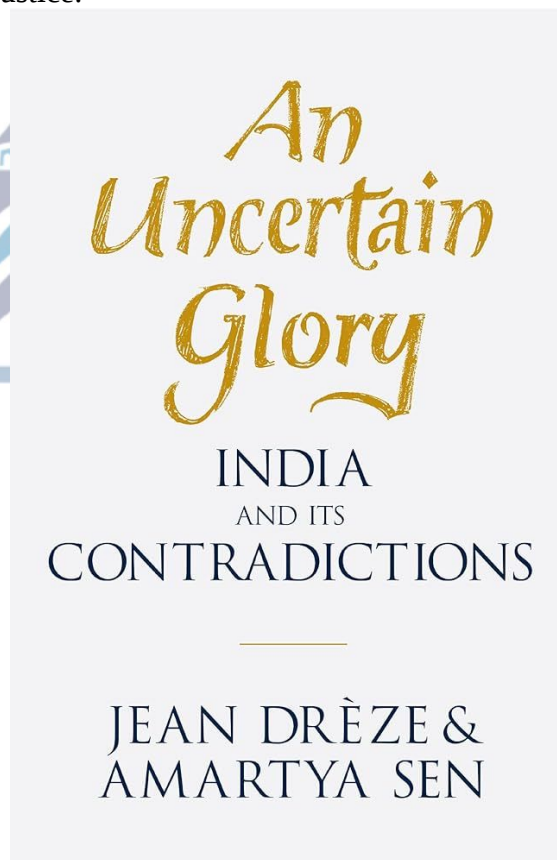


Book Review

An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions

Authors: Jean Drèze, Amartya Sen

Jean Drèze has lived in India since 1979 and became an Indian citizen in 2002. He has taught at the London School of Economics and the Delhi School of Economics, and he is now a visiting professor at Allahabad University. He is the coauthor (with Amartya Sen) of *Hunger and Public Action* and *India: Development and Participation*. Amartya Sen is the Thomas W. Lamont University Professor and professor of economics and philosophy at Harvard University. He won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998. His many books include *Development as Freedom*, *Rationality and Freedom*, *The Argumentative Indian*, *Identity and Violence*, and *The Idea of Justice*.



Publisher: Penguin Books Limited, 2013

Language: English

Pages: 448

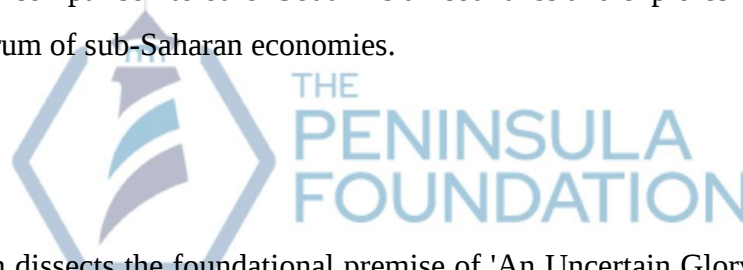
Reviewed by: Aryaman Tayal

In a landscape of burgeoning economic promises and ambitious proclamations, India's true socio-economic reality often resides in the shadows. When the first edition of Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen's book, 'An Uncertain Glory,' surfaced in 2013, India stood amidst a vastly different social, economic, and political backdrop. The nation grappled with economic slowdowns and persistent challenges within state-led initiatives. However, amid this turbulence, there emerged a rise of public engagement and a growing demand for transparency and accountability, often amplified by a vigilant media.

Now, in its second edition, the book revisits these poignant questions, painting a stark picture of India's present reality while confronting the notable dearth of updated statistics. Drèze and Sen adeptly delve into the evolution of India's landscape over the past seven years, particularly scrutinising the impact of the NDA government and its policies on the country's growth trajectory.

Centralising discussions around the pivotal domains of health, education, and social security, this book navigates the formidable challenges embedded within India's growth narrative. It puts India's progress in comparison to other South Asian countries and explores its standing amidst the broader spectrum of sub-Saharan economies.

Growth for All?



The initial section dissects the foundational premise of 'An Uncertain Glory'—the contention that true development transcends mere economic growth. Drèze and Sen assert that a nation's progress should pivot on the enhancement of human capabilities and freedoms, challenging the conventional GDP-centric narrative.

India's journey from the shackles of colonial oppression to the fervent embrace of independence in 1947 stands as a testament to unparalleled achievements. Emerging from the yoke of relentless imperial rule, India's ascent to self-governance was fraught with daunting challenges and profound uncertainties. The historical context surrounding India's post-independence growth rate of approximately 3.5% annually unveils a complex narrative (Table 2.1). Despite the presence of progress inherent in this growth rate, the economic policies adopted in the aftermath of independence failed to catalyse a substantial transformation in the living conditions of the populace.

The book points out that aspirations accompanying the 3.5% growth rate were buoyed by the prospect of positive change, particularly considering India's tumultuous colonial past. However, the economic policies implemented during the early post-independence period

faltered in their intended objectives. They neither significantly amplified the growth rate nor precipitated a remarkable improvement in the living standards of the populace.

Shockingly, available evidence indicates a disheartening reality—there was a glaring absence of poverty reduction, especially in rural areas, throughout the three decades following the initiation of the First Five Year Plan in 1951. This stark revelation underscores the profound limitations of the economic strategies employed during this period, failing to address the entrenched socio-economic challenges plaguing the nation.

The juxtaposition of seemingly promising growth rates with the stark persistence of poverty and stagnant living conditions underscores the fundamental inadequacies within India's post-independence economic policies.

It is enunciated that there has been a boom in the middle class, which stands as a testament to India's economic growth. However, this economic boom masks a complex reality—one where the fortunes of the privileged contrast starkly with the slow and often excruciatingly sluggish progress experienced by underprivileged groups.

The book points out that while the living standards of the affluent have soared beyond expectations, the narrative is vastly different for marginalised communities like rickshaw pullers, domestic workers, and labourers in brick kilns. For these segments, the reform-driven period hasn't heralded transformative changes. Though there have been marginal improvements in their lives, the pace of change has been agonisingly slow, barely denting their abysmal living conditions.

Health, Education, and Social Support

Education is a critical pillar of societal progress, yet India grapples with persistent challenges and shortcomings in this domain. Despite fervent pro-education sentiments during India's national movement, the expansion of school education has lagged significantly behind, especially when compared to East Asia.

India's educational disparity, particularly among women, stands starkly in contrast to the progress witnessed in East Asian nations like Indonesia, where literacy has become almost universal among younger age groups. The disparities within India itself are striking—Kerala, with its history of prioritising education, stands apart from the rest of the nation due to sustained efforts and a pro-education policy. However, this progressive outlook remains an exception in a largely educationally backward post-independent India.

The book pointed out that the educational landscape suffers from two principal deficiencies—limited coverage and poor educational standards. While some strides have been made in enhancing coverage, the quality of education in Indian schools remains a pressing concern. Rote learning prevails, often devoid of true comprehension, and basic skills like multiplication and division elude a significant proportion of students. Test results from various studies underscore the alarming reality that a substantial number of pupils lack fundamental knowledge and struggle with basic arithmetic.

Transitioning our focus to the critical domain of healthcare, we unravel a parallel narrative—one of systemic deficiencies and alarming under-representation in public discourse. This exploration takes us into the heart of India's healthcare challenges, where issues of child immunisation and public health expenditure come to the fore. The absence of these crucial concerns in mainstream dialogue poses a significant barrier to addressing the pressing health needs of the nation's populace.

The book points out that a strikingly low percentage of questions in the Indian Parliament, only 3%, relate to children, despite comprising over 40% of the population. Of these, a mere fraction pertains to early childhood care and development. Media coverage mirrors this invisibility, with the interests of young children virtually absent from the mainstream narrative.

This disregard extends to critical health indicators like immunisation rates. India's immunisation rates rank among the lowest globally, trailing even sub-Saharan African nations and falling below those of every other South Asian country, including Nepal and Pakistan. Bangladesh, in stark contrast, has achieved nearly universal immunisation rates of around 95% for each vaccine. India's sluggish progress in improving immunisation rates throughout the 1990s and early 2000s stands in sharp contrast to Bangladesh's significant strides during the same period.

The discussion on poverty navigates through India's socio-economic complexities, critiquing ideological extremities while advocating for a pragmatic approach. The struggle to elevate millions above the poverty line remains intertwined with the lack of access to essential elements of a decent life. The book scrutinises India's poverty line, spotlighting its outdated and inadequate standards, failing to address the enhanced requisites of dignified living. The authors caution against the pitfalls of an overreliance on market forces, drawing parallels with China's experiences and stressing the need for a balanced approach that acknowledges the limitations of a purely market-driven economy. This critique of the poverty line and the call for pragmatic economic policies echo the book's overarching theme of redefining progress beyond economic growth alone.

Drèze and Sen scrutinise the enduring disparities between India's privileged few and the vast underprivileged majority, highlighting the ineptitudes within the socio-economic structure.

Despite being a thriving democracy, the authors underline the persistent lapses in accountability and representation, where the voices of the marginalised often remain marginalised in the political discourse. This examination serves as a stark reminder that India's democratic ideals are hindered by unresolved disparities and a lack of inclusive governance, accentuating the need for a more equitable, participatory system to uphold the tenets of democracy for all.

"An Uncertain Glory" by Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen serves as an eye-opening exposé of India's multifaceted challenges in societal development. Through meticulous analysis and compelling comparisons, the authors unveil a stark reality—India's economic growth stands juxtaposed against alarming shortcomings in social indicators, from education and healthcare to poverty alleviation. The book's compelling narrative underscores the urgent need for a recalibrated approach to progress, one that prioritises equitable distribution of resources, heightened governmental commitment to social welfare, and a recalibrated societal discourse that focusses on the holistic development of all segments of society. It serves not merely as a critique of existing systems but as a poignant call to action, urging policymakers and society at large to address the systemic deficiencies and inequalities that impede India's path to a more inclusive and prosperous future.