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Dr. Raju Narayana Swamy popularly known as Kerala's Anti-Corruption Crusader is the All India Topper of the 1991 batch of the IAS and is currently posted as Principal Secretary to the Government of Kerala. He has earned many accolades as he hit against the political-bureaucrat corruption nexus in India. Dr Swamy holds a B.Tech in Computer Science and Engineering from the IIT Madras and a Ph. D. in Cyber Law from Gujarat National Law University. He also has an LLM (Pro) (with specialization in IPR) as well as three PG Diplomas from the National Law University, Delhi- one in Urban Environmental Management and Law, another in Environmental Law and Policy and a third one in Tourism and Environmental Law. He also holds a post-graduate diploma in IPR from the National Law School, Bengaluru and diploma in Public

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E.MBA, LL.M, Ph.D, PGDSAPM

Currently working as Assistant Professor at Law Centre II, Faculty of Law, University of Delhi. Dr. Nitesh have 14 years of Teaching, Administrative and research experience in Renowned Institutions like Amity University, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Jai Narain Vyas University Jodhpur, Jagannath University and Nirma University.

More than 25 Publications in renowned National and International Journals and has authored a Text book on Cr.P.C and Juvenile Delinquency law.



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BBA. LL.B. (Hons.) (Amity University, Rajasthan); LL. M. (UPES, Dehradun) (Nottingham Trent University, UK); Ph.D. Candidate (G.D. Goenka University)

Subhrajit did his LL.M. in Sports Law, from Nottingham Trent University of United Kingdoms, with international scholarship provided by university; he has also completed another LL.M. in Energy Law from University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, India. He did his B.B.A.LL.B. (Hons.) focussing on International Trade Law.

## ***ABOUT US***

WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal provided dedicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

# **BOOK REVIEW: WHOLE NUMBERS AND HALF TRUTHS RUKMINI S – A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR POLICY-MAKERS**

AUTHORED BY - DR SAMREEN HUSSAIN

Assistant Professor

DR RMLNLU Lucknow

CO-AUTHOR - ZEESHAN RAZA

Student ISB Hyderabad

Rukmini S.'s *Whole Numbers and Half Truths* is a brilliant guide to navigating India's data terrain and understanding how: numbers produced by elites drive policy decisions that harm the vulnerable. In the book she explains how she has discovered in her study that most of the reports and discourses in India respect of statistics and data are inadequate or potentially misleading. For policymakers, this book is an important call that wakes them up from focusing on the mortal sheen of statistics and figures and giving them a glimpse into the unseen and unknown truths that work behind them.

## **Know the difference between Understanding Data and Reality**

Public debate is another of the book's major themes: one of these debates is about the fact that there is a significant gap between what the number suggest and what is happening at the grassroots level. For instance, Rukmini gives the example to explain that figures in employment statistics in India are not entirely accurate. In the year according to the official statistics, unemployment rate in India was at 8.7% in 2019-20. But even this has excluded the informal sector that remains the largest in terms of employment opportunity in the country, taking close to 90% of the jobs that its population requires. Rewards of these jobs are low and more often than not come with no security and due to this, their struggle gets erased and falls outside the stats tallying millions.

As Rukmini writes, "Data can be like a funhouse mirror: it coveys something but what it coveys isn't veracious a lot of the time."

For policymakers, this is a key takeaway: It is not enough to look at the figures and then take



action. It is important to grasp the assumptions and constraints with regards to the data and their collection if one is to make policies addressing real problems.

### **Social Norms and Data**

The book also examines ‘minority’ data, for instance, gender, caste, health - what is counted and what is not, why that is the case, how culture shapes the numbers. A good example is data given by crime against women. Even the National Crime Records Bureau might present a decrease in cases; it does not mean there is a drop in violence against women, but that women are not reporting anymore.

Rukmini still argues that nearly thirty percent of the situations of sexual violence are reported in India only. This is one example of underreporting, and what it translates to is this; if policymakers are going to rely on such statistics to inform them, they might well end up with having their finger on the pulse of the wrong issues.

This serves as an important reminder for policymakers: Policies developed based on incomplete data will lack being able to address some of the vulnerable groups.

### **The Challenge of Big Data**

Using big data is also a problem that Rukmini discusses in her article. In that case, she cautions that big data can be a phenomenon that revels in the assumption that an abundance of data always equates to superior decision-making. For instance, when the COVID-19 scourge was raging, the government resorted to the application of digital surveys for measuring unemployment in the country. Nevertheless, these surveys were not equally accessible and did not include many rural workers because these were conducted by smartphone respondents. For this reason, the gathered data was limited, and therefore the severity of the issue could not be measured correctly.

She says, “It’s not just about people lacking connections to the internet, it’s about who isn’t included in the data.”

According to National Sample Survey Office in 2019, only 24 percent of Indians access internet. This means that when companies rely heavily in an environment which is full of digital data, they may be missing out on most of the market especially in rural areas.



## **Real Life Examples of Data Gaps**

Through the various studies Rukmini finds out that large gaps in data account for the production of wrong policies. A dramatic example would be the literacy rate in India today. According to government statistics the literacy is at 77.7%, but she argues this is a misrepresentation of the literacy levels in the country. A little over half of the students who registered at the Government primary schools in rural India could read none or read only what a second grader would have learned, as established by the ASER, the Annual Status of Education Report. This gap between data analysis and the state of affairs shows that the education policies may be designed with undue amount of idealism.

This example shows one must derive a fuller vision when it comes to data. It has emerged that official statistics are not enough for policymakers to make informed decisions; they must go further to get the right picture of the situation.

Therefore, the main policy advice that the book has for policymakers is that data is not actually value-free. In a society, preference can be inclined to the method of calculation, instruments, and dependent on existing bias. For instance, the Census, which is expected to take place every ten years dropped in 2021. This implies that the policymakers are operating under archaic data on sensitive issues such as migration, and urbanization. She writes, “Achieving more nuance, greater quantity in the sources collected is important if we want policies to tall with reality.” She also encourages policy makers to make use of a variety of data. Instead, they should use at least quantitative data and should use qualitative research methods like interviews and field surveys. This way, they will have improved knowledge of what they are dealing with and produce better policies.

## **Building Better Data Systems**

One of the most significant points Rukmini uses, concerns the weak institutional foundations of India when it comes to data accumulation. Cambodia’s Special National Programme (SNP) for immunisation occurs only once every five years while the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) also takes place every five years making it hard to document issues such as changes in health and nutrition.

Disclosure of data is also important, or to say in other words, data transparency is crucial.

Unfortunately, data can be oriented to certain political positions and thus incomplete or misinterpreted. Rukmini also argues the efforts under way to increase data obligation and openness will provide proper information to policy makers.

### **Conclusion:**

The book is rich in describing the misadventures of overreliance on data for a country as big as India and is a treasure trove of insights on how to do numbers right. Rukmini says that data is essential when making decisions but it can be skewed or partial at best. Politicians must learn to read and interpret data with a lot of care and scepticism in their policy making stage. Finally, as Rukmini puts it 'numbers do not lie but they do give a wrong idea'. You simply cannot afford to be wrong or give a wrong impression because as policymakers this is your job, do not let yourselves be misled.

