

REVIEWS

India's development story: unfounded apprehensions?

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Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen. *An uncertain glory: India and its contradictions*. Penguin India, 2013. ISBN 9781846147616. Hard cover. INR 699.

This book attempts to evaluate the implications of the recent economic growth in India for improvement in the living standards of the masses. According to Drèze and Sen, India's recent economic growth is, indeed, quite remarkable; however, its celebration is contemptible, given its limited translation into better living conditions for the people. One indication that something has been wrong with India's development strategy is the fact that it has started falling behind every other South Asian country in terms of social indicators, despite doing so well on the economic front. A comparison between Bangladesh and India offers evidence of this. India experienced higher economic growth than Bangladesh in the last two decades, in terms of per capita income, which was 60% higher than that in Bangladesh in 1990 and 98% higher in 2010. However, during the same period, Bangladesh overtook India in terms of a wide range of basic social indicators: life expectancy, child survival, fertility rates and immunisation rates. Bangladesh surpassed India even in certain educational indicators, such as the estimated "mean years of schooling". The authors present their analysis mainly in chapters 3–8. Chapter 3 deals with how poorly India fares on social development indicators in relation to poorer nations of the world. Chapter 4 discusses the lack of accountability in India's public sector and the prevalence of corruption. The next three chapters (5–7) discuss education, the healthcare crisis and poverty. In Chapter 8, the authors discuss the various forms of inequality in India.

The authors recognise the neglect of education in India, judging by international standards, both in terms of coverage and quality. They argue for universalisation of high-quality education. The proper evaluation and monitoring of teachers and students, along with the provision of an adequate number of teachers and basic infrastructure are ways to accomplish this. The evaluation of teaching should be aimed at restoring the accountability of the schooling system; this would certainly facilitate the attainment of the larger educational goal. Students' evaluation

tests need not be intended mainly to put pressure on children; they should aid us in determining the kind of help, attention or encouragement particular children or schools need. The poor health outcome, attributed to State negligence, is identified as another sector that requires serious attention.

The central message of the book is that growth per se is not sufficient to transform the living conditions of the underprivileged. Adequate attention must be paid to how the growth is shared or how far it visibly changes the quality of life. It is also important to recognise that the nature of the growth process – sectoral composition and employment intensity – as well as of public policy designed to enable the common people to experience the benefits of growth have a crucial influence on the impact of economic growth on living standards. In addition, Drèze and Sen emphasise the needs and rights of the underprivileged to receive greater attention in public discussion and policy-making. The authors put part of the blame on the media as well. They allege that rather than trying to diagnose the issues related to the lives of the Indian masses, the media celebrates only the rich and powerful, perhaps because it is an advertisement-driven business.

One could say that the book presents facts without providing any in-depth analysis of the same. For instance, it is a well-known fact that India has failed to perform well on many fronts despite its higher economic growth in relation to the rest of the South Asian countries, and evidence of this can be found in the various reports of the World Bank. However, what is expected of a scholarly exercise in terms of offering probable explanations for the observed state of affairs is largely missing in the book. Prior to offering any policy suggestion, it is necessary to undertake an in-depth analysis to discover the reasons behind such poor performance. It is possible that the reason for the slow progress with respect to some indicators is that the earlier regimes were negligent about making promotion efforts. An apt example could be the abysmal performance of the healthcare system, which cannot be set right unless it is duly regulated and monitored. Such measures remained a neglected domain even during the pre-reform periods. While a book of this kind serves as a glossary of evidence, it would be more rewarding to locate the factors responsible for the disappointing evidence and measures to alleviate them.

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