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Jean Dreze, *Sense and Solidarity: Jholawala Economics for Everyone*, Permanent Black 2017, 341 pp., \$49 Hardcover.

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Book review

Jean Dreze's new book, a collection of essays called 'Sense and Solidarity - Jholawala Economics for Everyone' is a wonderful read for those who have genuine interest in India's development economics. Dreze combines his academic rigour with a deep sense of social activism that sets him apart from other academics working in development economics. He works in a space that is widely ignored by many, and rare researcher has ventured into such arena with sense of social activism.

The book contains ten essays which are written by well-known authors who are extraordinarily sensitive towards the social issues and have contributed immensely in the past to bring such issues to the forefront of academics and action-oriented research.

Through the introductory chapter "Economics among Road Scholars" Dreze rates the most persisting social evil - *poverty* in its quintessential form which is poignantly mentioned in the opening paragraph. "Hundreds of informal sector coal-miners in Ranchi trudging miles with heavy loads of coal they have dug up, often from below the land from which they were forcibly displaced. Dreze quotes George Orwell saying all of us owe our comfortable existence to ...poor drudges underground, blackened to the eyes, with their throat full of coal dust". This largely summarizes the spirit of "Wretched of the Earth" whose significance can be discerned through these collections of essays.

At the outset economist Dreze argues for an increased role for action-oriented research in development policy. This has been considerably highlighted under the ten broad themes such as Drought and Hunger, Poverty, School Meals, Health Care, Child Development and Elementary Education, Employment Guarantee, Food Security and the Public Distribution System, Corporate Power and Technocracy, War and Peace, and Top-UP. He has updated and given clarity to issue with introductions, background notes, statistical and bibliographic sources.

Dreze's analysis could comfortably suggest the gap that exists between the inadequacies of statistical analyses and academic research and approaches. The world sometimes has grown pessimistic about economics for its over-reliance on data and statistics, but not been able to predict or assimilate reality. Understanding the pulse of real India especially through this collection of essays has been gathered from Dreze's travels to nook and corner of India as wide as, from the hills of Chamba district to the terrain of Chambal area of Madhya Pradesh to the forests of Kalahandi and the dusty plains of Bihar.

Dreze's findings from the ground zero provides us with critical analysis of social issues. One of the greatest difficulties with many social programmes, he asserts, is the selection of eligible households who can remain under the below poverty line (BPL). If the central government had its way, even programmes

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Integrated Child development services (ICDS) and NREGA would have been restricted to BPL households. In between the idea that many of these social benefits should be regarded as a right of poor households, gained ground. BPL targeting has been one of the intricate social issues quite for some time and government tries to adopt and innovate new schemes to define BPL.

The recent transition away from BPL targeting with all its arbitrariness and restrictions, seems like a step forward. However, BPL targeting continues in some centrally sponsored programmes such as the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana, a health insurance programme. It is proving difficult even for the government to generate new lists of BPLs and justify it.

While analyzing the corporate power and technocracy, Dreze feels the influence of corporate houses has become all pervasive deeply influencing public policy and all walks of life. The influence has become so thick that if major corporate houses for some reason 'don't like policy, they change it.' Corporate interests are driving not only the traditional areas of business, but also urban planning, health, research, academics, mass media, sports, entertainment, etc. India is fast becoming a "business-driven society" if analysis of Noam Chomsky's United States society is any indication.

In 'The Bullet Train Syndrome', he questions the pro-rich institutional bias of the Indian Railways based on his own extensive travel on its networks. "If you have money, the Indian Railways is great fun, bullet or no bullet," he writes. "But the lesser mortal who travels without reservation is exactly where she was 35 years ago." The book succeeds in reminding us that poverty and privilege both are inherited at birth more often than earned. "The privileged tend to believe that they deserve or have earned what they have. But the chief determinant of privilege is chance," he writes of the accident of birth. Often the system works to perpetuate those inequalities without taking enough remedial measures.

In 'Glucose for the Lok Sabha?', he traces the clamour from Parliamentarians and ministers for replacing cooked midday meals in primary schools with biscuits to the corporate lobby. The plea for doing away with cooked midday meals for school kids was first made by the Biscuit Manufacturers Association through a letter signed by a senior executive at Parle Products, the biggest manufacturer of glucose biscuits.

Dreze through this collection of essays considerably highlights the extraordinary challenges that the Indian society faces starting with deeper malaise like poverty, to employment, to corruption and the role of corporate houses in influencing the decisions of the government. He has firmly suggested that the practical implications of evidence-based economics cannot be worked through without engaging all of society in democratic discussion including those who are working for a change. Dreze applies economics, philosophy and practical experiences to reignite the whole range of social policy in India.



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