

SOCIAL RESISTANCE TO DEVELOPMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF SITUATION OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

— M.N. Karna

If social change is an objective reality, development is embedded in ideology. This ideology in a modern state is the product of historical experience and political change. The transition from feudalism to capitalism to socialist transformation in the West is nothing but an ideological transformation. The developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America is experiencing a similar alteration in their ideology of development which is essentially anti-colonial in content and liberal in form. In this sense, development is not merely an empirical process devoid of any well conceived direction reflecting historical forces and qualitative character of its society. It is a coherent ideology to bring about well defined transformation in the life of the people. When development is only taken as a programme, the very essence of its qualitative importance is lost. The path of development instead of taking a desirable direction may lead to unfavourable changes in the economic structure and social relations of the people. Directionless development is no development at all.

For the most countries of the Third World, this is a crucial question. The legacy of colonialism and colonial exploitation has brought them to a stage when they are facing a serious crisis of ambivalence. While outlining their ideology of development they face a dilemma created by persisting influence of Western ideology and growing awareness of their own national identity. Consequently, no consistent ideology has developed in most of these countries resulting into a slow pace of development.

Any discussion of development in India must begin in this perspective. But the situation here is hazy and nebulous. Not only the policy and programmes of development launched for different communities and regions are directionless but even the framework in which this is explained fails to comprehend the various issues adequately. The conceptual scheme adopted for the present discussion on constraints of development itself reflects such a limitation of analysis and rigorous examination. To identify social and educational constraints and tribal practices and customs as independent sets of factors responsible for tardy pace of development in North-East is naive and simplistic. Unfortunately such a facile scheme suffers not only from methodological drawbacks but involves far reaching policy consequences for the intended path of development.

The idea that India's socio-economic backwardness in general and North-East's in particular is rooted in its traditional institutional structure does not provide us with a proper and adequate perspective to understand the reality of the situation. Whatever role the traditional institutions might have played in bringing and perpetuating poverty and economic backwardness, the slow rate of economic growth has definitely been more due to a long spell of colonial exploitation. Several new arrangements were made even in secluded and 'excluded' areas to suit colonial interests. Even some baneful social practices were utilised to facilitate colonial goal. Thus perceived we must not exclude the role of impediments and constraints from our purview that were created by prolonged foreign rule. There is no denying the fact that the structure of traditional Hindu society in Central India and isolated social organisation with associated psychological insulation in tribal regions has partly contributed to the creation and maintenance of a very backward economy and social system. But to assign primacy to this factor as compared to the barriers imposed by the colonial administration will be distortion of facts and exaggeration of the reality.

Another unsatisfactory dimension inherent in this logic as applied to North-East is whether social and educational constraints are responsible for arrested growth or such a backwardness itself is the result of slow pace of development. The issues involved here are not merely academic but substantive. Every social system possesses both the elements, one that stimulates change and the other which resists it. It is the ideology of development which articulates these elements in a desired direction to fulfil its goal. What we, therefore, require in the present

context is not only an identification of social constraints found in numerous communities of North-East but also a proper understanding of those elements in social organisation which facilitate change and transformation. Accordingly, we should develop a scheme of inquiry which takes care of both sets of factors: barriers and stimulants of change. The framework being suggested does not contradict altogether the popular notion of constraints of development but attempts to give them rigour and precision.

In speaking of constraints there has been another tendency to see them in "tradition-modernity" framework. Under the influence of western sociology especially American conceptual formulations societies or nations of the Third World have been characterised as 'traditional' as against the First World which are regarded as 'modern'. Besides several other differences, the traditional societies are supposed to possess some peculiar features not generally found in modern western societies. Behaviour in traditional society is governed by custom not by law. The social structure is hierarchical. The position of individuals in society is ascribed not achieved. Economic productivity is at the level of subsistence. Since such societies are closed and immobile, they experience tension as in most cases tension is mainly concerned with the conflict between tradition and modernity. The oft-quoted theoretical model of Talcott Parsons has also been used to explain the tradition-modernity dichotomy. The scheme attempts to structure the relevant relationships in terms of the "pattern variables" in the attempt to state the basic factors comprising a framework in which entire social system can be studied and compared. The five dichotomies which express these choice alternatives called pattern variables have been listed by Parsons¹ as follows:

- (a) affectivity vs affective neutrality,
- (b) self-orientation vs collective orientation
- (c) particularism vs universalism
- (d) ascription vs achievement
- (e) diffuseness vs specificity.

Applying this to the question of development it has been suggested that the first set of variables—*affectivity, self-orientation, particularism, ascription and diffuseness* are broadly associated with backward economies as against the other five found in an advanced

society. But in a somewhat different way the traditional societies are facing these constraints because these alternatives determine the pattern of economically relevant behaviour. The contrast between traditional and modern societies in terms of the contradiction between the two sets of pattern variables is based on the assumption perhaps that they represent two extremes on an evolutionary scale. Such a theoretical assumption is not tenable because possibility of constant dialectical evolution of tradition cannot be denied. Moreover, the traditional society is by no means extremely traditional and modern society devoid of tradition. Such a functional scheme of inquiry attaches secondary importance to historical forces of change which may be introduced from outside the system. Even these reasons are sufficient to discard this framework in the present discussion.

What I have attempted to highlight in the foregoing paragraphs is the limitations of the framework which endeavours to explain the constraints of development in a structural-functional manner. It is my contention that the social constraints of development in North-Eastern region of India must be viewed in the historical context. Except geographical contiguity the region does not form a homogeneous whole. Each unit has its own peculiarity from the points of view of social organisation and cultural pattern. The enormity of the problem is further reflected in a large number of tribal groups which inhabit the area. Despite the socio-cultural heterogeneity it is possible to formulate a systematic approach to develop if we go by historical analysis that does not consider the region as static, timeless and spaceless in character. We cannot elucidate the role of social institutional constraints in their complexities purely in terms of the existing situation. We have to refer to the historical experiences under which the entire region has had uniform impact. What I propose to do now is to dwell on some important aspects of indigenous social life which are directly associated with the development question in North-East. This will be taken up at two levels, first at the level of individual personality and secondly at the level of social institutions.

Since change is initiated in the minds of the people, their attitude towards life and work are directly intertwined with the question at issue. Unfortunately, we do not have any systematic study of what one may call 'tribal psychology'. However, keeping the overall civilization growth in view it is not difficult to point out some of the common features of such societies at the attitudinal level. Superstitious beliefs and irrational outlook, lack of competitiveness and ambition, reverence for the past

and fear of the new, submissiveness to authority and exploitation are some of the major constraints at the psychological level which are normally highlighted in relation to tribal societies of North-East.² Such attitudes towards life and work are the products of social environment not of biological instincts. 'The individual no more act upon the world than the world upon the individual'. Those who assign importance to these factors and hold tribal responsible for these drawbacks tend to look for certain 'modern values' in societies which had been based entirely on different value structure. An important instance is the notion of competitiveness which is definitely the outcome of the capitalist mode of production. To look for such values in indigenous societies that have been traditionally based on mutual interaction and exchange is to seek effects without a cause.

How far have these attributes taken firm roots in the minds of the people? What I mean to suggest is that whether these elements of people's experience has been brought into systems of thought and values to defy possible change and transformation. For instance, the traditional and dominant Hindu world views have been based on doctrines of *maya*, *karma* and *dharma*. Such philosophical doctrines have influenced minds of the people of ages insisting on extreme conformism in practice. The attitude of fatalism, compulsiveness of caste obligations, secondary place for secular values are some of these elements that are incompatible with the moral sense of modern man. I am of the view that in the tribal societies of the North-East we do not find any such system of thought and value providing normative-philosophical support to the negative ideas of the people. Hence these value components are not difficult to be replaced by rational, scientific and secular outlook. Modern education can play a liberating role if properly planned and executed.

Coming to the social institutional dimension of the problem we can begin from the village community. Like other regions of the country the village in North-East India has been more than a collection of individuals. The nature of ecological setting and demographic features had led to close knit and well integrated structure functioning on the basis of self-regulation and self-government. The village leadership has been based on status which has carried with it a well defined code of obligations and duty. Continuity and stability of the tribal social structure could be maintained through such a village community. In most of the cases these villages have been the extension of lineages and clans. In this sense a tribe and its villages have been a world within itself having a

few external ties.

It will be interesting to point out here that some of the components of this village community are taken today as constraints in socio-economic development. But the local level institutions such as chieftainship and village government which are considered to be stumbling blocks now are not the creation of tribal social process itself. It is clearly the consequences of colonial legacy. The system of chieftainship, for example was developed by the people to maintain a self-zamindar. But the colonial administration found in these chiefs a very convenient and powerful ally who could be utilised to accomplish colonial interests. It is through this process that in most of the tribal communities democratic chiefs became hereditary ones. In this sense, the colonial rule had in fact a vested interest in the continuation of India's social stability.

Similarly communal control over land is another important feature that attracts our attention in this context. The social organisation of *jhum* cultivation does not allow the individual ownership of land as does the settled agriculture. *Jhuming* is labour intensive, particularly in its initial phase when land is cleared for cultivation. Under such a system the control over land is exercised either by the clan or the village but rarely by the individual household. Such a communal ownership is found in majority of the tribal groups. However, several distortions have taken place in the system and we find growing privatization of land. But the fact of the matter is that community ethos and values associated with agricultural land and forests continue to be maintained.

The development administrators today consider this system of land tenure and modalities of land distribution as serious constraints in replacing *jhuming* by settled cultivation. Hence the established principles of individual ownership is advocated for this region as well. It is also being contemplated for providing institutional credit as in the absence of individual ownership it will not be possible to do so.

I would like to make it clear that the transition from communal ownership to individual ownership of land started during the British period and has been going on even now. Nevertheless the dominant practice continues to be communitarian. Unfortunately, a somewhat egalitarian system is being treated as a constraint in development because it goes against the established thinking of the government agencies which is in tune with the system prevalent elsewhere. The policy makers perhaps do not realize that the strategy adopted in other areas may lead

to a serious social implication in this part of the country. This can be illustrated with the help of concrete example.

The communal land tenure system, distortions notwithstanding, had not permitted much internal differentiation within the community in terms of income and wealth. It has resulted in the absence of sharp class distinction in most of the tribal communities. Iniquitous norms and inegalitarian values are yet to be internalized by the individuals and institutionalised by the group. Self-help, self-reliance and community sentiment which helped them to sustain through the difficult days of hills and forests continue to guide them even in the age of government subsidy and help. Naturally, if we ignore these facilitating factors and go on viewing them as constraints, it is going to create a serious problem for the region. A directionless investment and subsidy will lead to parasitic development giving rise to what one of our Naga research scholars has said a 'sponsored society'.

As a matter of fact numerous new objects of resistance have emerged in these societies in the wake of changes taking place during the last few decades. A potent obstacle to development today is individuals and groups that fear a loss of power, wealth or prestige. Should development gain prominence? Emerging internal differentiation and growing inequality in these indigenous societies have given rise to a class of people which has vested interest in the backwardness of these societies. It consists mainly of rich and middle landowners, traditional social leaders and new professionals having landed interests. A notable feature of this class is that while confronted with the disgruntled groups the different segments of this class come closer to protect their interests but whip up passion to mobilise their own people for other immediate gains. As such, this group takes the form of a class on one occasion but goes back to the traditional tribal appeal on the other. Thus the underdevelopment of these societies is in the interest of this class.

Then there is a question of resistance to change on the grounds of "ideological traditionalism". The basic intellectual and religious assumptions with regard to existing power relations, morality, welfare and security tend to be adversely disposed to change and development.

REFERENCES

- Talcott Parsons and Edward A. Shils, *Toward a General Theory of Action*, Cambridge, Mas., 1951, pp. 49, 76-7.
- See for details, *Report on Development of North Eastern Region*, National Committee on the Development of Backward Areas, Planning Commission, Government of India, November, 1981.