RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

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The crisis of poverty persists in South Asia and it is concentrated in the countryside. Large segments of the most miserable people are socially peripheral, including the landless, the tribals, the low castes, the migrants, single women and widows. Many are physically at the fringe, on the edge of villages, between villages or in remote uplands. The invisible poor hidden at the fringe of habitats are very often the missing poor. They are easily missed out in surveys and censuses. There are many biases against outsiders seeing them (Chambers). They are allowed to exist, but they must accept the physical and moral restraints of confinement and remain invisible.

Wretchedness remains,
When all is said,
It cannot be uprooted, live or dead
So it is made invisible instead. (Theodor Adorno)

Poverty in the South Asian countryside represents an exclusionary relation from institutional networks sufficient to maintain one's survival and self-esteem. The poor are excluded structurally in ownership and access to resources. Legislative land and tenurial reforms, with very few exceptions, have been implemented through the bureaucratic machinery. There has been very little alliance between state administrations and the peasantry.

In fact, the alliance was more often between the bureaucracy and the local elites. Lack of peasant organization and of institutional support prevented the potential beneficiaries from taking risks on their own. This is a difficult course of action when small farmers, tenants and share-croppers depend on large landholders for employment, credit and security. On the other hand, such reforms have generally strengthened the rights of a minority of middle-level tenants and owner-operators as well as increased productivity in the short run through the delivery of technological inputs. The consequence often was, as in the case of Pakistan, the emergence of a new group of share-croppers, sub-tenants and seasonal workers, nullifying what little may have been achieved under the reform programme. Tenancy laws in India, for example, have resulted in the large-scale eviction of poor tenants by owners afraid of losing their title to the land. The legislation of 1984 in Bangladesh, providing for security of tenancy and a reasonable share of the produce for the share-cropper, has resulted either in the

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continuation of past practices in defiance to these laws, or in the eviction of share-croppers demanding their due. Of course it would have been surprising if things happened otherwise. The structural limitations of the Bangladesh state and society would not have permitted anything else. (Akira Takahashi et.al.)

The poor are culturally excluded in education, opportunity and status, and even from a franchise to life.

Life expectancy at birth is fifty six years for India, fifty five for Bangladesh, fifty two for Pakistan, and forty-seven for Nepal. They are denied thirty per cent of the lives that men and women from the developed nations enjoy. In effect they are condemned at birth to an early death. Under five mortality in India is about one hundred and fifty per thousand. More than twenty per cent of the world infant deaths occur in India. Lack of freedom from hunger and escapable morbidity is exacerbated by lack of freedom to read, write and communicate. Literacy rates for India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal are 36, 26, 24 and 19 per cents respectively. The scenario is quite different in Sri Lanka. Had Sri Lanka tried to achieve its life expectancy of around seventy years and literacy-rate of eighty six per cent not through public investment but primarily through growth, then it would have taken Sri Lanka, depending on assumptions, between fifty eight years and one hundred and fifty two years to get where it already happens to be.

In countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal, where the overwhelming majority are illiterate or drop-outs at the primary education level, the educated elite enjoy a high scarcity value of their education and profession. By managing to direct educational investment away from the masses, they have been able to protect their scarcity value and by requiring license-giving powers at various levels of bureaucracy some of them have increased their capacity to increase its rental income. It seems that the old rentier class in Indian society deriving its income from absentee land-lordism has now been replaced by the rentier elements in the privileged bureaucracy. The innovative programme of making education more relevant to the functional needs of the rural masses, while retaining the school-leaving certificate which prepares the privileged for college on to jobs and professions can and has become a clever exclusionary devise by blocking access of the rural poor to professional qualifications, credentials and privileges.

Similarly, there is a large and sometimes edifying literature on appropriate, relevant and intermediate technology, especially in relation to the rural areas. But the questions of access to technology, or whether technology is internal to particular producer groups and related to the broad social goal of participation rather than being exogenous and thus related to outside control, have generally been overlooked. Quite often the result has been that the few with resources and access to institutions of both the market and the state have used technology as instruments of control over the people lacking in assets and access.

The two exclusionary social closures mentioned above are exacerbated by the spatial isolation and remoteness of certain segments of population from the centres of political, economic and cultural power.

The cities are chief centres and engines of "economic growth" or "modernization" not only in their concentration of industrial functions but as transport hubs, financial centres and the major clusters of higher education, technical advances, and literary artistic and intellectual ferment. Access to the centre of political and cultural power is much easier for the educated and the affluent than for the impoverished and the disenfranchised. True, many try to escape from the dull and limited world of rural poverty but few can. Perhaps one can argue that the crisis of poverty in South Asia which is concentrated in the rural areas came alive when due to some of the less happy consequences of the Green Revolution, *i.e.*, growth of agriculture in selected regions only and the inability to generate employment opportunities for the growing numbers of the rural labour force, the ruling elite got worried about massive out-migration from countryside to the cities. Politicians and development planners alike, do not like slums around them, particularly when some of the old cities like Bombay or Calcutta are choked already in their own effluvia and disfigured by vast clouds of homeless and the squatters. The crisis of poverty that raised its ugly head needed to be contained from breaking out into clear visibility in the urban centres. Various diagnoses of the crisis were summarized as follows:

> Cyclical instability of food supplies; high population density and low rates of growth of agricultural output postulating an inverse association between the rate of demographic increase and the growth of agricultural production; increase in relative inequality due to an inappropriate pattern of growth; structural predisposition in many countries in favour of "immiserizing growth"; and finally laziness, superstition and cultural norms of some people.

The treatments prescribed were new-style programme categories like target group approach and integrated rural development.

The target group approach itself a pejorative term, concentrates on small farmers and leaves out large segments of marginal farmers, tenants, share-croppers, landless labourers and women. Access to subsidized credit and inputs by the small farmers is effectively blocked by the comparatively large farmers because they dominate the receiving structure, *i.e.*, the government sponsored co-operatives. The new extension and diffusion methodology through an intensive system of "training" and visits so as to reach large numbers of farmers quickly, uses the phrases "rural poor" and "small farmer" quite insistently. Yet these key phrases gradually slide back into "progressive farmers" and the importance of "visible impact" by farmers of "good" standing and therefore, easily imitable. The transition becomes lost, and somewhere in between the small farmers in the programme are raplaced by a status secondary to the larger farmers. Moreover,

the resource poor farmers in the upland areas are automatically excluded from the green revolution technology that modifies the environment through irrigation and fertilizer to fit the high yielding genotype. Improved cereal varieties which can thrive under rainfed conditions, provide a major proportion of nutrients, and respond to low cost and organic management practices are yet to be evolved.

Even within this prescriptive approach, the pigeonholing of rural development into the agricultural sector neuters the concept and ignores the ever increasing number of landless labourers and indigent artisans. Allocation of resources by a government, both inter and intra-sectorally, without recognizing the needs and aspirations of the impoverished and isolated population in the countryside, may in fact explicitly exclude them. For instance, if a government decides to allocate resources to build a large city-hospital, that may mean deciding not to build a large number of rural health clinics. That may also mean deciding to invest in urban doctors rather than village health-workers.

A decision to locate a large industrial project in an urban area has ramifictions for the labour force living in remote villages. Most important are the employment effects, first from the construction and later from the existence of the facility, both of which benefit the adjacent area. Furthermore, such a facility will certainly compound the imbalance between urban and rural infrastructure, since additional infrastructure with benefits extending beyond the initial facility will be created. Also the inter-sectoral implications of the diversion of administrative and financial resources from the rural areas must be recognized.

Again, the decision of an industrial development bank to invest in cosmetics at the expense of bicycles also affect the rural poor. There is a great need for re-tooling the industrial sector to support production and consumption needs of the large numbers of rural people and that leads to the question of the pattern of industrialization itself. Dispersing industries throughout the countryside increases the linkages between agriculture and industry not only by commodity flows and input-output coefficients, but also in a locational or geographical sense. Such dispersal enables members of a farm family to combine employment in industrial activities with agricultural pursuits. This in turn enables a family to diversify its sources of income (and thereby reduce risks of income failure), to obtain employment for a larger number of days per year (and thereby reduce unemployment and raise income), and to acquire several types of skills (and thereby increase the mobility and adaptability of the family). What is most important, however, is that the development of local industries through the peasant users participating in the process, fosters self-reliance, puts a stop to proliferation of State enterprises and concomitant State bureaucracy, and enlarges the capability and sense of responsibility of the masses of population in the rural communities on which creative vigour in the last analysis depends. In South Asia, however, enclave modernization goes ahead unabated in the name of comparative advantage and economy of scale and because the subsistence peasantry and

the landless labourer lack in education, skill and knowhow for complex modern practices.

These new programmes and strategies of the seventies along with the construct of Integrated Rural Development which persists today have all been concerned with the objective of increasing the productivity, income, physical security and moral welfare of the "rural poor" in the margin, and without the high cost of political disruption so far as access to resources and opportunities are concerned. Classification and categorization of segments of population as "target groups" have successfully objectified the human subjects. The basic needs strategy has become a rubric for many South Asian governments to calculate how little they can get away with. We are forgetting how to give presents. Instead we have charity, administered beneficence and the planned plastering over of society's visible sores. In its organized operations there is no longer room for human impulses, indeed, the fit is necessarily accompanied by humiliation through its distribution, its just allocation, in short through treatment of the recipient as an object.

The good-will of the planners, technocrats, model-builders and bureaucrats, both at national and international level is not questioned. There have been, are, and will be people who are committed to positive action on behalf of the poor. The problem is that many of them believe that they must be the executors of transformation.

Accordingly these adherents to the people's cause constantly run the risk of falling into a type of generosity as malefic as that of oppressor.

These well intentioned strategies and prograrmes, all within the invariant development discourse, transformed themselves in their implementation into political and planning technologies for the confinement of the growing number of indigents into the invisible countryside.

It is against this scenario that one could look at the creative social movements that are emerging all over South Asia. The poor are getting together in locally specific actions and initiatives, not just for survival, but for security, freedom and self-respect.

A gaze averted from the beaten track, a hatred of brutality, and a search for fresh concepts not yet encompassed by the general pattern, appear to be at the core of these initiatives. The search is for a new usage of sociability and individual dignity, in which rights of some subjects are not defended to the detriment of the rights of others; for a plural and more enhanced from of democracy without any overarching mediation ; for a decentralized and participatory development created and owned by the people themselves. The search is also for a balance between human beings and their environment, between nature and culture, projecting paradigm-shifts in a more horizontal organization of agriculture, industry, energy and infrastructure and more particularly of knowledge itself.

Latent subjectivity of the poor which has been brutally objectified by the various deployment of downward directed power, emerges through human relatedness. Subjectivity enlarges itself through inter-subjectivity and becomes the birthing ground for creative action. The urge for belonging and continuity by the people who have been demobilized, fragmented and isolated takes on a new base in cooperative togetherness. Self as a centre of relationships serve as the conceptual underpinning of group solidarity. The effective social relationships become increasingly moral. The real struggle is between the possessiveness of the private ego and the openmindedness of the true self. The conflict between self and society can be minimized and a sense of mutuality enhanced if the participating members are willing to make adequate personal sacrifice to ensure that egotistic desires do not significantly undermine the corporate spirit.

A central concern is self-reliance meaning self-determination and empowerment. Self-reliance at individual, communal and national level does not call for autarky, but requires that interactions between actors at different levels take place with each starting from a position of near equality, so that the outcome is interdependence. Outside support and information become contrary to self-reliance when they carry with them implicit power relations through which outside decisions become controlling. Such dependence undermines sustainability of local efforts and positive cultural values.

Social energy of the poor and the oppressed remains often a potential awaiting to be galvanized by external intervention. Without countervailing forces, however, such facilitation can bring about a new dependency. If access to knowledge can create the classes of the "wise" and the "ignorant", the catalysts or facilitators from outside, through their control of information and theory, can become paternalistic. The line between such doctrinaire paternalism and fascism can easily be crossed.

In that context, an emphasis on the unity of knowing and doing and the implication that mass activity being the largest aggregate of concrete experience is a dynamic source knowledge, do give increased confidence to the participants and release new enthusiasm and energy. Outside knowledge is extremely important for the individual members of a group to evaluate their existing conditions and choose life enhancing values which best serve the future of self and society. But that knowledge must be integrated into the local, practical, organic, intuitive and inner knowledge of the people concerned. People's energy and creativity pooled together in solidarity groups emerge as the key factors in self reliance.

The intricate negotiations between local groups/organizations and the outside, like the regional/national structures and sometimes even beyond, require intermediaries. Hence the importance of leading groups within the organizations, growing out of struggle and the groups' participation in the learning process.

Finally, the more plural such organizations are, the better are the possibilities that voices of the submerged groups can be heard, that subjugated knowledge can be resurrected and that oppressive power and social relations can be transformed without a mediating totality. Autonomous social movements, each respecting the right of the other, can and do forge alliances within a country and across countries. Such coalitions and alliances may shift as the social dialectics resulting from organized action itself unfolds.

Within the above generalizations on certain trends in the locally specific molecular group actions in South Asia, more questions remain.

Are these micro-initiatives and local movements marginal and diversionary? Are they romantic, pastoral and opposite to progress? Are they palliative substitutes for assuring some minimum basic human rights to the people who have been denied such rights either partially or completely? Are they "safe concessions" benignly neglected by sometimes authoritarian central powers? Or, are they, together, capable of creating a new equation of power-relationship given the ubiquity of the structures of power in many South Asian countries?

Local struggles, it is argued, are vulnerable to co-optation or repression, without an over-arching mediation through political parties or macro-organizations. Grass roots organizations and social movements in South Asia question precisely this conventional wisdom that the transformation of existing power and social relations has to be mediated by a totality. If power does not radiate from the State or the Sovereign, or centralized instances of power alone; if power is multi-dimensional or a reciprocal inter-play between centres of authority and discipline and practices covering the relations of everyday life at various sites — Foucault's microphysics of power; a great many social cultural and even everyday practises, then it must become transformed for political conditions to change fundamentally. Simply trying to "seize" power centrally will not work.

Further, locally specific, molecular group-actions can establish symbolic unity with other such articulations through shared perceptions or a common cultural identity. Literary skills, for example, link scattered local 'Dalit' movements. Sometimes a network of alliances can come about as exemplified by the experience in the cases of Grameen Bank and the Chipko Movement. Sometimes a chain of equivalences can spring up. The possibility to hold a limited and partial perspective and the need to defend a space for more immediate molecular effort may be more relevant and pragmatic for the oppressed who are scattered all over a country. In fact such initiatives are not only worthwhile in themselves but they may also contribute in various ways to the large process of breaking down institutionalized oppression. It is true that whether or not such possibilities are realized depends on the degree to which the central power-apparatus or a nation-state allows for the expression of these desires. Macro-policies like that of land-reform in Japan, China or Taiwan can facilitate formation of peasant organizations, or reinvigorate the traditional norms of vicinity groups extending beyond blood connection. State-power on the other hand can stamp out local popular movements

and can also co-opt them. Therefore, the more plural the voices, the longer will be the chain of equivalences set up between the rights of one group and those of others. That will deepen the democratic process, thereby making it more difficult to neutralize certain struggles. Societal aggression, aggression by powerful individuals or groups and by the state can bring out unsuspected capacities for indignation, resistance and common action. Solidarity generated, thereby, can be a more than adequate proxy for security.

In fact, a central concept in these popular endeavours is solidarity. It "rises out of a horizon of experience", to use Brecht's words "of friendly life together". This friendliness does not exclude conflicts, rather it focuses on human forms by which one can survive them.

In a society deeply divided between those in a strong position to defend their rights and those who are excluded and whose demands cannot be recognized as legitimate, the central notion of solidarity transcends a certain individualistic conception of right. Chantall Mouffet in the context of Europe, calls it a post-individualist liberalism in which rights are defined not as a personal possession but as a form of solidarity among all oppressed groups. This can only be achieved if the rights of some subjects are not defended to the detriment of the rights of other subjects. It is a relation between persons in which the one accommodates the other, identifies with the other, empathizes with the other — an inter-subjectivity free of coercion that is established and maintained in the reciprocity of mutual understanding based on free recognition. Self-preservation and realization are achieved not through each individual pursuing his/her own clearly understood interests but through social solidarity.

It is only through such "solidarity-groups" that the inferior poor can break out of their closure, exclusion and categorization. People who have been systematically degraded and structurally oppressed may sometimes be implicated in their oppression. But to say that there is nothing but the implication of the slave with the master is extremely reductionist. It is a highly unstable theory about the world which has to assume that vast numbers of ordinary people, mentally equipped as you or I can simply be thoroughly and systematically duped into mis-recognizing their own interests.

These movements, however, are at different moments and levels, within an unfolding process. Some of them are vibrant with limited emancipatory content; some are apparently modest; some, even precarious. Indeed, some of them may be subtly engineered palliatives to elicit popular consent to the **status-quo**; and some are co-opted **albeit** in the periphery into the dominant system. Valourizing them as emancipatory instruments may be romantic; stigmatizing them as irrelevant *vis-a-vis* the centres of condensation of power will be equally naive. They may, on the other hand, provide some tentative insight into the possibilities inherent in human reason and emotion and in specific cultures that transcend the instrumental reason of an acquisitive individual mediated through technique.