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View Point

People and development: With special reference to the tribal peoples of north-east India

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Abstract

Northeast India is comprised of seven states peopled by tribes and communities majority of which are culturally and ethnically different from the rest of India. After India's independence from the British in 1947, the Government- both at the state and central level has been implementing several development programmes in the region on poverty alleviation, employment, infrastructure, education, agriculture etc apparently to positively transform peoples' lives in the region. However, inspite of these initiatives, several decades of intensive development programmes and strategies has somehow seen more failures than success. While development should have brought a positive change in peoples' lives, it has instead become more and more conflict sensitive resulting in intense and often fatal socio-economic, socio-political and socio-environmental disasters between and among communities in Northeast India. Why is this happening, how did it happen and how can this problem be solved are the questions being asked. The main aim of this paper is therefore to briefly try and see the essence and ethics underlying development along with the need for it as perceived by many, its impact on the societal cohesion of the people of Northeast India and the urgent need for a shift in the current development paradigm.

Keywords: Development, Conflict, Alienation, Displacement, Culture, Paradigm

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There are various definitions and approaches to development—modernist, Marxian, positivist, western or third world. One of the most popular definitions of development has been given by Lucy Mair as “a term that refers to a process and in the contemporary context, the process of a movement towards a condition that some of the world’s advanced nations are supposed to have attained” (Lucy Mair, 1984:1)ⁱ. According to the UNESCO’s Position Paper for the World Summit on Social Development, development is first and foremost social. It says that Social dimension is to be the starting point of development and should determine to a large extent the priorities of development policies.

Development is actually a concept that lacks a universally accepted definition, but it is most used in a holistic and multi-disciplinary context of human development - the development of livelihoods and greater quality of life for humans. It therefore encompasses governance, healthcare, education, gender equality, disaster preparedness, infrastructure, economics, human rights, environment and issues associated with these.

One of the core idea of development as given by Nussbaum (2000)ⁱⁱ, is that of the human being as a dignified free being who shapes his or her own life in cooperation and reciprocity with others, rather than being passively shaped or pushed around by the world in the manner of a “flock” or “herd” animal. A life that is really human is one that is shaped throughout by these human powers of practical reason and sociability. While these philosophical concepts may indeed contribute in some abstract way to better understanding of what “humane” implies, development thinkers and others especially civil societies engaging themselves in development issues needs to have a more practical, realistic vision in sight, one based on what the poor themselves have to say. Here, it is necessary to offer two suggestions regarding how anthropologists can deal with this. One way is through a reappraisal of the potential role of praxis in guiding how developmentalists should conduct themselves. A second way is to think of the types of development activities that could provide the foundations for the flourishing of some of these capabilities.

In India, development is defined and conceptualized as progress in socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-political, educational, scientific and technology brought about by planned or programmed efforts to bring about an era of orderly and peaceful transformation of a society in a constitutionally or nationally desired direction. In spite of several theories on development, most concepts of development are primarily economic and have to be within the conceptual framework of the Modern State. In anthropology, development has been popularly understood as an improvement/progress in the way of life of the people- both empirical and non-empirical leading to a better life; better chances of survival for an individual as a member of a society and also for the survival of the very society with all its customs and traditions, beliefs and any other elements that forms the culture of that society’. Going by this definition, development in the true sense is not only the empirical economic or political level but also development on the cognitive level where development takes place in the way of life of a people or group through evolution of their perceptions and thoughts. The main aim of this paper is therefore to briefly try and see the essence and ethics underlying development along with the *need* for it as perceived by many.

While development initiatives for the tribals in North-East India have seen some successes in some quarters, the general scenario is one of disillusionment and wanton chaos, especially when one takes into

consideration other tribal areas outside North-East. For instance, due to the introduction of development schemes like dams, mines, industries, etc, on tribal inhabited areas, vast segment of India's tribal population have been displaced¹ from their natural habitats apart from being subjected to numerous forms of exploitation and deprivations. More are likely to be displaced in the near future. Take for instance, the recently started Tipaimukh Dam project on the confluence of the Barak and the Tuivai River in Tipaimukh sub-division of Manipur. The catchment's area and the submerged area will touch a vast hill area of three states viz., Manipur, Mizoram and Assam which is the native home of three major tribes - the Zeliangrong Nagas, Hmars, Kukis and Paites of which the Hmars will be most affected. Several villages in Tipaimukh area will either be completely submerged or directly affected along with hundreds of hectares of Jhum lands, not mentioning the non-Jhum forest areas. The impact on the environment needs not be mentioned as it is obvious enough with a little imagination. It will suffice to say that the area is home to many exotic plants, herbs and endangered wildlife. Needless to say, all in the name of development, this dam will result in large scale displacement and eventual alienation of thousands of tribals already in danger of losing their very identity².

While land alienation and displacement have been an integral part of tribal history, rehabilitating them does not seem to be a part of the agenda. This is the same bleak scenario that the tribes of Manipur, especially those in Tipaimukh face in the near future. Even without the added problem of being likely to be displaced from their ancestral home, the tribes in Tipaimukh and other hill areas already face serious problems in matters of land alienation and decreasing forest, Jhum and village areas, deteriorating socio-cultural life, backsliding and stagnant economy, etc due to the inroad of development and other outside elements that invariably follows in its wake (John: 2006)ⁱⁱⁱ.

The continuing process of land alienation, eviction, marginalization and exploitation of the indigenous people is the so-called 'development'. Furthermore, as direct or indirect results of these development initiatives, for the last five to six decades, there has been a stream of tribal uprisings and movements highlighting the demand of tribal self-rule with different dimensions and magnitude. On one extreme, there is the articulation of the demand for sovereign state and, on the other, for greater power to tribes over their lands, forest and other resources at the level of village or locality. In between, there has been a demand for greater powers in the form of separate state or autonomous regional/ district council within the existing sovereign state or. They all stem from the idea of self-rule, the genesis of which invariably lay in the structure of relationship of domination-subjugation. This has been so as many tribes have the feeling that they are situated in a state of domination either by non-tribal domination or by a state considered as alien and an intruder. The domination according to them has been economic, political, social and cultural. Accordingly,

¹ Displacement is a territorial concept. The Modern and Indigenous concept of territory and its qualification is often not considered carefully by the development experts on the one hand and implementation suffers from individualistic behaviour that is generally accepted by the target population. Hence, problems galore.

² Identity is a modern concept and used fashionably. What could be meant here is the target population's own concepts of territory and genealogy and the interface between them.

these people feel that development is nothing but a development of control and not of progress. Hence the idea of self-rule in the form of demand for autonomy is very strong among them. (Xaxa 2002: iii)^{iv} Many tribal termed this domination as nothing but a covert form of Internal Colonialization which is no different from the much hated Colonialization of India by the British thus resulting in all-out mobilization movement and even armed conflicts just as the Indians did against the British before independence (Vanlalilien 2005)^v.

The MNF, Bru and Hmar movements in Mizoram, Naga movement, Kuki movement, the Bodo movement in Assam, the Khasi and Garo movements in Meghalaya, etc are all standing examples to this end. Thus the question - "has development actually brought development to those in need of development?" invariably comes to mind. Moreover, one cannot help but ask the questions: What is development? Development for whom, by whom and at what price? The irony lies in the fact that development is commonly presented as the panacea for all the ills of the people but the last four to five decades of development era and the last one decade of privatization, liberalization and globalization have further put emphasis on the fact that development serves the needs of only those who are already developed at the expense of the undeveloped; at the expense of those people for whom development programmes were initiated in the first place.

For protecting the rural populations, especially tribals from various kinds of exploitation, liberalization, privatization and globalization are presented as the prescription. However, the ground reality of tribals and development clearly demonstrates that liberalization, privatization, globalization, linearization and marketization of Indian economy have instead led to marginalization of the poor. They are deprived of the fruits of economic development due to poor governance, poor delivery of public services and goods, violation of entitlements and human rights etc. The growing inequality between the rich and poor, urban and rural areas, land owners and landless, affluent and destitute etc. is causing serious concern for policy makers. Development scenario can be diagnosed further with several negative impacts rendering the much needed success an elusive dream. One of such negative impact of development initiatives, especially on the tribals like the Hmars of Tipaimukh is the increase or inducement of a severe and acute dependency syndrome³ among them. This syndrome came about mainly due to shortsightedly pumping in large amount of money in the name of development believing that money or economic is the answer to development in totality therefore sidelining everything like tribals' rights to their lands and forest, their valuable, intricate and archaic socio-economic-political setups. The end result of this action is the weakening of the survival and innovation capacities of these peoples rendering them incapable of looking after themselves unlike their forefathers who used their Traditional Knowledge Systems (TKS) to survive and prevail against all kinds of adversity.

Regarding the beliefs in financially induced development, anthropologists like Cernea^{vi} has pointed out that financially-induced development cannot succeed unless it recognizes the crucial determining role of local social organization and of the local population that has to support that development; that the people for whom development projects are being initiated are not like guinea pigs that are expendable but instead

³ Ignoring the indigenous concepts behind practices often disturb indigenous balance between autonomy and dependency.

ultimately becomes the decisive actors. People have to absorb the technology, to rise to it, to create a new capacity through adjusted social organization and Local Capacity Building.

For the last few decades of planned development, development, especially among the tribal population of North-East is a Pandora Box rather than being a panacea to their problem contrary to the colourful prospects as painted by many, bringing in its wake systematic, slow and sure destruction of the fragile life of many in favour of the ruling elite. The more money that comes in, the more money that can be corrupted by unscrupulous and corrupted officials and others to corrupt the already or easily corrupted socio-cultural life of the myriad tribal in North-east in particular and India in general. It also increases the level of dependency in them by alienating them from the very fabric of their socio-cultural way of life.

It is time to understand that development in India can never be a positive success until our leaders and so-called experts; so-called messiahs of *the people* realize the fact that all communities are not the same even though they share the same nomenclature. Many communities are as socio-culturally, socio-geographically and socio-economic-politically different from each other as a non-tribal from a tribal even though some common features (but not necessarily based on the feature or criteria for tribals as given by the Government of India), so as to be able to fall into the same group, could be found. However, in many cases, even these common features are not enough reasons to club two groups into one as that will be the same as trying to call a horse an antelope as both fall under the same nomenclature called mammals and also share many similarities but are very much distinct from each other. Therefore, the same programme that might have worked on one group might not work for the other as a horse-shoe that will work perfectly for a horse but will never work on an antelope even though both are herbivorous, four-footed mammals! Thus, all development programmes meant for a particular group or region should be structured or modified according to the socio-cultural, economic, political and geographic environmental set-up of each particular tribal community or communities concerned instead of clubbing together all the tribal and making them wear the same shoe without caring to see whether the shoe fits them or is ideal for them in their own distinct situation. One should therefore try to understand the mentality component of Culture and be conscious of what a community or region hold or regard as dearest to them and which they strongly feel should be preserved at all cost.

In our tumultuous world of today, I feel that understanding needs is the need of the hour in one's endeavour to understand and correct the paradoxes of development. One is inclined to agree with Burton when he remarked that needs are *basic* and *universal*, permanent in time and extensive in space; that cultural differences indicate *satisfiers*, not *needs*. Only interests can be negotiated, while needs will be pursued by all means possible. When needs are repressed there are two possibilities: boiling (violence) or freezing (apathy, withdrawal). He (Burton) remarked "*there are frustrations and concerns under the surface that are not negotiable and cannot be repressed, adjudicated by the courts or negotiated.*"

This is because "there are limits to the extent to which the human person, acting separately or within a wider ethnic or national community, can be socialized or manipulated....there are human development needs that must be satisfied and catered for by institutions..." (Burton, 1990: 13)^{vii}

As a concluding remark, there is a need to stress on a paradigm shift in development with participatory, human-centered, diversified and decentralized approach to human development which recognizes the various inner needs of varied communities or regions according to each situational context may help. Ignoring them may lead to more chaos and violence. Without a properly planned and oriented development initiative where every aspects of socio-political, socio-economic, socio-cultural and the natural environment across cultures and society are proportionately addressed, it will invariably lead to a hay-wired development scenario. Often, it is the lack of understanding on the socio-cultural and psycho-social components that development projects, planners and implementers alike have been in numerous cases, perpetrators or catalyst for further deterioration of societies and of individuals rather than bringing out positive results.

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ⁱ Mair, Lucy (1984). *Anthropology and Development*. London: Macmillan.

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^{iv} Xaxa, 2002.

^v Pulamte, Vanlallien (2005). In: Review Of The Political Transition Of The Hmars And Future Political Vision. *Hmar Arasi Golden Jubilee Souvenir*, 2005. Shillong: Hmar Students' Association

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