SOME SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON DEVELOPMENT IN THE EASTERN HIMALAYAS

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Development is a type of social change which is caused by the conscious efforts of humans to improve their material, social, cultural and spiritual life. Implicit in its philosophy is the belief that human happiness can be maximized by the greater and greater control of the material environment in the service of man. This is a concept based on the materialistic-mechanistic philosophy born of the west which has immensely progressed due to enormous development in the fields of science and technology. This philosophy is the natural outcome of the historical development of the western society, and it is well integrated into it. It is now being accepted by societies in the non-western world, where the material, social and spiritual are well integrated and the spiritual is a living part, in order to improve the conditions of their peoples. In these societies, the economic part of the society interacts with the non-economic part in mutually reinforcing one other. Thus to separate the economic part and to look at it from the western materialistic point of view creates more problems than it can solve.

Another important feature of the development concept is that it has a national framework. It is again a western contribution. No item of development, however laudable it may seem as regards the interests of a group for whom it is meant, can be approved and implemented if it goes contrary to the overall national interest. A third feature is that the development concept is defined, conceived and implemented by a central authority which determines the priorities as well as the areas and strategies of development, no matter how the people for whom the development programme is meant feel about their needs. All these have complicated the problems of development in the third world.

Major efforts in the programme of development have been in the direction of economic development which is to be assisted and supplemented by the introduction of such changes in the non-economic sectors of social organization as to bring them more in line with modernity. But societies are not inanimate things. They react and refuse to be interfered with indiscriminately. They have their own

natures, which have to be understood if we want any modification in their material and non-material parts. One instance of such continued resistance by traditional features is the circumvention of the Indian democratic process by caste, especially in the rural areas. Despite a total commitment to the abolition of caste, it is as pervasive as before in many areas, and, further, it has also crept into new areas of our life.

Both the ecological and social framework will determine how a particular item of development will be useful or accepted in a community. There are examples from cross cultural scenes to support this contention. To take an example from the tribal world, according to the late Professor Guha, the improvement in the house structure of the Andaman Islanders led to an increase of diseases among them. Likewise, Dr. Mazumdar points out that the introduction of the values of civilization into tribal societies has resulted in the cultural disorganization of the tribal peoples of India, leading to incidences of crime, gambling, prostitution diseases, and the disappearance of tribal institutions which shaped their personality. These instances can be multiplied without number to show that the changes introduced from the outside do not always produce the desired results; on the contrary, they lead to such unintended consequences that may create more misery for the community than they were intended to remove.

It is also fairly clear, on the basis of several studies, that a community is selective in the acceptance of an alien innovation or cultural trait. For example, the Newars of Nepal, who have a very high degree of material culture, who have excelled in technological skill, craftsmanship, and metalwork, and who are traditionally known also for their skill in agriculture, still by and large shun the use of the plough. They stick to their digging hoe, although the plough is an advanced technology in comparison to the hoe. Side by side, the Chhetri would be using the plough in adjacent fields. Since they are excellent craftsmen, it cannot be said that the Newars are ignorant of the plough. The reason is that, if the Newars take to the plough, they are excommunicated by their society. But the Newars have willingly accepted the hand tractors which have been introduced from Japan. This serves to show that if any cultural item is negatively defined in a community, it is not accepted however much it may benefit the community economically. Social structure exerts its own pressure on the acceptance of an innovation from the outside.

So with regard to the acceptance or nonacceptance of a cultural trait, it is necessary for a planner or his agents to know under what social circumstances particular kinds of alien culture or innovations will be accepted by the people for whom the development scheme is to be introduced, since the planned development scheme is another name for bringing about the contact between traditional culture and the scientific technological culture borrowed from the outside.

It is therefore necessary to understand the nature of culture. The sociological-anthropological approach regards culture as an integrated whole in which the parts do not consist of a simple aggregate. They are interrelated and interdependent, forming a functional system, and the change in one part is reacted upon by the other parts and vice versa. It is because of this integration into a system, that the existence and continuity of a society is sustained. Whenever the basic existence and continuity is threatened, the cultural system reacts and develops defense mechanisms. It is this view that can explain why an innovation — be it a value, norm, behavior pattern or a material item — is not accepted by a community, however rational and beneficial it might appear.

But to say that culture is an integrated whole is not to say that its various parts are in perfect harmony. There are many stresses and strains resulting in changes in some parts or in some elements. But the tendency is towards reaching harmony which, however, never happens in the perfect sense of the term. There are internal causes of such a change such as changes in the demographic features of the population, innovation within the community, imperfect copying across generations, as well as between individuals with regard to their social behavior pattern, natural calamities, and clashes of class and group based interests, as Firth has pointed out. These are auto-genetic changes. Given a relatively integrated community, the imbalances created in the functional system of culture are manageable, since the adaptive changes changes take place in the other parts of the system.

The other factor of change is external, arising from conquest or contact with an alien culture. Here the situation is different. The impact of the forces of change is quick, continuous and pervasive. This is likely to disturb the internal balance. The status and role of the individuals may become confused, leading to a disorganization of the society.

In view of the above, problems of development of the Himalayan region may be better understood if we look at them from such an angle. The communities and tribes that live over these areas are more or less independent cultural wholes with the exception of the Nepalis who have developed the caste system. These communities and tribes have been living somewhat in isolation from the mainstream of the Indian civilization on the one hand and from one another on the other, because of the difficult terrain and the absence of modern means of communication.

These communities and tribes are almost autonomous in their cultural life and are largely dependent on their natural environment for eking out their livelihood. With the exception of the Darjeeling hills, the density of population in the mid-eastern Himalaya is small.

Moving higher and higher from the south to the north, it becomes yet smaller. Thus the density of the population per square kilometer is 45 in Sikkim, 24 in Bhutan, 6 in Arunachal Pradesh, while it is 214 in the Darjeeling hills (Census 1971). Such small concentrations of population that are confined to certain areas can hardly be amenable to modern development and to the kind of distribution of skills needed for the supply of manpower.

Another important feature which should not escape our eyes is that from the ethnic point of view these people are divided into a number of linguistic and cultural groups of endogamous nature, and separated from one another not only by geographical isolation but also by the rigidity of cultural traditions as is reflected in their respective social organizations. Broadly speaking, they occupy different altitudinal zones ranging between the alpine zone on the north and the tropical foothills in the Tarai. The higher mountainous regions are occupied by the Tibetans and the Tibetan-like peoples who either practice dry farming or combine it with pastoralism and trade with Tibet. The peoples of the middle zone (i.e., who live in the lower hills and the mountainous valleys) belong to Hindu communities or semi-Hinduized groups of Mongoloid origin. They practice irrigated cultivation, trade and animal husbandry, while those who live in the tropical or subtropical regions also live on wet cultivation and domestic trade. A basic feature of the entire region has been that the majority of the people depend upon agricultural and forest products. Because of the comparative absence of roads, marketable produce is unable to find easy outlets. At the same time, the domestic market is very much limited because of the small populations and low purchasing powers of the local people.

The environment of the hills has imposed its constraints on the people to which the communities have adjusted. Thus each culture group along with its social organization has adapted itself to the environment which, when looked at from the point of view of the mainstream culture of Hinduism, is a life of hard misery and material and economic poverty. The predominance of spiritual and magical institutions, as in the case of the people of Sikkim, Bhutan and Arunachal, is an anathema to the scientific, technologically oriented planners of the country.

And here lies the rub. To the people, these beliefs and practices play an important role in their social, political and economic life. How to meet these spiritual bases of the society, while introducing modern technology and rationality without doing damage to their existence is a fundamental issue. The property system, clan system, lineage system and economic system are all intertwined and interdependent with the religious system. So to replace their traditional economic institutions with modern ones would mean undermining the very existence of these hill peoples.

The manner that development leads to the imbalance in the local society can be found in the case of Sikkim. The people of the Nepali ethnic groups, being hard working and skillful cultivators, were imported into Sikkim to develop agriculture and trade in that country. But the cost is also great. Because of high fertility among the Nepali people and their continued in-migration, the Bhutia Lepcha population is on the way to becoming extinct, and their culture has been supplanted by the Nepali one. The rapid rise of the Nepali population and Sanskritization of the Lepchas, who live intermixed with the Nepali people in the southern part of the country, has led to a change to Nepali marriage customs and language. The political and economic integration of Sikkim into the Indian republic has been entirely due to the Nepali ethnic groups as a majority community who voted for the merger of that country. Development creates such unintended consequences which have to be foreseen from the beginning.

In Bhutan also, the population dynamics of the Bhotiyas, the Nepali people, and the people of Indian origin may, in the long run, result in favour of the numerical superiority of the Nepali ethnic groups. Although sociological data with regard to Bhutan are meagre, it is guessed that Bhutan has a sizeable population of Nepali ethnic groups of perhaps 30 to 40 percent. They have settled in the southwestern part of the country.

As the Nepali people are said to be efficient laborers, and have the physiological capacity to quickly adapt themselves to different kinds of climatic and environmental conditions, they have a tendency to displace or assimilate the Tibeto-Burman tribes everywhere. Their marriage and family organizations provide them a lot of freedom to take wives from other communities besides of their own caste. Being patrilineal, the children born out of such mixed wedlocks are affiliated to the father's group. Besides, the fertility of the Nepali women has been found to be greater than that of the Tibeto-Burman or tribal communities, as shown by studies from other regions. From the point of view of traditional marriage ideology, the Nepali people have been polygynous whereas the Tibeto-Burman tribes have been polyandrous. This single factor had in the past helped the Nepali people to multiply their population to such an extent that today in the Himalayan region as a whole, from western Nepal to Sikkim, their population overwhelms those of other groups.

Bhutan, as a developing nation, must modernize itself, if it is not to be continued to be called a backward country. Its industrialization and modernization, besides serving its own prosperity, is a function of world pressure. There is a need for greater manpower to man the different sectors of the country's trade, economy and administration. Such a massive supply of skilled manpower is beyond the capacity of the Bhotiya population, especially because of the country's religio-social-political system. The identity of the Bhutanese culture and the

society is co-terminus with the existence of monastic institutions and their predominant importance in the overall society.

But the existence and continuity of the monastic institutions, and thereby of the Bhutanese culture, may not be compatible with the increased demand for skilled manpower to match the much needed pace of development. It must make a grim choice either to cut back the pace of development or to draw upon the people of Indian origin for supplies of skilled manpower with a view to not impede the regular nourishment of monks and nuns. In the long run, the inter-regional migration, which as a matter of ethnic policy is not permitted, may have to take place if Bhutan is to desire for the elimination of regional imbalances in its development. In the greater part of the country, especially in the higher hills, development has been negligible. But economic rationality may lead Bhutan to make equitable distribution of its resources to exploit the wealth of its natural environment. Even for the scientific development of agriculture and animal husbandry in the upper region, the Nepali skilled labor force may be economically necessary, as the people of Indian origin will not be ethnically predisposed to migrate to the higher regions on climatic grounds. Thus the rising population of the efficient Nepali laborers may be forced to migrate to other places, where today they are not allowed, resulting in changes in the ethnic dynamics of the country while at the same time ensuring a greater pace of development.

To a certain extent, the Bhutanese ethnic manpower necessary for meeting the requirement of development could be augmented by diverting some of the labor of monks and nuns to the purpose of development. But it is the differential birthrate quality which will ultimately decide the ethnic dynamics of the country, if we assume that greater health care is available to all the communities, making the death rate uniform, and that the migration from Tibet is negligible.

Therefore, the problem of development in the hill region of the Himalayas is one of preserving indigenous culture and society, while at the same time ensuring the material and the social development of the region to enable the people to partake in the fruits of the modern achievements as an industrialized nation.

Another anthropological concept which we can apply with profit for development in the Himalayas is the concept of the sub-cultural world. In the Eastern Himalayas as a whole, we may take each of the ethnic groups and the tribes as an organic whole. Because of the effective functioning of each of the ethnic groups and tribes as a separate sub-cultural world, the personality development of the individuals in each of these groups may not be identical. The capacity of learning, the attitude towards change, and the eagerness to accept a particular innovation may vary between the peoples of the subcultural worlds. This is of vital importance when we introduce change. We

must have developed plans like micro-hydroelectric power schemes which can be managed by groups of families or clans.

The concept of subcultural world may be useful still in another way, especially among the Nepali people among whom caste is the basis for dividing people into hierarchic groups based on ritual consideration. If an innovation is introduced at the higher point on the social ladder, the chances of its acceptance by the community may be enhanced as it gains the prestige value of higher groups and thereby becomes an object of imitation, under the process of sanskritization, by the lower castes.

Another important concept is the differentiation between form, function, and meaning. Every culture trait has a form, function and meaning. An item of culture or innovation may not be identically perceived by the individuals of different culture groups. Homer Barnett has pointed out that the form which is the overt expression of a trait, appears to take precedence over the other two qualities as determinant of change. If the form is differently perceived in the value systems of two different cultures, it will be differently accepted by the prospective recipients. But if the form can be reinterpreted to conform to the patterns of meaning of the recipient culture and retain essentially its original functions, it may be accepted. Only on this basis can we explain the reinterpretations of the aboriginal gods as higher gods of the Hindus. Such syncretic process has become very handy in the spread of Christianity in Africa among the tribes. Thus an innovation may be acceptable to the culture groups of the hills — be they caste or tribe — if it can be reinterpreted to conform to their own value systems. This is the technique we may employ to overcome the traditional resistance to change in the Himalayas.

Again, the inter-ethnic conflict or inter-village conflict is another dimension of the life of the hill people. These conflicts may be reinforced and supported through mythology, assumed historical events, and village festivals and rituals, resulting in their overt expression in the day-to-day life of the inhabitants of a region. Such sentiments of conflict could be manipulated to the advantage of the developmental purpose. Thus the sociological significance of the various structural levels of cooperation and conflict is important, as these reveal the reality of the local social structure.

Given the range of change permissible by the structural functioning of a group or society, the success of the developmental efforts depends on the leadership tapped to influence the people to adopt the change. Here again the subcultural training of the administrative personnel, their moral status in the recipient community, and their image in the total traditional social hierarchy could do much to influence the people. In the hill areas, the traditional leaders still control the decision-making process of the local society.

Any lack of cooperation between the administrator and the local leadership may create mistrust and conflict. For example, concepts like 'environment' and 'ecology' do not evoke the same reaction as felt by the governments and aid missions. Forestation and taking care of the resources do not belong to the 'dharma' of the peasant. Theirs is the 'Raj Dharma'. Hence, the spread of new ideas and the implementation of programmes of development largely devolve onto the active cooperation of the local village or clan leadership. A study from Nepal shows that among the Tibeto-Burman tribes, the traditional leaders still control the masses, and in matters of the solutions and interpretations of crisis situations, they still follow their traditional leaders blindly. In the places where the hold of the magico-religious leaders is still strong, a development strategy that neglects these leaders will have negative impact on the authority of these leaders. And this is surely not likely to evoke the generation of local support. The strategy should be to assimilate such local leadership into the development efforts to bring about successful results.

To sum up, the Himalayan communities and tribes should be regarded as organic wholes which have different cultural and mental capacities to absorb the ideas, behavior patterns, institutions and material and social skills brought from outside as items of development. Second, the introduction of developmental inputs must take account of the internal imbalances that may be created as a consequence, in as much as the traditional fit between the religious, social, political, economic, and environmental becomes disturbed without having achieved a new fit. To prevent disorganization, as in the case of the tribals of the plains of India, some positive steps in the way of interrelated bunches of innovations may be introduced to counteract the dysfunctional consequences arising out of the development efforts. Third, each tribe or ethnic group and its mental and social ability should be born in mind while implementing the development programs. And finally, the local leadership and the traditional technology may be of immense help, both for further improvement and for an effective use to manage the specific programs that yield immediate benefits to the local population.