

Book Review

Development Discourse : Issues and Concerns by T. K. Oommen
(Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2004, 68 p, Rs 150).

Traditionally all the issues relating to development are considered as the subject matters of Economics. Thanks to the state patronage, for centuries only the economists enjoyed the privilege of heading all the commissions and committees determining the strategies and goals of development. They virtually dominated the discourses on development in the world and also in India. However, the growing realisation that mere economic growth and economic development are not enough to resolve the complicated problems of the modern world has necessitated the involvement of and interactions with several other disciplines, scholars and social activists in the developmental processes. Consequently, many issues and concerns, which were neglected earlier, have now become part of the development discourses. In the book **Development Discourse : Issues and Concerns**, which is a compilation of three lectures that Prof. T. K. Oommen delivered in March 2004 at the North Eastern Regional Centre of Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR-NERC), Shillong, the author critiques the leading development discourses for their commissions and omissions. He raises several uncomfortable questions and issues, ignored hitherto by the development discourses and makes a case for the need to broaden our perceptions, methodologies and strategies on issues concerning development.

In the first chapter Oommen discusses three major perspectives in the trajectory of development, namely mainstream perspective on

development (MPD), alternative perspective on development (APD) and post-development perspective (PDP). He traces the origins of MPD to colonialism and its civilising mission. The native nationalist elite in the colonies who fought against their colonial masters also accepted the MPD's prescriptions of modernisation and westernisation as means to pursue development after their countries attained political freedom. Alongside the post-colonial states, Oommen includes even socialist countries under MPD on the ground that both capitalist and socialist countries see industrialisation, urbanisation and modernisation as their primary tools / goals of development, and they differed only on the roles assigned to state and market, not on the issues of technology, techniques of production and division of labour. India, which he thinks has tread the third path by mixing the multi-party democracy of the first world and the planning model of the second world, also followed the MPD model. He includes even neo-liberalism and human development approaches which dominate the development discourses today under MPD category, for both of them, despite other differences, concentrate on the individual as the unit of development and neglects social engineering based on groups and communities. According to Oommen, MPD conceptualises development as a single homogenous process towards modernisation underestimating the potentials for diversity, complexity and adaptability. The limitations of MPD project and the entry of non-economics disciplines into the development discourse heralded the beginning of what Oommen chooses to call as Alternative Perspective on Development (APD). APD lays emphasis on people-oriented development. It stresses on pursuing the basic felt needs of the people through participatory and self-reliant strategies. It advocates eco-friendly, feminist-oriented goals based on local knowledge to be achieved through NGOs. APD rejects the singular notion of modernity and pleads for multiple modernity. Despite the fact that APD is associated with the contemporary progressive ideologies and social movements, Oommen points out that even APD is gradually being accommodated and appropriated by the World Bank and the IMF,

the votaries of MPD. Even though APD rightly interrogates the maladies of the mainstream perspective, Oommen feels that it cannot provide an alternative goal. The limitations of MPD and APD have given birth to Post-Development Perspective (PDP), which under the influence of post-structural theories question the very ideas of enlightenment, modernity and development. PDP considers poverty as historically and culturally constructed notion and sees development as prescription for the problem that modernity invented. Unlike a section of intellectuals, who under the influence of post-modern and post-colonial theories, began to justify PDP arguments, Oommen refuses to buy its logic. He rightly points out that the criticism hurled against positivism, Cartesianism and Newtonian Physics has lost much of its relevance with the development of quantum physics and chaos theory. By talking against science as such, PDP puts a moratorium on human creativity; it denies the agency of the South; the importance of the dependency theory; the relevance of alternative development and the sensibility of human development. By upholding Eurocentrism, albeit unwittingly, PDP, in effect, throws out the baby with the bath water.

Oommen finds four absences or cognitive blackouts in the development discourse, namely displacement, disparity, distress and discrimination. The development discourse usually talks in terms of displacing one aspect by the other – rural by urban, traditional technology by modern technology, market by state, and state by civil society. Oommen feels that this sort of displacement is no road to development. In addition he observes that the development discourse does not take note of the widening of certain types of disparities like disparities within the nations, between the groups, rural-urban disparity and income disparities. Further he states that human distress that one finds even in the so-called developed countries, as is evident from the increasing incidents of rapes, murders and suicides, hardly becomes an issue in the development discourse. Similarly, the development experts rarely debates over the socio-cultural discriminations based on caste, gender, ethnicity, race and religion. Stating that the

development discourse is very rich in rhetoric but rather poor in coping with reality, Oommen suggests five precautionary measures to overcome its current sterility. They include application of chaos theory to realise the unpredictability of the outcome; inclusion of people's reflexivity into the development enterprises; viewing of development as a conjoint project of state, market and civil society; fusing of different layers and dimensions involved in development into a totality, and acceptance of multiple models of modernity and developmental pluralism.

In the second chapter, Oommen talks about six revolutions that the human society has experienced so far: the first one, the revolt of aristocracy against the clergy; the second, the revolt of the bourgeoisie against the clergy and aristocracy; the third, the proletarian revolution against the bourgeoisie; the fourth, the revolt of the colonised people against their colonial masters; the fifth, the revolution in the socialist world for an autonomous civil society and the market vis-à-vis the state; and the last, the ongoing movements initiated by the deprived and the marginalised against governing elites of all the Three Worlds for evolving a participatory society to improve the quality of life. Oommen thinks that while the first five revolutions were fought by and for particular classes and were basically confined to certain regions, the sixth revolution, which is still continuing, is truly global in scale and scope and multi-dimensional in its thrust. He thinks that it is the womb out of which the notion of participatory development is emerging.

Explaining the different phases in the cognition of the nature of deprivation, and of societal mechanisms invoked to cope up with the deprived, Oommen says that earlier the poor were seen basically as objects of charity or relief. Later with the advent of welfare states and socialism, the concepts of development and welfare replaced the idea of charity. The modern state and the NGOs initiated different strategies to bring about a self-sustaining development of the poor. The leadership for these tasks was taken over by the middle class

development bureaucrats and altruist professionals who basically saw development as non-political, technocratic and managerial activity. Oommen points out that in this model also, the people's participation has little scope. The poor are seen as mere clients or target groups. It is only in recent years that it has been realised that to be authentic, development ought to be participatory. This new approach that comes out in support of collective action emphasises mobilisation and protest by a set of ideologically oriented militant social activists. Defining development as a human right, it focuses on the effort to conscientise the deprived of their legal and political rights. To overcome the limitations of this approach, Oommen suggests that the new collective actions and social movements had to be based on a different set of assumptions and strategies. People's action in contemporary societies is to be directed through NGOs that wish to avoid the iron law of oligarchy that has sapped the vitality of established institutions. The emerging collective actions aims to establish the much-needed balance between the logic of development and the demands of democracy. The contemporary collective actors seek to provide economic content to political democracy; they insist that food without freedom is not worth consuming. To Oommen, the choice of technology should be decided on the bases of the social and human cost of its production and the mode of its deployment. He considers it prudent to opt for technological pluralism that consciously nurtures harmony between humanity and nature, and fosters sustainable development. He suggests that the emerging collective actors recognise three basic sources of deprivation: class exploitation, social cultural discrimination and ideological oppression. Further, by throwing light on the possibilities of different kinds of deprivations, he makes a distinction between dispersed deprivations and cumulative deprivations, and argues for locating the real content of contemporary collective actions and social movements in the confrontation between the cumulatively dominated and the cumulatively dominant.

In the third chapter, apart from further elaborating his ideas on technological pluralism and appropriate technology, Oommen

interrogates Amartya Sen's conceptualisation of development as freedom. At a time when we come across several scholars in India, including those claiming to be Marxists, blindly reiterating Amartya Sen's formulations and prescriptions, it is heartening to see individuals like Oommen daring to problematise the basic assumptions of Sen's views on development. He contends that although as an ideal-type arrangement Sen's proposal is laudable, in reality it could not be realised even in small-scale utopian communities. He feels that Sen's optimism: "In a democracy people tend to get what they demand and more crucially, do not (typically) get what they do not demand," is not sustainable in the light of empirical evidence. By pinpointing the achievements of China, Oommen reflects on the limitations of Sen's argument that development, seen in terms of meeting the basic needs of people, cannot be achieved through non-democratic route is untenable. Referring to Sen's proposition that famines occur only in authoritarian regimes and are absent in democratic polities like India, Oommen rightly maintains that if famines are seen as a process, not as events, then India has been witnessing continuous famines, despite it being a democratic country. On the contrary China, which is considered as non-democratic has outshined India in all aspects of development. Saying that revolutionary and evolutionary trajectories of transformation entail qualitatively different social costs viewed in the long and short-term perspectives, Oommen emphasises the need to develop new tools for their comparison before pronouncing the eternal superiority of one over the other.

Oommen's interrogations of dominant discourses on development help broaden our understanding of what development means or should mean. This book also needs to be valued for its lucidity, brevity and clarity. Of course the book has its flaws and limitations. Viewing the superficial similarities between capitalism and socialism, Oommen clubs both of them under MPD. He appears to be unaware of the fact that it is not the nature of the relationship between the state, civil society and market, but the nature of the state, civil society and market that distinguishes capitalist societies from socialist societies.

His projection of the counter-revolution that has taken place in socialist countries like the USSR, as a revolution, discloses the author's ideological position. Despite his criticism of certain negative aspects of the capitalist world, his liberal stance come out openly when he identifies democracy and freedom only with that which exists in the liberal bourgeois states. Again, his contention that India chose the third path of development shows his ignorance of the fact that planning and state sector per se do not amount to socialism and that state ownership can co-exist with private ownership even in the developed capitalist economies. While eulogising the ongoing 'sixth revolution,' he seems to ignore his own earlier proposition that the APD's strategy of involving people in the development processes through the NGOs has been appropriated by MPD. As such the participatory development process that he zealously prescribes for eliminating all forms of inequalities and discriminations operates only within the broad parameters of liberal bourgeois framework. Despite these intellectual and ideological limitations, this book by Prof. T. K. Oommen is still worth reading for the uneasy questions that it raises and for the innovative propositions it makes, and for the interesting ideas that it throws. All these coming from a scholar who is not an economist makes the book all the more worth reading.

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