

Models of development – a preliminary inquiry in a Hindu context

Ramakrishnan Sitaraman

Department of Biotechnology, TERI University, India

Abstract

The environmental problems we now face, locally or globally, are partly unintended consequences of development and partly the consequence of not analyzing *a priori*, the consequences of such development in pertinent contexts. This paper is a preliminary exploration of ideas and circumstances behind modern perceptions of ‘development,’ especially as it applies to the Indian context. A brief account of some historic milestones that transformed traditional social structures in India is given. Also described are some aspects of traditional society that had allowed, prior to industrialization, the co-existence of communities with widely varying levels of material attainment.

Introduction

The age of exploration that started in Europe loosed forces that transformed entire continents and their peoples. As a result, Europe advanced materially and underwent major social transformations, and even violent upheavals in many cases. A salient consequence of these transformations was the rise of the majority of what we recognize as ‘developed nations.’ Also notable was the entry into popular discourse of the concepts of democracy and egalitarianism, which ironically also co-existed with grave injustices and outright imperialism. A detailed analysis of these historical forces, ideologies and events is outside the scope of the scope of this essay, but is available as part of the historical record.

A brief excurses on terminology in order at this juncture. Much that we discuss in this essay applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. The reason is that these countries share not only a common history, but have also shared, for varying time periods stretching right up to the present, a common civilizational heritage in terms of religious forms, social mores and world views. These commonalities may be subsumed under the appellation of ‘Hinduism’ that was originally applied to all the religious practices and doctrines originating in the Indian subcontinent (1). A majority of the people currently inhabiting this area are therefore Hindus or converts from Hinduism to one of the Abrahamic religions, barring numerically small invading and immigrant groups whose entry into the Indian area in historical times is well-documented. As the only Pagan society of classical antiquity that has survived in sizeable numbers and extent to modern times in the face of three major world-conquering ideologies – Christianity, Islam and Communism – the vicissitudes of Hindu society provide a unique window into the effects of modern development on traditional societies, and its leitmotif of pluralistic thought offers original and unique frameworks to evaluate the concept of development afresh.

Problematizing ‘Development’

We feel that, when one seeks to improve environmental quality, whether in terms of cleaning rivers or, setting stringent standards regulating automobile exhausts, we must, sooner rather than later, confront the issue of ‘development’ head on. What constitutes ‘development’ and, more importantly, what do different communities with

different worldviews *construe* as ‘development?’ Does it mean, for example, having more affordable cars per capita or an effective mass transit system? Can a land-scarce nation like Japan afford a steady increase in the numbers of automobiles? On a larger and global scale, we may review encounter between industrial Europe and pre-industrial societies in the Americas. While no one alive today would deny that much development has taken place on these continents that are home to two of the seven most developed nations in the world, one cannot help but wonder whether or not the impact of development has been uneven, and sometimes to the detriment of both the environment and human communities in both tangible and intangible ways. The objective of this reflection is not to criticize, but to learn lessons from history that may be of value in informing contemporary courses of action when grappling with issues that have both social and environmental ramifications.

Coming to the specific case of India, we would like to examine briefly, but not exhaustively, the forces that have shaped our notions and trajectory of development. Agreeing with Hindu philosophy that action is predicated on the resolution to act (*samkalpa* precedes *karma*), and that the resolutions we make are invariably (consciously or unconsciously) influenced by our prior impressions (*samskaaras*), we present the first milestone in recent Indian history in the form of Thomas Macaulay’s famous *Minute on Indian Education* (2). This minute was instrumental in the eventual *substitution of* English education for traditional Indian education, with its many regional, linguistic and religious variants. The most visible consequence of this policy today is that practically all higher education in India is imparted in English, in contrast to, say, France, Germany or Japan, where the native languages hold sway, and fluency in English is not neglected either. But, to be fair to Macaulay, he had intended his educational policy as a means for enabling a limited number of Indians to gain access to the knowledge of Europe. These select Indians, he felt, would be able to then communicate this knowledge in the ‘vernacular’ to the masses, effectively uplifting everyone in the process. Given our foregoing observations about higher education in India, we cannot help but conclude that Macaulay’s heirs have abdicated their responsibility, moving along the path of least resistance and maximum benefit.

A more deleterious consequence of this policy was the increase in the prevalence of absolute illiteracy (as opposed to merely outdated knowledge) in Indian society owing to the wholesale decay and destruction of traditional educational systems. Almost a century after Macaulay had outlined his vision, Gandhi was to accuse British administrators of having made India more illiterate in the course of their rule (3). This is our second milestone, the realization by English-educated Indians that they had to evaluate their history afresh. Gandhi entered into a debate with an Englishman, Sir Philip Hartog, on this issue, but could not pursue it systematically, preoccupied as he was with social and political activities. It was left to a follower of his, Dharampal (1922-2006), to investigate archival records of Indian educational systems and institutions in early British India. Dharampal's data, primarily derived as they are from observations of British surveyors, also rule out, to a large extent, the possibility of any nationalistic bias. In his remarkable book, *The Beautiful Tree* (4), Dharampal summarized the observations of British surveyors and came to the conclusion that traditional systems of education were operational during the early days of British rule. The curriculum of the traditional Indian schools, the British surveyors found, and Dharampal re-discovered, primarily addressed the needs of pre-industrial village society of the time, and notably included a vocational component to address the training needs of various *jaatis*, or endogamous professional-cultural groups, often termed (confusingly) 'castes' in popular usage (5). Moreover, enrollment in traditional schools was considerable, and included both the 'higher' and 'lower' castes, even if there was a predominance of male students. Interestingly though for its time, there was significant female enrollment. While the curriculum was certainly not technically at par with those in, say, the advanced universities of Europe, the schools were accessible and affordable, and managed locally by the community. It is an interesting exercise to think about the consequences for Indian society had the English language and European knowledge been *added* to widen the scope of the traditional curriculum – something *paaTashaalaas* and *madrassas* (traditional Hindu and Muslim schools respectively) are trying out even today.

A third milestone in the history of development, insofar as the modern nation of India is concerned is its first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru's conscious adoption of the Soviet model of centralized economic planning, marked by the creation of a Planning Commission in 1950 that was entrusted with the task of formulating Five-Year Plans

for the nation. We may now view Nehru in the light of our earlier comments on the causal relationships between, *samskaara*, *samkalpa* and *karma*. Nehru was deeply impressed by Marxist thought as well as by the accomplishments of the Soviet state and consciously opted to incorporate aspects of the Soviet state into Indian government, as may be seen from his extensive writings, speeches and actions (6). In a sense, English education inculcated *samskaaras* that shaped Nehru's views and actions. The result of Nehruvian policies over four decades was a very low annual rate of economic growth in India that was derisively spoken of as the 'Hindu rate of growth.' It has been suggested by Rajeev Srinivasan that the more accurate term for this underperformance is the 'Nehruvian penalty' (7).

Interesting models of development

Based on our understanding, we delineate what seem to be two models of development – assuming that development is what gives people in general a greater sense of well-being and comfort. The first model we term the 'Mutiny on the Bounty Model.' Here, the emphasis is on escaping most problems of advanced societies by finding a place much like that found by the mutineers on the HMS Bounty. In salubrious Tahiti, the islands with their surrounding ocean provide sufficient sustenance for small numbers of people. Tahiti does not, however, lend itself to modern, intensive levels of industrial development, having very few natural resources that may be commercially exploited for a significant period of time. This model may be considered viable only if the inhabitants voluntarily opt for a lower standard of living relative to industrialized societies (e.g. fewer automobiles per capita), in combination with a limited use of mostly renewable natural resources and a small population. This option is available to individuals or small groups at best, but not to large communities, leave alone most modern nations. It is also debatable if nations actually aspire to such a situation that essentially means going closer to subsistence levels of economic activity, or being heavily dependent on imports of essentials and tourists for economic activity. Japan, as we know, though an island nation lacking most raw materials indispensable for industry, has nevertheless opted for industrialization based on imports of raw materials and resources, making it one of the seven most developed economies of the world.

A second model that has operated over vast stretches of the globe in the two centuries since the Industrial Revolution may be termed the ‘Guns, Germs and Steel Model’ (8). In this model, new resources are located and newer types of economic activity founded on the basis of the military or political superiority of one (usually national) group over others. This model has been played out throughout the colonial era. The upswing in economic fortunes under these conditions also fosters a population growth in the colonial power, resulting in the movement of its surplus population to its colonies, often resulting in adverse consequences for the natives of the said colonies – ranging from political subjugation to economic impoverishment to outright extinction. It is also notable that, under the present circumstances, this is considered quite unacceptable, even by a majority of the peoples of the former colonial powers.

A quest for a ‘middle path’

Indian society is so complex that any unqualified exposition of historical trends must be superficial, and any deeper one will become enmeshed in paradox. – Christopher I. Bayly

With Bayly’s warning in mind, we note that, India is a region of great diversity, both genetically and culturally. The genetic diversity of the Indian population is next only to that of the African continent (9). However, it is the cultural diversity that concerns us here. Contemporary Christian evangelical agencies intent on conversion note that India has the ‘largest number of unreached peoples’ – speaking different languages, observing varied customs and religious practices, and at very different levels of material culture. From the hunter-gatherer tribals to westernized entrepreneurs such as the Zoroastrians, India exhibits a wide range of communities that have co-existed in relative harmony for at least three millennia. This may be contrasted with the United States, for instance, where distinct ethnic strains, whether Scottish or Teutonic, French or Italian, mark their presence solely as last names, and not as living cultural entities, as compared with situation in the countries of origin of these groups. The extinction of several native tribes all over North and South America (physically or culturally) is too well-known to bear repetition. By contrast, Cochin Jews or Gujarati Zoroastrians in India, though ancient immigrants have kept their distinct identities over a millennium or more.

The proximate reason for the existence of this diversity over long time periods is the much-maligned caste (more accurately, the *jaati-varna*) system. Briefly, the system promotes endogamy within the *jaati*, and gives primacy to customary laws in conducting intra-*jaati* affairs. Given such an arrangement, it is hardly surprising that there should be so many ‘unreached’ peoples in India, because leaving them as ‘unreached’ as possible (whether by zealous evangelists or by industrialization/urbanization/globalization etc.), is the cardinal (pardon the pun) principle of the *jaati-varna* system. Additionally, it may be noted in passing that, while a *jaati* may rank ‘high’ or ‘low’ in the hierarchy, this position is not *only* due to some combination of economics and politics, but largely due to notions of ritual purity (10). Therefore, whatever the overall ritual position of a *jaati*, it is entitled to its own customs and traditions, and a ruler may not interfere with these under any circumstances. The ruler is entitled to levy taxes and tribute, and perhaps impose a levy of men in times of war, but nothing more. Additionally, the *jaati* may collectively negotiate privileges and obligations (such as the form and amount of taxes, for example) with the ruler, in a manner somewhat analogous to the medieval guilds of Europe. By way of contrast, we recall that the Christianization of several parts of Europe follows approximately a set pattern, starting with the conversion of a ruler and ending with the conversion of the entire ruled populace in most cases, without any reference to their internal religious diversity or preferences. Similarly the Islamization of the Middle East, Iran and Central Asia is based on conquest and the imposition of additional taxes (*jaziya*) on the unconverted, as an inducement to conversion. These policies would meet with strenuous disapproval in the Hindu context as it involves a king arbitrarily imposing his beliefs on communities, and thereby overstepping his authority. An edict of the Emperor Ashoka of India pleading with the ‘forest dwellers’ to abstain from violence (11) is a notable contrast to the European case reviewed earlier. It is also notable for informing us of the co-existence of ‘forest peoples’ with clearly recognized rights to follow their own customs within the domains of the kingdom of Magadha that commanded a large standing army.

From an individual’s viewpoint, belonging to the *jaati* also entitles one to a supportive network of one’s peers – something indirectly acknowledged even by the Catholic Church through the papal bull of 1623 sanctioning caste observances and

taboos among Indian converts (12). The reason is that individual converts can be collectively excommunicated and isolated from the *jaati*, whereas converting an entire *jaati* (or at least a majority of members of a *jaati* in one location) preserves valuable social networks and support systems, not to mention privileges. A glance at contemporary Indian matrimonial advertisements will bear out the prevalence of *jaati*-consciousness among Abrahamic converts as well, even in cases where they individually seek to go beyond such considerations. The clause ‘caste no bar’ is as much a statement of disapproval as an acknowledgement of the durability of the institution of caste in contemporary India. As such, these practices often live on under the rubric of ‘inculturation’ that is increasingly favored by most evangelizers today. We may also recall that a pioneer of inculturation, Robert de Nobili, tried to share (or, depending on your point of view, usurp) the sacerdotal prestige of Brahmans and the Vedas by calling himself a ‘Roman Brahman’ (*Romaca Brahmana*) and the Christian Bible a ‘Yesur (i.e. Jesus) Veda’ (13).

Lessons from history

But the main objective of recounting these facts of recent and ancient history is not solely to further historical research, decry historical wrongdoing or even to develop apologetics for all that is described as Hindu tradition. Rather, it is to bring into sharp relief a model of community empowerment and action that could be of value in addressing environmental problems at a local level. In the modern Indian nation, we see a three-cornered contest between expanding mega-cities, villages in the throes of often involuntary social and material transformations, and dwindling forests and forest-dwelling communities at very early stages of material development. It is easy to see even for the uninitiated that the last are the least likely to adapt to the demands of what is generally recognized as ‘modern’ society. However, key to this fresh understanding of traditional India is the rejuvenation of its languages and knowledge systems, in the spirit of free enquiry and objectivity. The Macaulayite system of education needs an urgent dose of supplementation at the very least, and we may consider afresh another Minute on Indian Education, this time from an Indian viewpoint. This is a process started by individuals like Gandhi who, uniquely among the leaders of anti-colonial movements, was well-rooted in the native tradition as well and actively identified with it (14). Going back to the terms of the discourse introduced in the section titled ‘problematizing development,’ we may view this as a

an early attempt to infuse some contextually pertinent *samskaras* into the educational system, and thereby make it more relevant in the Hindu and Indian context.

The environmental problem in modern India (and even elsewhere, if we care for a fresh review) is therefore not only characterized by rapid industrialization, overexploitation of natural resources, and major increases in human population, but is often also accompanied by the problem of equity. It may also be viewed as a test of the willingness and ability of a nation state based on hastily borrowed and sporadically and unpredictably applied European and western notions and models of governance to introspect afresh, and effectively work for the survival of multiple communities with very different notions of the world, their place in it, and at very disparate levels of technological advancement. It is, if you like, a singular challenge to the intellectual vision and political will of the future makers of the nation state to consider creative approaches rooted in their own civilizational moorings and uniqueness, to promote equity and accountability in the midst of the seemingly irresistible forces of development. This is certainly not a plea for resurrecting wholesale the romantic notion of the ‘noble savage,’ or of going back to a ‘golden age,’ but a humble effort to highlight the highly uneven and often adverse impact of development on communities with very different modes of living and thinking (15). Efforts rooted in the traditional ideas have to necessarily be very local, empowering local forms of governance and community participation with an enhanced level of awareness, sensitivity and objectivity. That this can be done successfully, and can even mitigate *jaati*-based prejudices significantly, has already been demonstrated in the field by several Hindu service groups, for example the Swadhyaya movement (16).

We conclude with a quote from Alain Daniélou, and hope that India’s traditional social structures and philosophies, as well as an objective re-evaluation of her history using original sources, will creatively and fruitfully inform future decisions on India’s economic and environmental future to a greater extent than has been the case hitherto.

‘To present the Pygmies (of Africa) or the Mundas of India with the alternatives of becoming bankers, lawyers or factory workers, or else of disappearing, is a sinister jest, which has unfortunately already justified the annihilation of many human races.

In the whole of history, India has been the only defender of peoples who do not adapt to the industrial exploitation of the world (17).’

It remains to be seen how long the last contention will remain true, even on average.

Disclaimer

The opinions expressed herein do not represent the views of TERI University or TERI.

Conflict of interest

The author is an Indian Hindu and a microbiologist by training.

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References and Notes

1. For example, the first Mughal emperor Zahiruddin Mohammad ‘Babur’ writes in his memoir (Babur-Nama) that ‘...most of the inhabitants of Hindustan are pagans; they call a pagan a Hindu...’ This indicates that the grouping of Indian religious forms under the term ‘Hindu’ was a settled fact nearly 5 centuries ago (Babur-Nama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor. Translated from Chagatai Turkic by A. S. Beveridge [London, 1921], pp. 518).

URL: http://www.farlang.com/diamonds/beveridge-baburnama/page_057.

2. Macaulay, T.B. (1835). Minute on Indian Education.

URL:http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html

3. Gandhi, at Chatham House, London, on October 20, 1931, remarked: 'I say without fear of my figures being challenged successfully, that today India is more illiterate than it was fifty or a hundred years ago, and so is Burma, because the British administrators, when they came to India, instead of taking hold of things as they were, began to root them out. They scratched the soil and began to look at the root, and left the root like that, and the beautiful tree perished.' Cited in Dharampal (1983). *The Beautiful Tree: Indigenous Indian Education in the Eighteenth Century*, Biblia Impex Private Limited, New Delhi.

URL: <http://gyanpedia.in/tft/Resources/books/beautifultree.pdf>

4. Dharampal (1983). *Ibid.*

5. For a detailed discussion of the caste system, especially its contribution to the co-existence of diverse communities, please see Elst, K. (1994). Caste: Verdict from Belgium. *Hinduism Today*, September, 1994.

URL: <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=3336>

6. Goel, S.R. (1993). *Genesis and Growth of Nehruism, Volume 1: Commitment to Communism*. Voice of India, New Delhi, India.

URL: <http://www.voiceofdharma.com/books/gagon/>

7. Some interesting observations on the consequences of Nehruvian policy are in order here. For nearly 40 years, from 1951 until the liberalization phase that started fortuitously (and somewhat compulsorily with IMF prodding) after a balance of payments crisis in 1991, Indian gross domestic product grew very slowly at an average rate of 2.5-3.5%. In 2003, Goldman Sachs published a paper predicting high levels economic growth in Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC) until 2050, assuming the continuation of present trends (Wilson, D. and Purushothaman, R. [2003]. *Dreaming with BRICs: The Path 2050*. Goldman Sachs (URL:

<http://www2.goldmansachs.com/ideas/brics/brics-dream.html>). These predictions were based on a model with certain assumptions. In order to test the plausibility of the model, the authors compared observed and estimated growth rates over the historical period of 1960-2000. It was found that, for most developed economies, the two values were very close, to within a few tenths of a percent. In the case of some Asian developing economies, actual values exceeded the estimate by a percent or

more, indicating that these countries actually did better than expected. However, in the case of India, the estimated value *exceeded* the observed value by three percent, the highest such deficit observed, indicating a chronic underperformance. Ironically and unjustly, this chronically low growth rate, fostered in an ideologically and procedurally socialist milieu became popularly known as the ‘Hindu rate of growth’ – a coinage due to the economist Raj Krishna. In a 2004 article the columnist Rajeev Srinivasan argued that this chronic growth deficit is better described as the ‘Nehruvian Penalty’ (URL: <http://www.rediff.com/news/2004/jan/14rajeev.htm>).

8. *Guns, Germs and Steel* is title of a book by Jared Diamond (1997). However, we use this expression solely as a highly relevant metaphor. No active attempt is made to correlate aspects of this work with those in Diamond’s. Given the nature of the subject matter, some commonality is inevitable, but these points of convergence are not being explored here in a systematic fashion either.

9. Reich, D., Thangaraj, K., Patterson, N, Price, A.L. and Singh, A. (2009). Reconstructing Indian population history. *Nature*, **461**:489-494.

10. A spectacular example of this reality is that of the Maharajah of Alwar refusing to shake hands with King George V of Britain, politically his overlord, for fear of defiling himself in a ritual sense by contact with a barbarian outside the pale (*mlechcha* being the Samskrit word). Of course, the same king would have no scruples in reverently touching the feet of a wandering monk or a poor Brahman priest, both far beneath him economically and politically. (mentioned by Manohar Malgonkar in his historical novel, *The Princes*. [Viking Books, 1963], quoted by Yasmeen Murshed in the Daily Star, April 24, 2004. URL: <http://www.thedailystar.net/2004/04/24/d404241502102.htm>).

11. Ashoka declares that ‘Even the forest people, who live in Beloved-of-the-Gods’ domain, are entreated and reasoned with to act properly. They are told that despite his remorse Beloved-of-the-Gods has the power to punish them if necessary, so that they should be ashamed of their wrong and not be killed. Truly, Beloved-of-the-Gods desires non-injury, restraint and impartiality to all beings, even where wrong has been done.’ Ven. Dhammika, S. (1994). *The edicts of King Ashoka: An English rendering*. Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka.

URL: <http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/ashoka.html>

12. For example, Pope Gregory XV allowed caste practices in the Church by his bull of 1623, effectively agreeing with Robert de Nobili’s contention that these were

purely 'civil and social' matters, and did not have religious implications. (de Vault, B. [1961]. History of the missions. Burns & Oats, London.

URL:

<http://dcommon.bu.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2144/772/historyofthemiss013362mbp.txt?sequence=3>

13. Goel, S.R. (1994). Catholic Ashrams. Sanyasins or Swindlers. Voice of India, New Delhi, India. URL: <http://voiceofdharma.org/books/ca/>

14. Perhaps the only (distant) parallel that we are aware of is the slave revolt that led to the formation of Haiti, that incorporated elements of African traditional religions in during the mobilization and the actual military campaign. However, in the final analysis, this was more incidental than intentional.

15. We note parenthetically that the coat of arms of the Rajasthani kingdom of Mewar depicts a Bhil forest dweller on one side and a Rajput warrior on the other – commemorating their shared historic struggle against the imperial Mughal army of Akbar. We hope it is not too late to explore the possibility of the contemporary city dweller, villager and forest-dwelling tribal working together for a shared and equitable future, especially in the face of an environmental crisis that affects all.

16. Shourie, A. (1996). The Indian way of seeking the Almighty. The Observer, January 12, 1996.

URL: <http://arunshourie.voiceofdharma.com/articles/19960112.htm>

17. Daniélou, Alain (1993). Virtue, success, pleasure, liberation – the four aims of life in the tradition of ancient India. Inner Traditions International, Rochester, Vermont, U.S.A. pp. 44.

18. All webpages cited are current as of January 30, 2011.