

BY G. SAMPATH

60 MINUTES: WITH JEAN DRÈZE

'We need to go beyond self-interest or we're doomed'

The Indian education system would be a good place to start with reforms, says the development economist

Jean Drèze is possibly the world's most famous Belgian-Indian. He has lived in India since 1979, and as a development economist and activist, has helped draft some startlingly pro-people legislations, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), 2005, and the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013. In his most recent book, *Sense and Solidarity: Jholawala Economics for Everyone* (January 2018), he makes a strong case for combining economic research with public action. In a freewheeling chat, Drèze spoke about, among other things, the problems with economists, his idea of success, nationalism, and activism. Excerpts:

In general, economists are a part of the problem and not the solution. Would you agree?

■ Well, economics can be a very useful discipline if studied critically. But if you are not critical, then it can become toxic. If you take economic models at face value, you could end up being in a world of your own.

But even as a discipline, economics seems biased against the poor.

■ It's not just economics. In many disciplines, if you look at the history of ideas, it is essentially the ideas that are convenient for the privileged and the powerful that tend to flourish; they are the ones that get sponsored, the ones around which conferences are organised, and so on. In contrast, ideas that are deemed threatening to the established order tend to be sidelined.

Can you give an example?

■ Take the idea that competition is good not only for economic efficiency but also for social welfare. This is questionable even in terms of mainstream economic analysis. But the way it is taught is that, except in cases of asymmetric information or other market failures, there is general compatibility between competition and social welfare. On the other hand, ideas about the value of cooperation, which are equally important, have not been developed much. Another example is the concept of exploitation. We do not learn anything about it, and it is not even a word we use in economics courses. How can you understand the labour market in India, or the Indian economy, without thinking about exploitation?

It often happens that the same set of economists work in the corporate sector, then they go to World Bank or IMF and tell governments what to do, and later they join the government themselves. Doesn't this make them biased in some way?

■ Yes, this revolving door phenomenon is becoming a serious problem in the profession. When economists

move around mostly in elite circles, their worldview can get coloured in a certain way. That's why I feel economists should spend more time engaging with popular organisations, and the people at large.

As a development economist, how do you define development?

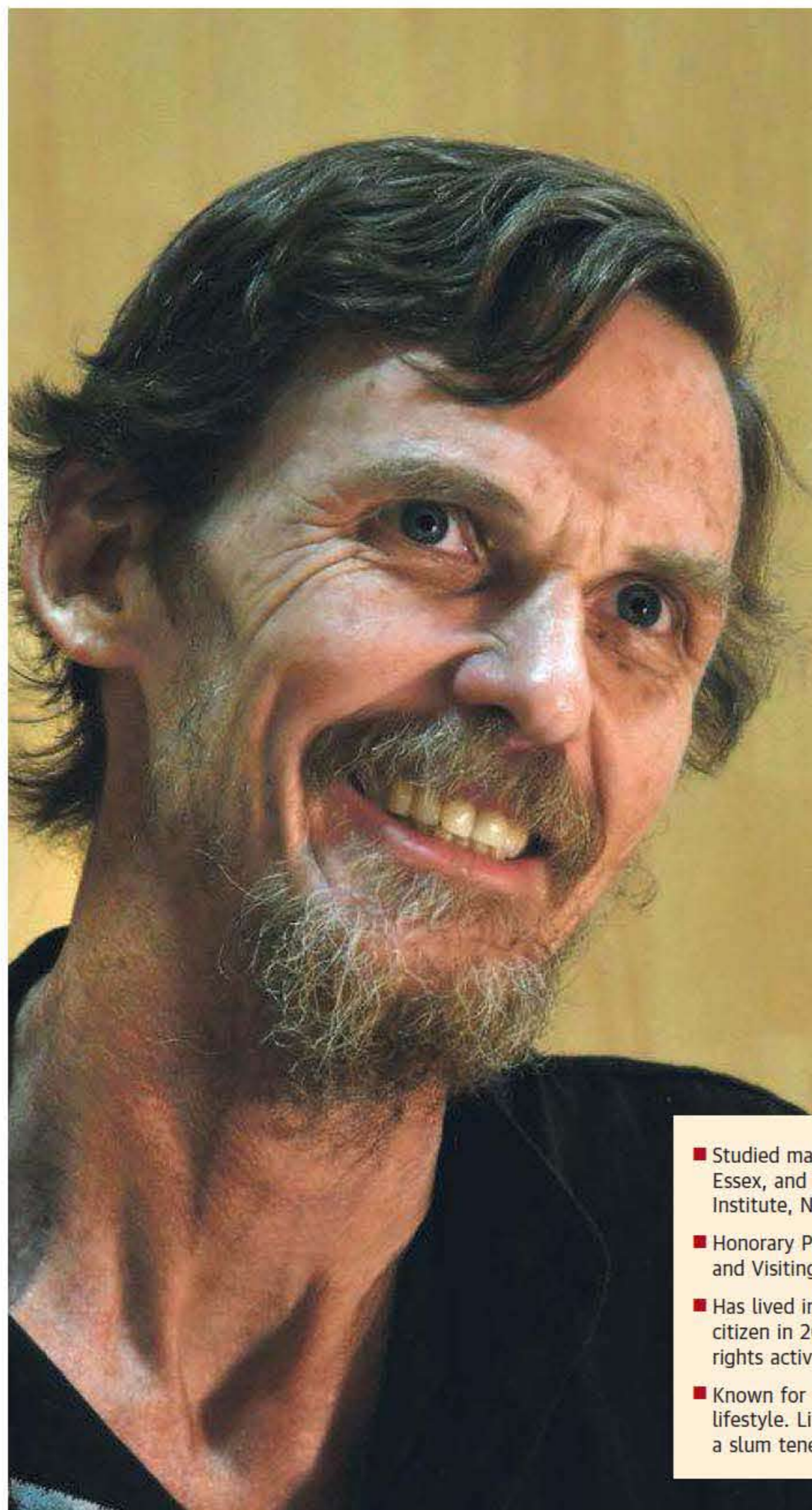
■ For me, development is about expanding people's freedoms.

How do we expand people's freedoms when, in the capitalist society we all inhabit, self-interest remains the supreme mover, with everyone trying to maximise his or her gains at the expense of others?

■ I don't know if it's true that people are living mainly by self-interest, though I do know that in economics there is a tendency to think like that. By and large, standard mainstream economics tends to conflate rationality and self-interest, though there is hardly any relation between the two. I think a lot of people have motivations other than self-interest, and these can be developed much more. But the schooling system, the economic system, and social norms tend to give more emphasis to self-interest as a motive, and that is a problem. If we want the human race to survive, we need to go beyond self-interest and foster different kinds of values and social norms. How to do that is a difficult question, but a good place to start would be the education system.

If you look at the Indian education system, there is a huge pressure to compete and come out on top, so obviously you are reinforcing the self-interest motive. Nonetheless, through

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education, democratic engagement, and social movements, you can still develop different ways of thinking and behaviour, and we have to do this somehow. Otherwise we are doomed.

Most professionals, including economists and journalists, are disdainful of people who combine their work with activism. But you are an economist who has written a book on 'jholawala economics'.

■ Well, many of the economists who take a dim view of activists are actually activists themselves – they are activists for the corporate sector or the government. There are economists who write relentlessly in the news media, deliberately pandering to certain interests because they know that is how their career will advance. This somehow doesn't count as activism. But someone who advocates minimum wages or the enforcement of environmental regulations suddenly becomes an activist. I think one has to be careful with the use of the term.

For me, economic research has always been a complement to action, a way of understanding the world and finding the means to change it.

What exactly do you mean by action?

■ For me it means using non-violent, democratic means to bring about change. It could mean legal action, taking to the streets, writing, or being a part of collective movements.

There is this whole middle-class obsession with success, this anxiety not to be seen as a 'loser'. What is your idea of 'success'?

■ It's hard for me to answer this question because the whole idea of pursuing success is something you have to question, I think. Do you mean personal success?

Individual success, yes.

■ I am not so much after personal success, but there are certain things that are important to me, certain causes. For example, the question of universal health care. If in my lifetime, India puts in place a system of universal

At home I don't try to masquerade as a *desi* Indian: Jean Drèze. V.V. KRISHNAN

■ Studied mathematical economics at University of Essex, and did a Ph.D from Indian Statistical Institute, New Delhi

■ Honorary Professor at Delhi School of Economics, and Visiting Professor at Ranchi University

■ Has lived in India since 1979 and became an Indian citizen in 2002. Married to academic and human rights activist Bela Bhatia

■ Known for shunning luxury and leading a simple lifestyle. Lived with Bhatia in a one-room house in a slum tenement in Delhi

health care that makes sense, as opposed to the token initiatives taking place today, I would count that as a success. At a more personal level, consistency between your beliefs and your actions, having a good rapport with your friends and family. I don't think this is a matter of success, however. These are just the kinds of things one would hope to see and achieve in one's lifetime.

As a naturalised Indian, does the recent resurgence of nationalist sentiment leave you cold?

■ By and large, yes. But I don't try to masquerade as a *desi* Indian anyway. There are many kinds of Indians, and I am a Belgian-born Indian.

If India plays Belgium in the hockey World Cup, who will you support?

■ Nobody. I don't follow hockey.

Let's say India and Belgium face off in the World Cup of whichever sport you do happen to follow. Who will you support?

■ If there is, say, a football match, I might support one team, but it won't be out of nationalist sentiment. I don't have a nationalist sentiment – either Belgian or Indian. These national boundaries don't mean much to me. I am very happy to be in India, and while I like many aspects of Indian society, there are also aspects I don't like. But for me it's a good place to live and that's what matters.

How 'Indianised' are you?

■ In terms of learning the local language, trying to learn a little bit about the society, history, and culture, you could say I have become Indianised. But I think your childhood remains very influential throughout your life. I left Belgium when I was 17, but I still have a lot of habits that were acquired in childhood.

A Belgian trait that marks you out as not very Indian?

■ The sense of time, for instance. Indians are pretty relaxed about time, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. But Belgians have a different mindset. In my family, there was a very effortless view of time. If we say, okay, we shall have dinner at 7, then everyone will definitely be there at 7. Indians might wonder why should we have that kind of discipline in the family, that it makes no sense. But it doesn't feel like discipline – it feels like a kind of a coordination mechanism. So yes, I feel this difference in the sense of time in India. There are lots of things like that.

So, despite all these years in India, you have failed miserably in developing an Indian sense of time.

■ That's right.

(Read the full interview online.)