



Institute of Social Sciences

Democracy Lecture Series

Instituted by

Nirman Foundation

Lecture

by

Dr. Jean Drèze

on

Dr. Ambedkar and the Fate of Indian Democracy

6 December 2014

Venue: Abdul Nazir Sab Hall, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi



Dr. Jean Drèze, Development Economist, delivering the Democracy Lecture at Institute of Social Sciences (ISS). From left: Dr. George Mathew, Chairman, ISS, Dr. Shyam B. Menon, Vice-Chancellor, Ambedkar University and Dr. Ash Narain Roy, Director, ISS.

Democracy in India has “neither perished nor flourished”, said Development Economist Jean Dreze while delivering the lecture on ‘Dr. Ambedkar and the Fate of Indian Democracy’ at the Institute of Social Sciences on December 6, 2014.



Dr. Jean Dreze

The Democracy Lecture Series has been instituted by the Nirman Foundation in 2013. Dr. Shyam B. Menon, Vice-Chancellor, Ambedkar University presided over the lecture. Dr. George Mathew, Chairman of the Institute of Social Sciences (ISS), in his opening remarks highlighted the importance of the day as the 59th Mahaparinirvana Diwas of Dr. Ambedkar. Dr. Mathew thanked Professor Bhikhu Parekh, Fellow of the British Academy and Labour Member, House of Lords, and the Nirman Foundation for instituting this lecture series at the Institute. He underlined the scope of the lecture by quoting Dr. Ambedkar from his last address to the Constituent Assembly on 25th November 1949. Dr. Ambedkar said “Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the

base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life”.

The lecture that followed saw repeated mention of the idea of social democracy as envisaged by Dr. Ambedkar and the current state of social and economic democracy in India.

Before Dr. Jean Dreze captivated the audience with his thought provoking talk on the hopes and frustrations of Dr. Ambedkar while creating the Indian democratic set up, Dr. Ash Narain Roy, Director of ISS, talked about Dr. Ambedkar’s contribution to the inclusive nature of Indian polity and the need for the society also to become inclusive. Dr. Roy, while discussing the problems of disparity and inequality, talked about the lack of empowerment of the poor, Dalits, Adivasis and women in our society. However, he stressed that democracy “is not without Utopia”.

Dr. Jean Dreze highlighted primarily how Dr. Ambedkar would have been dismayed at the state of democracy today and yet not been appalled. This, he said, was because the final democratic set up agreed upon by the Constituent Assembly was far from Dr. Ambedkar’s own dream for the country and was more a compromise to reach a more agreeable solution. While steering clear of the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate, he observed how even though India has achieved a certain state of Political democracy, ‘ideal democracy’ could not be achieved due to inequalities in the society. Dr. Dreze, pointing out the glaring statistics like the 5% rate of inter-caste marriages in the country, elaborated how economic and social democracy are the ‘tissues and fibers’ of political democracy.

Dr. Dreze explained how the democracy envisaged by Dr. Ambedkar was a mode of associated living requiring the people to commit to rationality and scientific discussion and that morality and ethics had to play a significant role in shaping a democratic society. Talking about the personal ideology and dreams of Dr. Ambedkar, Dr. Dreze further elucidated how Babasaheb had envisioned, for the country, a much more socialist constitution containing aspects like state ownership of land and collective farming. Most of these socialist ideas of Dr. Ambedkar are reflected in the Directive Principles of State Policy that, though not justiciable, provide the framework for the functioning of every government in the country.



Dr. Shyam B. Menon

Prof. Shyam B. Menon in his Presidential address reminded the audience that it was exactly 36 years after Dr. Ambedkar passed away that the demolition of Babri Masjid happened. In more sense than one, this event was one of the major challenges that the Indian democracy had to face in recent decades. Reflecting on the phrase "fate of Indian democracy" in the title of the lecture by Jean Dreze, Shyam Menon wondered whether the incredible inequality that characterizes the Indian society isn't indeed the genetic predisposition that explains most ills of India's democracy. That greater access to technology among ordinary citizens actually leads to their increasing vulnerability as electorate to propaganda and marketing by media is also a matter of concern, according to him.



Lecture on "Dr. Ambedkar and the Fate of Indian Democracy": A view of the Audience