

Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen. *An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. USA. 2013. 448 pages. \$ 29.95.

The spectacular performance of India in terms of economic growth has generally been a source of pride for the Indians as a nation, in addition to attracting significant international applause. Drèze and Sen, on the contrary, question the justification of lauding Indian performance in their book, 'An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions'. In their book, they focus on the performance parameters that actually reflect standards of living of Indian population. Their analysis portrays a shockingly dismal state of affairs for a vast majority of citizens of the country. The book disillusiones the reader about the projected image of Indian development through a detailed yet objective discussion on specific issues plaguing the social sector of the country. The discourse throughout is substantiated by extensive statistical evidence, in addition to a comprehensive statistical appendix given at the end of the book.

The book starts with the acknowledgement of India's historic progress on the economic front. The authors then justify the title of the book by reflecting on the sustainability of these glorious achievements because of absence or inadequacies of efforts directed towards removing hard-set malaises impeding efficient working of the economic and social systems in the country. The book also adequately highlights the distinction, as well as interdependence, between economic growth and sustainable development. Moreover, it also comments on the relative placement of India in international context with regards to progress on various social indicators. The authors then take the readers on a ride to look at the characteristics and progress of Indian economy on different fronts, such as accountability and corruption, education, health, poverty and social support, inequality and democratic practices, devoting a chapter to each of these issues.

The importance of a well-functioning public sector to cater especially to the needs of the underprivileged in the country is stressed throughout the book but the issue of accountability is highlighted as a major catch in this regard. The institutional reforms proposed to improve performance of the public sector cover three main areas, namely transparency and accessibility of information, promoting social environment for intolerance of misdeeds, and legislative measures to prosecute and punish the wrongdoers.

With respect to education and health, the authors favour active role of public intervention in providing the baseline as well as for improving the standards of performance in these areas before, if any, private investment is allowed in these sectors. The often proposed schemes of school vouchers for universal education or health insurance in an environment of private provision of education and health facilities are strongly denounced by the authors on the basis of 'public good' characteristics of health and education. Moreover, international experience in this regard is also highlighted to call for a larger budgetary allocation for health and education as well as the development of public provision in these sectors until they are strengthened enough to avoid predatory profit exploitation by the private sector.

In the domain of social support for the poor, the book contends that both 'market mania' and 'market phobia' may be unfair in deciding upon the tools to cater to the needs of the under-privileged. Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of Public Distribution

System (PDS), Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs), and National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), the strengthened PDS is seen as a promising form of social support. The authors conclude that, in any case, the poor should not be left on their own to struggle on their way out of destitution; some form of 'support' for the poor is indispensable.

A particularly striking feature of Indian economy highlighted in the book is the large scale and multidimensional inequality that is historically prevalent yet inadequately addressed. Inequalities range from the domain of income to gender, caste, education and even to the knowledge of English. And all of these different forms of inequalities tend to feed each other, forming a vicious circle of multiple deprivations. The depressing feature associated with inequalities peculiar to Indian case is not the abundance available to the affluent few but the utter lack of even basic necessities for a decent living for a vast majority of Indian populace. Gravity of the situation is aggravated by the lack of public debate on issues concerning the destitute owing to their under representation, and in some cases non-representation, as an identity group which causes failure of the needs of the indigent to earn recognition on political front. The widely applauded Indian democracy also proves far from being well-functioning in this regard, calling for an initiation of extensive public reasoning, facilitated mainly by the media, to highlight the needs of the underdogs in the society and the subsequent political debates on policy proposals for required remedies. In the end, the book stresses the need for impatience in getting these social issues solved to get the troubled stratum of the Indian society out of the miserable state of affairs it is currently in and to build human capabilities if the country wants to enjoy economic growth in the long run.

The major strength of this book lies in the statistical support and thorough referencing of the evidence presented. Moreover, the arguments are placed in context by international comparisons as well as comparing performance of different states within India, which enhances the reader's comprehension of the nature of the problem. In addition to being an engrossing and captivating read throughout, the book is praiseworthy for a generally hopeful perspective on the dismal state of affairs. The practical suggestions for improvements drawing from international and national experience leave the reader optimistic about the consequences of struggling for a change for the better.

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