



India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity

Jean Dreze, Amartya Sen

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India's success in reducing endemic deprivation since Independence has been quite limited. Recent diagnoses of this failure of policy have concentrated on the counterproductive role of government regulation, and on the need for economic incentives to accelerate the growth of the economy. This book argues that an assessment of India's failure to eliminate basic deprivations has to go beyond this limited focus, and to take note of the role played in that failure by inadequate public involvement in the provision of basic education, health care, social security, and related fields. Even the fostering of fast and participatory economic growth requires some basic social change, which is not addressed by liberalization and economic incentives. The authors also discuss the historical antecedents of these political and social neglects, including the distortion of policy priorities arising from inequalities of political power. Following on from this, the book considers the scope for public action to address these earlier biases and achieve a transformation of policy priorities.

Beginning with an introductory chapter presenting the motivation, focus, and approach of the book, it discusses the respective roles of the market mechanism and government action in economic development and discusses the particular role of public involvement in the fields of health and education. International comparisons of development experiences are brought to bear on the diagnosis of India's successes and failures, and the work discusses the lessons to be learnt from the contrasting development experiences of different states within India, with particular attention to Kerala's outstanding success in social fields. The authors consider the role of public action and political organization in promoting social opportunities. Attention is drawn, in particular, to the part played by widespread illiteracy in suppressing that process and perpetuating social inequalities. The work also looks at the issue of basic education, including a critical assessment of public policy in this field. The issue of gender inequality is discussed, and the role of women's agency in the expansion of social opportunities for both women and men is explored. The work concludes by consolidating the argument and discussing the policy implication of the analyses presented. A statistical appendix presents a comparative picture of India and other developing countries, and also the comparative performance of different states within India.

This new work by two internationally renowned economists is an important and relevant argument for promoting human welfare.

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