

REVIEW

JEAN DRÈZE - AMARTYA SEN, *An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions*, Princeton University Press, Princeton & Oxford, Paperback, 2015

This is the second work by Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen as coauthors, after *Hunger and Public Action*. *An Uncertain Glory* explores India's miserable underperformance on many indicators of human development relative to neighboring countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal, even while its economy has grown much faster. India's record in pioneering democratic governance in the non-Western world is a widely acknowledged accomplishment, as is its basic success in maintaining a secular state, despite the challenges arising from its thoroughly multi-religious population. When India became independent in 1947 after two centuries of colonial rule, it immediately adopted a firmly democratic political system, with multiple parties, freedom of speech, and extensive political rights. India's commitment to democracy has been a unique experiment in developing countries and has been an achievement in itself, and a means of avoiding the famines that have characterized autocracies, including China. The famines of the British era disappeared, and steady economic growth replaced the economic stagnation of the Raj. The growth of the Indian economy quickened further over the last three decades and became the second fastest among large economies. Despite a recent slowdown, it is still one of the highest in the world.

Drèze and Sen present a deep and wide analysis of India's deprivations and inequalities, enlightening the weakness of India's model of growth. These topics aren't new, but the authors offer new ideas for how India can achieve long-term economic sustainability and growth through meeting the essential needs of its citizens. Rather than relying on the standard indicators of economic growth, the authors incorporate a broad view of economic development in their analysis, including human well-being and social opportunity. They believe that the economic development issues in India have to be seen in the larger context of demands for democracy and social justice. A third of the world's absolute (<\$1.25 a day) poor still live in India. India failed in ending poverty and ensuring the right to everything from decent education to flush toilets. The 2011 census revealed that half of all Indian households have to practice open defecation resulting in many deaths from diarrhea and encephalitis. The rapid growth has no apparent impact on India's very high levels of under-nutrition. Calorie and protein intake among the poor has actually dropped. Children's weights did not improve during a growth surge from 1998-2005 and anemia even increased. Nearly half of all Indian children are underweight (compared to 25 percent in sub-Saharan Africa). Twice as many Indian children (43%) as African ones go hungry. Many adults, especially women, are also undernourished, even as obesity and diabetes spread among wealthier Indians. Sanitation

and public hygiene are awful, especially in the north. Polio may be gone, but immunization rates for most diseases are lower than in sub Saharan Africa.

The book is an impressive complaint of the government failures as well as a statement of the possibility of change through democratic practice. The data compiled by central and state governments, Indian non-governmental organizations, and international bodies, show better than any other commentators how Indian governments since the 1980s have failed. The book's *Statistical Appendix* contains detailed, useful information and data on economic development in India as a whole as well as in India's major states. The country's main problems nowadays lie in the lack of attention paid to the essential needs of the people, especially of the poor, and often of women. Social indicators leave that in no doubt. The extent of social instruction, the authors say, remains generally "horrifying". Even the poor prefer private tuition; at least the teachers show up. Despite a rise in literacy rates, "a large proportion" of them "learn very little at school". There is also a continued inadequacy of social services such as schooling and medical care as well as of physical services such as safe water, electricity, drainage, transportation, and sanitation. Almost all Indians buy health services from private providers, exposing themselves to crippling debt as well as quackery.

The diagnosis is gloomy. The authors agree that the growth has done some social good, but they concentrate on what growth has so far failed to do for the poor and disadvantaged. They attribute India's failure to eliminate poverty and deprivation to insufficient public investment in social and physical services. They go further, arguing that social investment is necessary from the start for the right kind of growth. Sen and Drèze warned as early as 1995 that reforms that boost growth, though important, were not

enough to improve the living conditions of the poorest, let alone dismantle caste and gender hierarchies and generate employment. They "have to be supplemented", they wrote, "by a radical shift in public policy in education and health". There have been major failures both to foster participatory growth and to make good use of the public resources generated by economic growth to enhance people's living conditions. In the long run, even the feasibility of high economic growth will be threatened by the underdevelopment of social and physical infrastructure and the neglect of human capabilities, in contrast with the Asian approach of simultaneous pursuit of economic growth and human development. Long-term investments in education and public health were needed. But in these primary tasks, India's rulers failed disastrously. Their "breathtakingly conservative" approach to social services can be blamed, as Amartya Sen has often argued, on "the elitist character of Indian society and politics". India's rulers neither matched the educational accomplishments of some socialist countries, nor did they help unleash, like their counterparts in South Korea and Japan, entrepreneurial energies in the country's protected private sector, which accounted for the bulk of manufacturing output. Instead of making the public sector more accountable, they imposed irrational restrictions on business, spawning the "license-permit Raj" that mostly enriched corrupt politicians and officials. Economic growth led to a rise in the number of Indians in the Forbes billionaires list, and also to an expanding middle class. Several hundred million Indians had some share in this new-found prosperity. But many more Indians remained desperately poor.

The authors argue that the state fails mainly because of deeply entrenched inequality. Inequalities have widened between classes, regions, and rural and urban areas. More worryingly, they seem un-

bridgeable owing to the lack of adequate education and public health. India's contradictions are the result of an "unique cocktail of lethal divisions and disparities". They are the result of the "Indian folly" and abysmal education system. The multi-faceted inequality, must be considered both as symptom and cause. A ruling elite defined by class, caste, but also by gender, religion, education and income, has a very weak lack of interest in improving matters for the rest. Newspaper editors and readers, judges, NGO activists and academics are also drawn largely from privileged backgrounds, and care little. The analysis of inequality is made more wide-ranging by an excellent analysis of the limitations of the Indian media. Sen and Drèze excoriate the Indian press for "its partiality in favor of the rich and the powerful". The fact that newspapers and magazines are kept afloat by large corporations "creates a general tendency to pander to corporate culture and values". Further, there are "strong pressures on the journalists and editors in a corporate-sponsored world to be selective in what they say or write".

Despite the big weakness enlightened Sen and Drèze remain optimistic about the long-term outlook. They argue that in a democratic system addressing India's main

failures requires not only significant policy rethinking by the government, but also a cultural change which brings to a clearer public understanding of the situation. India's bureaucrats, when properly led and held accountable, the authors argue, can function well. Even northern states like Himachal Pradesh and Chhattisgarh have recently inaugurated flourishing public schemes, distributing food rations on time and cheaply, for example. This perspective calls for a welfare-minded state to moderate the excesses of the market. Maintaining rapid as well as environmentally sustainable growth remains an important and achievable goal for India. But this goal is not enough. The authors are right to draw attention to the limits of India's success and how much remains to be done. Unless and until the country and its politicians stop saying, "Growth is all very well, but..." the country's amazing potential will go unfulfilled. "In order to match China in health coverage and surpass it in resilience, India has to make much greater use of the democratic system than it already has". The same can be said for the priority of basic education for all... The important task is not so much to find a "new India", but to contribute to making one.

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