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DEVELOPMENT THROUGH INDIGENOUS RESOURCES

by

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Rather than state my own definition of development it is better to consult the most authoritative source of the English language, the unabridged Oxford English Dictionary of some 13 volumes. It is necessary to examine the word "develop" to find out what it actually meant, because only by finding out what words mean are we able to communicate accurately. Confucius said that if words are not exact, communication is not exact. With inexact communication comes disorder in government and society. This is an important statement with practical consequences in terms of development today.

The word "develop" is a 12th or 13th century word. The Italian form, is "velupare" which means, significantly "to unwrap", "to disentangle", "to rid free off". The opposite of "develop" is "envelop" which means "to hide", "to cover up", "to put constraints upon" - which is what we do when we envelop something. When we develop we do the reverse. We remove constraints, whatever they may be. The word "develop" maintains its original definition in photography. When we develop a film we reveal what is already latent in that film. We cannot put new things on the film and call it developed. Development is a process of revealing. As we continue with the dictionary definition, it says, "to unfold, as a tale or as a story develops", "to lay open by removal of that which enfolds". That is to say, something more comes out of that which already exists. This is the fundamental meaning.

We must also turn our attention to what has happened to this word. Develop which meant "to unfold", "to reveal", "to open up", "to remove constraints" continues with that basic meaning in



most of its usages with one major exception. About 1850, a new interpretation begins to appear. It is said of "series of organisms showing progression from simpler or lower to higher or more complex types".

Around the middle of the 19th century this new idea began to appear and the word today primarily means, to evolve from lower to higher". We have to ask ourselves, what was happening at this time to change the meaning this way. When I say 1850 and add 7 years you know that I am 100 years after the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and at the high watermark of British imperialism. In 1857, the sovereignty of India passed from the East India Company to the Crown itself and India became "the greatest gem in the British Crown" and so forth. This was also a period of major darwinism intellectually in which concepts of evolution were also saying that things go from lower to higher. More importantly, imperialism and colonialism asserted that countries go from lower to higher and what was lower were the colonies and what was higher was the civilization of mother countries. If you look at the Illustrated London News between 1850 and 1900 you will see reports or explorers who discuss "primitive peoples" living in these conquered countries. Who are these "primitive people"? These are people who were alleged to have primitive religions, primitive arts and primitive music.

This viewpoint of India, Africa and other countries continues today. By the 1930's and 1940's it changed slightly and instead of being known as primitive people they were simply known as backward people, backward countries and backward societies. So from primitive they became backward. You know the rest of the geneology. From backward they became underdeveloped and from underdeveloped they became developing. That is where they remain today - as developing societies. To put it in political terms, they became known as the Third World. What was the First World? Obviously, the First World was the United States and its allies. The Second World was the Soviet Union and its allies. The Third World? About 75% of the rest of the world's population became Third.



The statement is amazing in its ethnocentric arrogance and yet that term is basically accepted today to describe most of the people in the world.

This interpretation of going from inferior to superior had a particular impact on India in almost every respect. In order to understand that impact, it is necessary to look at the writings of travellers and reporters to India before the 1900's. I am not romanticising the writings of Huang Tsang or Fa Hien or Marco Polo, or even the writings that are found in the Mugal period - in the Akbar Nama or such texts. Even if we bring it up to persons such as Sir Thomas Row, the Ambassador of James I or we discuss some of the very early reports of the Agricultural Commissions in this country, we will find a very different society than one that was "primitive," "backward" or "underdeveloped".

Here we must introduce the issue of indigenous resources. I am suggesting that indigenous resources are fundamental to the idea of development. This is not a totally new concept. The use of phrases such as "local resources", "local felt needs", "people's participation" - all of those are part of the standard vocabulary of development workers in most parts of the world. They are included in most donor agency charters and manifestos and they are part of the almost every apex, intermediate or primary voluntary groups, discussion.

The first question is what does indigenous mean and what are indigenous resources? The word indigenous means, very simply, whatever is born in that area. It is clear from that very meaning that indigenous resources cannot be something that are transposed from another culture or other institutions. Indigenous resources are those which are closely associated with the specific area with which development is involved. The issue of development itself revolves, knowingly or unknowingly around this central question of indigenous resources.

If we look at the history of what is involved we will observe that indigenous resources were the very first to be



attacked in this country and in this culture by the colonial and the imperial powers. One may say that it was almost a necessity of western colonialism to assume that the cultures, ideas and institutions of the people governed are inferior to their own ideas and institutions. Throughout earlier Indian history this was not the case.

In fact, the idea of local institutions and in particular, of local laws were so important that throughout the classical and legal texts of India, and this includes even the centralized texts such as the Artha Shastra, it is indicated that the king or the central government may not override local laws, unless those laws are clearly opposed to the interest of Dharma. Even then, kings are advised to be very careful in overruling local laws because, the text points out, some kings who have done that have been assassinated. The importance of local laws and local institutions were so central in the history and culture of India that no ruler would have thought of overriding them - that is until the British period. Even the Mugal emperors, though they were far more oriented to centralizing than the rulers that arose in the different wars between kingdoms of India, did not go as far as the British. The British introduced a whole new concept of imperialism that had not existed in the history of India. That was the concept of centralized empire rather than tributary kingdoms which had previously been the usual method of administration.

Local laws and local institutions were amongst the first and the earliest victims of the new colonialism that arose in the 18th and the 19th centuries in India. This unfortunately was at the same time when the idea of development itself was undergoing a new definition. In this new definition, development did not emphasize "to reveal" or "to unfold" or "to remove constraints", but rather "to go from inferior to superior". That was part of the new doctrine of Darwinism and evolution and it could be conveniently applied politically to the relationship between the countries that were governed and the colonial powers. It was not a long step from discussing primitive organisms such as amoeba and paramecium to



discussing primitive societies and primitive people and to determine that primitive was clearly inferior and to label wholesale the institutions of these colonialized countries as primitive.

One of the first targets in India was the practice and institution of agriculture. Indian agriculture is, even today, in most western texts, labelled as primitive agriculture. In fact one of the most common descriptions of the agricultural system of India is to call it a primitive system. We call the plough that is used by the farmers as a primitive plough. We condemn this major institution of agriculture on which Indian society has existed for well over five thousand years as "primitive". It was a gigantic step (backward) to insist that "primitive" agriculture change to the recent western chemical based agriculture.

The religions of India were also described as primitive. The Hindus particularly were identified as believers in a primitive religion which was riddled with idolatry and superstition. Today this is still a major image and stereotype of Hinduism. In the same way Europeans misinterpreted folk religion in their own cultures, they were making the same misinterpretation with respect to India. They compared Hinduism at its folk level with Christianity at its elite, philosophical level. Obviously when you make that comparison, the differences in the religions are enormous. Had Hinduism been compared in its philosophical level as found in the Upanishads, the concept of Atman or Brahman, the idea of Reality, with philosophical Christianity - ideas of St. Thomas or Augustine - the comparisons and the understandings would have been very different.

But, that did not take place. What took place was a comparison of gods at the village level with Christianity at its elite, montheistic level. Even today many believe that Hinduism is a polytheistic religion and that Christianity is a montheistic religion. Neither of those statements are correct. Hinduism is a monotheistic religion; it is a monistic religion. It is a pantheistic religion; and it is a polytheistic religion. By the same token, Christianity is also a monotheistic religion; a pantheistic and a polytheistic religion. It depends on the level of practice - whether it be by



the village peasantry of Mexico or Italy, or in elite priestly philosophical discussions - those interpretations will vary. In any case, Hinduism was given this branding and that continues to this day. One of the most widespread of the Episcopal Hymns, which was found until recently in the Hymnal says:

"What though the breezes blow soft
Over Ceylon's spicy Isle
Where every prospect pleases
And only man is vile
In vain with lavish kindness
The gifts of God are strewn
The Heathen in his blindness
Bows down to wood and stone..."

In other words, it does not really matter what God does, the heathen bows down to wood and stone and this is the best you can expect of primitive, superstitious people.

Once this branding had been made, the culture itself was understood to be primitive, backward and inferior. The pity was that many people who belonged to the Indian intellectual classes went along with that interpretation of Indian culture. They also agreed that it was primitive, inferior, and backward. That in essence becomes the cradle ground of development. With that agreement it now became necessary to bring in a transposed technology and new institutions - political, medical, legal, educational institutions - not as an afterthought, not in a sly, secret way, but with all of the clear arrogance of imperialism.

Macualay, in his famous "Minute on Education" said that one good shelf of British literature was worth all the books that India had produced and that it would be the aim of the educational system in India to produce people who, while Indian in colour and in appearance, would behave like Englishmen in all other ways. These would be the people who became the foundation of the Indian Civil Service. With their ideas, their concept of bureaucracy and their mistrust of the people (because fundamentally colonialism is



based on mistrust) they built a Government that was based on mistrust. This concept of mistrust now extends very deeply into the fabric of Indian society. It is the foundations of daily behaviour of the present bureaucracy and Government of India.

Development meant that these indigenous systems were to be replaced. They were replaced. The Anglo-Saxon system of British law established that every legal proceeding is an adversary proceeding. Someone is against someone else. The issue is who is guilty and who is innocent. This concept of law was quite different from the classical Indian concept of law which was that Dharma or harmony or the balance has been put out of order and the purpose of law would be to right the imbalance, to make things harmonious again. It was not a question of who is guilty^{or}/innocent; but how to restore the balance. That concept was fundamental in a village society because balance and harmony were crucial. In the urban and technological society out of which the legal systems of the west had grown - whether Roman or British - the principles of law and the needs of the law were quite different.

The political system of a Parliament Political Parties and other institutions that developed as a result of the very peculiar and particular historical experience of the West were now understood under a concept of universalism. This idea of universalism is still one of the most dominant of western cultural values. It is unfortunately one of the foundations of the United Nations operations today - that what is good in the West is good around the world. That same chemical medical system of the World Health Organization is good anywhere in the world. It is universally applicable. The United Nations believes that its charter of human rights - in terms of western Anglo-Saxon law - must be human rights around the world. We have seen it in the development phenomena in terms of the women's movements. Once again a situation that is felt within the problems of women in the West is universally applicable around the world. The same is true of another phenomena that is just beginning to arise in India. This puts a new and a



very unfortunate interpretation on Indian society to separate people into age groups, so that the old and the young are separated from each other. This process has already gone a long way in the West, particularly in the separation of the old, who sadly are understood to be unproductive people. They are put into separate homes, separate institutions and given specialized treatment that is sometimes patronizing, sometimes welfare - but essentially removed from the main stream of the society. This, of course, has never been the case in India where old and young have been the two greatest sources of educational transmission. We now begin to see aspects of these western values coming into India with development organizations arising specifically for the purpose of "benefitting" the aged. The concept of dividing people into age groups or dividing people into sex groups - these are all part of a transmission of different institutional systems and alien cultural values.

The result of this very aggressive drive under colonialism and imperialism - whether that imperialism was political, cultural or economic does not really matter a great deal - came in an analysis of development in this country which said that the main problem of development and the main obstacle to development is the people of this country! The people are so tradition bound and so backward that it is going to be almost impossible to develop the country. This amazing and most arrogant concept said that the very foundation of the culture had to be changed if development was to take place! This was also one of the minor chants of the Government of India itself. The ideas and the institutions of the people it claimed must be changed. The emphasis on indigenous resources has exactly the opposite awareness. It is the planners who must change their ideas. It is the Government which must change. Development must be built and indeed can only be built on the institutions of the people.

The effect of this attack on indigenous resources was, very tragic. It was to result in a very substantial lack of confidence of the people in themselves. It was to produce a mentality



of passiveness. The new mentality said: "We cannot do anything for ourselves. We are dependent on you to do for us." That mentality is now one of the major hurdles of development programming. Indians themselves began to adopt a very negative attitude towards their own culture and their own country, with expressions such as "Oh well, we are only Indians. It does not really matter for us. Please sahib you take that. We are only Indians." This attitude carried over to Indian products - if fountain pens, one had to have a Parker or toothpastes had to be Colgate or radio to be Grunig or tires had to be Firestone. Whatever it was, if it was foreign it was much better and if it was Indian it was only Indian.

This attitude had and continues to have most regrettable results. But fortunately it never really penetrated fully into the village level of Indian society. There the people took a different attitude and many of them resisted these mentalities that have now been subscribed to by a whole generation of Indian intellectuals, many of whom had been educated in the west as a form of "development" activities. It was considered highly developmental to give scholarships and fellowships and bring elite Indians to the west where they could be "properly" trained in understanding and ideas and then come back to this country. A number of them did not return which some lament as being a "braindrain". In my judgement, it is probably better that they did not return to bring even more of these culturally offensive ideas into the country.

This lack of people's confidence and passiveness is itself one of the major reasons why many of the development programmes have been unsuccessful. To emphasize indigenous resources is to validate the heritage which most people of this country still use as their foundation. There is no possibility of any meaningful development without the restoration of confidence, since confidence and development go together. The only way that confidence will be restored is by voluntary agencies and the government and others validating the existing cultural heritage and ideas and institutions. Not because it is a sentimental, romantic or nostalgic thing to do



but because it helps to reaffirm the personal experience of centuries of living that much of the people of this country have had. Because to emphasize indigenous resources gives more than lip service to concepts such as "power to the people", "people's rights to make decisions about their own lives" or "learning from the people". Many of these are today little more than empty cliches and slogans. An emphasis on indigenous resources reaffirms these ideas as central and these ideas will necessarily have to be given more than lip service if development is to be meaningfully achieved.

It is not necessary to indicate in great detail the number of projects that have failed in this country - projects that were essentially based on alien ideas, on alien institutions, on transposed technology. It really did not matter how powerful the organization was sponsoring those ideas - whether it was the family planning drive of the Ford Foundation, or whether it was the agricultural technology of tractors and pesticides and chemical fertilizers which, unfortunately, are now to be found dominating in every agricultural college of India. Most of these projects I am delighted to say have been failures in this country. It is my hope that one day the agricultural colleges will create a major department of organic people's gardening which is not based on the expensive debilitating system of western agriculture. So long as development plans are based on western concepts the number of failures will rightly continue.

The use of indigenous resources is a meaningful village entry strategy - meaningful because it can gain the confidence of the people honestly rather than by gimmicks. A leading Indian development Institute, funded by the Government of India told me that their village entry strategy was to take a bunch of pills and go to the village a few times and distribute those drugs. Once this was done it was possible to plan and work with the villagers. Such an ignorant and dishonest approach does not lay any foundation for meaningful village entry strategy. Indigenous resources can make a major difference in project success.

Even if all this were untrue, if all this evidence were



without any historical basis and if all the statements made here were false, one still must consider the futility of the pursuit of non-indigenous resources. It will never be possible to produce in India enough automobiles for example, that is equivalent to the situation in the west. If that were achieved we should all die of pollution. China wisely ruled out the pursuit of that kind of transportation. In the field of medicine it will never be possible to produce physicians in sufficient number or enough accessible and inexpensive hospitals and a supply of drugs to supply all the people in India through the western allopathic system. All you can do is to make the resources available for the rich at the expense of the poor. This is the greatest danger in following a model that is based on alien technology. To sustain that model the poor have to pay for it. It is the rich who always benefit from the western legal, medical, educational, technological, political and economic systems. When development organizations build legal aid programmes they contribute to that exploitative system. It is true as well when they build hospitals or use or advocate the use of pumpsets and diesel or pesticides and chemical fertilizers. When they use these they help only to increase the profits of multinational companies and contribute to the power of the rich. For the landless labourers and small peasants are without those resources. All these indicate the clear futility of the pursuit of non-indigenous resources. The use of such scarce resources and the practice of pesticides, for example, are under heavy attack even in the west. Many countries have banned varieties of pesticides and medicines. Unfortunately and with great danger those that are banned are now profitably dumped in India and South East Asia.

Indigenous resources are the only way by which dependencies can be avoided. If development is accepted as an activity of relying on one's self, then indigenous resources are the genuine methods by which dependencies will be avoided. When people cannot supply resources to themselves it is not genuine development. I am not advocating a museumised or fossilized culture which continues

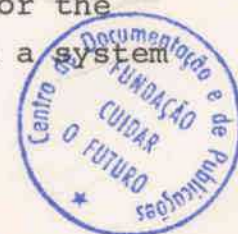


on the basis of a romance with ancient India. Development first means the removal of constraints that become sources of exploitation. The sources of exploitation need to be removed, be they local or native or indigenous. I am not supporting those indigenous institutions. What I am saying is that indigenous resources are the soil and the root on which new ideas can be grafted. A mango tree cannot be grafted to an apple tree. Alien institutions and ideas cannot be grafted to Indian systems. Modifications and adaptations may be necessary but the foundation must be indigenous.

Indigenous resources are a method of preventing exploitation in a society. If exploitation is central to the whole question of underdevelopment, the more we use resources which are scarce the more those resources are capable of exploitation. This is another aspect of indigenous resources that is particularly important especially for activist and neo-marxist groups who discuss the question of resources seriously. We must change our understanding of resources to an understanding that resources are far wider than simply saying that land is the fundamental resource, as some of these groups argue.

The indigenous resource position says that because resources are locally available you do not require specialized knowledge for their control. Specialized knowledge is at the base of western resources, technology and medicine and of exploitation itself. But once you are using Grandmother's medicine, once you are using a system which can be taught to most of the people in the villages then everyone has the resource. Anyone can pick the neem leaf. Any one can find the bark of a tree that is local to make a paste for a massage. As long as you cannot control the resource you cannot exploit by selling that resource.

It may be of some value to say a few words about folk medicines. The Manthravathis of the folk system of medicine which is used by most people of the country are held in contempt by those who imagine themselves as scientific. They say that this is a superstitious quack system of medicine. Recent reports in Canada show that 60% of the medical prescriptions are ineffective for the purposes for which they are prescribed. When you start with a system



of medicine that is 40% effective and then you begin to add the enormous exploitative financial cost of that medicine, then you see you may be dealing with one of the most repressive medical systems that the world has ever produced. Here it is salutary particularly in South India to look at the early medical folk systems that were practiced and still are practiced in smaller villages and ask whether those systems are not a far better foundation of development, rather than more and more chemicals based on the control of multinational corporations.

The objective of a programme of indigenous resources is to make local resources and particularly the resources of knowledge, which is a fundamental resource, more widely available. It is that resource of specialized exploitive knowledge which enables the lawyers to bleed the people in this country. It is that knowledge resource of exploitive medicine which enables physicians to become a special group - one of the highest paid in the society. It is knowledge that is the resource. Take that resource and awaken it in the people in as many areas as possible and you will limit the amount of exploitation. It must be done in the field of education where universities now charge enormous capitation fees and when the degrees they give are not worth much. Alternative educational systems remove the resource from the hands of the specialists. Stimulate technology that people themselves can repair with materials that are locally available and you remove the power of the technicians to control those resources. Indigenous resources then is also a method of preventing or minimizing or reducing exploitation which is fundamental to the question of development.

We talk about learning from the people, but the truth is that our education system is based on a top-down approach. "I am the specialist. I teach you and you teach some one below you and they teach someone below them and finally we teach the people in the village." But as a matter of fact, our educational system is quite impoverished and it ignores an enormous body of knowledge. There is a big fashion in development organizations for what is called literacy.



There are people who think that literacy is of the highest importance and illiteracy is a terrible curse. I cannot help asking what University Buddha went to, or how literate was Krishna, or what were the degrees that Christ had in this exercise of literacy. But that apart it is important to recognize that the oral tradition, that is to say, the illiterate tradition, is a culturally significant phenomena. What does literacy mean? Literacy is not knowledge. Literacy is not wisdom. Literacy is not education. Literacy is the ability to read and write the local language. That is it. Even an illiterate person like myself is able to communicate in India and understand many things that are going on. That is no less true of people in the villages.

More important is what happens when you replace an oral tradition with a literate tradition. Many beneficial things in the society die. What are some of the casualties of a literate society? One of the most important is personal communication. To the extent that a society emphasizes literate communications it de-emphasizes oral and personal communications. The traditional educational system of this country based on the guru-chela concept was an oral tradition. It is a fact that India has what we call the oldest living literature today because of the oral traditions, not because of the literate traditions. The Vedas and other texts were all orally transmitted by pundits. They were in early times not even permitted to be written down. It was that oral tradition that ensured their survival and not a literate tradition which has interpolations and corrections in the margins of the text. Imagine what would have happened to Indian music had that music been a literate system. Had it been written as western music is written, there would be no Indian music. Indian music is based on a parameter of the rāg or the tāl within which all of the spontaneity, all of the personal creative expression is displayed. Reduce that to literacy and you destroy that system.

In many European countries, no dominant cultural concept of guesthood is fundamental. Continuous daily personal relationships



are on the contrary the dominant part of Indian society. One of the greatest complaints of western societies today is the enormous depersonalization of people. It is not simply an issue of romantic nostalgia. It is a serious problem of mental illness in a society where people receive therapy because they do not and cannot find enough scope for substantial personal contact and personal recognition and personal relationships. We should thus examine literacy programmes as we should critically look at other projects that have been introduced as part of alien ideas and institutions.

It is important to re-examine very critically other "development" programmes including balwadis and creches which split up families and take children away from their parents putting them in the hands of strangers in the name of employment. Indeed, we must re-examine the concept of employment itself and ask ourselves to what extent development agencies are building programmes which put people into humdrum, boring, uncreative work day after day, considering it development, simply because it provides them with a few rupees. Employment is understood in the western world to be fundamental form of personal identification. People are identified by their jobs, by their form of employment. In moving in those directions we may often be doing acts which are quite underdevelopmental. That is to say, quite uncreative, quite unrevealing. Many "income generating" projects are some of the worst curses of existing development programmes.

Beyond exploitation, and beyond indigenous resources the fundamental issue of development must be the revealing of the creative genius, the inner person, the higher aspirations of a people and a society.

Indigenous resources are not a romantic accessory to the issue of development. Indigenous resources are at the very heart of developmental activity, and ought to be at the heart and head of development organizations.

Note: Copies of this article may be obtained from:

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HOW TO IDENTIFY INDIGENOUS RESOURCES:

* Resources locally available

- local knowledge
- local infrastructure
- local maintenance
- local decision making
- local implementation
- local employment
- local supplies
- local technology
- local administration

- * Resources easily accessible to the disadvantaged.
- * Resources cheap - within financial range of the landless and the poor.
- * Resources have historical precedent in the area.
- * Uses traditional folk knowledge as base.
- * Is consistent with the local cultural values.
- * Is part of local worldview.
- * Is primarily produced for local consumption.
- * Benefits and will be consumed by the local people.
- * Cannot be taxed.

HOW IT MUST ASSIST:

- * Builds self-confidence of the poor.
- * Improves the quality of their life.
- * Promotes non-violence.
- * Assists in removing constraints.
- * Encourages people to reveal themselves.
- * Promotes openness.
- * Promotes harmony between people.
- * Reduces dependencies.
- * Increases the joy of life.
- * Beautifies life and environment.
- * Is mentally and emotionally satisfying.
- * Should be a freeing, releasing, revealing component.
- * Is aesthetically pleasing.
- * Should encourage creativity and adaptation.
- * Must minimise fear.
- * Demystify knowledge.
- * Minimises burdensome employment.
- * Reduces the potential for exploitation by the Government, foreigners or the rich.
- * Project design and implementation involves creative participation of the people concerned.

THE NEGATIVE POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- * Tries not to use established structures and system.
- * Does not injure or destroy life.
- * Does not rely on specialised knowledge.
- * Does not rely on synthetic chemicals.
- * Does not rely on petrooil.
- * Does not require permits and licences.
- * Does not involve the export of food.
- * Does not violate the integrity of cultural heritage.
- * Should preferably not be sales oriented.

(This criteria for project proposals based on indigenous resources has been developed by J W Spellman, Prof of Asian Studies, University of Windsor, Canada).

