

Who are the people of India? What are their rights? What are their claims on the Indian Constitution and on democracy?

We the People, the fourth volume in the Rethinking India series, brings together a collection of essays that explores the process of germination and growth of undisputed universal rights, and of them being developed as tangible entitlements in India. The essays also examine the continuing challenge of establishing, realizing and protecting these entitlements.

For a Set of Universal Rights

The opening chapter of the book *'For a Set of Universal Rights'* delves into the exclusivity as well as the inclusivity of Economic rights in India. Beginning with an argument on the credibility of economic rights, author Prabhat Patnaik and Jayati Ghosh brings out the flaws to have such rights, as there could be no guarantee to manoeuvre the economy towards a particular structure which would only adhere to a certain ideal. Both the authors have structured out a perfect and comprehensive narrative around the dimension of economic rights, presenting the various ontological ideologies for the universal set of economic rights. The chapter busts the myth related to GDP and the per capita income of individuals which could also have a precarious relationship with economic rights in the country. Patnaik and Ghosh bring the dilemma with neoliberal regimes and economic empowerment under it. The chapter ends on a note of how the judiciary can intervene to act as a catalyst between 'social mobilization' and 'public intervention'

Fighting Inequality: Rights and Entitlements

'Fighting Inequality: Rights and Entitlements' by Amitabh Behar and Savy Soumy Misra takes the reader into a journey of growing disparities within Pan India. Citing from the *'Public Good or Private Wealth'* published by Oxfam in 2019, the revelations suggest how the total wealth of India had increased by \$151 billion in 2018. But the authors provide a counter-argument mentioning the significant rise of the underprivileged in 'emerging' economies like India. The point being put forward is to understand the nature of inequalities which have resulted in a lot of unrest all across the country. "A reduction of poverty is not the same as a reduction in inequality" is the most striking judgement which in a way wipes the silver lining between the two and produces two different and distinct terminologies which have to be dealt in their typical contextuality. The chapter unfolds into sections namely *'Inequality in India: Looking Beyond the Economic Dimension'*, *'Underscoring social*

Inequalities, *Gender and the Burden of Intersectional Inequality* and *Religious Exclusion Exacerbating Inequality*; each of these chapters provide with a thorough explanation of various inequalities which cut through the attached cleavages of caste, class and gender within the country. The chapter concludes by suggesting a moral framework rather than the requisite for a structural framework.



Image source: Outlook India

From Social Democracy to Social Accountability

The third chapter titled *From Social Democracy to Social Accountability* by Paras Banjara, Rakshita Swamy and Shankar Singh defines the truth of the Indian society. Our society highly classified by caste and class raises a debacle to the notion of 'rule by the people'. The authors have pointed it out lucidly how electoral politics is charted out by separation of 'equality' from the values in the society. The debate on social justice and accountability cannot end without reference to Dr BR Ambedkar and the chapter has captured it beautifully. The notion of social accountability the authors present would require a deep

analysis of the 'sophisticated structures of social and economic inequality that determine all relationships.' The answers to a structural framework for social accountability in the country would require certain elements and the authors have particularly explained all intricacies of such elements in details. The chapter also dives in exploring social accountability through schemes such as MGNREGA and Shiksha Samwad. The narration lucidly pinpoints the challenges of social accountability in the country. In a diverse country like India whereby social cleavages work in synchronization, the reader is paddled through the constitutional fundamentals of liberty, equality and fraternity which is necessary to achieve social accountability.

The Right to Education and Health: Is the State Giving Up?

The fourth chapter by Ambarish Rai, Srijita Majumdar and Dipa Sinha clearly explains the concept of education and public health, their role and why we need to work on improving it. Along with that even in this article to make readers understand about the importance of public health and education better, the author is giving 'real' examples which are concerned with the concept of public health and education. The examples are quite interesting, different and easy to understand. The provisions are there, but their structures are laid down in such a way that makes public health and education a far-fetched dream for the poor, even though the idea behind the provisions was to make the poor feel more comfortable. Privatisation of public services is being done but it is not solving the problems related to education as well as public health. This has been explained in the chapter, elaborately and precisely. This is important as not many people are aware or they pretend to not understand/recognize the pitfalls related to privatisation and think that this will actually help to remove the issues related to public health and education. The laws are contradictory to each other and this is elucidated well. The harsh reality is given in the article and not just given a rosy picture of the policies/laws being perfect. The author rightly points upon the real problem of lack of infrastructure in public health and education which is necessary, suggests ways on how to improve it. The author also mentions about the state of public health in the current time-COVID-19 pandemic and how it needs to be improved, the shortcomings of it. The part is well written and interesting to know.



Image source: The Hindu

MNREGA: A Distress Saviour or a Saviour in Distress?

Through the chapter, *MNREGA: A Distress Saviour or a Saviour in Distress* Rajendran Narayanan and Annie Raja, are educating the readers about MNREGA, as to why it was implemented and what is the idea behind it. This is explained in a detailed way, making the readers fully understand the meaning as well as the importance of the MNREGA scheme in society. The working of the scheme has also been well explained through adequate data necessary to show the positive trend of the scheme. Even women are benefitting from the scheme and it is interestingly explained in the article. The impact of the scheme on environmental resources of villages have been also outlined. This makes it easier and even intriguing to know about the scheme. The authors also stress upon the pitfalls of the scheme and as to why it is not able to make adequate progress which is necessary. Lack of political will and issues linked with it are well described in simple and easy language. The issue of centre gaining more power over the resources needed for better implementation of the scheme and the shortcomings of countering is stressed upon well. This is needed as it is required to understand the ground situation of the scheme and the chapter illustrates it

well. It gives a good essence of it. Along with this, the technological aspect which plays an important role in the scheme is elucidated well. The authors also explain the lag between procuring technical knowhow but not having enough physical resources to implement the idea. This is something which is quite interesting to know about and even necessary to understand. The chapter is quite informative, and it gives a good brief about the topic and its relevance.

Key to Reducing Inequalities through Accountability, Transparency and Participation

N. Paul Divakar, Beena Pallical, Juno Varghese and Adikanda Singh have attempted through this short, yet very informative, chapter to bring to the fore of the discussion, the problems of the marginalised communities of our society. Focussing heavily on the troubles of the *Dalit* and *Adivasi* communities, their work has drawn attention to the problems of inequality that these communities are subjected to every day of their existence. As the title of the article suggests, they advocate practices of accountability, transparency and participation in the functioning of the government and decision making bodies. Through their careful analysis, they have been able to pinpoint the various loopholes and drawbacks of the existing system, especially in the dimension of allocation and use of funding. The article is also conscious of the problems the marginalised communities are currently facing or are going to face as a consequence of the Coronavirus pandemic. Their work is the embodiment of the belief in the ideal of social justice and is a step forward in helping these communities to mobilise support to secure the rights they have been granted by the constitution.



Image source: DNA

The Role of Independent Institutions in Protecting and Promoting Constitutional Rights

Autonomous bodies to ensure a system of checks and balances on the power of the various organs of the government are the hallmark of any true democracy. This is exactly why the fathers of our constitution were insistent on the realisation of this mechanism in the functioning of Independent India. Prashant Bhushan and Anjali Bharadwaj, both eminent personalities and advocates of free speech and transparency, have argued through this chapter about the importance of such autonomous institutions in our country. Speaking in detail about the four existing independent bodies- the judiciary, information commissions, Lokpal and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI)- they shed light on the various obstructions in the functioning of these institutions. These hurdles, they postulate, work to undermine their free functioning and in turn, the functioning of a fair democracy. The manner in which this chapter educates the reader about the very essential pillar of democracy, that is transparency, makes this a must-read for everyone.

Rights-Based Development and Democratic Decentralization in Kerala

An analytical piece, this chapter wonderfully summarises the achievements of the decentralization of governance in Kerala under The People’s Plan. This work by T.M. Thomas Isaac and S.M. Vijayanand has highlighted how if there is a will within the state machinery, a successful and efficient system of self-governance at the local level can be charted out. Another appreciable point about this article is how it is not presenting only the successes of this system, rather it observes it from an unbiased and critical lens and identifies the places where the system is lacking. The decentralisation of decision making enables greater participation by the people and strengthens the spirit of democracy amongst the populace. It is also essential for enforcing of rights and the availing of benefits of various schemes by the government. By highlighting the Kerala model this work by Isac and Vijayanand serves as a guide for leaders in other states to follow suit and evolve systems of local governance, while at the same time educating the masses about the benefits of democratic decentralisation.

This book has been reviewed by Arijita Sinha Roy, Harris Amjad and Sara Dev from The Kootneeti Editorial Team

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