

‘World Bank in India’

Michael Carter

This review must start with a disclosure: from 2006 to 2006, this reviewer was the World Bank’s Country Director for India. Readers will need to make up their own minds about how to interpret this review in that light.

This *book is billed as the report of an ‘Independent People’s Tribunal on the World Bank in India.’ It is scarcely that: the participation of those ‘affected’ was organized by ‘grassroots’ organizations and interested individuals, and the jury was appointed by them. In other words, the prosecution identified victims and chose the judges. It is not a great surprise that the Government of India declined to participate in the process (but quite a surprise that, initially, the Bank did not). The book is made up of a large number of essays, mainly by activists and academics, on an impressive range of topics relating to the World Bank’s work in India, and concludes with the findings of the jury in which the Bank is found guilty on all of 29 charges (which appear to have been selected by the jury).

In some of the essays, this book quite appropriately points to some cases—notably where involuntary resettlement was involved—where the Bank’s performance has been inadequate. A number of the essays touch on some important systemic weaknesses in the Bank which deserve much more active debate: for example, flawed internal governance with an overly-powerful president; the need for further progress in increasing the transparency of the Bank; the dilemmas of lending and conditionality; the need for more incisive and efficient analytic work; the extent to which the Bank has really internalized the lessons of its experience in India; and how the management of bank staffing encourages or impedes a strong grounding of real local knowledge.

Sadly, though, the discussion of many of these issues is so overlaid with dogma that the analysis falls short of practical conclusions.

It would be less than candid for this writer to suggest that the volume was read with anything but considerable irritation: irritation at the fundamental governance flaws in the process that have just been mentioned; irritation at the half-thought-through underlying ideological slant of anti-‘neo-liberalism’ (which starts in the Introduction, and recurs in many of the essays); irritation at the innumerable factual inaccuracies, misrepresentations and examples of sloppy logic (just one example: the characterization of the Indira Kranti Patham in Andhra Pradesh as solely focused on savings and micro-credit ‘without challenging the basic social, caste and patriarchal inequalities that are already firmly in place’); irritation at the slur on individuals who have chosen to serve India as a part of careers that at other times have included employment at the World Bank, and at unfounded allegations of Bank misconduct in procurement; and, yes, irritation that, in a book of close to 500 pages this reviewer could find not one instance cited of the World Bank doing something of help to India (such as its support to the roll out of the green revolution, and to the reduction of TB, leprosy and polio).

But sense of irritation was gradually overshadowed by a more important feeling of frustration; frustration that this book is a wasted opportunity for promoting an intelligent debate about the effectiveness or otherwise of the Bank in helping India address the deep-seated problems of inequality and deprivation that the country faces. How much more telling would some of the criticisms have been, if they had been calmly and dispassionately argued, and properly set in the context of the complexity that is India. How much more helpful they would have been, if accompanied by recognition of strengths as well as weaknesses, and by practical proposals for change, founded on rigorous analysis, including of the political economy context.

If what you are looking for is a polemic on the World Bank's role in India, designed to reinforce already-held prejudices, this is the book for you. But if the quest is for a reasoned, thoughtful and balanced assessment that might actually help foster understanding and practical change that would make the Bank a more effective instrument for poverty reduction, sadly the reader must look elsewhere. □□□

[http://www.india-seminar.com/2010/612/612_books.htm]

***THE WORLD BANK IN INDIA: Undermining Sovereignty, Distorting Development—Independent People's Tribunal on the World Bank in India** edited by Michele Kelley and Deepika D'Souza. Orient Blackswan, Hyderabad, 2010.