



## Book Review

# An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions

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**Jean Dreze & Amartya Sen, *An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions*, Allen Lane, 2013. Pages: xiii + 434; ISBN 978-1-846-14761-6.**

The wide chasms and cascading depths, characteristics of the Indian political economy and unfathomable social divide, have never ceased to interest the scholars of repute. Notwithstanding the chanting of the *mantra* of 'unity in diversity', the Indian republic has exhibited a set of not only vulnerable but deeply divisive contradictions that have tended to undermine and shake the strong democratic foundation.

*An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions* present a powerful analysis of these seemingly irreconcilable contradictions. This new book tackles several of these disturbing yet distinct and interrelated features in a captivating way.

Comprising ten chapters, the book not only analyses the state of the nation, but also addresses the underlying issues and offers remedial measures. The authors, while underscoring the rapid economic development India witnessed, ably assisted by the firm democratic political system, lament the heart wrenching failure in reaping the benefits of the same in true terms.

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The authors claim that the impact of high levels of sustainable growth ought to be judged by the way it has affected the lives and freedoms of the people. While noting that the fruits of economic labour have benefited a few privileged classes, although substantial, they have virtually left the teeming millions untouched. They assert that India has fallen way behind in the scale of social indicators of living standards when compared with many countries, such as Bangladesh, which it has over taken in terms of economic growth. The authors' claim that such an economic development sans a broad based social justice is indeed an eye opener. In fact, the authors rue that the world development studies offer few other examples, if any, of such a fast paced economy but doing precious little in terms of alleviating human sufferings. While noting that economic growth is intricately entwined with improvement of standards of living in many a way, they contend that very scant attention, if any, is paid to this aspect.

The authors seek to buttress this point by highlighting the continued failure of participatory growth and lack of crucial social services such as schooling and medical care as well as services such as safe water, electricity and the like. In the process, they caution that the under or no-development of these social indicators and human capabilities, would in the long run stymie the feasibilities of high economic growth in India.

The authors point out, in exclusive chapters, that well functioning public services, especially in the fields of education and health care, are crucial to achieve real economic growth as aforementioned. However, they observe, in light of the voluminous statistical data appended in the form of a separate Appendix, that India's track record in these fields is abysmal. They fear that the highly privatized and compartmentalized health and education systems will further perpetuate the social disparities plaguing the society. In the same breath, the authors also insist on the dire necessity for the lives of underprivileged, women and children to be given utmost attention in public discussion and policy making. While noting that Indian democracy has been able to get rid of some social inequalities which stifled its growth earlier, several new imbalances including economic inequality, tend to threaten it further. Also the authors draw our attention to the larger issues of

accountability and corruption affecting the Indian society. They observe that an effective engagement with these issues is the need of the hour.

The book is noteworthy for, among many other factors, the analysis of law's response for some of these issues. The authors applaud the crucial role played by the Right to Information Act 2005, The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 and the proposed Lokpal Bill 2011 to name a few, in this regard.

Contrary to the general disenchantment about Indian democracy and its inadequacies to address various of these contradictions, the authors note, "Indian democracy offers significant opportunities for popular movements to flourish and resist the concentration of power and the neglect of the interests of the deprived. The book is, thus, contingently optimistic. The important task is not so much to find a 'new India', but to contribute to making one", and sign off on a very hopeful note.

On the one hand, this book is unique in terms of analysing the inherent contradictions operating as bottlenecks on the road to development, and on the other for offering solutions from within. It is recommended for all those who evince a great interest in policy rethinking for realizing the dreams our forefathers dreamt for us.