

**THE LAST HEROES: FOOT SOLDIERS OF INDIAN
FREEDOM** by *P. Sainath*

and

**THE MIDDLE OUT: THE RISE OF PROGRESSIVE
ECONOMICS AND A RETURN TO SHARED PROSPERITY** by

Michael Tomasky

Reviewed by Annavajhula J C Bose, PhD
Shri Ram College of Commerce, Delhi

These two books were impressively good reads, just like *Kantara* was a wonderful shamanistic movie to watch on the eve of 2023. They can be appreciated independently and interdependently. The focus of the books, rather similar to the movie's focus, is on the study of society from the viewpoint of common people—what they think, about freedom and necessity and what moral beliefs and attitudes—shamanistic or not—govern them regarding shared prosperity. The two authors are exemplary investigative political and economic journalists. They have more refined sensitivity and sensibility than that of typical economists.

Almost a quarter century ago, on behalf of the people, Sainath made a searing indictment on Independent India's developmental realities of the present connected to the past. In his first book, "Everybody Loves a Good Drought", he pointed out that one out of every third person in the world who lacks safe and adequate drinking water is an Indian. Nearly half of the illiterates in the world are citizens of this country. Every third child outside schools on the planet is an Indian. The highest number of absolute poor live in this country. So do the largest number of those with inadequate housing. Indians have a shockingly low per capita consumption of textiles in the world. There are more job seekers registered at the employment exchanges of India than there are jobless in all the twenty-four nations of the OECD put together. Yet, this nation has over forty-four million child laborers, the largest contingent in the world. India's dismal position in the UNDP's Human Development Index has, if anything, fallen. Every third leprosy patient in the globe is an Indian. So is every fourth person dying of water-borne or water-related diseases. Over three-fourths of all the tuberculosis cases that exist at any time worldwide are in this country. No nation has more people suffering from blindness. Millions of Indians suffer from malnutrition. Central to the philosophy of Indian development, is the idea that we can somehow, avoid the big moves, the painful ones, the reforms that Indian society needs—like land reform, literacy, decent standards of health, shelter and nutrition, and eradicating child labour. The Indian elite, excited about globalization, are not bothered that even the authoritarian states of Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan, and South Korea

provide these basic necessities to the people. Citizens, however, do bother. The issues of land, forest, and water resources remain fundamental to real development. The poor are acutely aware of this. After all, 85% of the Indian poor are either landless agricultural labourers or small and marginal farmers. They know where it hurts. They are net purchasers of food grains. Hikes in grain prices hit them profoundly. Inflation is strongly linked to food prices. So its impact on these sections is always worse. The public distribution system is in a state of advanced decay. The so-called targeting of the poor on a special basis has not prevented the incidence of starvation. The upward revision of grain prices is never matched by rises in daily minimum wages. Real development would mean more than just letting them know the plans for the elite. It would mean their involvement in decisions for progressive development. Not even one migrant worker would fail to lament about the inequitable land distribution. Just a little over 1% of the total cultivable area has actually been redistributed. A profoundly undemocratic streak runs through India's development process. The exclusion doesn't end at the symposia. Villagers are robbed of control over water and other community resources. Over time tribes have been cut off from the forests. Yet, the elite vision holds the poor and their experiences in contempt. And there is a growing disconnect of the mass media from mass reality. Stakeholders have often abdicated their duties toward citizens. Human rights have been diluted. Pressing issues are often left to NGOs, while the state tinkers around with how to double the wealth of the richest 5%. International funding agencies are using NGOs to dump fertilisers, harmful contraceptives, and obsolete technologies. There are pressure groups trying to push drip irrigation in districts that have abundant rainfall. They hawked a technique used for the deserts of Israel because some corporation had something to sell. Besides, in India, many NGOs are contractors for government schemes. Some government officials have relatives running NGOs. Quite a few establish an NGO or begin to head one the moment they retire. Few NGOs do excellent work when filling gaps. They produce effective within modest objectives. But they cannot be a substitute for the state. They cannot fulfill state responsibilities. There has been no substantial increase in the efficacy of the State. Every five years the public is disappointed by blaring gaps between promises and actions. NGOs are only accountable to their funding agency—which may support, even spur dubious activities that prove harmful to society. The soul and character of 'media' has been sucked into a growing process of corporatization, it has eroded and proved increasingly inept at covering the weaknesses of the development process.

"The Last Heroes", is the much-awaited successor to "Everyone Loves A Good Drought" and its signed copy is one of my prized possessions. Here, Sainath reinstates the aforementioned facts. He writes that millions—men, women and children working different occupations, hailing from different regions, speaking different languages, practising different religions, and believing in various ideologies had fought for independence from colonial rule only to realize that freedom and independence are not the same. Hence, their struggle for freedom continues. Here, Sainath has explored the intriguing question of what is "freedom?" answered by these people through their own unique stories.

Tomasky too, speaks about the people and their problems and disappointments in the American context, although they hold good everywhere. A common inference indirectly from Sainath and directly from Tomasky is that people around the world need progressive economics, not free market economics, to be free from want, exploitation and oppression, and discrimination. It is as if people are politically proclaiming to Connect economic ideas to the ideals of democracy and freedom. That means, destroying the myth of Homo Economicus and replacing it with human tendencies.

Today's economic discourse in the realm of politics proceeds entirely from the old neoclassical, neoliberal, and Friedmanesque assumptions. We need to put a fuller view of human nature back into economics, and politics. People thrive on competition but they also value cooperation, trust, and the esteem in which they are held by others. Therefore, the way we shape economic policy should reflect this complex view of what motivates our behaviour in the marketplace.

Democracy is more important than capitalism. When you have capitalism capturing democracy, when you have the kind of regulatory capture where powerful corporations can arrange the rules for their benefit, that is not real capitalism. Capitalism without democracy turns into crony capitalism, which then turns into oligarchy. Economics and democracy are thus not the separate issues they are taken to be in the media. They are the same issue. Democratically elected officials need to explain to people that if the economic and political systems are hacked by the wealthy, if inequality continues unchecked, and if we can't create an ethos wherein businesses understand that their long-term interests are better served by a healthy democracy to which they contribute their share than by a corrupted and out-of-kilter one that asks little of them, then the impacts on democracy will be severe, and it will fail. This is a connection few politicians make. It is of vital importance that they do.

Today the right-wing economists and politicians own the word freedom. For the middle-class and working-class people, it needs to be taken back and redefined. It is our economic vision that will give people freedom, and the right-wing vision of freedom has left millions struggling. Freedom is not freedom if you work full-time and live in poverty. Freedom is not freedom if a single medical crisis can drive you to bankruptcy. It is not freedom if childcare is too expensive for you to hold a job, or if you are born poor and at every turn are blocked in your rise: by underfunded schools, overpriced colleges, and usurious college loans. Not to mention women's right to reproductive freedom, or the right to go out in public without being gunned down. The first right of all, in many ways, is the right to be secure in one's person. These are absolute freedom issues. Freedom of speech and worship were long-established and not controversial freedoms. The right-wing glorifies these freedoms and attacks freedom from want and from fear and this is the freedom, the realisation of which economics and politics must address. We need economic programmes that provide people freedom to achieve their full potential, to change jobs without having to worry about their health coverage, to pursue their ambitions knowing that they can enroll their kids in a safe childcare facility, to try community college without falling into debt, to move to a new part of the country because taking such chances becomes less risky, or to stay in their hometown because a certain level of public investment has ensured jobs and opportunity in town again. The free market has reduced people's freedoms by making their lives harder. Smart government investments can open up options in people's lives and widen their scope of freedom. The freedom that ordinary people cherish is the freedom to live happier, more productive lives in a society of shared prosperity.

To conclude, I don't want to labour the point that books like these which change the way people think about the fundamental principles of economics and politics and how they relate to the sort of society the majority of ordinary people want, are the books you must read if you want to propose sound economic policies that work for them. You need to be careful not to be carried away by technocratic economists and politicians justifying big business on the one hand and repressive austerity and fascism, on the other, for society at large even as they speak of a pure economics paradigm ushering in politically neutral science of policies and individual behaviour.

A more genuinely liberal and just economics will give us a fairer society (and by the way, better growth too)—and it will strengthen democracy and vastly increase freedoms for all. This is very much possible. This is the minimally progressive message you can take from the books reviewed

here. If you are a bit more radical type, you may be drawn to Bernie Sanders politics and economics of democratic socialism, which establishments everywhere do not want.

If you are also mystical like me, you can strengthen the minimally progressive argument linking humanistic economics with the values of democracy and freedom further by also exploring the human-nature relationship through the study of interlinkages among bioculturalism, shamanism, and economics.

I am permanently beholden to Palagummi Sainath, Michael Tomasky, and Rishabh Shetty.

References

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