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BOOK REVIEW



Rehman Sobhan, Challenging the Injustice of Poverty, (Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd., New Delhi, 2010, xxx+ 486 pages) ISBN-978-81-321-0580-0 (PB)

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The author of the volume being reviewed, Professor Rehman Sobhan is recognized as one of the foremost scholars of economics in Bangladesh. He is the author of nearly thirty books and hundreds of scholarly articles. Six years in the making, in this publication, he has penned a fresh approach to the way policy makers and researches perceive poverty.

Under the auspices of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, the author has put to use the extensive resources available to the research institute with great effect. Needless to say, the recommendations put forth carries with it the feedback, considerations and deliberations of countless researchers and scholars.

The author begins the discourse with the obvious yet astute observation that poverty rates may have fallen but the number of poor people in South Asia have actually risen. This is all the more mysterious because poverty alleviation programs have been on in full swing for some decades now thanks to the international development agencies such as the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme and so on. In this regard, he introduces the idea that there are structural dimensions of poverty which have never been addressed by those who have sought to reduce it.

The conceptual framework rests on the idea of structural injustice. This structural injustice stems from issues in productive assets, markets, human development and governance. More explicitly the sources of injustice according to the author stems from unequal access to assets, unequal participation to market, unequal access to human development and unjust governance.

The policy agenda his research puts forth hinges on seven pillars. They are expanding the ownership and control of the excluded over productive assets,

strengthening the capacity of the excluded to compete in the market place, designing institutions for collective action by the excluded, enhancing their access to quality education, redesigning budgetary policy to reach public resources to the excluded, restructuring financial policy to deliver credit and provide savings instruments to the excluded and empowering the excluded.

The book devotes a significant amount of space to reviewing poverty alleviation strategies. In order to justify the policy agendas, the author focuses on promoting agrarian reform, enhancing market power of the excluded and democratizing educational opportunities. The book subsequently delves into budgetary policies and financial policies for poverty eradication. The discussions regarding budgetary and financial policies are extensive and suggestions provided should be relevant for policy makers to ponder.

To expand on financial policies discussed in the book, the long standing argument of the poor being excluded from the financial system is revisited by the author. Microfinance pioneers such as the founder of Grameen Bank, Dr. Yunus, have long been clamoring for greater inclusiveness in the global system. Indeed, the author adds, insurance products need to find their way to the poor.

In Saman Kelegama's critique of the book, he reflects that the author's contention that eradicating poverty should be measured through the change in opportunity structures for the excluded is 'somewhat different' but 'not necessarily original' interpretation of poverty in South Asia. Kelegama also picks up on the fact that suggestions such as making the excluded the principals, taking collective action against unequal participation in the market are tasks easier said than done in the current era of globalization. He goes on to add that the author's suggestion of making the excluded the principal in a production process is difficult to envision in industries that are increasingly outsourced. Kelegama also observes that the book promotes employee share ownership programs, however, how such programs could be practically implemented remains vague. On the matter of the international community taking charge in this matter as suggested by the author, Kelegama is skeptical as it is against the best interests of multinational companies which prefer hassle free labor.

Muchkund Dubey reflects that by arguing that poverty in South Asia is rooted in the inequitable and unjust social order in the region. He feels Professor Sobhan's work in this book brings a fresh insight into the issue of poverty and on

that basis suggests a comprehensive and inter-related set of measures to remove the root causes. He goes on to add that such an inclusive approach alone will mitigate the suffering of the millions, ensure their human rights, consolidate democracy, sustain the recent trend of high growth and enable the region to cope with global economic crises.

Professor Nurul Islam find the work done in this book as a highly stimulating and a challenging approach and puts together piecemeal analyses and policy approaches of the past in a comprehensive and holistic framework. Shoaib Sultan Khan opines that the book makes a most powerful case for empowering the excluded and a must read for the political and administrative leadership of the developing countries.

Amit Bhaduri considers Professor Rehman Sobhan as one of the few economists who did not join the mainstream, but tried systematically over many years to understand the economic and political processes that lead to massive poverty in South Asia, using his intimate knowledge of Bangladesh. According to Bhaduri, in this book, he has crystallized his thoughts and experience on the subject.

Shahidul Islam writes that agrarian reform as promoted by the author may lead to poverty eradication. He supports the author's theory in this regard with reference to China where equitable land reform, among other things, is attributed to have helped lift millions above the poverty line in a reasonably short span of time. Islam critiques two main areas in the book. Firstly, he feels urban poverty is a topic that could have been addressed specifically. Secondly, he questions how it would be possible to practically implement the policy agendas put forth by Professor Sobhan here.

Professor Sobhan's remarkable effort in addressing a topic of immense social and economic importance to the South Asian region is appreciable. Over the years, his body of work in this area has been the focus of many discussions at the policy level. To surmise, this work of six years of research into redefining poverty as structural injustice has met with largely favorable responses. The book has garnered attention internationally. Some have critiqued the book for outlining agendas that may not be practically applied due to the geo-political realities of the South Asian region in particular and the world in general. Nonetheless, it opens the

pathway to targeting poverty eradication in a fresh way. The publication's contribution to the knowledge base in the area is invaluable. Policy makers shall be able to use Professor Sobhan's vision of achieving structural justice as a vision for poverty eradication. The wealth of information and insight it offers into modern thoughts on poverty and its roots are timely and germane since poorer nations are faced with tangible economic growth and rising poverty on the other. Society as a whole will benefit from Professor Sobhan's contribution of ideas and approaches as present in this book.

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