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## **THE CRISES IN DEVELOPMENT**

One of the dominant themes of our times is development. Particularly important is development with reference to the less developed countries. 'Development' began assuming the complexion of an ideology in itself consequent upon the first massive wave of 'decolonisation' which ensued after the end of world war II. The reasons for the seemingly sudden and new-found elevation of development to the status of a fundamentalist ethic were not wholly rooted in altruism. It is not that the rich and affluent countries were subjected to pangs of remorse about their centuries-old exploitation of the poor south and were seized by a penitent desire to make amends. In the main, global inequality was perceived as a threat to peace—a threat which would wreak havoc on such gains as the war had conferred on the 'civilised' west. Lest this interpretation be seen as being too cynical, I should like to enter two caveats.

The first is that the study of development was always an integral part of the concern of social sciences, economics in particular. Secondly, the focus on poverty in the south emanated also from enlightened liberal thinkers. It should be remembered that one of the prime promoters of the Bretton-Woods twins, the IMF and the World Bank (forgetting, of course, their present impact), John Maynard Keynes, could hardly be accused of total callousness towards poverty. Yet the two caveats which I have entered themselves require to be qualified by an overarching rider.

It is probably undeniable that the compulsions of the World War were more weighty than those of genuine empathy with the poor of the world. Even at the academic and scholastic level, conventional theorising restricted itself to an inquiry into how nations became rich rather than why they remained poor. To cut the long story short, studies on development of the pre-1940's vintage did not focus specifically on what we consider today as the core of the discipline, namely, the poverty of the poor countries.

The litany does not end with the beginning of light falling on the dark, unfathomable depths of poverty which is the lot of an astonishing number in the world. More is to come. The early years of development theory were full of enthusiasm. All that the newly independent countries had to do was to improve their economic performance. If only they could save a larger proportion of their national incomes and thus succeed in accelerating their rates of economic growth they would be on the way to a resolution of the problems which had bedevilled them for decades. It did not take long for this euphoria to yield place to a quite shocking reality. Many less developed countries which registered fairly impressive rates of growth also showed the persistence of poverty, unemployment and inequalities. It is this reality which compelled a second look at the relationship between growth and development. This is why today we make a clear distinction between growth, which is quantifiable and measured through increases in the national income, and development, which focuses on the quality of life. Thus we have been forced to posit a disjunction between increasing material affluence at the aggregate level and an improvement in the quality of life for the poor. It is for this reason that over time our criteria for assessing development have become more qualitative and now encompass ingredients centring on human development. The evolution of development thought can be described as the successive incorporation of the human element.

The present perception of development is one which centres on certain key notions such as *access*. Development is regarded, normatively speaking, as a process which widens access for all human beings to those components which are essential for civilised living. It is perceived as an attempt to enlarge the area of choice. It hardly requires to be stated that our view of what constitutes a good life and of those ingredients which contribute to its fruition cannot remain static. Nothing illustrates this self-evident truth better than the attitude of most societies to two of the principal concerns of this conference, namely, gender and environment. It is difficult for us perhaps to imagine that there was a time when development studies hardly concerned itself with these two issues which are now dominant themes. And that time was not long ago. That in the course of perhaps two decades gender and environmental concerns have come to influence the very orientation of development

studies is the result of two sets of factors. Fundamentally it is less the result of scholarly work than that of the voiceless finding a voice. Women who have remained invisible and silent are now becoming visible and audible. Their disquiet at the lot to which they have been subjected has led to an open articulation of discontent.

This scenario is true of the environmental dimension, but with differences. Concern for protecting the environment has gained strength, because it is the affected people who have taken up cudgels. Without their vocal and direct participation, the cause could not have been expressed so stridently. This has gained from the intellectual efforts of those who strive hard to communicate to people at large the fragility of our planet and have cautioned against self-destructive greed.

It is necessary to remember that even in its days of infancy development theory had shown awareness of the importance of enlarging the compass of human choice. An outstanding theorist of the early years, Sir Arthur Lewis, stated bluntly that the benefit of economic growth is not that it increases happiness (there is no evidence in favour of this) but that it increases the area of *choice*. It increases freedom for human beings by investing them with greater control over their environment. Even more prescient was his remark about growth and its impact on women. He said: "It is open to men to debate the desirability of economic growth is to debate whether women should have the chance to cease to be beasts of burden, and to join the human race" (*The Theory of Economic Growth*). And this was forty years ago. Lewis, like several other theorists, believed that the process of growth was by nature selective in the sense that its impact across space and sectors could not be uniform. That is the nub of our problem today.

We have undoubtedly progressed from the comparative naivete of early perceptions of development. Our present focus on the growth of human beings and realization of their potential rather than making them objects of growth is laudable. Yet problems remain. One of them relates to the complex nexus between rising material affluence and improving the quality of life for all. Much as one may criticize an excessive pre-occupation with material affluence, it has to be admitted that up to a point it has a role to play. Rising output

provides a basis upon which one can construct the intricate mosaic of development. But there is no guarantee that it will. The translation of the benefits of material prosperity into a more fulfilling life for each and everyone requires a change of focus and a change of attitude. Further, obsession with material prosperity is sure to result in a value system which has little consideration for the weak and the dispossessed. Imagine the terrifying consequence of a poor and populous country like India pursuing the consumerism culture. The poor and the voiceless will remain where they are, while the data will tell us that the country has 'progressed'.

A clear illustration of growth not leading to development is provided by the analysis of the human development in different countries made by the UNDP. The methodology is subject to criticism no doubt, but the data are revealing. They reveal a large number of countries which have high incomes but rank low in the human development index. (The principal components used in the HDI are life expectancy, literacy and mean years of schooling, and income level). We witness the sad phenomenon of 'children without childhood', of an alarming number lacking access to safe drinking water, of women being wholly marginalised. Accompanying this are wasteful consumption, toxic waste being exported to the poor south, continuing environmental deterioration and ever widening inequalities both intra- and inter-country. Many less developed countries spend enormous amounts of money on arms and are encouraged by richer ones who thrive on this trade. Strangely, even decline in military expenditure has not resulted in larger allocations for the social sectors.

These disturbing trends raise important questions which go to the very core of development. The most basic question is where we have gone wrong. Is it that our development strategies have not concerned themselves adequately with what ought to be the principal thrust, namely, the poor? Has our obsession with rising output marginalised the real problem? Answers to these and many other related questions are not easy to come by. Any fundamentalist answer will lead only to further problems. One may cite as an example the environment. If concern for environmental preservation boils over into an extremist position, it may result in insufficient appreciation of the need for economic growth. Further, exclusive

focus on the big issues (what UNDP calls 'loud emergencies') such as global warming and ozone depletion may detract attention from the 'silent emergencies' which are poverty-related, such as water pollution and land degradation. Another thorny issue is the moral entitlement of the North to preach the virtues of conservation of resources to the poor South, having been principally responsible for the problem. The problem is further aggravated by the emerging international order in which few countries can insulate themselves against exogenous influences of various kinds.

It is right that we should begin turning our attention to the values which underpin our conception of development. It is equally necessary that we understand how closely the survival of all is bound with survival of the poor. Yet translating these in to reality is no easy task. What strategy can one prescribe so that human avarice is checked and the virtues of charity and brotherhood are affirmed? Religion can play a part here, but there are so many issues where the position of the religion is contestable. Population is one such. I refrain from adverting to the better known and cruder manifestations of fundamentalism wherein religion is used to divide rather than to forge humane bonds. Yet all religions have something to offer. Christian charity, Islamic brotherhood, Hindu respect for all living beings, are not irrelevant for a resolution of our crises. The twin difficulties are the extent to which religion is responsive to the crises which bedevil us, and, secondly, how its practice remains quintessentially true to the principles upon which all religions are founded.

The religious dimension apart, we need to examine today in an introspective spirit the basis of our understanding of development. We can no longer rest comfortably on piecemeal tinkering. Our perspective has to alter.