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ISBN 9780691129945*

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**Review of Pranab Bardhan, *Awakening Giants, Feet of Clay: Assessing the Economic Rise of China and India*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2010, 172pp, hb, ISBN 9780691129945**

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It is not difficult to grasp the reasoning behind Pranab Bardhan's choice of subject matter for his 2010 book, *Awakening Giants, Feet of Clay*. India and China's staggering growth over the past two decades, and their status as the world's two largest nations by population, have made them a focal point of the development literature. Never before have the two countries made international headlines with the frequency they do today.

Between introduction and conclusion, *Awakening Giants* tackles eight discrete domains that together sum up the political-economy situations in China and India. Bardhan begins with a short historical background on each country, explaining economic reform in the second half of the twentieth century and linking it to the countries' famed recent growth. He devotes the next chapter to agriculture, and then infrastructure, and so on, covering what he identifies as the fields that have a major impact on economic growth today and making direct comparisons between the two 'giants' on each point. In the author's own words the book is 'a comparative assessment of the economic achievements and massive problems' (p. 2) of India and China, laying out analysis of their politics, economic systems, and financial and social growth, one at a time and always backed up by statistical data. By presenting information in this way, Bardhan attempts a rational comparison that steers clear of the 'oversimplification and clichés' (p. 22) that he says abound in contemporary

analyses of the two countries; with some prior knowledge, a subtle read-through will allow readers to capture implicit trends.

For example, Bardhan examines infrastructure in the third chapter, explaining that Chinese decentralization and ties between local government and business provide the incentives and funding for effective investment in infrastructure. In India, lack of state autonomy and the need for local officials to please constituents in the short term, as well as the Indian Administrative Service (IAS)'s bulkiness in addressing larger projects, get in the way of equivalent investments and leave the country crippled. Bardhan returns frequently to the theme of Chinese decentralization, which allows local governments to cater to local economic needs and incentivizes them to do so.

Government savings and investment, addressed in chapter four, are also inhibited by populist pressure in India (a recurrent theme) as constituents make it impossible for the state to lower its subsidies of a variety of goods. The final three chapters look at poverty, social services, and the environment. Major initiatives to address deficiencies in these domains in both countries will require significant infrastructural change to be effective, in the form of accountability and incentives for public providers.

Many will approach a comparative study of India and China searching for an answer to the question of whether democracy or autocracy better serves economic growth. Though Bardhan addresses this in the concluding chapter, he refuses to present any conclusions on so complex a topic. As with other questions not explicitly answered, examples throughout the text lean towards one conclusion: that China's decentralized authoritarianism accomplishes the political goals it sets for itself in a way that Indian democracy cannot (this is primarily true in building infrastructure, which Bardhan identifies as the single most inhibiting factor to India's growth (p. 14) – itself a significant take-away). As an immense umbrella under which multitudes of opposing objectives come to clash, and with the limitation of vote-seeking that turns most local initiatives into short-term and unsustainable plans, the huge and bureaucratic democratic state in India finds its power to institute change severely limited. It comes as a disappointment that Bardhan does not do more to debate this crucial trend in the data he presents: the book comes to read more as a compendium of facts than as a conclusive argument because the author shies away from acknowledging these trends rather than taking the extra step of pitting them against other scholars' conclusions.

It is equally frustrating that the author omits mention of the historical and cultural dimensions to the conclusions implicit in the text. While India as we know it today was unified under a single nationalism for the first time half a century ago, China has historically been a cohesive and isolated nation-state. India's religious and cultural diversity, valuable in incalculable ways, is identified throughout the book as the key hindrance to policy-making. Chinese authoritarian rule derives a large part of its legitimacy through 'a kind of preening nationalism [that] has replaced socialism as the social glue in China' (p. 146) and this legitimacy (along with the smothering of any vocal opposition) is vital to the effectiveness of the Chinese state, as demonstrated repeatedly in the volume. Bardhan omits comment on this important difference. Similarly, though he devotes an entire section of chapter 8 to education, Bardhan glosses over the crucial fact that widespread education at the beginning of economic reforms in 1989 in China made the rural population ripe for micro-entrepreneurialism and economic growth – a socialist legacy with no equivalent in India. By leaving out historical and cultural context, the book misses valuable explanations for the data that it presents.

Certainly *Awakening Giants* is an important read for anyone interested in the politics and economy of either of these two countries; the comparison is enlightening, and Bardhan's book does justice to the breadth of the topic he takes on. Any student of economics, politics or development will find the information useful. But the book is dry, if not particularly inaccessible, and prior knowledge of China or India will prove invaluable in trying to situate the numbers Bardhan rolls off. One might try reading both the introduction and the conclusion before and after plowing through the eight short chapters of data, to better understand the links between them. With this criticism made, there is no doubt that the data this book presents, and the quiet trends it illustrates, make it a significant contribution to the literature on these two countries' economic development.

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