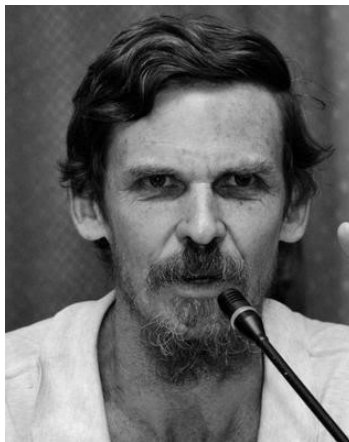


IN CONVERSATION WITH JEAN DREZE

Jean Dreze is an internationally acclaimed development economist and an Honorary Professor at Delhi School of Economics. His works in India includes hunger, famine, gender inequality, child health and education and NREGA. His co-authors include many well-known economists like Amartya Sen, Nicholas Stern and Angus Deaton. Dreze is well known for his commitment to social justice and has been actively involved in major social movements including peace movements, RTI campaign, Right to Food campaign and many more.



Editorial Board: In your experience, how has the policy-making scenario in India changed over the years? Has the increased voice of civil society brought any positive change?

Jean Dreze: I think that there has been some positive change at the state level. Poor people have always been on the margin of the democratic process in India, but over time, their ability to participate has grown, partly due to better education. In many states, public policy is now more responsive to people's demands and concerns than it used to be. The central government's policies, however, are still largely driven by privileged interests and the aspirations of the Indian elite. Prestige projects like the bullet train and so-called smart cities are a symptom of these distorted priorities.

Editorial Board: You have had a long experience working with the Indian tribal communities. What do you think are the effective approaches to policy-making in these regions, especially use of natural resources?

Jean Dreze: I am no expert on tribal development, but it seems to me that tribal communities should be given opportunities to develop on their own terms. In my experience, Adivasis aspire to a better standard of living including better nutrition, health care, education facilities and of course some economic security. At the same time, their culture and lifestyle have many valuable and valued features that are sometimes threatened by the dominant development model. There are ways of raising living standards without destroying the Adivasi way of life, and indeed, by building on it. To illustrate, tribal communities tend to be relatively egalitarian and to have a robust tradition of cooperative action. This can be a great strength for the purpose of building public amenities, protecting the environment, or fostering local democracy. Alas Adivasis tend to be regarded by the agents of the state as victims at best and enemies at worst. Their individual and collective abilities, and what we can learn from them, get devalued in the process.

Editorial Board: You, along with Dr. Khera, have been a strong advocate of increasing public expenditure in Social Welfare Schemes. In what way do you think we could, in fact, make our existing social welfare schemes more efficient?

Jean Dreze: Making good use of social spending requires, first and foremost, a better work culture in schools, health centres, Gram Panchayat offices, and the public sector in general. This may sound like a pipedream, but it can also be seen as a natural development in a country with a modicum of democracy. Public-sector absenteeism, exploitation and corruption thrive on the disempowerment of the public and the submissive acceptance of practices that are, in fact, totally unacceptable. As democratic engagement gains strength and the public becomes more articulate and vigilant, these practices often become harder to sustain, and the corresponding social norms tend to evolve. Of course, one should not rely on this process alone to achieve more responsibility in the public sector – better incentives and accountability measures are also required. But these measures are best seen as part of the larger need to change the public work culture through democratic practice.

Editorial Board: Your work involves quite a few social movements including the peace movements, the RTI campaign, the Right to Food campaign etc. Do you think there is any major inherent social or cultural barrier to the development of India?

Jean Dreze: No. There are obstacles, like the caste system, and social inequality in general, which tend to undermine development in the broad sense of the term, aside from being a concern in their own right. But there is nothing immutable about social inequality. The

treatment of Dalits in Indian society today is awful, but it is much better than a hundred years ago. The same applies to the condition of women, and there are vast possibilities of further elimination of caste and gender inequalities in the future. So there is nothing “inherent” in these social and cultural barriers. They are part of India’s historical legacy, but they can be removed.

Editorial Board: What would be your advice for aspiring economists and young students like the readers of Aapoorti?

Jean Dreze: Learn with a critical mind. Economics can be a very enlightening discipline if it is read intelligently. Unfortunately, the teaching of economics does not always encourage critical enquiry. Concepts and theories that ought to be received with the greatest skepticism are imparted to students as if they were a matter of common sense. In the process, studying economics can end up clouding our understanding of the world we live in, instead of enhancing it. Being a good economist requires not only a sound training in economic science but also engaging with its critics, with other disciplines, and with the real world.