

**Book Review: The Shackled Continent: Power, Corruption, and African Lives by Robert Guest, 2004, Smithsonian Books Washington, ISBN: 978-1-58834-311-6, Pages: 263, Hardcover: Rs.1634**

For decades, scholars and policymakers have been trying to find the causes of poverty and underdevelopment in Africa, which remain the constant features of the continent. Unlike other parts of the world, the situation has shown no improvement in the past two decades, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Though scholars have come up citing different reasons for Africa's backwardness, their opinions have no point of convergence. Among others, the work of Robert Guest, 'The Shackled Continent' has tried to reason out why Africa has remained extremely poor. The author, in the nine chapters of the book, attempts to find the matters concerning African lives and identify the causes of the situation.

Robert Guest, an economist and also a journalist, has travelled across Africa, mainly Sub-Saharan Africa, where, according to him, almost half of the population lives in extreme poverty. Besides observing their lives from close quarters, Guest conducted interviews, reviewed literature and discussed different points to find the root causes of underdevelopment. The author blames African leaders and underlines that bad government and governance problems affected Africa's development endeavours.

In the introduction, the author presents his assumptions regarding Africa's backwardness that touch upon aspects such as geographic factor, past slavery and colonial legacy, failures in leadership, HIV/AIDS, ethnic conflict, inappropriate aid and imbalanced trade. The book argues that geographic factor influences development, as the hot climate results in exhaustion and diseases in human as well as livestock. Regarding past legacy, the book traces the beginning of slavery during the pre-European intrusions into Africa when Arabs and African chiefs practised, and claims that

slavery may not be an excuse for Africa's backwardness because it affected almost all countries. The author finds the arguments about the negative effects of colonialism unconvincing citing the prosperous and peaceful life in erstwhile colonies like Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. Therefore, the author points finger at the underlying failure and incapability of African governments to transform African people since independence, and contends that lack of strong leadership has led to the pathetic situation in Africa.

The book illustrates a pen picture of the day-to-day life of Africans, and gives an account of their living conditions. It says Africans lack freedom and are forced to live under vampire states/greedy & incompetent governments characterised by corruption, bad economic policies and an atmosphere of terror that deprives the well-being of society. The writer takes former Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe as an example, and he blames that economic and political freedom came under question under his leadership. For the writer, Mugabe considers capitalism and colonialism as two sides of the same coin, arguing that privatisation was unlikely, and communal landholding system existed until he changed his beliefs. The author describes mineral wealth in Africa as a "curse rather than blessing" citing recurring conflicts to control mineral mines like in Congo where poverty breeds war, and war exacerbates poverty. The author points out that the absence of strong property laws in Africa hindered investment and resulted in the inability to get the right to sell property. The government's mistrust towards citizens has prevented them from giving services like telephone and electricity, fearing no one would pay bills back. The severity of AIDS in Africa has impacted the lives of many productive citizens and hindered investment. Tribal politics is another cause that the author mentions brazenly for the absence of development of democracy. By depicting practical examples of the Ugandan massacre, the writer cites a local saying in Uganda that "the son of a snake is a snake", indicating how much these tribal issues affect social life beyond politics. For the author, African politics largely

depends on patronage style through tribalism more known as clienteles forming local networks of interest for political legitimacy. For him, tribal by itself is not a problem but its external and internal politicisation.

The proceeding sections of the book deal with the failure of foreign aid in Africa, trade barriers, threats and incentives of investing in Africa, Africa's readiness and opportunity for technology and education, and South Africa's development as hope for the continent beyond apartheid rule. Besides corruption, incompetent leadership, and bad economic policies, the greedy traffic police officers on roads, low-quality pothole-filled roads, damaged bridges, car accidents, and the absence of reliable services are some of the challenges that hinder investment in Africa, according to the author. The author depicts Africa's resistance to accepting technology and recommends the use of technology for the development of the continent. He describes South Africa with its good hospitality and cheap life as Africa's best hope similar to Japan in Asia. Though the author saw South Africa as an example of Africa's entire development, he doubts problems like unemployment, crimes, corruption, etc., are prevailing. Therefore, the hope and reservation discussed by the author about South Africa's development are much more memorable and the way by which the African National Congress (ANC) brought political stability has to be a lesson for others to bring overall change. Guest concluded that the best way to develop Africa is to leave the past trends behind and stretch to progress through forming partnerships.

Apart from a few limitations, this reader-friendly book adds an invaluable volume to the background of Africa's problems and introduces a new approach to solving African socioeconomic and political crises. What made the book unique is its broad-based observation and identification of the factors for Africa's underdevelopment than other related books. Unlike others, it criticizes African leaders for being greedy and dictatorial from which most of the problems apparently emanated. Most

of the arguments in this book for African backwardness are compatible with Calderisi (2006), who underlines that past legacies may not necessarily be a solution to today's problems. The book is valuable in addressing some wrong and dangerous assumptions of preaching past colonial legacies to teenagers, seeking compensation from past colonizers, and relating the concept of modernisation to the Western world. Such assumptions may hinder Africa's development by fostering a colonial mentality in citizens. Therefore, he recommends getting education, doing hard work, and cultivating the habits of saving and investing for the modernity of Africa.

The writer criticizes Western countries for protecting farm product imports from Africa. Such trade imbalances are well discussed in the book. Scholars like Marland et al. (2008) put similar cases and support Guest's assumption about Africa's minerals blaming African leaders for their weakness in utilising minerals to help African people overcome poverty. The author's discussion about the impact of HIV on African lives is compatible with Calderisi (2006) who underlines the severity of HIV/AIDS on African lives with estimated deaths of 3,000 persons per twelve hours. Guest also recommended the importance of separation of State and tribe, avoiding racial discrimination and political patronage by governments that can improve societal life.

Another very impressive idea underlined by this book is about the need for education to cope with technology, which needs better scientific and mathematical skills. The author observes that despite spending more time on education, Africa remains poor. He identified some good practices from the successful East Asian educational system such as parents helping students with their homework, market rewards for education, State's enforcement on students, reading, writing and manipulating numbers without using calculator, etc. Guest rues that skilled men with great talent escaped from Africa and the governments were not liberal enough to make them stay home.

Undoubtedly, the book has some weaknesses. For instance, the book stressed the lethargic attitude of African governments or leadership in most cases as a main obstacle to its underdevelopment. This may be true in some cases though other factors like the influence of developed countries, legacy of colonialism, and geographic factors prevail (Rodney, 1973). The author, however, failed to recognise or deliberately concealed such factors, and thus failed to consider the concept of “dependency theory” that explains the systematic deprivation of developing countries by developed countries. Rather, his view is mostly favouring “modernisation theory”.

The book emphasises on identifying the reasons for the failure of foreign aid in Africa as Africa’s internal problem only. However, it would have been better had it discussed the influence of the primary objective of aid, which is mostly focused on the interest areas of the donors rather than poverty alleviation (Desai & Potter, 2014).

The author has doubts about the case of the slave trade as he tries not to blame Europeans for the impact of the slave trade on Africa. However, Rodney (1973) never denied the severe impacts of the period of European slave trade on Africa describing that the way slaves were captured through hunters and warriors itself was inhuman.

The book was developed based on both primary and secondary sources. However, the author’s generalisation about the whole continent may not be true since data was collected from a few areas. Besides, African countries are heterogeneous and difficult to treat as a single State as Guest did. Similarly, the solutions he put forth to solve Africa’s problems failed to address variations within African countries.

The book offers directions for African leaders as well as the young generation to work on constructive ideas that can leap Africa forward. The book reflects that Africans have to adopt a visionary approach to come out of poverty by ignoring the past legacies like impact of colonisation and slave trade. In general, the solutions that the author pointed out may contribute to the revival of Africa though some of the proposed points reflect Western ideologies, which may not be compatible with existing realities.

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