

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282626220>

An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions, by Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013. 448 pp. ISBN: 978-0691160795

Article in *Business Ethics Quarterly* · April 2015

DOI: 10.1017/beq.2015.5

CITATION

1

READS

7,059

1 author:



S. Prakash Sethi

City University of New York - Bernard M. Baruch College

102 PUBLICATIONS 2,349 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

***An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions*, by Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013. 448 pp. ISBN: 978-0691160795**

S. Prakash Sethi, The City University of New York

Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen's *An Uncertain Glory* is an excellent, highly readable, and exceptionally meaningful book. It is laden with relevant data, lucid analyses, insightful conclusions, and passionate in advocating changes that assign a higher priority to quality of life and preservation of human rights than to the dictates of ruling elites.

Drèze and Sen also reject the notions—vociferously advocated by many economists—that globalization and unhindered international trade are, first, a necessary precondition for economic growth and, second, an assurance of better developmental solutions than government-directed reforms that obstruct the efficiencies realized through the competitive marketplace (Bhagwati & Panagariya, 2013). The authors note that advocates of unfettered globalization fail to explain the vast and increasing inequality in income distribution in countries that have embraced it. If a rising tide of globalization is to raise all boats, they don't seem to count those filled with impoverished individuals that have sunk under the tide.

An Uncertain Glory should be required reading for the political and business elites of India to shake their consciences and dislodge them from their self-declared perch of guiding India's economic growth. The poor of India would benefit as well from synopses of various parts of this book—translated into local languages—to better recognize, understand, and perhaps in the future ameliorate the harm that India's corrupt bureaucracy has inflicted on the population.

This book would also be relevant to other developing countries that are burdened with pseudo-democracies, corrupt business leaders, and inept institutions of governance, as it helps to demonstrate that a functioning democracy needs more than “vote buying” and “mechanical vote counting” when the underlying values of informed choice and respect for human life are sacrificed in the name of short-term growth (*The Economist*, 2014).

Drèze and Sen's primary focus is on India and its tortuous path to economic growth since it achieved independence from the British in 1947. From its inception, India's leaders were committed to building a democratic nation that would recognize its multiple linguistic and highly developed cultural communities, respect all religions and faiths, and adhere to a secular constitution and rule of law. It seemed highly improbable at that time that such goals could be achieved, given the country's persistent and volatile mix of interracial violence, a condition that still afflicts its former, pre-independence components and now sovereign nations, i.e., Pakistan and Bangladesh.

That India has survived more than six decades of democracy is a testament to its people and, yes, to its leaders. However, if we were to analyze the country's path to economic growth in terms of the well-being of the masses, it has a lot to answer for its shortcomings.

The first three chapters of *An Uncertain Glory* are titled “A New India,” “Integrating India’s Growth and Development,” and “India in a Comparative Perspective.” This section of the text points out the remarkable periods of economic achievement in India’s history, while acknowledging that the nation has suffered stagnation and very slow growth for almost half a century following independence in 1947. Notwithstanding its impressive growth rate during the 1990s, which has since abated, India seems to have lagged behind many other developing countries, both in economic growth and, equally important, in the upward mobility of large majorities of people in terms of economics, health, and education. The growth has been largely confined to service industries—e.g., information technology—and clustered among small groups of highly educated people, leaving most others behind. India has also trailed a number of similarly placed countries in providing essential services, even at a basic level, to the large majority of its people. Drèze and Sen assign blame for this situation squarely on corrupt political and business elites, as well as on incompetent and entrenched bureaucracies.

The next four chapters of the book address operational aspects of India’s economic and political system. In Chapter 4, “Accountability and Corruption,” the authors raise important questions about the rationale and efficiency of India’s public-sector enterprises and their lack of transparency and accountability for poor performance. For example, one of India’s largest public-sector enterprises, electric power generation, suffers from two related issues: (1) energy production is inefficient and poorly managed, and (2) its distribution is biased toward politically connected individuals and groups. Although electricity production is not an isolated example, it is indicative of a host of problems facing other public-sector enterprises, including public railways and food distribution. Even more problematic is the fact that political leaders and senior government officials responsible for running these enterprises are fully aware of this situation and appear indifferent to finding feasible and workable solutions. Those responsible for perpetuating such inequities suffer no negative personal consequences for their conduct.

Large state-owned enterprises also give enormous discretion to officials to exercise judgment without any meaningful external oversight. Given the long history of state-owned enterprises and lack of external accountability, it is not surprising that the system has become riddled with corruption. The authors argue that prevalence and persistence of such large-scale corruption is due to a lack of transparency and a sense that corruption at higher levels is normal. Sadly, there is an element of social leniency toward corrupt officials, since it would be difficult to isolate some when there is a danger that many others would also be exposed.

To a casual Westerner who routinely comes into contact with “smart and educated Indians” working in science, technology, medicine, law, and public service, it would come as a surprise that India’s educational system is abysmally derelict and poorly managed. The authors maintain in Chapter 5, “The Centrality of Education,” that only a handful of elite universities and research institutes consume the greatest share of education funding, and the overwhelming majority of people in India are poorly served in terms of public education. Illiteracy condemns individuals to a lifetime of unemployment and underemployment, resulting in the loss of multiple generations of India’s youth from becoming gainfully employed and contributing to the growth of their nation’s economy.

In Chapter 6, we learn that India's health care crisis is no less serious than its education crisis or public services crisis. But while corruption and education have been hotly debated, the health care situation in India has the ignoble distinction of remaining under the radar of news media attention and public debate. As things stand now, India's record of public health ranks below some of the poorest countries in the world. The authors state: "Public expenditures on health in India have hovered around 1.0% of the country's GDP for most of the last twenty years" (148), which puts it at the bottom end of most other countries in the world. A majority of Indians, who are also poor, lack access to public health facilities and instead must rely on private doctors and health care clinics, which are not only expensive but are also prone to practicing bad medicine.

At the same time, India has increasingly become a destination site of medical specialties serviced by highly proficient and internationally trained doctors. These include, among others, artificial insemination and surrogate mothering. It should come as no surprise that the results of this high-end medicine, especially surrogate mothering, is often achieved at the expense of uneducated young women from impoverished Indian villages—women who have little choice but to accept a mere pittance in compensation for whatever "employment" they can find (Roy, 2011).

The last three chapters of *An Uncertain Glory* provide an overarching view of the context of democracy in India and its alternative ability to address the persistent and endemic problem of inequality and poverty facing the voiceless masses in India. The authors persuasively argue that effective democracy is not possible if the country fails to address the social problems discussed throughout the book. To the extent that having a democratic form of governance is an end in itself, India has much to celebrate. But if democracy is an instrument for enhancing the quality of social and economic well-being of a society, and, in particular, for removing injustices and social inequalities, achievements of India's democracy are tempered by its significant shortcomings. Drèze and Sen attribute the failures of India's democratic institutions to five conditions: ineffective methods of addressing inequalities, inept and corrupt bureaucracy, a venal and self-serving business elite, the failure of the news media, and an almost total disregard for the ethical norms expressed in India's religious and cultural history.

It has not taken very long for India's democratic apparatus to be subverted by a politics that caters to those with vested interests. It has given rise to vote buying through patronage. Allegiance has overwhelmed the citizenry at the expense of deliberation. India's civil service—based on historical traditions of the British Raj—is in theory comprised of the best and the brightest of India's intellectual and professional cadre. Now that politicians come and go through election cycles, senior bureaucrats effectively administer government policy. This has increased bureaucrats' opportunities and expectations to extract personal financial gains in exchange for contracts and licenses to the favored few. In other words, crony capitalism in India has become the norm rather than exception.

India has a vibrant news media, which, in theory, should provide a robust forum for discussion and debate about issues of national importance. In reality, however, the "power of the press" is poorly exercised. Surveys suggest a pervasive media

bias toward discussing the activities of the wealthy and powerful, and a conspicuous disregard for covering the issues that affect the majority of the population, e.g., education, health care, and nutrition. Viewing this peculiar situation, a highly respected Indian author recently noted, “The India we are lauding forms but a microcosm of this vast land. It is the India of the elite, the privileged, and the affluent. The only India we want the rest of the world to see and acknowledge, because we are so damned ashamed of the other. Ashamed and ignorant” (Dé, 2008).

Throughout the book, and especially in the last chapter, the authors offer a number of actionable ideas to address these problems and help India realize its potential for a just and prosperous society. Unfortunately, from this reviewer’s perspective, it is disappointing that the authors did not go further and examine the viability of their preferred remedies, which go beyond controlling the problem to preventing the problem.

Drèze and Sen’s suggestions are reasonable. This should make it easy for India’s political, business, and bureaucratic regimes to undertake reform; however, the lessons from the book illustrate why it would be contrary to their vested interests and why there are few, if any, negative consequences for their inaction. Our emphasis, therefore, must be on changing the incentives and disincentives that entrench India’s status quo.

Three themes come to mind. First, India should consider term limits for its elected representatives and thereby deny them the opportunity to perpetuate their political patronage; similarly, officials should be banned from holding electoral office if they are convicted of specified crimes. Second, Indian civil servants should face a mandatory five-year performance review, which would be based on outcome-specific performance standards, would be undertaken by an independent group of experts outside the influence of bureaucrats, and would be documented in reports that are made public. Currently, senior bureaucrats have effective job tenure, which is further strengthened by their knowledge of administrative processes and their obsequiousness to venal political leaders. This system must end. Third, corrupt corporations and their executives should not only face penalties for past indiscretions but also be restricted from future business opportunities. Emphasis could thereby be placed on deterring future misconduct within the business community rather than merely paying for past sins. Finally, a greater—and universal—emphasis on adherence to ethical norms must prevail when forming the foundation of human activities. Although it is difficult to precisely define the contours of such norms, they could certainly develop through more vigorous public discourse and democratic governance.

REFERENCES

- Bhagwati, J. & Panagariya, A. 2013. *Why Growth Matters: How Economic Growth in India Reduced Poverty and the Lessons for Other Developing Countries*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Dé, Shobhaa. 2008. *Superstar India*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- The Economist Staff. 2014. What’s gone wrong with democracy? *The Economist*, March 1. <http://www.economist.com/news/essays/21596796-democracy-was-most-successful-political-idea-20th-century-why-has-it-run-trouble-and-what-can-be-do>
- Roy, N. S. 2011. Protecting the rights of surrogate mothers in India. *New York Times*, October 4. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/05/world/asia/05iht-letter05.html?_r=0

Copyright of Business Ethics Quarterly is the property of Society for Business Ethics and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.