Also by Amartya Sen

Choice of Techniques
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On Economic Inequality
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The Argumentative Indian
It was a thrilling moment. On 14 August 1947, on the eve of India's independence, we glued ourselves to the radio in our little school a hundred miles from Calcutta. It was almost exactly four years after the terrible famine we had seen as young children (with millions dying), which gave many of us, unaffected by the famine, the enduring thought that "there, but for the grace of class divisions, go I". Those were terrible days, but August 1947 was a different and a joyous time. In celebration of independence and in welcoming a democratic India, Jawaharlal Nehru's voice roared loud and clear over the radio, telling us about India's 'tryst with destiny'. The 'task ahead' included 'the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity'. We heard with rapt attention and we felt powerfully inspired.

The Pledge and the Record

Rather more than half a century has passed since then, and it is not too soon to ask what came of that 'tryst' with destiny, and of the 'tasks ahead'. The answer is not altogether simple. In line with Nehru's formulation, we can split the evaluation into three broad fields: (1) practice of democracy, (2) removal of social inequality and backwardness, and (3) achievement of economic progress and equity.

*This is an extended and updated text of an essay published in the Financial Times on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence, on 15 August 1997.
must also ask how the successes and failures in these different fields interconnect and relate to each other.

There are reasons for satisfaction in the first area. While the correspondent of The Times in 1967 did report, with some sense of absolute certainty, that he had just witnessed ‘the last general elections’ in India (Indian democracy, he confided, could not but end very soon), the doom did not come as anticipated. Systematic elections have continued to happen with regularity and reasonable fairness.† Political parties have come into office after winning elections, and have left after losing them. The media have remained largely free, and the press has continued to report, scrutinize and protest. Civil rights have been taken seriously, and the courts have been fairly active in pursuing violations.‡ The military has stayed well inside the barracks.

This is largely a story of success. And yet the achievements of Indian democracy have been far from unblemished. While political movements have been very effective in dealing with some wrongs, other wrongs have not received anything like sufficient redress or even serious engagement. Since democracy is not only a blessing in itself, but can also be the most important means to pursue public ends, it is


†Indira Gandhi’s brief attempt in the 1970s at curtailing basic political and civil rights was firmly rejected by the voters, thereby electorally ending the proposal as well as her government. Even in that misguided initiative, there was, however, no attempt to replace elections, nor any proposal for ignoring the electoral verdict. Indira Gandhi took her defeat with good grace, and, after dropping her plans to prune political and civil rights, she returned to being Prime Minister with a victory in general elections within a few years with a strongly democratic platform.

‡Among the more recent efforts of the Supreme Court is its attempt to have a fair trial of the miscreants in Gujarat responsible for the killings - mostly of Muslims - in 2002. The Supreme Court found the acquittal of the accused in the judicial process in Gujarat to be lacking in due process, and has insisted that the accused be retried outside Gujarat, which is still ruled by the same state government which was in office during the uncontrolled riots in 2002.

not enough to make sure that Indian democracy survives. While we must give credit where it is due, Indian democracy has to be judged also by the strength and reach of public reasoning and its actual accomplishments. After discussing the other areas of concentration identified by Nehru, I shall come back to these concerns about democracy which are more complex than the mere survival of democracy.

The second field - that of social progress and equity - has fared much worse than democracy itself: not quite an immemorable failure, but certainly a measurable underperformance.⁴ Educational progress has been remarkably uneven. Even though India has many more university-educated persons than China has, China has made remarkable progress towards universal literacy, while India is still far behind. The proportion of literates among adult males is still below 75 per cent in India (in comparison with China’s above 90), and only about half of Indian women are literate (compared with China’s 80 per cent or more). Life expectancy at birth in India has climbed to around 64 years (from being near 30 at the time of independence), but it is still significantly below China’s life expectancy of 71 years.⁵ Further, mortality rates in India sharply differ between different states, and also between classes and between urban and rural areas. Many rural residents, especially the poorer villagers, are still far removed from decent medical attention.† Inequalities between women and men in economic and social opportunities, and often even in health care, remain quite large.

What about the third field - that of economic progress? India’s economic expansion was particularly slow before the 1980s, especially in comparison with the spectacular performance of Asian economies further east, such as South Korea or Taiwan. After the quickening of Indian economic growth from the 1980s, India has done comparatively better, not just in the aggregate movement of the

⁴This static comparison is, however, somewhat deceptive since the life expectancy gap between China and India has sharply declined after 1980, and some parts of India, notably Kerala, have overtaken China and gone considerably ahead of it. In this change over time, public reasoning and democracy in India have made, it would appear, a significant contribution. These issues are discussed in the last part of Essay 8, and also in my ‘Passage to China’, New York Review of Books, 2 Dec. 2004.

†A new problem that is clearly serious in India is the rapid spread of HIV infection and AIDS. Public efforts to confront this new hazard are still extremely inadequate.
gross national product (GNP) and gross domestic product (GDP), but also in terms of reduction of income poverty. The economic reforms introduced in 1992, led by Manmohan Singh (then the Finance Minister, and now the Prime Minister of India since the spring of 2004), have led to considerable liberalization and freeing of international trade, and to some replacement of what used to be called the 'licence Raj' (with pervasive bureaucratic control over private economic initiatives). This has greatly added to business opportunities in India and has also helped to consolidate India’s faster economic growth. Liberalization, which still has some distance to go, has helped to free Indian entrepreneurs to seek global trade, and the success has been especially large in specific sectors such as the development and use of information technology. The overall performance of the economy may not have matched that of post-reform China (with its sustained growth rate of 8 to 10 per cent a year), but India’s move from the rigid box of a 3 per cent growth rate to the 5 to 8 per cent arena is certainly not a negligible development.

The proportions of the Indian population with incomes below the standard poverty lines seem to have fallen over the 1980s and 1990s, even though there are disputes about the extent of this decline, and some doubts about the social reality that lies behind these statistical figures. What is, however, clear enough is that India’s reduction of poverty has been far less rapid than what has occurred in China since the economic reforms.

Poverty and Social Opportunity

There is indeed much about the process of economic growth and development that India can learn from the experience of China. Making good use of global trade opportunities is among the lessons that China offers to India, and the lessons here can be critically important for India’s economic progress. A similar message had already emerged from the economic success of other East Asian economies, including South Korea, but given China’s size and the intensity of its pre-existing poverty, China’s experiences are particularly relevant for India’s economic policy-making. The general lesson that good use can be made of global opportunities of trade and commerce to enhance domestic income and to reduce poverty has emerged very clearly from the success of economies in East and South East Asia – led now by China.

It is, however, important to avoid the much-aired simplification that argues that all India needs to do to achieve fast economic growth and speedy reduction of poverty is greater reliance on the global market and on international trade. This reflects, in fact, a serious misreading of the variety of factors that have contributed to the kind of economic success achieved in China, South Korea, Thailand and other countries in East and South East Asia. These countries did emphasize international trade and made fine use of the global market mechanism. But they also made it possible to have broad-based public participation in economic expansion, through such policies as extensive schooling and high literacy, good health care, widespread land reforms, and some considerable fostering of gender equity (not least through female education and employment).

This is not to doubt that India can achieve reasonably high growth rates of aggregate GNP even with the rather limited social opportunities that exist in India. For one thing, it can continue to do extremely well in industries that make excellent use of India’s accomplishments in higher education and technical training. New centres of technical excellence, like Bangalore and Hyderabad, can prosper and flourish, and India can even accelerate its progress along the lines that it has already established well. This will be a substantial achievement of considerable economic importance.

Yet even a hundred Bangalores and Hyderabads will not, on their own, solve India’s tenacious poverty and deep-seated inequality. The very poor in India get a small – and basically indirect – share of the cake that information technology and related developments generate. The removal of poverty, particularly of extreme poverty, calls for more participatory growth on a wide basis, which is not easy to achieve across the barriers of illiteracy, ill health, uncompleted land reforms and other sources of severe societal inequality. The process of
economic advance cannot be divorced from the cultivation and enhancement of social opportunities over a broad front.  

The products that China exports to the outside world include a great many that are made by not particularly highly skilled labour, but schooled and literate labour nevertheless. Their production generates much employment, with a great deal of income going to poorer sections of the community. Utilization of the world market for such exports requires production according to specification, quality control and an informed consciousness of the economic tasks involved. Good school education is central for these tasks. Similarly, good health is extremely important if productive effort and economic schedules are not to be affected by illnesses and intermittent absence.†

Basic education, good health and other human attainments are not only directly valuable as constituent elements of human capabilities and quality of life (these are the direct pay-offs of schooling, health care and other social arrangements), but these capabilities can also help in generating economic success of a more standard kind, which in turn can contribute to enhancing the quality of human life even more. If there is something that India can learn from China’s post-reform experience in the 1980s onwards about making skillful use of global markets, there is also much that India can assimilate from China’s pre-reform experience in rapidly expanding the delivery of basic education and elementary health care.

**Political Voice and Social Opportunity**

If social and economic tasks are so interrelated, what about links with the politics of democracy? While it has frequently been claimed that democracy is inimical to fast economic growth (India itself has been cited often enough to illustrate this specious thesis), there is little statistical evidence to confirm this. Indeed, even the limited success of India in recent years in raising economic growth shows that growth can profit more from a friendly economic climate than from a coercive political environment.‡

India has certainly benefited from the protective role of democracy in giving the rulers excellent political incentive to act supportively when disasters threaten and when an immediate change in policy is imperative. India has successfully avoided famines since independence,† while China experienced a massive famine during the failure of the Great Leap Forward when faulty policies were not revised for three years while famine mortality took from 23 to 30 million lives. Even today India is, by and large, in a better position than China both to prevent abuse of coercive power and to make quicker emendations if and when policies go badly wrong (this issue is discussed, among other themes, in Essay 8).

Democracy gives an opportunity to the opposition to press for policy change even when the problem is chronic and has had a long history (rather than only when it is acute and sudden, as is the case with famines). The weakness of Indian social policies on education, health care, land reform and gender equity is as much a failure of the opposition parties as of the governments in office. In comparative terms, the political commitment of leaders of some of the less democratic countries has often led to more achievement in these fields than has been produced by the working of democracy in India. The educational and health achievements of Maoist China illustrate this well.§ Indeed, post-reform China has made excellent use of China’s pre-reform accomplishments.

*This general issue is discussed in my Development as Freedom (New York: Knopf, and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
†The elimination of large famines in India must not, however, be seen as the removal of undernourished people, who are chronically hungry, to varying extents. The problem of persistent underfeeding is discussed in Essay 10.
‡We must, however, distinguish between cases of good results brought about by strong political commitment and any expectation that authoritarian leadership would, in general, produce such results. North Korea is authoritarian too, as was the Taliban’s Afghanistan, Idi Amin’s Uganda and Mobutu’s Congo. The central point at issue concerns political vision rather than coercive power.
(particularly, in raising basic education and health levels across the country) to make its market-based expansion after 1979 draw widely on the capabilities of a better educated and healthier population.

Only in some parts of India have the failures of social achievement been adequately politicized. The state of Kerala is perhaps the clearest example, where the need for universal education, basic health care, elementary gender equity and land reforms has received effective political backing. The explanation involves both history and contemporary development: the educational orientation of Kerala's anti-upper-caste movements (of which the current left-wing politics of Kerala is a successor), the early initiatives of the native kingdoms of Travancore and Cochin (outside the British Raj), missionary activities in the spread of education (not confined only to Christians—a fifth of the population), and also a bigger voice for women in family decisions, partly linked to the presence and prominence of matrilineal property rights for a substantial and influential section—the Nairs—of the Hindu community. Over a very long time Kerala has made good use of political activism and voice to expand the range of social opportunities.

The contribution of modern and radical politics to Kerala's social progress is sometimes underestimated. At the time of Indian independence, in 1947, the proportion of literate people in Kerala, while higher than in the rest of India, was still quite low. The work for the achievement of literacy for all happened mostly in the second half of the twentieth century. Also, the state of Kerala was formed, on linguistic lines, at the time of independence by putting together two 'native states'—Travancore and Cochin—which were formally outside the British Raj and one area—Malabar—from old Madras in the Raj. At that time, Malabar's level of education was far lower than that of Travancore and Cochin. But today the three regions are very close together, practically indistinguishable from each other in terms of school education. The credit that is due to participatory and vocal politics should not all be given away to favourable past history.

*Along with the positive achievements of radical left-wing politics, its problematic side should be recognized too. Kerala has been comparatively slow in reforming economic policies in a market-utilizing direction. While people from Kerala have easily earned good money working elsewhere (often abroad—much in the Gulf), the opportunity of taking economic initiatives at home has moved relatively slowly. This has not prevented Kerala from experiencing one of the fastest reductions of poverty in India, but the full economic potentials of its social advantages still remain partly unreaped. On this and related issues, see Drèze and Sen, India: Development and Participation. See Essay 1, section headed 'Gender, Caste and Voice', and Essay 2.

The Use of Voice

It is hard to escape the general conclusion that economic performance, social opportunity and political voice are deeply interrelated. Despite the political facilities provided by India's democratic system, the weakness of voices of protest has helped to make the progress of social opportunities unnecessarily slow. That, in turn, has not only been a serious handicap in itself for the quality of life in India, it has also served as a major drag in the process of economic development, including the range and coverage of growth and the alleviation of economic poverty. As was discussed in Essay 2, political voice is extremely important for social equity, and to that recognition we have to add the connection between equitable expansion of social opportunities and the force, range and reach of the process of economic development.

In those fields in which there has recently been a more determined use of political and social voice, there are considerable signs of change. The issue of gender inequality has produced somewhat more political engagement in recent years (often led by women's movements in different fields), and this has added to determined political efforts at reducing gender asymmetry in social and economic fields. There is a long history in India of women's prominence in some particular areas, including in the sharing of leadership positions in politics. While those achievements were themselves linked with the use of women's voice (helped by the opportunities of participatory politics in recent centuries), their reach was largely confined to relatively small segments of the population (often women members of the urban elite). An important aspect of the strengthening of women's voice in contemporary Indian public life is the broadening of this social coverage.

There is, however, still a long way to go in removing the unequal position of women in India, but the increasing political involvement
about women's social role has been an important and constructive
development.† There is also some achievement through the increased
politicization of educational inequalities in general and the neglect of
basic health care, especially for the poor. These disparities receive
more public attention today than they did earlier, and the effects of
that favourable change can, to some extent, be already seen in the
relative progress made in spreading medical attention and educational
opportunities. Again, there is still a very long way to go, but positive
developments demand acknowledgement, if only to overcome the
persistent cynicism that often characterizes public perception about
what democracy can or cannot do.

The possibilities of public agitation on issues of societal inequality
and deprivation are now beginning to be more utilized than before.
There has been much more action recently in organized movements
based broadly on demands for human rights, such as the right to
school education, the right to food (and, in particular, to midday
school meals), the entitlement to basic health care, guarantees of
environmental preservation, and the right of employment guarantee.
These movements serve to focus attention on particular societal
failures, partly as supplements to broad public discussions in the
media, but they also provide a politically harder edge to socially
important demands. The interdependences between economic, social
and political freedoms give a critically important role to the use of
democratic opportunities and to the deployment of political voice.

The remedy for many of the central failures of Indian society is
closely linked to broadening the force and range of political
arguments and social demands.† The 'tryst with destiny' is thus partly
an invitation to further engagement and encounter. What Nehru
hoped would happen automatically with the independence of India
may continue to be neglected unless it is demanded with an insistence
that makes it politically critical in a democratic system. It is not
equipped to continue to have systematic elections, to safeguard political

*See Essay 11 on a general assessment of gender inequality in India and its changes
over time.
†The inadequacy of steps taken so far to confront the growing epidemic of HIV
infection and AIDS is also both a governmental failure (in the form of inaction) and a
failure of political engagement (in the form of comparative silence).
In his speech on the ‘tryst with destiny’ delivered on 14 August 1947, with which the last essay began, Jawaharlal Nehru talked not just about freedom from British rule, but also about his grand vision of independent India. Nehru was particularly determined to remove the barriers of class stratification and their far-reaching effects on inequality and deprivation in economic, political and social spheres. It was a thrilling image that could rival Alfred Tennyson’s eloquence: ‘For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see, / Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be.’ It was good for free India to be told, at the defining moment of its birth, about the possibility of ‘all the wonder that would be’.

Nehru’s vision was not fulfilled during his own lifetime. There is nothing surprising in that, since the vision was ambitious. What is, however, more distressing is the slowness of our progress in the direction to which Jawaharlal Nehru so firmly pointed. But that is not all. There is disturbing evidence that the battle against class divisions has very substantially weakened in India. In fact, there are clear indications that at different levels of economic, social and political policy, the debilitating role of class inequality now receives remarkably little attention. Furthermore, support for consolidation of class barriers comes not only from old vested interests, but also from new sources of privilege, and this makes the task much harder.

This essay is based on my Nehru Lecture, given in New Delhi on 13 Nov. 2001.

Jawaharlal Nehru’s speech, delivered at the Constituent Assembly, New Delhi, is included in Jawaharlal Nehru: An Anthology, ed. Sarvepalli Gopal (Oxford and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).
be followed with a more integrated understanding of the functioning of class in alliance with other causes of injustice. Or, to put it differently, class is not only important on its own, it can also magnify the impact of other contributors to inequality, enlarging the penalties imposed by them. The integration of class in a consolidated understanding of injustice is of paramount importance given the need to address, simultaneously, different sources of inequality, related to class, gender, community, caste and so on, and given the overwhelming role of class in the working of each of the other contributors to inequality.

A second source of complexity lies in the fact that some of the new social barriers reinforcing rather than weakening the hold of class divisions come – as it were – from the ‘friendly’ side of the dividing line; they can, in fact, be rooted in institutional devices that are intended to be among the remedial features against class division. For example, public programmes of intervention can protect vulnerable interests and thus serve as a good instrument in the battle against class-based inequality. However, they can also have regressive consequences if the battle lines are wrongly drawn, or if the remedies are wrongly devised.

In fact, what the armed forces call ‘friendly fire’ – whereby an army is hit by its own firing rather than by enemy shelling – is a concept that may have relevance not just in the military spheres but in social fields as well. The actual impact of supportive public institutions and public policies has to be constantly scrutinized. The operative impact of institutions and programmes that have been instituted as anti-inequality devices requires probing investigation in an open-minded – rather than in a fixed, formulaic – way.

I shall take up these two issues in turn: first, the need for an integrated understanding of the contribution of class in the combined impact of diverse sources of inequality; and second, the possibility of ‘friendly fire’, which requires us to rethink the old battle lines against inequality. In particular, the relevance of new barriers strongly suggests the need to re-examine the ways and means of confronting class inequality.

In this essay, I shall try to identify two specific issues to examine in trying to understand the far-reaching relevance of class in India: first, the ‘integration issue’ (to see the influence of class as not merely additive, but also as transformational), and second, the ‘institutional issue’, in particular the role of institutional features – new and old – in reinforcing and even strengthening class barriers.

Class, Gender, Caste and Community

The significant presence of non-class sources of inequality is an important recognition that can be combined with the acknowledgement that there is hardly any aspect of our lives that stays quite untouched by our place in the class stratification. Class does not act alone in creating and reinforcing inequality, and yet no other source of inequality is fully independent of class.²

Consider gender. South Asian countries have a terrible record in gender inequality, which is manifest in the unusual morbidity and mortality rates of women, compared with what is seen in regions that do not neglect women’s health care and nutrition so badly. At the same time, women from the upper classes are often more prominent in South Asia than elsewhere. Indeed, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have all had, or currently have, women Prime Ministers – something that the United States (along with France, Italy, Germany and Japan) has never had and does not seem poised to have in the near future (if I am any judge).

Belonging to a privileged class can help women to overcome barriers that obstruct women from less thriving classes. Gender is certainly an additional contributor to societal inequality, but it does not act independently of class. Indeed, a congruence of class deprivation and gender discrimination can blight the lives of poorer women very severely indeed. It is the interactive presence of these two features of deprivation – being low class and being female – that can massively impoverish women from the less privileged classes.

Similarly, turning to caste, even though being lower caste is undoubtedly a separate cause of disparity, its impact is all the greater when the lower-caste families also happen to be very poor. The blighting of the lives of Dalits or people from other disadvantaged castes, or of members of the Scheduled Tribes, is particularly severe when the caste or tribal adversities are further magnified by abject penury. Even
the violence associated with caste-related conflicts tends to involve a great deal more than just caste.

For example, the Ranveer Sena in Bihar may be a private army that draws its sustenance from the upper (in this case, Bhumihar and Rajput) castes, and the victims of brutality may typically be low-caste Dalits, yet the predicament of the potential victims cannot be adequately grasped if we do not take note of the poverty and landlessness of Dalits, or place the conflicts in a broad social and economic background. This recognition does not suggest that caste is unimportant (quite the contrary), but it does make it necessary to place caste-related violence in a broader context in which class, inter alia, belongs. The basic issue is complementarity and interrelation rather than the independent functioning of different disparities that work in seclusion (like ships passing at night). Given the wide reach and generic relevance of class, related to poverty and wealth, ownership and indigence, work and employment, and so on, it is not surprising that it tends to rear its ugly head in a great many conflicts that have other identifications and correlates.

In fact, there is also considerable evidence that affirmative action in favour of lower castes has tended to do much more for the economically less strained members of those castes than for those who are weighed down by the combined burden of extreme poverty and lowness of caste. For example, 'reserved' posts often go to relatively affluent members of disadvantaged castes. No policy of affirmative action aimed at caste disadvantage can be adequately effective without taking account of the class background of members of the lower castes. The impact of caste, like that of gender, is substantially swayed by class.

Or consider the deprivation that is generated by communal violence. Members of a minority community can indeed have reason for fear even when they come from a prosperous class. Yet the raw danger to which targeted communities are exposed is immensely magnified when the persons involved not only belong to those communities, but also come from poorer and less privileged families. This is brought out by the class distribution of victims of Hindu-Muslim riots around the time of independence and the partition of India. The easiest to kill among the members of a targeted community are those of that group who have to go out unprotected to work, who live in slums, and who lead, in one way or another, a thoroughly vulnerable life. Not surprisingly, they provide the overwhelming proportion of the victims in communal riots.

My own first exposure to murder, at the age of 11, occurred when I encountered a profusely bleeding Muslim daily labourer, Kader Mia, who had been knifed by Hindu assassins just outside our home in Dhaka (he died in the hospital to which my father took him). Almost his last words to me were that he knew he was taking a heavy risk in coming to a largely Hindu region of the city, but he had to do it in the hope of earning a little money from some work (he was on his way there when he was knifed). Kader Mia died as a victimized Muslim, but he also died as an unemployed labourer, looking desperately for a bit of work and money.

This was in 1944. The riots today are not any different in this respect. In the Hindu-Muslim riots in the 1940s, Hindu thugs killed the unprotected Muslims, while Muslim thugs assassinated the impoverished Hindu victims. Even though the community identity of the exterminated preys was quite different (Hindu and Muslim, respectively), their class identities were often extremely similar. The class dimension of sectarian violence tends to receive inadequate attention, even in newspaper accounts, because of unifocal reporting that concentrates on the divisive communal identity of the victims rather than on their unified class identity.

This remark would apply also to the recent communal killings and victimizations in India, for example the anti-Sikh riots that were organized in Delhi following Indira Gandhi's assassination, the anti-Muslim brutalities that accompanied the terrible days that followed the demolition of the Babri masjid, and so on. Class is an ever-present feature of communal and sectarian violence.

What we need, therefore, is some kind of a dual recognition of the role and reach of class that takes into account its non-uniqueness as well as its transformational function. We have to recognize, simultaneously, that

(x) there are many sources of disparity other than class; we must avoid the presumption that class encompasses all sources of disadvantage and handicap; and
(2) nevertheless, class disparities are not only important on their own, but they also tend to intensify the disadvantages related to the other forms of disparity.

Class is neither the only concern, nor an adequate proxy for other forms of inequality, and yet we do need class analysis to see the working and reach of other forms of inequality and differentiation.

Inequality, Concurrence and the Underdogs

Aside from the variety of factors that contribute to inequality, there is also the important issue of the form that inequality may take. Here, it may be thought, class speaks in many voices, with much discordance. There is truth in this recognition, but once again this may not weaken the overwhelming relevance of pre-eminent class divisions in understanding the plight of the underdogs of society. We have to see simultaneously the distinctions as well as the interconnections.

There are many different forms of deprivation: economic poverty, illiteracy, political disempowerment, absence of health care, and so on. These distinct dimensions of inequality are not entirely congruent in their incidence. Indeed, they can yield very different social rankings. The tendency to see deprivation simply in terms of income poverty is often strong and can be quite misleading. And yet there are also powerfully unifying features in the manifestation of severe deprivation. This is partly because different types of handicap reinforce each other, but also because they often tend to go together at the extreme ends, dividing the general ‘haves’ from the comprehensive ‘have-nots’. The absence of a conceptual congruence between different types of deprivation does not preclude their empirical proximity along a big dividing line, which is a central feature of classical class analysis.

Some Indians are rich; most are not. Some are very well educated; others are illiterate. Some lead easy lives of luxury; others toil hard for little reward. Some are politically powerful; others cannot influence anything. Some have great opportunities for advancement in life; others lack them altogether. Some are treated with respect by the police; others are treated like dirt. These are different kinds of inequality, and each of them requires serious attention. Yet often enough—and this is the central issue in the centrality of class analysis—the same people are poor in income and wealth, suffer from illiteracy, work hard for little remuneration, are uninfluential in politics, lack social and economic opportunities, and are treated with brutal callousness by the police. The dividing line of ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ is not just a rhetorical cliché, but also an important part of diagnostic analysis, pointing us towards a pre-eminent division that can deeply inform our social, economic and political understanding. This concurrence of deprivation adds to the overarching relevance of class as a source of inequality and disparity.

When I come to discuss the issue of what I called ‘friendly fire’, the role of such manifest concurrence in the lives of the extreme underdogs of society will become particularly relevant. Many of the distributional institutions that exist in India and elsewhere are designed to defend the interests of groups with some deprivation (or some vulnerability) but who are not by any means the absolute underdogs of society. There is an understandable rationale for seeing them as ‘friendly’ institutions in the battle against class divisions. Yet if they also have the effect of worsening the deal that the real underdogs get, at the bottom layers of society, the overall impact may be to strengthen class divisions rather than weaken them. This is the sense in which their effects can be seen as ‘friendly fire’, and I am afraid there is a great deal of this phenomenon in Indian public policy as it stands.

It is extremely important to study the issue of ‘friendly fire’, though not because it is the largest contributor to class divisions in India: traditional factors, such as massive inequality of wealth and assets, immense gaps in education and other social opportunities and so on, remain central to our understanding of the brute force of class divisions. Yet these traditional features are now supplemented by new barriers, some of which were created precisely to overcome the influence of class, but end up having the opposite effect.

I can illustrate the point with a great many examples. I shall, however, concentrate in this essay on exactly two paradigmatic illustrations, dealing respectively with food policy and elementary schooling, both of which have a major bearing on the lives of the most deprived among the Indian people, that is, the hungry and the illiterate.
Food Policy and Hunger

India's record in countering hunger and famine is strangely mixed. The rapid elimination of famine since independence is an achievement of great importance (the last real famine occurred in 1943—four years before independence), and this is especially so in contrast to the failure of many other countries—most notably China—to prevent famine. Whenever a famine has threatened, the safeguards of a democratic process have come into operation, with rapidly arranged protective policies, including temporary public employment, which give the threatened destitutes the money to buy food. The mechanism of famine prevention in India has been discussed in my joint book with Jean Dreze, *Hunger and Public Action*. It is a record, we argue, of considerable achievement.

And yet India's overall record in eliminating hunger and undernutrition is quite terrible. Not only is there persistent recurrence of severe hunger in particular regions, but there is also a dreadful prevalence of endemic hunger across much of India. Indeed, India does worse in this respect than even sub-Saharan Africa. Calculations of general undernourishment—what is sometimes called 'protein-energy malnutrition'—show that it is nearly twice as high in India as in sub-Saharan Africa on the average. It is astonishing that despite the intermittent occurrence of famine there, Africa still manages to ensure a higher level of regular nourishment than does India. Judged in terms of the usual standards of retardation in weight for age, the proportion of undernourished children in Africa is 20 to 40 per cent, whereas the percentage of undernourished Indian children is a gigantic 40 to 60 per cent. About half of all Indian children are, it appears, chronically undernourished, and more than half of all adult women suffer from anaemia. In maternal undernourishment as well as the incidence of underweight babies, and also in the frequency of cardiovascular disease in later life (to which adults are particularly prone if nutritionally deprived in the womb), India's record is among the very worst in the world.

A striking feature of the persistence of this dreadful situation is not only that it continues to exist, but that the little public attention it gets, when it gets any at all, is so badly divided. Indeed, it is amazing to hear persistent repetition of the false belief that India has managed the challenge of hunger very well since independence. This is based on a profound confusion between famine prevention, which is a simple achievement, and the avoidance of endemic undernourishment and hunger, which is a much more complex task. India has done worse than nearly every country in the world in the latter respect.

In this context, it is particularly remarkable that India has continued to amass extraordinarily large stocks of food grain in the central government's reserve, without finding good use for them. In 1998 the stock was around 18 million tonnes—close to the official 'buffer stock' norms. It has climbed and climbed since then, firmly surpassing 62 million tonnes at the time this essay was written (as a Nehru Lecture in 2001). To take Jean Dreze's graphic description, if all the sacks of grain were laid up in a row, this would stretch more than a million kilometres, taking us to the moon and back. To see it in another way, the stocks substantially exceeded one tonne of food grain for every family below the poverty line.

The counterintuitiveness—not to mention the inequity—of the history of this development is so gross that it is hard to explain it by the presumption of mere insensitivity—it looks more and more like insanity. What could be the perceived rationale of all this? What could explain the simultaneous presence of the worst undernourishment and the largest unused food stocks in the world (with the stocks being constantly augmented at extremely heavy cost)?

The immediate explanation is not hard to find. The accumulation of stocks results from the government's commitment to high minimum support prices for food grain—for wheat and rice in particular. But a regime of high prices in general (despite a gap between procurement prices and consumers' retail prices) both expands procurement and depresses demand. The bonanza for food producers and sellers is matched by the privation of food consumers. Since the biological

need for food is not the same thing as the economic entitlement to food (what people can afford to buy given their economic circumstances and the prices), the large stocks procured are hard to get rid of, despite rampant undernourishment across the country. The very price system that generated a massive supply kept the hands – and the mouths – of the poorer consumers away from food.

But does not the government automatically remedy this problem through subsidizing food prices compared with the procurement prices – surely that should keep food prices low to consumers? Not quite. The issues involved are discussed more fully in my joint book with Jean Drèze, *India: Development and Participation* (2002), but one big part of the story is simply the fact that much of the subsidy does in fact go to pay for the cost of maintaining a massively large stock of food grain, with a mammoth and unwieldy food administration (including the Food Corporation of India). Also, since the cutting edge of the price subsidy is to subsidize farmers to produce more and earn more, rather than to sell existing stocks to consumers at lower prices (that happens too, but only to a limited extent and to restricted groups), the overall effect of the subsidy is more spectacular in transferring money to medium and large farmers with food to sell, than in giving food to the undernourished consumers.

If there were ever a case for radical class analysis, in which ‘the left’ could take ‘the right’ to the cleaners, one would have thought that this would be it. To some extent, we do see such criticism, but not nearly enough. The dog that does not bark is the expectable howl of criticism from the perspective of class analysis.

Why? This is where the diagnosis of ‘friendly fire’ becomes relevant. When the policy of food procurement was introduced and the case for purchasing food from farmers at high prices was established, various benefits were foreseen, and they were not altogether pointless, nor without some claim to equity. First, building up stocks up to a certain point is useful for food security – necessary even for the prevention of famines. That would make it a good thing to have a large stock up to some limit – in today’s conditions, perhaps even a stock of 20 million tonnes or so. The idea that since it is good to build up stocks as needed, it must be even better to build up even more stocks, is not only mistaken, but also leads to shooting oneself in the foot.

I must also examine a second line of reasoning in defence of high food prices, which also comes in as a good idea and then turns counterproductive. Those who suffer from low food prices include some who are not affluent – the small farmer or peasant who sells a part of his crop. The interests of this group are mixed up with those of big farmers, and this produces a lethal confusion of food politics. While the powerful lobby of privileged farmers presses for higher procurement prices and pushes for public funds to be spent to keep them high, the interests of poorer farmers, who also benefit from the high prices, is championed by political groups that represent these non-affluent beneficiaries. Stories of hardship among these people play a powerful part not only in the rhetoric in defence of high food prices, but also in the genuine conviction of many equity-oriented activists that this would help some very badly off people. And so it would, but of course it would help the rich farmers much more, and cater to their pressure groups, while the interests of the much larger number of people who buy food rather than sell it would be badly sacrificed.

There is a need for more explicit analysis of the effects of these policies on the different classes, and in particular on the extreme underdogs of society who, along with their other deprivations (already discussed), are also remarkably underfed and undernourished. For casual labourers, slum dwellers, poor urban employees, migrant workers, rural artisans, rural non-farm workers, even farm workers who are paid cash wages, high food prices bite into what they can eat. The overall effect of high food prices is to hit many of the worst-off members of society extremely hard. And while they do help some of the farm-based poor, the net effect is quite regressive on distribution. There is, of course, relentless political pressure in the direction of high food prices coming from farmers’ lobbies, and the slightly muddied picture of benefiting some farm-based poor makes the policy issues sufficiently befuddled to allow the confusion that high food prices are a pro-poor stance, when in overall effect they are very far from that. It is said that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. So unfortunately is a little bit of equity when its championing coincides with massive injustice to vast numbers of people. It is, again, a case of ‘friendly fire’, even though the involvement of the rich farmers’ pressure groups thickens the plot.
Elementary Education

For my second example, I turn to primary education in India. It suffers, of course, from many deficiencies. The paucity of financial resources is obviously a principal problem: there are not enough schools and the facilities available in the ones that exist are often very limited. But there are several other problems as well. A major difficulty lies in the weak institutional structure of primary schools in much of India, which are often inefficiently run. A further problem concerns inequity of schooling arrangements, and the challenge of bringing first-generation school attenders into a sympathetic and just system of primary education.\(^*\)

I have had the opportunity of getting a sample of the problems involved through a small study conducted on this subject by the Pratichi Trust, which I was privileged to set up in 1999 with the help of the proceeds of my Nobel award. We investigated the working of a number of elementary schools from three districts in West Bengal initially (but later the study was extended to six districts in West Bengal and one from the neighbouring state of Jharkhand). The overall picture that emerges from these investigations is very depressing. A significant proportion of teachers were absent from school on the days we visited them unannounced. Teacher absenteeism was very much greater in schools where the bulk of the pupils come from Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe families; indeed, 75 per cent of those schools in our list had serious problems of teacher absenteeism — much higher than in schools in which the pupils come from less disadvantaged families. A very large proportion of the children rely on private tuition as a supplement to what they get from the schools, and those who do not are evidently prevented from doing so because of penury, rather than because of being satisfied with the teaching the children get in the school. Indeed, of the pupils in Classes 3 and 4 we could test, the vast majority of those who did not get private tuition could not even sign their names.

\(^*\)The investigation cited was carried out by Kumar Rana, Abdur Rafique and Amrita Sengupta, working with me. Our first Education Report presents the main findings from the first part of the study: The Delivery of Public Education: A Study in West Bengal (New Delhi: Pratichi Trust, 2002).

Effective elementary education has in practice ceased to be free in substantial parts of the country, which of course is a violation of a basic right. All this seems to be reinforced by a sharp class division between teachers and the poorer families. Yet the teachers’ unions — related to the respective parties — sometimes vie with each other in championing the immunity of teachers from discipline. The parents from disadvantaged families have little voice in the running of schools, and the official inspectors seem too scared to discipline the delinquent teachers, especially when the parents come from the bottom layer of society. The teachers’ unions have, of course, had quite a positive role in the past in defending the interests of teachers, when they used to be paid very little and were thoroughly exploited. The teachers’ unions then served as an important part of the institutional support in favour of more justice. Now, however, these institutions of justice seem to work largely against justice through their inaction — or worse — when faced with teacher absenteeism and other irresponsibilities.

The problem is, in some ways, compounded by the fact that school teachers are now comparatively well paid — no longer the recipients of miserably exploitative wages. The recent boost in the salary of public servants in India (leaving far behind those who are served by the public servants, such as agricultural and industrial labourers) has led to a very substantial rise in the remuneration of school teachers (as public servants), all over India. The primary school teachers in West Bengal, where our study was conducted, now tend to get between Rs. 5,000 and 10,000 per month, in the form of salary and allowances, which compares with the total salary of teachers in the alternative schools — called Sishu Siksha Kendras — of Rs. 1,000 per month.

The salary of teachers in regular schools has gone up dramatically over recent years, even in real terms, that is, after correcting for price changes. This is an obvious cause for celebration at one level (indeed, I remember being personally involved, as a student at Presidency College fifty years ago, in agitations to raise the desperately low prevailing salaries of school teachers). But the situation is now very different. The big salary increases in recent years have not only made school education vastly more expensive (making it much harder to offer regular school education to those who are still excluded from it), but have also tended to draw the school teachers as a group further
away from the families of children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is considerable evidence that the class barrier that deeply impairs the delivery of school education to the worst-off members of society is now further reinforced by the increase in economic and social distance between the teachers and the poorer (and less privileged) children.

A Concluding Remark

Nehru’s hope of overcoming class divisions in the economic, social and political progress of the country remains largely unfulfilled. The barriers to progress come not only from old dividing lines, but also from new ones. Sometimes the very institutions that were created to overcome disparities and barriers have tended to act as reactionary influences in reinforcing inequity. There are many examples of such ‘friendly fire’, of which I have discussed two particular cases.

The terrible combination that we have in India of immense food mountains on the one hand and the largest conglomeration of undernourished population in the world on the other is one example of this. The positive hopes of equity through high support prices of food and payment of subsidies have, to a considerable extent, tended to produce exactly the opposite effect. Another example relates to the institutional features of delivery of primary education. The teachers’ unions, which have a very positive role to play in protecting the interests of teachers and have played that part well in the past, are often turning into an influence that reinforces the neglect of the interests of children from desperately underprivileged families. There is evidence of a hardening of class barriers that separate the newly affluent teachers from the impoverished rural poor.

I do not want to end on a note of pessimism. The point of diagnosing a problem is to use it to remedy the identified deficiencies. In the two cases considered, possible lines of reform are not hard to see. On the latter, the report of the Pratichi Trust makes a number of policy suggestions, which include emphasizing the need to strengthen the voice of parents, especially of those from the underprivileged sections, in school management. This would require a restructuring of the administration of primary education, though making room for effective parent–teacher committees for individual schools, with legal authority. With the help of the countervailing power of the interest group most directly involved – that is, parents – the role of teachers’ unions can be made more constructive. Similarly, on the former problem, the food mountains can be turned into assets rather than liabilities, with an appropriate focus on the interests of the worst-off members of the society (for example through use in school meals).

These and other policy changes call for urgent action and consideration. That process can be facilitated by clear analysis of the exact effects of actual and possible public policies. It is important to prevent ‘friendly fire’ as well as to press for policies that can make a real difference to the inequalities of class division in India. It is crucial to scrutinize the benefits to be obtained and the losses to be sustained by the different classes and occupation groups, resulting from each policy proposal. The ubiquitous role of class divisions influences social arrangements in remarkably diverse ways and deserves a fuller recognition than it has tended to get in the making of Indian public policy. There is something serious to argue about here.

The recent initiative of the Indian government (in late 2004) to help provide cooked midday meals in schools across the country is a very positive move that has emerged since the Nehru Lecture was given in 2001. This initiative, which followed directly from the Indian Supreme Court’s visionary decision to cover this right among the entitlements of children, has favourable potential in simultaneously addressing the twin problems of child undernourishment and school absenteeism. It has had much success in states (such as Tamil Nadu) where it has been in use for many years, and it is beginning to have positive effects where it is just being introduced. Investigations by the Pratichi Trust team in West Bengal record higher school attendance and a high level of satisfaction from the poorer families.