

**BOOK REVIEW: “SENSE AND SOLIDARITY: JHOLAWALA
ECONOMICS FOR EVERYONE BY JEAN DRÈZE”**

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INTRODUCTION

Jean Dreze is a Belgian-born development economist of India and is known for his work on development issues like hunger, poverty, health and education. He is famously known for conceptualizing the idea of NREGA.

In India, public policy is best seen as an outcome of democratic practice. Drèze believes that democratic practice is more effective and appropriate and thus is essential to clarify the goals and priorities of public policies. By having a distinctive understanding of the Indian economy and showing its relationship with the social life of the ordinary people, Jean Drèze gives an entirely different outlook to understand and analyse the development economics and social policy in India. His regular visits in rural India during his fieldwork have enabled him to make invaluable contributions not only to public debates on India’s social policies and economics but also contributes to the understanding of the Indian state from the lens of the marginalized. *Sense and Solidarity* is a collection of ten essays which offers insights on hunger, poverty, health, education, unemployment, inequality, corruption, and conflict which is often viewed as ‘unfashionable’ issues of India. By discussing several issues in such a broad manner, Drèze has raised the concern to enlarge the boundaries of social development. Drèze’s book is largely about goals and actions in the field of social development, but it also contributes to a clearer vision of a society one can aspire to build. Jean Drèze discusses that the situation and social location of someone is determined by a ‘chance’. The deprived and marginalized section of the population never had a chance. Public spiritedness and spread of civic sense which has been emphasized in the book can be of great help in preventing corruption, exploitation, crime and environmental vandalism.

Jean Drèze has defined the title *Jholawala economics* as just an expression. The rationale behind this term is that ‘jholawala’ has become a term of abuse in India’s corporate-sponsored media, and is a disparaging reference to activists who often dismiss economists as docile servants of the state. Drèze argues that jholawalas can make better use of economics other than briefcase

carrying professional economists, because jholawalas have relatively good view of the dark underbelly of the system as they are well placed to see it. He has further argued that it is mainly activists who have developed the principle of a series of anti-corruption legislations vis-à-vis the right to information, grievance redressal, and right to public service and whistle-blowing. Such a perspective helps in understanding the Indian state from a very different perspective. According to Jean Drèze, the title jholawala economics is intended to serve a dual purpose. Firstly, it affirms the validity of research for action in economics. And secondly, it is an invitation to mutual learning between economists and so-called jholawalas.

RESEARCH FOR ACTION

The method used by the author is based on collective enquiry which he terms as action oriented research or “research for action”, which essentially refers to a kind of research aimed at contributing to practical change.

The ten essays in the book deals with various aspect of India’s social development in the broadest sense and with a wider perspective. India is still grappling with issues like hunger, poverty, corruption, inequality, conflict and many other related issues. Furthermore, this collection of essays provides some sort of retrospective on the course of social policy in India between 2000 and 2017. Several welfare initiatives like mid-day meal programme, National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, etc. have emerged out of lively public debates. The chronological arrangement of the essays helps in understanding that how social policy evolved over time.

The first chapter on Drought and Hunger deals critically with the excess accumulation of food grain stocks by the Indian Government which has intensified the hardship like hunger and starvation death in the countryside. Jean Drèze called the food subsidy as the biggest scam in India, as the government is keeping millions of tonnes of food out of the reach of the poor in the name of “food security”. According to him, the food subsidy is essentially the deficit of Food Corporation of India, whose operations are now chiefly geared to keep food prices up rather than down. The ordinary households benefit nothing from the subsidized PDS. The chapter also highlights the abysmal condition of local public services, inadequate and unpredictable delivery of the PDS, lack of proper education and school system, political marginalization, declining land productivity, lack of public accountability, absence of basic health facilities in many villages, etc. is pushing the backward regions in the situation of extreme vulnerability.

The second chapter on Poverty has discussed that how the outdated BPL lists in most states are creating a problem in the successful delivery of the welfare schemes. It has also been discussed that how the whole idea of “BPL targeting” is restricting various social benefits like PDS for

example strictly to the households below the poverty line.. Jean Drèze has argued that the hidden nature of mass poverty in India has been lost in the din of the recent debate. The dismal living conditions of the poor call for immediate intervention. Old-age pension has been often viewed as a tool of social security in rural India as it gives a sense of economic security, dignity and bargaining power to the recipients especially women. Jean Drèze has shown five major flaws in the pension schemes for widows and the elderly namely, narrow coverage, bureaucratic procedures, low pension amounts, irregular payments, and high collection costs. He seems to sought for an universal approach in these schemes.

In chapter three the midday meal scheme has been widely discussed and it has been defined that how the supply of nutritious food in primary schools make some positive impacts like breaking caste barriers, solving hunger problem of the poor children, increasing school participation, boosting female enrolment, creating employment opportunities especially for deprived women, and is also helping in reducing the class inequalities. Some limitations in the proper functioning of midday meal scheme like funding problem, resistance to eggs by upper caste parents, and infrastructural problems has also been discussed. Still, the scheme seems to provide a ray of hope to poor children and their parents.

Chapter four deals with the health care issues in which the author has widely discussed how the public expenditure on health which has been stagnated at around one percent of India's GDP is making space for private control as a large part or expenditure is coming from the private pockets and in a way is profit-oriented. Which is when compared with other South Asian neighbours like Bangladesh and Nepal reflects that India's basic health facilities lag behind them which also focuses that within Indian health services there is a space for private control and that patients are being exploited by these private agencies. India has been neatly "leapfrogged" according to Drèze there is a huge lack of basic health facilities in a large part of India, and the neglect of health services in public policy has been intensified in the liberalization period. Few improvements have been marked after some health policy initiatives like Accredited Social Health Policy Initiatives (ASHAs) and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs), but the progress remains uneven and slow in some fields.

Chapter five deals with the importance of elementary education in child development, economic progress, demographic change, social equity, and democratic practice; and has discussed massive problem of inadequate quality of school education across the country, lack of funds, understaffing, erratic supervision, inadequate training, low salary of contract teachers and poor infrastructures reflects a lack of political interests in the well-being and rights of children.

Chapter six widely discusses the scheme of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and its several challenges and loopholes in its functioning. It has been argued that

NREGA is a pro-worker programme implemented by an anti-worker system which is pervaded by indifference towards marginalized people in general and rural workers in particular. This scheme has been justified by the author as it has been argued that it would lead to a sharp reduction in rural-urban migration, women empowerment, and also helps in changing the power equations in rural society. "Taxing the rich" has been suggested by the author to deal with the financial limitation in guaranteed employment.

Chapter seven critically deals with the functioning of the PDS in several states and has focused on the positive development led by the National Food Security Act. It has been discussed that that expanded PDS coverage and lower issue prices have both contributed to enhancing the voice of the disempowered rural population and otherwise poor. BIMARU states which have moved towards a more "inclusive" approach to PDS have achieved better results as substantial impact on rural poverty has been seen. In this sense the food security bill is viewed as a step to tackle India's enormous nutrition problems.

Chapter eight discusses the anomalies of increasing corporate power not only in traditional areas of business, but also in urban planning, mass media, welfare services, etc. Taking Noam Chomsky's idea the author has argued that India is in danger of becoming a "business-driven society". The UID project is also creating several problems as it has become compulsory for accessing several social schemes, and in a way is breaching right to privacy, civil liberties, and the right to dissent. It is creating a vast infrastructure of social control with full possibilities of getting misused; and the project has also been rolled out without any legal framework. Even the drive to impose biometric authentication on the PDS is threatening to disrupt its recent progress. The author gives importance to human capital along with physical capital

Chapter nine is on war and peace in which the author discusses the destructive power of modern technology through the lens of nuclear war or climate change, which for him has reached frightening proportions and keeps growing. He is critical of both the pacifist and abolitionist view as none of them talk for the complete abolition of violence. A huge expenditure on military has scuttled the spending on public services like health and education. Security concerns have also led to massive displacement of development concerns. The popular uprising in Kashmir due to continuous military regimentation and continued repression has alienated the Kashmiri people from rest of the India and has deprived them of the basic human and civil rights. Jean Drèze views the abolition of violence and armed conflict, and progress of ethics and social norms as an integral part of the social development

In the last chapter of the book Drèze has discussed the living conditions of the urban poor, caste, and other discriminative initiatives like "the Bullet Train Syndrome" which has created separate public facilities for the privileged against the rest, and accordingly prioritized to the former

instead of providing service to all. The idea of universal basic income in India has been viewed as a case of premature articulation. The author has also discussed the upper caste domination in civil society institutions, corporate boards, media houses, etc. which is ultimately leading to the dismal conditions of deprived caste poor. The projection of Gujarat as a model during 2014 general elections has been criticized by the author and has been termed as “Gujarat muddle” as most of the present issues relating to welfare schemes were undermined and corporate-led development was glamourised.

CONCLUSION

The book further helps in understanding some of the advances and setbacks of the welfare initiatives, as well as debates that accompanied them. Most of the issues like farmer suicides, environmental issues and issues related to gender inequality have not been discussed very widely but that has been acknowledged by the author. Also it seems the book focuses more on the nitty-gritty of hunger, poverty and other related issues. But whatever issues the book discusses, it does so in a very broad and substantive manner. As the author gives his best to understand the social policies like PDS, midday meal, NREGA and other by using a lot of surveys and field studies done by him with his team, and has compared in a very well manner with that of government and expert committee reports. The author has also re-visited many of his field to recheck and re-evaluate the several social schemes and thus has highlighted the positive aspect with some appreciable suggestions about how to improve any policy more to make its reach to a larger population. The constant emphasis on universalisation of several public policies shows some positive hope, as well as emphasis on ethical progress and changes in human values and social norms shows a way to create a society which reconciles liberty and equality.