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'DEVELOPMENT' IN THEORY AND PRACTICE : THE CASE OF INDIA

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"Development is not about factories, dams and roads. Development is about people. The goal is material, cultural and spiritual fulfilment for the people. The human factor is of supreme value in development".

Rajiv Gandhi (2013)

'Development' is a contested term – what it means to the World Bank, for instance, is certainly not what it means to Greenpeace activists; what it means to western developed countries, is not the same as what it means to countries like Bangladesh which has shown remarkable growth Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the past few years but may have severe problems in sustaining that growth in the face of any global economic slowdown, or India, which is the world's sixth largest economy by nominal GDP and the third largest by purchasing power parity (Silver, 2020), but has a Below Poverty Level (BPL) population of 21.9 percent on the basis of the World Bank 'poverty gap index' of $1.90 per day measured at 2011 purchasing power parity (PPP) prices (The Global Statistics, 2021) and a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.645 (2020), which gave it a global ranking of 131 out of 189 countries in 2021, which actually meant a drop of two ranks in two years, even though the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) noted that 27.1 crore Indians had been lifted out of poverty between 2005-06 and 2015-16. In this context, 'development' is also a political term because development is a

process bringing about change in socio-economic growth and status, and therefore raises the question of who has the power to bring about this change, and the implication is what agenda does that agency for change have?

I

It must also be stated at the beginning that the contemporary concept of 'development' is a western one, there being no Sanskrit equivalent for the meaning that we understand today. In the context of India, the English-Sanskrit dictionary, throws up words like 'pusti' meaning 'completeness', 'prapancana' meaning 'consciousness' etc, which connote spiritual development more than anything, with only 'vikasa' and 'vriddhi' connoting any closeness to growth that can be interpreted in the modern sense. In fact, rather than economic progress or human development, 'development' was seen more in terms of spiritual growth and enhancement in ancient and medieval times, with the most respect paid not to the richest person, but to one who had attained spiritual enlightenment, even though India had made such economic progress that it was its wealth that drew in invaders right through its history including the western nations. With colonialism, western concepts became universal and in the post-colonial phase, 'development' was viewed in the western sense as progress began to be measured in terms of GDP and per capita income. In fact, colonialism had changed the world: it had not only brought the world closer together, it had also enriched the western nations partly at the expense of the colonies – causing economic development in the west, while making the colonies economically dependent on the metropolises through channelling trade from the periphery to the centres, what has been termed as the "development of underdevelopment" (Frank, 1966). It is in this context that new theories of development, all initially originating in the west, were shaped. However, no theory in the social sciences is static since society itself is dynamic. Therefore, theories of modernization gave way to dependency theories, which in turn, were rejected in favour of theories of interdependence and globalization, which again were countered by grassroots development theories; and these were all interspersed

with doctrines of sustainable development, human development, gender and development etc. At this stage, many of the ideas were coming from non-western sources and the models on which these views were set were not only Latin American countries, but African countries, South Korea, China and India.

Modernization theories studied the process of social evolution and the development of societies. Its origin can be traced to Social Darwinism through Max Weber (Weber, 1987) regarding the role of rationality and irrationality in the transition from traditional to modern society, and later Talcott Parsons (Parsons, 1964) who carried this further. With de-colonization and the growth of democracy, modernization got linked with democracy and authors like Seymour Lipset, Larry Diamond and Juan Linz argued that economic growth is very important for democracy; that socioeconomic development helps social change that facilitates growth of democracy and other changes, like the development of a middle class, which is conducive to democracy. This argument was carried further by Walter Rostow in *Politics and the Stages of Growth* (Rostow, 1960), which spoke of five main stages of economic growth, and others like AFK Organski (Organski, 1965) and David Apter. (Apter, 1965). However, all these authors based their arguments on European history and expected the Third World to follow western growth patterns. In fact, the United States modelled its economic and food aid programmes to the Third World on theories like Rostow's expecting outcomes similar to that of Europe if sufficient developmental aid was pumped in.

This, of course, did not happen, and modernization theories were critiqued by scholars like Andre Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein (Wallerstein, 1974) who argued that the underdevelopment of Third World nations derived from systematic exploitation of raw materials of the periphery by the centre, or the metropolis, something that began during colonial times when trade was structured to benefit the Western colonizers, and this structure continued into postcolonial times through neo-colonialism. Dependency models focused on Latin America but could be applied to all underdeveloped countries because they were all weaker

members in a world market economy. However, their prescriptions of import substitution industrialization, planning and state intervention and regional integration, also proved slow, often insufficient and inefficient, and sometimes not possible because of the small size of markets.

Dependency theories in turn, gave way to interdependence theories, that is, incorporating the complex relation between central and peripheral development and stressing global interdependence through global markets and trade. But the immediate prescription of massive financial transfers to the developing world in the 1970s and 1980s from Western commercial banks and international lending institutions resulted in a world debt crisis that has actually yet to be fully resolved. Two responses have to be noted here: one is the neo-liberal one which advocated restricting the role of the state and state planning in development and relying more on the market for optimal resource allocation. The second is more diffuse, recognizing the realities of power in which development has often degenerated into a rhetoric of admirable goals like providing basic human needs and services while operational goals focus on debt servicing, crisis management and also, defence of privilege.

In the 1970s, a new concept associated with development emerged, claiming that the rates of economic growth of the world economy could not be sustained at the then prevailing levels because arable land, water, and most other natural resources were being depleted at fast rates that could not be sustained for long. This led to the Brundtland Report in 1987 (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), which made "sustainable development" a key model in development studies as well as in the work of the World Bank and other organizations engaged in development. The report warned against the depletion of natural resources and called for economic growth strategies that could be sustained without harming the environment or compromising the welfare of future generations. Subsequently, it was acknowledged that development is both a quantitative increase in economic production and a qualitative improvement in life

conditions, while protecting the environment. At the same time, renowned economist Joseph Stiglitz argued that development is about transforming the lives of people, not just their economies, and, therefore, development involves every aspect of society; it engages the efforts of everyone: markets, governments, NGOs, cooperatives, and not-for-profit institutions (Stiglitz, 1998). Thus, true development can only be achieved when society acquires the capacity to utilize its human and natural resources efficiently to improve the quality of life for all citizens. Due to its comprehensive nature, development seeks to improve life conditions by helping to free people and their creative energies from all constrictions. In the modern sense, development also seeks to enable people to pursue personal goals within legitimate frameworks that guarantee fairness, equality of opportunity, freedom, and social justice. Development, therefore, is both a vision to create new, much-improved conditions of life and a programme to transform economic, political, and socio-cultural conditions to correspond to that vision (Rabie, 2016).

II

Given this theoretical background, let us next examine what kind of development trajectory India has had. Following a period of colonial economic and political exploitation which obviously had its social repercussions in fortifying religious, caste and even gender lines despite many liberal reforms that transformed society, post-independence India's economic policy was shaped by left-leaning liberals influenced by the Soviet model. India was principally an agricultural country which had been made into a producer of primary resources for the British market, and had stagnated for over a hundred years in this mode. Economics was at the root of thinking on India's development of our early leaders, who had a daunting task of lifting literally millions out of poverty on the one hand, and making India economically sufficient on the other. At the same time, a political stance was taken on caste, expanding reservations already instituted by the British, to encompass education and employment in the state sector hoping that this would lead to what we today call 'human development'. Such affirmative action was not taken for

women or religious minorities at the time. The Soviet model implied a planned economy with the centre guiding development. The Nehru-Mahalanobis approach, the basis of the Second Five Year Plan, stressed import substitution industrialization with a focus on the development of basic and heavy industries as a means of accelerating growth. In a way, this followed the pattern laid out by modernization theory, which emphasized western style industrialization-driven growth. Critics of this approach have noted, among other things, that the 'misbalanced' weightage on the industrial sector over agriculture led to an increase in food grain prices, which in turn, increased poverty and malnutrition. Land reforms, which were subsequently proposed to correct certain imbalances but were inadequately implemented in most states, were never directed to correct imbalances of caste, gender or religion, and as such, did not address inequalities based on exclusion. Later, following the theories of dependence, the 1970s saw measures to help Indian industry such as nationalization of industries and financial institutions, and massive increases in the tariffs of imported industrial products. This meant a continuation and strengthening of the state sector without correcting inefficiencies within this sector. Perhaps these were necessary steps in India's growth story, because when India did begin its process of liberalization and limited market capitalism, there was a degree of economic growth within the country that helped it to cope with the demands of the global market. State planning meant not just planning for industrial and agricultural growth (which had been done through the green revolution, again promoted by the state sector), but also resource allocation for human development like the education, health, insurance and other sectors. Given India's large BPL population, low employment opportunities and centuries of keeping certain sections socially backward, the importance of the state sector cannot be understated in providing basic needs, because market capitalism would have proved disastrous to the huge majority with extremely low per capita incomes, had it been introduced in the immediate post-independence period. Basic services like education and medical services would have been beyond their reach. Further, it must be remembered that the private sector was never stifled in India despite the heavy

emphasis on central planning and aid; resultantly, when liberalization began in the 1990s, there was enough private capital in the country to fuel market capitalism, which, in turn, attracted foreign capital, leading to phenomenal growth rates for several years. Liberalization follows the global interdependence theory, which implies that India fits into the scheme of global theoretical trajectories as they go.

But does it? It may be noted here that every country is unique and has its own peculiarities with disparities in 'development' within the state, apart from the fact that the same prescriptions may produce different outcomes depending on predictable and unpredictable variables; further, it has already been stated that theories are not static and every theory has various models. The Indian model is intricate because of its historical complexities of inclusion and exclusion, and the fact that this complexity was compounded further by whoever was in power at different points of history, since each followed policies that included some and excluded others in their 'development' projects. Further, western theories suggest a link between industrial growth and development in general. India, on the other hand, has witnessed economic growth based on the expansion of the services sector. It has been argued that the pattern of Indian development has been a specific one and that the country may be able to skip the intermediate industrialisation-led phase in the transformation of its economic structure (Kochhar et al, 2006). However, this kind of growth does not generate jobs and there have been serious concerns about the jobless nature of India's economic development which would certainly exclude some sections from the benefits of growth (Novotny, Ramachandran, 2010). Moreover, the rate of growth has varied between and within states and one can safely state that there is no single, national Indian economy. There are sharp regional variations in terms of poverty, availability of infrastructure and socio-economic development indices, that is, literacy rates, life expectancy, income, and living conditions. Also, there are intra-state variations based on, for instance, literacy, gender, urban and rural divides, and also among various social groups, especially, religious, which is also related to gender. All these obviously, have an impact on our overall human development index. While on the surface

there may seem to be clear winners and losers in India's ongoing development trajectory, the country's recent performance and consequently, future prospects, are much more nuanced. Many high-performing states still lack investment in infrastructure and education, while some low-income states have seen robust growth in recent years because of more appropriate local government policies. In fact, each of the country's 28 states and 8 territories essentially has its own economy, its own regulations, and its own attitudes toward economic reform. As a result, there is a high degree of variation in economic and business conditions across the subcontinent and correspondingly, social indicators of development also vary.

Perhaps this can explain why our Human Development Index (HDI) does not correspond to that of our previously soaring GDP growth rates, and also the regional variations in HDI. According to 2019 UNDP figures, Kerala with an index of 0.782 has the highest HDI, while Bihar with 0.574 has the lowest. None of the states are however, comparable to any developed western state. At the same time, if we look at the degree of improvement in the last 20 years or so, there is remarkable change for the better. Kerala's HDI in 1990 was 0.544, and if we look at the 2018 figure of 0.790, there has been a rise of 0.246 in the index. Bihar was 0.378 in 1990; the 2018 figure of 0.576 marks a rise of 0.198 indices. The national average HDI for India was 0.467 as late as 2008; in 2018 it was 0.647, which implies a 50 percent growth in 10 years, and now India is above the average for the medium human development group of countries, ranking 131st out of 189 countries and its HDI is marginally above the average for other South Asian countries (0.641; Sri Lanka, however, is ranked far above India with a HDI of 0.782). This is because in the last three decades, life expectancy at birth in India increased by 11.6 years, whereas the average number of schooling years increased by 3.5 years (Global Data Lab). Per capita incomes increased from US$ 1,670 in 2016 to (an expected) US$ 1800 in 2019-2020; but it may be noted simultaneously that the per capita income of Goa is far higher than the national average, while that of Bihar is far below, signifying major inter-state differences in industrial and human development (*Statistics Times*, 2021).

While some of the statistics may be heartening especially when compared to earlier figures, there is another part to this story. Despite lifting 271 million people out of poverty between 2005 and 2015, a recent report on Global Social Mobility at the 2020 World Economic Forum (WEF) ranked India 76th out of 82 countries in social mobility with a score of 42.7, noting its low life expectancy, low educational quality and equity (scoring 31.3), second highest level (behind Saudi Arabia) of workers in vulnerable employment (76.2 percent), low female labour participation (29.8 percent of male labour participation), low social protection (2.68 percent of GDP), to name a few (World Economic Forum, 2020). Moreover, according to the latest WEF report on gender, India dropped 28 ranks in the gender gap index following the Covid pandemic to rank 140th out of 156 countries having dropped in performance, especially in labour participation and access to finance, educational attainment, health and survival and even political empowerment of females (World Economic Forum, 2021). The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) *Human Development Report 2019* stated that as the number of people coming out of poverty is increasing, the world is veering towards another type of poverty. The old inequalities were based on access to health services and education whereas the next generation of poverty is based on technology, education and climate change. India has both types of poverty. Even as Indians continue to face a lack of access to healthcare and education, many others are becoming poor based on the new criteria. According to the UNDP administrator, Achim Steiner, "What we are seeing today is the crest of a wave of inequality. What happens next comes down to choice...politicians and policymakers have a battery of choices that, if correctly combined for the context of each country or group, will translate into a lifelong investment in equality and sustainability." (UNDP, 2019). This statement further emphasizes the point made earlier that the issue of development is also political. The kind of choices our leaders have made have led to unprecedented growth in GDP, which of course, has translated into higher incomes, better educational levels and state-of-the-art health care at the urban level even for those who are not affluent. But at the same time, has it

lessened unemployment? Has development had a trickle-down effect? Have policies been pro-rich, and inversely, anti-poor? How have they affected the middle-income group? Have they increased rural-urban divides? Have they truly addressed gender issues? And in the context of the ongoing pandemic: have they increased social inequalities?

III

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize equality of opportunity and reducing inequality of outcomes, the elimination of discrimination in law, policy and social practice, and socio-economic inclusion of all under the banner goal 'to leave nobody behind' (United Nations, 2015). ''All" here means, ''irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status". However, there is no mention of caste, the UN terminology for inherited status being "work and descent". While prohibited by international human rights law, caste or 'work and descent' based exclusion is excluded from the international agendas of negotiations such as SDGs. Yet, some international human rights groups claim that caste or 'work and descent' is a fundamental determinant of exclusion and development.

On the issue of gender, there is a lot of literature on gender and development ever since the publication of the Danish development analyst, Ester Boserup's book, *Women's Role in Economic Development,* in the 1970s, where she focused on integrating women's needs into development agendas. But gender inequalities in development continue to persist because most countries do not focus on the particular needs of women. There are two types of needs: practical and strategic. Practical needs include improving women's health and services for their families, increasing their income and reducing their workload. Strategic needs, on the other hand, include improving their educational opportunities, gaining equal opportunity for employment and ownership, and increasing their participation in decision making (Moser, 1993). The concept of 'empowerment' was another approach focusing on removing social and institutional barriers to reach structural change in gender

relations as well as economic growth. These approaches, especially empowerment, with its emphasis on structural change, illustrate that gender has a very important role to play in the initiation and promotion of sustainable development, especially in rural areas. At the national and international levels, attempts have been made to empower women and integrate their needs into development agendas through international conventions, national law and allocation of resources. But on the ground, gender disparities continue in the workplace, in access to educational opportunities, property ownership, decision making, and representation, to name a few. In India, the increase in the gender gap reported at the WEF report of 2021, brings out the stark realities of women's development or the lack thereof, at the ground level, belying the goal of leaving 'nobody' behind. Women often land up doing reproductive as well as productive work, but are denied entitlements like a right to the land that they till while their men folk move to cities and do much easier but better paying work like being lift-mans or security guards in housing complexes. They also have no decision on the end product of their labour, whether it will be marketed or consumed at home, or if marketed, how will the money be divided or spent. While poor children, especially in the rural sector, suffered a setback in education due to school closures during the pandemic, it was the male children in poor households who benefited from online education because it was they who had access to smart phones if the family could afford one or the government paid for one. Girl children were denied priority. As a result, the gender gap in education has increased among both the rural and urban poor.

In India, there is a lot of inter-linkage between caste, gender and religion. All three are identities in the political sense when it comes to the politics of development, and there is certainly politics involved here because whoever sets the agenda has the power to frame policies that will impact development, perhaps excluding some. Caste, in a way, is central to the debate on development because it is a residue of religious and social practices and its reflection can be found in other religions like Christianity and Islam in India to which many lower and upper caste Hindus converted and carried the vestiges of caste prejudices with them,

which now some wish to politicize by demanding OBC status for groups within these religions (which are supposed to be casteless) for the political benefits that go with reservation. Gender is also central to religion and caste because of women's secondary status in all religions and castes. The Indian Constitution outlawed 'untouchability' and gave reservations in public sector employment and government funded educational institutions to the Scheduled Castes (SC). But although educational and employment levels increased, did it really help in human development? Many of the manual scavenger jobs in the public sector, for instance, the railways, which have toilets and train tracks, have gone go to SCs. While permanent scavenger type jobs help them get better salaries, do they improve their status? Moreover, the economic reforms in the country, which were introduced in the 1990s, have significantly shrunk the breadth and scope of public sector employment, while government educational institutes have expanded reservations to almost 50 percent in some states. So, educational attainment has increased for SCs and other 'backward' groups, but the scope for employment commensurate with that education may be shrinking.

In this context, it is pertinent to mention the capabilities approach theory of Indian economist Amartya Sen, who based it on his experience of India's development; he challenged the concept of measuring development by economic growth. While acknowledging that radical redistributive policies are needed for the poor to benefit from growth, he saw human development as the expansion of citizens' capabilities (Sen, 1987). In India, attempts have been made to increase school enrolment and keeping the child in school by measures like providing free books, mid-day meals, scholarships, the idea being that better schooling will increase capabilities and therefore life choices. However, the intricacies of caste and religion have led to outcomes that are less than the expected goal. Various studies have shown that while literacy rates have increased all around, firstly, they do not compare to growth in countries like Sri Lanka, Thailand or Indonesia; and secondly, enrolments are influenced by community norms like religion and caste, and within these, gender, with enrolment rates for Dalit and Muslim girls being much lower

than the general Hindu group. There is variance again on the degree of community effect based on the educational level of the parents, as well as between urban and rural areas. This would imply that Dalits and Muslim children in villages have less of a chance of benefiting from state policies on development than those in the city because of something called the 'community effect', and women of these groups are the worst sufferers. In a way, those who should benefit from government policies are the ones who are deprived, partly because of the prevalence of caste and religious prejudices within castes and communities. And the other part? How efficient has the government been in pursuing its developmental policies that refer to the underdeveloped in this emerging country? What percentage of our resources is actually allocated to elementary and secondary education at the village level for the uplift of the underprivileged? Is 'Sabke Saath, Sabka Vikas' a reality or a mere election slogan? Further, there are quite a few political parties in India now which are ostensibly SC or backward class based, and they have held power in certain states for several years. What has been the track record of such political parties with regard to grassroots development issues, especially those concerning lower and backward castes and classes, and particularly women of these groups, in the states where they have been voted to power?

Under the Right to Education Act, 2009, the government is mandated to provide elementary education to all children between six and 14 years of age; but the Economic Survey of 2019-2020 noted that the expenditure on education by the Centre and the states between 2014-15 and 2018-19 as a proportion of the GDP was around three percent only (Ministry of Finance, 2020). India's expenditure in the health sector is even worse. Despite the pressures of the pandemic, India spent only 1.8 percent of its GDP on health in 2020-21; it had varied from 1 to 1.5 percent in previous years, which is among the lowest that any government spends on health. As a result, there are huge infrastructure inadequacies as well as major inter-state and inter-regional variations in the availability of both education and healthcare in India. And these are the basic building-blocks of human development in any country.

IV

In conclusion, it may be said that India's growth story is unique in that while the GDP has grown exponentially in the last 20 years, human development indices have stagnated and in some cases like the gender gap, regressed. According to Nobel prize-winning economists Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, "One very real danger is that in trying to hold on to fast growth, countries facing sharply slowing growth will veer toward policies that hurt the poor now in the name of future growth. In a bid to preserve growth, many countries have interpreted the prescription to be business friendly as a license to enact all kinds of anti-poor, pro-rich policies, such as tax cuts for the rich and bailouts for corporations" (Banerjee & Duflo, 2020). They further added, "The explosion of inequality in economies that are no longer growing is bad news for future growth. The political backlash leads to the election of populist leaders touting miracle solutions that rarely work". These observations are very pertinent to India from which Banerjee hails. What the two also note is that GDP is a means to an end and not the end itself, which is improving the quality of life, especially for those who are the worst off. And quality of life does not mean just consumption; it means a feeling of worth and respect, health, education, having their voices heard and following dreams. The prescription? According to Banerjee and Duflo, "In the absence of a magic potion for development, the best way to profoundly transform millions of lives is not to try in vain to boost growth. It is to focus squarely on the thing that growth is supposed to improve: the well-being of the poor".

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) brought out a report in 2021 (UNCTAD, 2021), which noted that India "suffered a contraction" of 7 percent in 2020, but is expected to grow 7.2 percent in 2021; the projected economic growth for 2022 is 6.7 percent. It further stated that "The recovery in India is constrained by the ongoing human and economic cost of COVID-19 and the negative impact of food price inflation on private consumption". A slower economic growth, high inflationary prices of food and fuel, can hamper

human development, and without 'sabka vikas', India can only remain a developing country when measured by the modern accepted criteria of 'development'.

As mentioned at the beginning, 'development' is also a political term because the agenda for development is set by whoever is in power. In a democracy, 'sabke saath, sabka vikas' or 'together with all, development for all' is a worthwhile slogan; it should include people from all religious groups, the underprivileged among the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) and women – they should have a voice along with the privileged and be empowered to follow their dreams. Policies should be framed in consultation with groups who are expected to benefit from these policies since it is they who best know their needs; they should also be widely discussed before they are adopted and implemented to see whether they help actually designated groups and are not detrimental to other groups. It is only then, perhaps, that India's growth trajectory could encompass all, leaving 'nobody' behind.

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