

DEVELOPMENT THINKING AND GAPS BETWEEN EURO-CENTRIC APPROACHES AND ASIAN REALITIES

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a contribution towards "Development Studies" from an Asian perspective. It is exploratory in nature, in that it seeks to identify and comment upon some critical issues and concerns that lie at the center of contemporary debate in development thinking, particularly in the Asian region.

The paper is divided into three main sections - viz, (a) an attempt at a re-definition of "Development" that emphasises the holistic perspective of development centered on the human person and people's consciousness, (b) identifies some salient issues that distinguish "Western" and "Asian" perspectives and contributing factors to development studies, and attempts an outline of "Development Studies from an Asian Perspective"; and (c) discusses the case of the "Cultural Development Approach" in Thailand as a valuable contribution towards current development thinking.

2. THE CONCEPT OF "DEVELOPMENT"-A RE-DEFINITION

It is important to clarify the concept of "development" as it is understood and applied in this paper

First, the concept of "development", like many other fashionable concepts in the past decade (environment, democracy, human rights, peace, etc), has been used and mis-used, depending on the given economic, political and socio-cultural realities, and on the subtle political biases of its proponents. Furthermore, its usage ranges from very restrictive definitions-like, economic growth-which is measured by high Gross National Product (GNP)-to a more comprehensive notion of development-such as, *"the achievement of human potential-economic, social, political, and spiritual-in harmony with the environment."*

Second, it must be clearly understood that "development" is not a **"state"** to be reached, but rather a **"process"** - which is not necessarily evolutionary in nature. This implies that development is neither static nor replicable, but rather that it is a process determined by the specific societal context in which it takes place. Thus, efforts to duplicate or copy "development models" of other societies-as has been the case in many of our Asian societies-is basically an exercise in futility

Third, there is no final definition of "development" - every notion or definition is merely

tentative in a given space and time. It needs to be an "open-ended concept" that is constantly revised, updated and improved to better our understanding of the process of development taking place in a given society. Thus, there can only be suggestions as to what development should imply.

Fourth, the human person is at the "center of development". Development is not of "things", but of "human persons".¹ Thus, a complete definition of the concept of "development" should include not only meeting basic needs, material and social, not merely the addition of the intellectual quest for knowledge, but also fundamentally, "spiritual development and growth" - in other words, all those aspects that constitute the total human development of the individual and community in society. This idea of "development" centred on the human person is crucial in the Asian context, wherein the social and cultural setting has evolved over many centuries of religious and cultural traditions - all of which have respected and dignified the human person.

The centrality of the human person in the development process is well illustrated by the following example.

"Development" as defined by the villagers involved in the "Corvodaya Movement" in Sri Lanka include the following six key elements

(a) **a moral element** *right action and righteous livelihood,*

(b) **a cultural element** *accumulated beneficial experiences along with customs, beliefs, art, music, song, dance and Drama, which helps to keep a community of people together as a cohesive whole,*

(c) **a spiritual element** *awakening of one's mind through concentration, to wisdom and unconditional happiness,*

(d) **a social element** *access of all to physical and mental health, knowledge, culture, etc.,*

(e) **a political element** *the enjoyment of fundamental rights by all and freedom to shape one's political environment,*

(f) **a economic element** *meeting human needs.²*

¹ Hettne, Bjorn, "Current Issues in Development Theory" SAREC Report, R3, 1978, pp. 7-10.

² Hendrick, Diane, "Development Studies and Peace Studies: The Links" in *Trocaire Development Review*, Dublin, 1989, p. 88-98.

3. DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

3.1 History of Development Thinking : "Western" and "non-Western" Factors :

It is rather difficult to trace the precise origins of "development studies" as it has been a product of a number of factors, both in the social sciences as well as in society at large. However, some key contributing factors include the following

(a) By far the most influential factor that contributed to "development studies" was the inadequacy of the major social science disciplines to interpret and explain the complexity of change taking place in society, especially in the past three decades - in the aftermath of the "Development Decade" of the 1970s. Thus, the need to study processes of social change and development with a "multidisciplinary" or "inter-disciplinary" perspectives became popular especially in Western societies.

*"Development studies has been concerned to understand the complexity of development processes through an "inter-disciplinary approach" relying not merely on economics, but also drawing on politics, ecology, sociology, anthropology, etc."*³

(b) The problematic of mal-development that witnessed the birth of the "dependency theory" also stimulated the social sciences to study development in relation to the "center" and "periphery" of economic and social relations of societies. Thus, there was the felt need to explain the "North" and the "South", the "First" and the "Third" worlds, the "rich" and the "poor" - all part of the same global capitalist economic system. Within such a wide perspective, development studies provided the scope and the tools drawn from various disciplines. This witnessed, especially among radical scholars in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the growth of multi-disciplinary approaches, especially geared towards the "politically-sensitive areas" of social research and enquiry - viz studies on politics, ethnicity, gender, culture, religion, social movements, etc.

(c) On the other hand, there was also the tendency in the West to view development studies as the "study of non-Western societies" ⁴ This was a response to seek answers to the critical questions "Why have the poor countries of the Third World not developed as the rich countries of the First World?" Besides, colonial anthropology had laid the basis for the study of "oriental wisdom" and "folklore" in the colonies that was fascinating to Western scholarship. In this sense, development studies became another tool to bridge the gap between "colonial" and "neo-colonial" approaches to the study of post-colonial and independent societies, especially in the Asia, Africa and Latin America.

³ SAREC, "Emerging Trends in Development Theory" Report of a SAREC Workshop, R3, 1978, p. 67

⁴ Even today in Europe, a number of established universities pride themselves of a department for the study of "non-Western societies"

(d) Development Studies also aimed to address the needs of policy makers, administrators and civil servants to better understand the reasons for failure of development plans and to adjust policy formulation and implementation to respond better to the needs and aspirations of the people at large. Thus, development studies was of particular relevance to policy makers in those societies where "development" was a general failure - especially in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

3.2 Development Studies - An Asian Perspective?

The following are some key elements that can be considered to be a contribution of an "Asian Perspective" to Development Studies.

Key Elements in "Development Studies" in Asia :

(a) Historical and Comparative Approach

The importance of history in Development Studies has emerged from the reality of Asian societies - most of which had experience centuries of Western colonial domination. Thus, the problematic of development - both during the colonial period and after independence - has been a central concern of Asian scholars and students of Development studies. History, in the Asian context, has been regarded as cumulative, rather than elitist; as plunder and exploitation rather than military victories and conquests; a history of the struggle for freedom and liberation rather than a history of subjugation and domination. Fals Borda defines "real history" as the *"cultural traditions of the common people and in their real history (not the elitist version), which are resplendent with feelings and attitudes of an altruistic, cooperative and communal nature and which are genuinely democratic."*⁵

The historical approach in the Asian context has also entailed a comparative perspective - especially given the vast diversity of Asian societies and their respective political and cultural traditions.

(b) "View from Within and Below"

The "inter-disciplinary" and "multi-disciplinary" approach in the Asian context has facilitated the development of a holistic perspective of development, drawing on the theory and methodology of various social science disciplines.

In the Asian context, a popular approach has been the "view from within and below" which has been adopted in Development Studies. This can be defined as follows

⁵ Borda, Orlando Fals, **Knowledge & People's Power-Lessons with Peasants in Nicaragua, Mexico and Colombia**, Indian Social Institute. ILO. New Delhi, 1988, p. 89.

"View from Within and Below implies that these realities are being seen most critically, and thus probably scientifically, by those who are suffering the efforts of these changes, watching them with suspicion and doubt. The basis of all science, objectivity can be guaranteed in such committed research by the distance through self-reflection which researchers can take from themselves and their own personal and cultural biases and the political-economic context to which they structurally belong" ⁶

(c) A Dialectical Approach

Development Studies in the Asian context has adopted a dialectical approach in the study of social and structural change in society. The fact that development itself is ultimately dependent on the given power relations and conflicts in society, has implied that any attempt to understand change needs to be located within the framework of a dialectical approach.

In the Asian region, the dialectical approach is not something new - it has been part of the "world view" of traditional Chinese and Indian social thought. However, the influence of Western Marxism and particularly the Chinese experience continues to have a significant influence in approaches to social change and conflict in Asian societies.

(d) Value-Orientation Approach

Development Studies is also a value-oriented approach. In other words, it is not "value-free", rather, it is sensitive to the value orientation of the teacher-student, researcher-community, academic-activist, donor-recipient, etc.

The centrality of value-orientation is an important factor that is present in development studies in the Asian region. The overwhelming influence of religion and culture in the daily lives of people in the Asian region, provides for a strong value-orientation in all aspects of social relations and development in society. Thus, the nature of development itself is determined by the value-orientation of people in that particular society.

(e) Action-Research based Approach

In the Asian region, the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach has also been used in the study of development and change in society. PAR holds that

- "Development implies structural changes fundamentally altering power relationships among social classes and states."

⁶ Huizer, Gerrit, **Peasant Movements and their Counter-Forces in South-East Asia**, Marwah Publications, Bombay. 1980, p. 213.

Hence, development studies and research must analyse the key local, national and inter-national structures and reveal what social forces might be instrumental in changing them to the desired goals."⁷

(f) Target Group "Top" and "Bottom" Approach

Development Studies in the Asian context has attracted not only academics and social scientists, but-also planners, administrators, politicians, NGO workers, activists in social movements, and many others. Thus, its scope has entailed a broad sweep of social groups and interests in society. It is for this reason that Development Studies has attempted to explain both the "top" and the "bottom" of society.

3.3 Participatory Research Methodology and Development Studies.

The "Participatory Action Research" (PAR) approach had become popular in Development Studies, particularly among scholars and researchers in the Asian region. The key elements of participatory research methodology which provide a valuable tool to development studies itself, include the following

(a) Subjective commitment on the part of the researcher to the people under study is essential. The researcher must have a sensitivity and democratic identification with the people. the "oppressed",

(b) Close involvement of the researcher with the researched community. The researcher is perceived as a committed, participatory social actor, who must seek to combine his critical insight and knowledge with the understanding and resources of the local people to trigger new awareness of contradictions facing them. The concept of "dialogue" between the researcher and community is emphasised,

(c) The approach is problem-centred. The objective of social research is to understand the conditions underlying a problem in order to resolve the problem by transforming those conditions,

(d) It is an education process for the researcher as well as for the people with whom the research is conducted. The close and active interaction between the researcher and the people through dialogue and discussion, is ultimately aimed at action towards the solution of social contradictions,

⁷ SAREC Report, **op. cit.** p. 67

(e) It stipulates respect for the people's own capability and potential to produce knowledge and to analyse it.⁸

4. THE "THAI CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT APPROACH" - A CONTRIBUTION TO DEVELOPMENT THINKING?

In the past ten years or so, rural NGOs in Thailand have adopted a unique approach to development Studies. This approach is known as the "community culture approach" (wathanatham chumchon).⁹

In Summary, the importance and contribution of this approach includes the following

"an analysis of community history can enable the people to recover the origin of their practices and rituals; make them realise their own values and identity; discover the independent consciousness of the community; recognise the value of communal organisation; inculcate a sense of history of their common struggle and make them realise the threat of domination from external, alien cultures aimed at exploiting the villagers."¹⁰

"The discourse of communal culture is therefore not only a politico-economic ideology that offers a mode for economic and democratic-administrative development but it is also a discourse that suggests three levels of important ideas the level of political and economic development that advocates self-reliance and power-distributing democracy; the level of social and cultural discourse that emphasises spiritual values and the people's feelings; and the level of religion."¹¹

One finds a critique of this approach in Jonathan Rigg's work. He considers it, *"an elitist reinterpretation of that (externally perceived) culture. Selective notions of village self-reliance, cooperation and participation have been coopted by academics (and then by the state) and placed within an entirely, new, alien framework. The ideology masquerades as village based and oriented, yet it is little different in the manner in which it has been designed from the orthodox development strategies it aims to replace."¹²*

⁸ Kassam, Yusuf. "The Issue Research of Methodology in Participatory Research" in Dubell, F. Erasmie, T. De Vries, J. (eds.) **Research for the People-Research by the People**, **Selected Papers from the International Forum on Participatory Research in Ljubljana, Yugoslavia, 1980**, Linköping University. S.V.E. Holland. 1981 pp. 63-64.

⁹ This approach is also popularly known as "the socio-cultural approach" "religio-cultural approach" "back to the roots approach" "cultural development approach" elevated to the "community culture school of thought" For a full discussion of the origins and varied nuances in this approach, refer **Nartsupha, Chattip** "The Community Culture School of Thought" in **Chitkasem, Manas & Turton, Andrew** (eds.) "Thai Constructions of Knowledge" School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1991 pp. 118-141

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137

¹² Cf. **Rigg, Jonathan**, "Grass-Roots Development in Rural Thailand A Lost Cause?" in **World Development**, Vol. 19, No. 2/3, 1991 p. 204.

*"If people were less concerned with ideology, consciousness - raising and empowerment, and more concerned with the achievement of development, then the practicalities and purpose of promoting grass-roots development would become clearer and its achievement easier "*¹³

In response to Rigg, Kevin Hewison argues "the cultural development perspective (CDP) is a dynamic approach, constantly being revised and reassessed in the light of both positive and negative experiences. It is populist, it is conservative, and it tends to be overly romantic, but all of this may be considered as much a strength as a weakness." ¹⁴

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS : THE FUTURE OF "DEVELOPMENT STUDIES"

Development studies, to be responsive and relevant to the rapidly changing context of our societies, needs to combine academic and popular knowledge. As Borda notes

*"academic knowledge combined with popular knowledge and wisdom may give as a result a total scientific knowledge of a revolutionary nature (and perhaps a new paradigm) which destroys the previous unjust class monopoly."*¹⁵

It also needs to take seriously the valuable contribution of NGOs and grassroots organisations and movements to "development thinking"/"development studies" in the Asian context. As noted by Surichai Wun'gao

*"the contributions of non-governmental development organisations to development processes. Innovative approach to development. Development, that is, increasing the capacity of the people to liberate themselves from their sufferings, cannot come from any kind of one right answer. Innovative approaches come out of a variety of local social and cultural contexts."*¹⁶

¹³ Ibid., p. 208

¹⁴ Cf. Hewison, Kevin "Non-Governmental Organisations, Rural Development and Populism A Partial Defence of the Cultural Development Perspective in Thailand" (Paper), School of Social Sciences, Murdoch University, Australia, n.d. p. 21

¹⁵ Borda, Orlando Fals, op. cit. 1988, p. 88.

¹⁶ Wun'gao, Surichai "The Non-Governmental Development Movement in Thailand" in **Asian Exchange**, Vol. VI, Nos. 2/3, ARENA, Hong Kong, March 1987 p. 76.