the Christian message, her goal was to access a universal love that might reach beyond religious, racial and intellectual boundaries.

Rather than having one individual ‘achievable’ goal to be reached, Mother Teresa sought to use the Missionaries of Charity to participate in the multitude of ‘unachievable’ goals that presented themselves in this time of modernity. She sought to alleviate poverty in Calcutta, fight leprosy, and ensure those suffering from AIDS could be treated. She sought out new problems and issues to always be working on her mission.\(^{16}\) This mission, however large, was also one of immediate action: if she were to encounter a starving child her reaction would not be to set up a focus group or survey to discuss the problem of starvation, but rather it would be to get food and

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 6.
\(^{16}\) Spink, Mother Teresa, 203.
drink for the child in the quickest possible way.\textsuperscript{17} This mode of thinking in terms of the individual rather than in terms of the crowd meant that Teresa would come under scathing critique. Often referring to her work as a glorified soup kitchen, social activists would criticize her for not addressing the issues of institutionalized oppression.\textsuperscript{18}

Though these critiques addressed some major pitfalls of Teresa’s movement, she remained strong in her claim that her mission was not to be successful, but to be faithful and live up to her vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and radical charity.\textsuperscript{19} Teresa’s program could then perhaps be boiled down to three major principles. First, to provide compassionate and loving service to the poorest of the poor, through absolute poverty, angelic chastity and cheerful obedience.\textsuperscript{20} Second, to never cease in one’s mission to bring about good for another person, and to place others always above one’s self. Third and finally, to live in a state of urgency and to address every person’s needs in the quickest and most effective way possible.

**Development as Freedom: The Counter Theory**

*Development as Freedom*, by Nobel Peace prize winner Amartya Sen, critiques the established paths to national development, and supplements these often solely economic approaches with a focus on individual freedom and its role as a means and end in development. Sen’s argument begins by defining development as the removal of ‘unfreedoms’, such as tyranny, poor economic opportunities and systematic social deprivation, and how these unfreedoms are road blocks to development.\textsuperscript{21} Sen also defines development as the expansion of human freedom to live life with autonomy and therefore have a more worthwhile existence.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 245.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, 74.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 295.
Sen establishes that by seeking development in terms of freedom, justice moves to centre stage, whereas in more utilitarian models, justice becomes distorted and limited. This promotes Sen’s thesis that people should have the right to choose the life they have “reason to value.”\textsuperscript{23} Sen argues that if a broader understanding of justice and freedoms is accepted, concentration will be placed on the capabilities of individuals to act, as a result of their freedom to do so.\textsuperscript{24}

As Sen focuses his argument, he notes that poverty is a significant roadblock to the growth of individual capabilities, using examples from across the globe, and noting literacy rate deficits and the growing gap between rich and poor not only in developing countries but also in the affluent ones.\textsuperscript{25} Sen argues that poverty reaches beyond the unfreedom of economic restriction, and affects the freedoms to education and social interaction that contribute to making life worthwhile.\textsuperscript{26} He outlines how previous methods of development have singled out particular institutions, such as the market, and offers a new approach that would evaluate each institution as a body that interacts with the other institutions around it, so to focus more clearly on freedoms.\textsuperscript{27} Along with economic institutions, Sen suggests that other social institutions such as education and healthcare need to be developed in a similar manner with the freedom of the individual at the heart of all construction.\textsuperscript{28} He suggests that since democracy has the potential to provide the most individual freedom it is non-negotiable for development.\textsuperscript{29} He also claims that democracy encourages public debate and discussion, where each person is given the opportunity to partake in his or her destiny where politics are concerned. However, attention must be paid to the democratic institutions that need also be in place and working ‘freely’ in order for democracy to

\textsuperscript{23} Sen, \textit{Development as Freedom}, 74.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 85.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 107.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 108.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 142.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.,144.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 157.
be successful.\textsuperscript{30} For Sen, this creation of a democratic community relies heavily on the restructuring of institutions in a deliberate and potentially drastic way, whereas Mother Teresa’s approach is quite contrary, focusing on the individual in a way that has implications for greater democratic structures.

The particular goods of Sen’s development theory are that all persons have the right to a life they have reason to value, whereas for Mother Teresa the goods of her program are more the freedom of the individual to live her or his own life. Rather than the abstract and idealized notion that all people can choose their destiny, Teresa focuses on what is possible for the dignity of each human. In order to evaluate Mother Teresa’s development scheme vis-à-vis the Missionaries of Charity, I will apply three major aspects of Sen’s theory to her program. First, I will evaluate how the Missionaries of Charity fit into the existing economic sphere and what attempts they made to ensure the fiscal freedoms of those they encountered. Next, I will evaluate how the Missionaries of Charity brought about political change and whether they effectively brought about democratic ideas which provide individuals with more freedom to choose their governance. Third, I will evaluate the ways in which the Missionaries of Charity brought about social change, bringing individuals with more personal freedoms to interact, participate and engage in the larger community within Calcutta. Finally, I will determine whether Sen’s theory is effective in evaluating Mother Teresa’s program, and whether her program was successful regardless of Sen’s limitations.

\textbf{Economic Outcomes}

For Amartya Sen, it is important that development come about in a range of spheres, rather than in just one. In order to measure development, one of the tools Sen uses is an economic gauge, whereby you measure the growth of an individual’s freedoms in a fiscal sense,}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{30} Sen, \textit{Development as Freedom.},159.}
generally relying on GNP and literacy rates as measuring sticks. It was not the goal of the Missionaries of Charity or of Mother Teresa to ‘fix’ the problem of poverty, nor was it their goal to interfere in the structure of oppression that provides for the continued persistence of this poverty. However, the Missionaries of Charity did focus on alleviating some of the consequences of that poverty from the shoulders of the poorest in Calcutta.31 Teresa herself defines her economic mission in plain terms: “I have been told that I must not offer fishes to men but rods so that they can fish for themselves… so often they do not have the strength to hold the rods. Giving them fish I give them the strength necessary for the fishing of tomorrow.”32 Due to this approach, Teresa never truly stepped back from the situation in any attempt to reform the larger structures, something that is integral for Amartya Sen. Sen would have witnessed the dying and destitute in the streets and sought to bring reform in terms of income supplementation and unemployment relief relying on an array of institutions. However, the processes that would be necessary to begin this sort of development would do no good for those presently on the brink of death in the streets of Calcutta.

On the possibility of success of her program, Teresa wrote that she was not concerned with how many lives she was able to reach, but rather that she was focused on what is possible for one person, claiming that with each life brought dignity, her program is justified.33 Therefore, Sen would deem Teresa’s works to alleviate economic unfreedoms through immediate supplementation of needs as inadequate for development. Since Sen views development on a large scale, seeking to reduce the unfreedoms for all rather than individually reducing the unfreedoms for whomever he can, Teresa’s model does not fit.

31 Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, 74.
33 Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, 77.
However, if development is about securing freedom, and in this case economic freedom, no matter the scale, then perhaps Teresa and Sen could agree. Unlike many other economic and social development theorists, Sen recognizes the importance of human dignity, and the work entailed in ensuring each has the right to choose the kind of life she or he has reason to value. Sen even states that while he believes no true development can happen without some focus on engagement with markets, social reform and programs are equally necessary to supplement and support individual freedoms. On this point, I believe Teresa would confirm Sen’s claim. Evidence for this can be seen in her works with the Nirmal Hriday hostel turned Home for the Dying. Officially accepted to the Calcutta community in 1957, this house became a centre of care for the dying. Teresa herself noted that at first it did not matter what they did, the patients still died, but over the course of 10 years, a lot has improved and by the late 60s more lived than died. What was important about this house is that it took the charity of those from America and the first world and gave it to those most in need of it, so that at the very least they could have a human death, rather than that of an animal put out to pasture. While not necessarily a fiscal gain for those being treated, Teresa was supplementing their economic unfreedom with what she could provide, which was a place to stay and be treated as an equal, something they would otherwise require money to receive. So while Teresa’s program does not reach the expectations of Sen’s call for economic reform and unemployment guarantees, it does seek to provide the same dignity and right to life that Sen’s theory seems to value ideologically.

34 Sen, Development as Freedom, 285.
37 Ibid., 64.
**Political Outcomes**

While Mother Teresa’s main focus was not on that of political reform, her movement was not completely void of political outcomes. Sen generally argues that development in politics and democracy is key to assuring essential freedoms to individuals. Teresa instead engaged with this idea by using charity as a means to assure and highlight the democratic and individual rights of all humans she encountered. For instance, the municipal government in Calcutta was searching for a means with which to deal with the increasing number of refugees and destitute people living on the streets and in the slums.38 However, the government had as yet been unsuccessful in providing any effective means of relief. That is, until Mother Teresa began to petition for a house and further means to provide care for the dying. This fit perfectly into the political scheme of the officials in power as, through granting her a house, they would soon see a lessening of the deaths on the streets and hopefully less scathing reviews in local and global papers.39 Through this continual practice of pleading to officials in governments across India and the world, Teresa was able to expand the movement to 77 countries with 350 houses by the late 1980’s.40

While this movement helped to improve the government’s image, Mother Teresa’s works did not always coincide with the hopes of those holding office in India. For example, when Indira Gandhi first came to office, a movement to sterilize large parts of the Indian population in an attempt to lower population rates was put forward.41 Initially, Gandhi had been supportive of Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity for the same reasons the Calcutta Municipal government had. However, Gandhi’s movement towards incentivised sterilization caused great

---

38 Spink, *Mother Teresa*, 52.
39 Ibid., 53-54.
40 Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, 309.
41 Ibid., 61.
tension between the two women.\textsuperscript{42} For Sen, this would have been an extreme violation of the freedoms of the citizens to make their own decisions about family life, and he would most likely deem this political move as a form of ‘nannying’ the poorer ‘uneducated’ citizens.\textsuperscript{43} Teresa’s solution to the problem of sterilization was adoption. She sent letters to all of the clinics, hospitals and sterilization centres, saying that the Missionaries of Charity will take the children and begging practitioners not to destroy life.\textsuperscript{44} She also went out teaching people in the slums and all over Calcutta about the ‘rhythm method’ of avoiding the high points of ovulation and, in 1979, the proof was in the numbers: after her program began, there had been 61,273 fewer children born in Calcutta compared to the previous year.\textsuperscript{45} Sen would support Teresa’s plan for providing information and spread of knowledge to the lower classes, believing that this method allots the most freedom to the individual while still resulting in the outcomes desired for population decline.\textsuperscript{46} In both of these instances, Mother Teresa did not stand back from the politics but rather acted where she saw injustice, leaving profound marks on the political and social landscape.

Mother Teresa’s influence was so great that she actually received the highest honour in India, the Bharat Ratna, an award granted annually by the President of India, in 1980.\textsuperscript{47} This award is prestigious in India as only 3 people are nominated each year, with a single winner handpicked by the President. The award is reserved only for those who perform differentiable services in the highest accord, and who bring something to the Indian community. While this award recognized her for her social and even theological efforts, it was a truly political prize as it

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{42} Spink, \textit{Mother Teresa}, 61.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Sen, \textit{Development as Freedom}, 284.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 62.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 63.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Sen, \textit{Development as Freedom}, 216.
\item \textsuperscript{47} “Bharat Ratna Awardees,” Bharat Ratna Website, last modified 2015, http://www.bharatratna.co.in/bharat-ratna-awardees.htm.
\end{itemize}
recognized Teresa as an effectual person in India, not only as a foreign aid worker, but as a true representative of Indian values and goals.

Amartya Sen focuses on politics and the political institutions that must be in place for true freedom and development to occur. For Sen, this means democracy and the right to participate in the structures of power within one’s homeland.\(^{(48)}\) When stated in this manner, it is difficult to see how Mother Teresa’s care for the dying and unborn is related to this call for individual freedoms. Sen himself most likely would not have recognized Teresa’s program as effective in bringing about significant political freedoms to the people of India, especially since India was, after 1947, already a functioning republic. However, if his claim is expanded to include smaller, more personal political freedoms, Teresa’s program plays a larger role. For example, Teresa sought to care for those people who were dying on the streets by bringing them into a home and petitioning the government for space to care for them.\(^{(49)}\) Through this act Teresa became an advocate for the freedom to live a dignified and human life, even if only for a short while until death. These people were unable at the time to defend their own freedom to live and die as dignified humans, so they needed her intercession on their behalf in order to receive these freedoms. Teresa was directly participating in the structures of democracy as a citizen to obtain freedoms, though small, for every individual she encountered. Similarly, when the government sought to reduce birth rates she provided education services and wrote letters to officials begging for a change in policy.\(^{(50)}\) Through these specifically political engagements Teresa brought greater autonomy to people who, though part of a democratic republic, would not have had the education necessary to make informed decisions about their future families. So while Teresa was not focused on bringing about a new regime of governance, she did ensure some political freedoms

\(^{(49)}\) Spink, *Mother Teresa*, 53.
\(^{(50)}\) Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, 291.
to the masses through advocacy and opportunity for individual autonomy. Therefore, since Teresa worked to create spaces of democratic exercise and autonomy even in the face of adversity, she is directly engaged with Sen’s theory, just on a smaller scale.

**Social Outcomes**

While the economic and political consequences of Teresa’s program are not enough to quantify as true development as outlined by Sen alone, through analysis of the social outcomes it will become clear that true development was happening because of her Missionaries of Charity. Addressing issues of class, race, gender and education, Mother Teresa sought to eliminate many of the barriers which often cause people to segregate themselves. For instance, the region of India in which Teresa resided was heavily populated by people suffering from leprosy. The leprosy hospital that had existed in Calcutta before this was closed down so that the government could build other service buildings for the richer members of the city and keep the lepers out. These people had become completely excluded from society and many were thus unable to obtain adequate care. Teresa resolved to develop a travelling leprosy clinic that would be able to minister to them. Teresa’s leprosy initiative resulted in the establishment of an entire village of lepers with the Missionaries of Charity at the helm bringing medicine and notions of community. However, the most prominent outcome of this action was not the statistical decrease in leprosy, but rather the philosophical notion of community and humanity that reached beyond religious or ethnic boundaries. Many lepers receiving treatment were Muslim women, who wore burqas as a sign of their faith, and through Teresa’s program these same women were able to associate with Hindus of all castes suffering from the same disease.

---

51 Egan, *Such a Vision of the Streets*, 77.
54 Ibid, 75.
Many of Teresa’s other endeavours worked to achieve a similar outcome, one where people would begin to look beyond their labels and begin to account for the dignity of the other. Amartya Sen would have seen this program as extremely effective because it systematically works to remove the roadblocks of prejudice and poverty to individual freedoms. For example, Sen claims in his book *Development as Freedom* that income deprivation amongst the poor is not the only factor contributing to the capability deprivations experienced in these places, and that while poverty is a major roadblock to essential freedoms, it is not the only one, as many economic theorists may suggest.55 Rather, it is the social opportunities, afforded through education and the removal of prejudice that grant greater freedoms, which would be likely to relieve many of the economic problems. For instance, Teresa’s program sought to reach out to the people being deprived of essential freedoms and capabilities, and to provide them with many of the things needed to escape that situation, even if there is more work than could possibly be overcome by her organization alone.56 By placing emphasis on growing the capabilities of these individuals, Teresa directly engaged with the ideals espoused by Sen in seeking to circumvent many of the roadblocks to freedom for the poor. Each theorist had varying ideas about how this would look, yet they both seemed to think that education and un-prejudicial discourse are the keys. By adopting a mentality wherein compassion exceeds ideas of race and class, Teresa ensured the growth of individual capabilities of the people she encountered.57

While Sen’s idea of social development hoped for complete social reform within a state that would allow for each individual to participate in all aspects of society, including politics, markets, arts and culture, Teresa’s program advanced a similar ideal on a much smaller scale. The scope and reach of the Missionaries of Charity was initially limited to Calcutta; however, it

---

56 Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, 87.
57 Ibid., 77.
quickly spread to include many major cities in India and eventually across the globe. Yet, as the reach of Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity grew, the scope of their work remained the same. Since the goal of Teresa’s program was to reach the individual and bring dignity to the person, rather than relief to the masses, no matter how large the enterprise grows the effects will still be witnessed on the individual level rather than through a scalable statistic. Even though Amartya Sen saw a larger scale reform as the key to freedoms, in his own text he notes how social exclusion can be a huge factor for loss of self-reliance and self-confidence as well as psychological and physical health issues.\textsuperscript{58}

**Development as Freedom, and Charity?**

If Amartya Sen’s hope for development could be summed up in a single phrase it would be that economic, political and social change must happen so to allow each person the right and ability to live the type of life she or he has reason to value. For Sen, no means of development that focuses solely on increasing GDP, introducing democracy through force or insisting on mass aid will be successful. Instead he called for an overarching emphasis on increasing freedoms of the individual. His theory however, does not provide for a step-by-step outline of how this subtle increase is meant to happen, other than to say that it must include a careful integration of the different institutions of state such as government, markets, education and legislation in order to affect real change. If all this is true, then Mother Teresa’s endeavour with the Missionaries of Charity engages completely with Sen’s proposal, but on a micro scale.

Rather than reform the economic market system in place, Teresa’s missionaries of Charity sought to relieve the poorest of the poor from immediate destitution, providing them with the freedom to have a dignified life and death. Similarly, rather than call for a revamping of the political structures in place, Teresa sought to work within the government to bring the

\textsuperscript{58} Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 7.
freedom to refuse sterilization and abortion to people who would have otherwise been subject to coercion. Finally, rather than altering social norms through educational and cultural reform, Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity used every opportunity to live compassionate and unprejudiced lives to inspire a similar social egalitarianism amongst the people. Though the results are not unanimous or staggering, her inspiration for a movement towards compassion and community engages with Amartya Sen’s call for freedom and development.

Perhaps, then, Amartya Sen is correct in saying that individual freedoms are the principal ends of development, but his claim that they are also the principal means may need to be supplemented. Since those who hope to have their freedoms expanded through development, (those who are poor, racialized, illiterate, oppressed etc.) do not yet have the freedoms necessary to expand their own freedoms, someone must enter the situation as an advocate. This was where Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity come in. The members of this organization made it their utmost priority to help expand the freedoms of the poorest of the poor in whatever way possible. Therefore, while Teresa’s missionaries did not necessarily bring about freedoms in the manner outlined by Amartya Sen in Development as Freedom, it is clear that they do seek to reach the same goal, and that they are, through their radical charity, successful, in many individual cases, in achieving it.

---

59 Sen, Development as Freedom, 35.
Bibliography


