

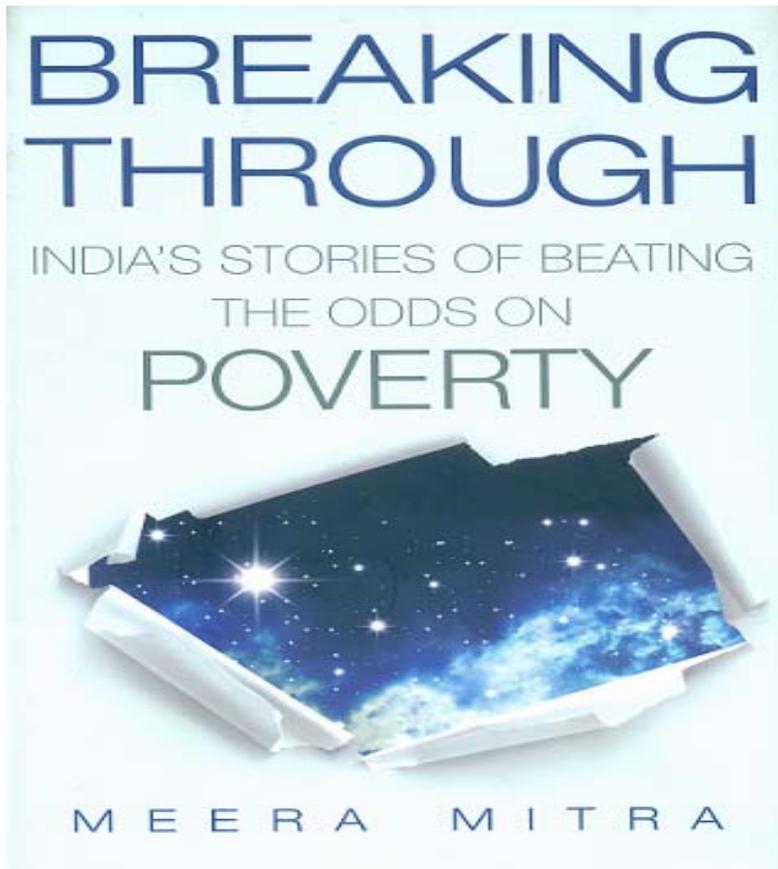


Institute of Social Sciences

New Delhi

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Book Discussion



The Institute of Social Sciences (ISS), organized a Book Discussion on *Breaking Through: India's Stories of Beating the Odds on Poverty*, authored by Meera Mitra on 27th November 2015 at the Abdul Nazir Sab Hall of ISS in New Delhi. The discussants were: Author, commentator and former CEO of Procter & Gamble India, Gurucharan Das and Former Union Minister and Member of Parliament, Mani Shankar Aiyar. The program was chaired by George Mathew, Chairman, ISS.



Mani Shankar Aiyar, Member of Parliament and former Union Minister, speaking on the occasion. From Left: George Mathew, Chairman, ISS; Gurucharan Das, author and commentator and Meera Mitra, author of the book

Welcoming the gathering, George Mathew fondly recalled how Meera Mitra, a Sociologist and Development Specialist, had visited ISS in pursuit of her quest for excellence in the study of Local Governance (Panchayati Raj). He elucidated on the systematic approach adopted by the Institute to facilitate Meera's initiative, wherein, the latter was linked with the Institute's local governance network in remote areas of Bundelkhand, for understanding the transitions that women have been able to achieve in their leadership capacity at the local level. Identifying award winners among women leaders and their success stories in the local governments, from ISS's flagship programme of celebrating Women's Political Empowerment Day, a commemoration spanning over two decades, was another segment of the approach.

Broadly outlining the contours of Meera's research efforts, he said "The outcome of Meera's research is a success story. This book has human stories from various parts of India. These stories are about the quest for some of the basics – shelter, health, livelihood, finance and rights to participate in democracy. What is the reality today? Meera has done an excellent study of it.

We could contribute through the study of Panchayats and its work, i.e. the reality on the ground. As most of you know, every year on April 24, since 1994, the Institute celebrates Women's Political Empowerment Day. We give awards to outstanding women elected members on this occasion. Meera's field study of one of the award winners: Sanjo Kol in Budelkhand region, is very special. What I find every day when travelling across several parts of India is well captured by Meera."

Member of Parliament and former Union Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar in his speech stated that the poor and the vulnerable across India together comprise 70 per cent of the country's population. One small setback like major illness or family distress could very easily push a vast number of those who are counted above the poverty line, back below it. Given this state of affairs, Mani Shankar Aiyar said the 'poverty line' should be renamed a 'destitution line and alternately, the line should be broadened to a band, since those large numbers who were above but still near



Gurucharan Das

that line, were often extremely vulnerable. He said the stories in Meera's book had left him elated and depressed. The country must invent a system that promotes success among those who are unsuccessful, instead of depending on exceptional poor citizens to succeed by beating the odds. However, Mani Shankar Aiyar said that from his experience of government, the Ministry of Finance was concerned with successful Indians rather than unsuccessful ones.

Gurucharan Das, in his address, congratulated Meera Mitra for her extraordinary work behind the book under discussion. He said some chapters of the book, dealt with topics of particular interest to him, because of his close association with efforts in this direction and highlighted stories in the book which were related to aspirations and efforts for education among the poor. Gurucharan Das also referred to stories in the book of entrepreneurial success among the informal sector, and the Jaipur case studies, which highlighted the constant maneuvering that had to be done, in order to circumvent roadblocks to economic freedom. He emphasized the need to promote more affordable private schools and to offer students and parents the option to choose these, rather than only government schools. Expounding on the 'abysmal'

quality of school education in India, he pointed out that Indians had emerged at the 73rd position among 74 countries that took a simple international test. Despite Crores spent on the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan and other such programmes, he pointed out, that only four per cent of teachers could pass an eligibility test. He rued the fact that, by focusing entirely on prescribed inputs without a word about output standards, the Right To Education Act had created 'a corrupt inspection raj.'



Meera Mitra



Section of the audience

Meera Mitra thanked the Institute of Social Sciences for organizing the discussion around the many themes of her book. She said that she was honored, that two of India's eminent thought leaders

from completely diverse perspectives, Mani Shankar Aiyar and Gurucharan Das were present to discuss the themes in her book. “We have a lot of numbers based data with respect to poverty, poverty ratios, poverty line and recent official data states that between 2004-05 and 2011-12, 137.8 million persons had come out of poverty. The book aims to look behind the numbers to understand what processes might have been at play in overcoming poverty and poverty scenarios” said Meera Mitra. She opined that a quarter of a century since ‘economic liberalization’ and well over half a century since the Constitution came into force, this had opened up several opportunities. The book, she said, is mainly about those who had grasped those opportunities with some modicum of success in different ways. However, despite the optimism on the ‘success’, the stories show tremendous gaps and roadblocks that is to be navigated even now, and in the best of cases. The struggle, she said, is on the one hand, about the poor straining to participate in the market processes in terms of getting property rights, security, credit, safety, information and skills etc so that they could engage effectively for economic livelihood; on the other hand it was about the poor being able to redeem the social entitlements outlined in the Constitution. The transitions, though they were happening to some scale, were neither smooth nor straightforward, stated Meera Mitra.
