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## ALTERNATE MODEL OF INDICATORS OF DEVELOPMENT FOR INDIAN SOCIETY

Desmond A. D'Abreo\*

"What is development?" may in essence be a fundamental question that philosophy rather than economics is better capable of answering. Yet, neither economists nor government officials can escape addressing this question since what they advocate or do to improve the lives of people depends ultimately on what is accepted as development.

An ever increasing monitoring income for the citizens of a country is the most commonly accepted notion of development. A high capita income is the goal and rapid economic growth is the instrument. It is not just the economist or policy-maker who has been uneasy with such a notion of development. People who are well above the poverty line are often more concerned about a "better quality of life", than with the number and type of commodities that a higher per capita income can purchase. They may not be able to describe what a better life may mean, but they know that it is not just about a bigger salary and the more commodities that such a salary can buy.

A richer country, in monetary terms, may indeed be more equipped than a poor one to realise a better quality of life. But what governments – and even society – often forget is that a higher income is only an instrument, one of many, that needs to be used to improve the quality of life.

All this still begs the question of what constitutes a better quality of life. We have all agreed that the goal of development is the expansion of "human capabilities" that will give people the freedom to do things that they value. It is the lives that people lead rather than the commodities that they can acquire which is of intrinsic importance.

The absence of an automatic connection between per capita income and human development is the reflection of the fact that governments and countries always do not use the resources at their command to achieve the kind of human development that is possible for a society. What countries do achieve by way of higher human development is instead a reflection of the quality of commitment that government and society demonstrate in using the resources at their command. The unease that many feel about making rapid economic growth the goal of public policy is a dissatisfaction that is based on reality.

Does the concept of human development mean that economic growth does not matter at all? The idea of human development has indeed been criticised at times for being anti-growth. This is not true.

The 1995 Human Development Report of the UNDP gave the best answer to this criticism: "It is wrong to suggest that economic growth is unnecessary for human development. No sustained improvement in human well-being is possible without growth. But it is even more wrong to suggest that high economic growth rates will automatically translate into higher levels of human development. They may, or may not. It all depends on the policy choices the countries make".

"The human development concept consistently asserts that the growth is not the end of development – but the absence of growth often is. Economic growth is essential for human development. But to fully exploit the opportunities for improved well-being that growth offers, it must be properly managed".

Costa Rica, Cuba and Vietnam may have managed to harvest the fruits of their economic growth well. But that growth has been limited and halting and per capita incomes are low. So unless these countries are able to accelerate the growth of their economies, they face the threat of being stuck at low levels of human development. For the countries of South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, rapid human development requires a combination of faster growth and more aggressive public action, in health education and basic nutrition.

The idea and measures of human development are yet to find universal acceptance even nine years after the first Human Development Report was published by the UNDP. Some governments – including India's – see it as a (conspiratorial) weakening of the basic thrust of accelerated economic development. Professional economists have criticised the concept for being nebulous and the methodology of estimation and Human Development Index ranking for being flawed. Flaws there have been and the annual reports have been the weakest when it comes to drawing an agenda for action. This is most evident in the 1998 edition which discusses the links between consumption and human development.

But human development is an evolving concept. It has had to, after all, also do battle with the idea of economic growth as an end in itself, an idea that has been ingrained in the minds of people and governments for decades if not centuries. May be, just may be, the 1998 Nobel Prize for economics will tilt the balance a little bit in the direction of human development.

For as much as 80 per cent of the human population, and around 45 per cent of the Indian population, the promise that

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growth brings prosperity has been a cruel hoax. Growth as currently defined is not itself a panacea for what ails human society. Indeed it is a major contributor to many of those ills. Yet growth dominates public policy, almost to the exclusion of other values.

## LAND REFORM

Prof. Amartya Sen, who has been hailed as "a sort of conscience" of the economics profession by the Nobel Laureate economist, Robert Solow, gave a lecture in 1994 in honour of Prof. D.T. Lakdawala. As is well known, Prof. Lakdawala's concern always remained with the state of education and the quality of human life.

This lecture was in the context of the great enthusiasm for liberalisation of the economy following the example of China and the other southeast Asian countries. In this lecture Prof. Amartya Sen says, "If India has to emulate China in market success, it is not adequate just to liberalise economic controls in the way the Chinese have recently done, but also to create social opportunities that post-reform China enjoyed through education, health care and land reform to a great extent inherited from pre-reform achievements of that experimental country. The force of China's market economy rests on solid foundations of social changes that had occurred earlier, and India cannot simply jump on to that bandwagon without paying attention to the enabling social changes in education, health care and land reforms that made the market function in the way it has in China" (Amartya Sen: Beyond Liberalisation: Social Opportunity and Human Capability, Lecture in honour of Prof. D.T. Lakdawala, published by Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, 1994 pp. 26-27).

In India, land reform is the first thing to be dealt with, as a requisite of distributive justice. The very large number of landless people in our country demands a readjustment in this regards for how can a country in which the top four per cent of the population own fifty per cent of the cultivable land of India, while the lower fifty percent of the population possesses only four percent of the land have any element of justice?

Land reforms, by raising the incomes of the poor, enables them to benefit from the facilities provided for schooling, leading to improved enrolment of children in schools and reduced drop-out rates. Rising female literacy and declining infant mortality rates combined to reduce fertility, resulting in early and speedy demographic transition. The low population growth rates, so achieved, had several salutary effects. The low dependency ratio not only has a positive impact on household savings but also enables a rise in public expenditure per child on schooling and rise in per capita public expenditure on social development, in

general. Real wages rise as the growth in labour force increases with the demand for labour in the economy.

## EDUCATION

The central issue in economic development is to expand social opportunities for people. This calls for something more than just 'freeing' the markets. Indian illiteracy and educational backwardness have many adverse effects, particularly in the ability of the Indian masses to demand responsible action in areas like health care. What is more, lack of elementary education makes the goals of economic education harder to realise. Even if India were to grow very vast, the bulk of Indians may still benefit very little from the economic programme under way.

We need not produce any statistical evidence to prove that in sectors like elementary education and health care, we are backward compared even to other low income countries. Every development worker and social activist has these statistics at easy reach. China, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, etc. are far, far ahead of us. We might agree that Kerala is ahead of many of the regions in these countries. However, there is much less disparity between regions in these countries than in India.

Despite official rhetoric on the importance given to elementary education, there is little evidence of this. In real terms, the percentage expansions of the number of teachers in elementary schools has been steadily declining since the fifties. The number of primary school teachers per a thousand persons which increased from 14.9 in 1950-51 to 19.9 in 1980-81, actually fell to 19.3 in 1990-91 (A Sen, *ibid.* p.30).

It is a shame that India still has the largest number of illiterates in the whole world. Countries that were on a par with India when it gained independence in 1947, have all gone ahead since then. Sri Lanka our small neighbour in the South has pushed its education and literacy far ahead to great steps. China, which is a larger country than India has increased its literacy rate tremendously. It has been said by a previous Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, that the number of illiterates in India today exceeds the population that India had at the time of its gaining independence from the British..

The government clearly has to step up its efforts both in elementary education and health care. Economic reforms are based on the premise that there is too much government in some sphere. But in these two vital sectors, there is too little government. Rural schools which cater to 75 per cent of India's population are the most neglected institutions in the country, and they ignore the adequate education of women, dalits and tribals.

This is not just to promote economic growth; used as means towards an end. "It would be a mistake to see the development of education, health care and other basic achievements only or primarily as expansions of 'human resources' the accumulation of 'human capital' as if people were just the means of production and not its ultimate end. The bettering of human life does not have to be justified by showing that a person with a better life is also a better producer." (A. Sen, *ibid.*, page 3) However, improvement in human life creates possibilities for further improvement.

The diffusion of primary education is perhaps the single most important factor accounting for the reduction in poverty and income inequality. In general, it has been seen that human capital, represented by primary education, is the most important prerequisite for growth, followed by physical capital and productivity of inputs. The East Asian countries, in general allocated a much larger proportion of their public investment for agriculture and rural development than most other developing countries in comparable stages of development. This, together with universal primary education, made growth broad-based and labour-intensive with skill-intensity, resulting in higher growth as well as improved income distribution.

## DEMOCRACY

These past few weeks we, in India, have been constantly reading in our newspapers and seeing on TV that we have been undertaking or participating in the greatest democratic election in the world. We are also reading and hearing that we are the largest democracy in the world. But we have to examine who are the people who constitute this "greatest democracy".

For weeks before the elections, one of the TV channels used to feature one particular village in the country on a programme called "India Matters". Every one of these villages were characterised better by the long - standing poverty prevalent in the place even after fifty two years of independence: there were main roads leading to these villages in an utter state of disrepair, no drinking water, no drainage in every one of the villages depicted. In fact, one day's programme followed another in boring repetition of the same images that showed the same realities of filth and horror in every village. And the reaction of every villager interviewed was the same every day "Elections come so often, politicians keep making the same promises before those elections and once the elections are over, they are no longer visible".

In Uttar Pradesh, which is India's largest state, the villages and towns practically are buried in a sea of uncollected filth and garbage. The garbage spills out of the towns and lines the national highways so

that along miles and miles of it you will see pavements that seem to be made up entirely of human faeces, rotting food, plastic and industrial waste. When it rains, this filth becomes mobile and spills into the roadside shops and restaurants, licking at the legs of tables and chairs. The squalor is unspeakable, with children, pigs and stray dogs all scrambling around in the same filth.

In the cesspools that are the small towns and villages of Uttar Pradesh, it is impossible to expect people to nurture dreams or aspire to better things. It is not possible to talk of civilisation of our ancient culture to people who live with untreated sewage seeping into drinking water and whose children go to school, if at all they do, through streets paved with rotting garbage. It is not possible to speak of democracy and intelligent voting to these people who live in this State that sends more legislators to the parliament than any state in India.

### **A REVERSAL TO TRADITIONAL VALUES WITH REGARD TO COMMUNITY AND NATURE**

When we look at the traditional value system and our cultural roots, we find that the ideology or philosophy underpinning globalisation and consequently, the economic policy adopted by the Indian Government, is diametrically opposite to these cultural foundations and value system of our country. It is a philosophy centred around money. In our present economic system, money serves two functions. It is, first of all, a medium of exchange. This function is a useful and positive institutional invention which serves a purely utilitarian purpose.

But, besides this, money has now become also a store house of value. It has acquired a value of its own, so that people measure their wealth not in their land, homes or other assets, but in the amount of money they possess. This function of money is wholly divorced from any intrinsic or instrumental values and has made it a powerful instrument of alienation.

In a non-monetary economy, like the one we in India were accustomed to in olden times, wealth was necessarily stored in things that had intrinsic value. The maintenance of this intrinsic value was integral to the accumulation process. These values, e.g. value of productive land, animals, wisdom and human relationship were commonly inseparably from community and place, which figured centrally in the veneration of these values.

But today, wealth is stored in money and money is not necessarily identified with coins or paper notes. In our modern society, it now exists very much as electronic traces in computers, wires and airwaves. It has as an almost ethereal nature

since it moves from place to place through actions of unseen and unknown people. As a result, those living in the world of money soon lose any sense of relationship to community or to locality, even if it is their place of origin or native country.

Consequently, the ability to accumulate wealth in the form of money breaks ties between an individual or a family with their community and native place. Instead, money becomes the activating force of institutions, alienating claims over natural resources, talents, and knowledge of others, alienating the individual owner from his cultural and ecological heritage.

We realise that once money becomes internalised as a value, the mere offer of sufficient credits can motivate the holder of real resource claims to relinquish them. If I hold money as a value in itself, the offer of an adequately large amount of money is enough to tempt me to give up whatever claims to land, house or asset I may have within my native village or city. This is what we are noticing in every part of the country. A lot of land which belonged for centuries to traditional indigenous Christian families in Mangalore, where this is being written, is now changing hands because of the offer of a tempting sum of money that has been gained in the Gulf.

Financial debts, through which one person accumulates specific claims against another are a particular common instrument of alienation. International debts tie up resources and labour of future generations of one country to future generations of another!

This alienation is the daily experience of the rural poor. As ties to community and place are broken, there is an increased migration to cities and a concomitant dependence on the monetary economy. The lifeless and placeless medium of money has become a substitute for the ties which for centuries affiliated people to their community and place of origin. Today, the arbiter of values is no longer one's religious teacher, but one's accountant.

The attributing of an internal value to money has grave international repercussions, in which the economically strong countries can hold immeasurable control over all the other countries of the world. As has been noted before, the economy that is predominant today is the free market economy. It has become globalised, and therefore, is regarded as seamless, that is, transcending all national boundaries. In such an economy, the countries with a relatively stronger economic power will appropriate to themselves greater freedom to exercise claims over the non-monetary resources of the poorer countries whenever profitable to do so.

This is one reason for the devastating ecological destruction carried

out in underdeveloped and developing countries. Those countries who have large accumulated financial credits at their control can acquire ecological stocks that lie beyond their national frontiers. The poorer the original holders of these environmental stocks, the more easily do the countries gain them at a cheap rate. The meeting at Rio from June 3<sup>rd</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> in 1992 forcefully showed how these powerful countries then shift social and environmental burdens onto those too uninformed or too powerless to protest.

The world has had a long history of increasing alienation of the human race from community and nature. This alienation is intellectually rooted in Western dualism that sees humanity apart from nature and legitimises the view that humanity has the right and also the **obligation** to subdue nature to its own benefit.

This concept of separation has been central to the philosophy of Descartes which holds as a underlying principle that man has the ability to be an objective observer of reality. There is no doubt that this attitude has led to remarkable scientific and technological advances in the West. But it has also led humans to think that they are masters of the natural world and no longer need to heed its limits.

The reason for this arrogance is found in the extent to which money has become the arbiter of values and the motivating force of nearly all human institutions and activities. We have created a society dedicated to the worship of money and to an economic practice that converts life into money with relentless efficiency. Our collective obsession with the replication of money as the defining purpose of human society is both cause and consequence of our collective alienation from the reality of the spiritual nature of all life, including our own. It is this alienation that is the root cause of the social and ecological crisis that threatens our collective future.

Centuries ago, we in Asia and Africa believed that God was found in Nature and had made man partner with nature, with forests, and with animals. But with colonialism we have placed God outside nature, and man at the head of all creation. Hence with capitalism, man has begun to use- or destroy-his partners for a profit! The rape of the forest is no longer sacrilegious. But nature is now taking its revenge. The spirits of the murdered forests are now beckoning the desert to come closer and closer every day, bringing in its wake drought and famine.

We do not hesitate to state that the domination of consumerism in our society is the supreme malady of all history, because humanity has virtually defined consumption as its highest purpose. It is tragic that we humans today are in danger of losing our way because in embracing consumerism we have discarded all our traditions which have

for so many centuries given meaning to our existence. This meaning can never go together with a dedication to consumption. We need urgently to rediscover those traditions which alone can give us a sense of our special role and purpose in life's evolutionary journey.

Consumerism has drawn us to love things and to use people in order to acquire things. Because of this inordinate love of things we tend to shun responsibility for life in a human community. The foundation of the traditions which we have rejected is the love for persons and the use of things in our growth in love for others. We have to rediscover this foundation through our efforts to love people and to accept responsibility for life in a human community.

This does not imply rejecting modern technology and returning to a primitive untouched life. We are poised to reach for new levels of social, intellectual, and spiritual advancement far beyond the reach of previous generations precisely because of the current potential to meld both ancient and modern wisdom to this end. To prepare the way, we must restore the social, spiritual and economic connections of the individual to nature, to place and to community that development has interrupted.

For as much as 80 per cent of the human population, and around 45 per cent of the Indian population, the promise that growth brings prosperity has been a cruel hoax. Growth as currently defined is not itself a panacea for what ails human society. Indeed it is a major contributor to many of those ills. Yet growth dominates public policy, almost to the exclusion of other values.

We need a new model for Asian Countries which will combine efficiency of resource use with rediscovery of life's innate spiritual character and inseparable spiritual connection of every person to nature and community. These are already deeply imbedded in India's rich religious and cultural traditions. The new alternative must reintegrate these spiritual traditions with modernity.

However let us not think of this alternative as a new theory of development. An attempt to construct any new theory will almost inevitably lean heavily upon many of the assumptions of the prevailing growth model. Many groups who have been trying to construct such a new theory have limited their approach to a mere tinkering at the margins of the dominant model. They have, for example, called for side agreements to international trade pacts to moderate their negative social and environmental consequences. Unfortunately, the dysfunctions of the prevailing model cannot be alleviated through damage control alone. **We need a true alternative.**

As a basic principle of this new model, we must realise that there can be no sustainability without EQUITY. The first step toward equity is to transfer the allocation of

limited ecological resources from non-essential consumption, from wasteful wants of society's overconsumers to the irreducible needs of society's marginalised people.

Whether dealing on the national or international level it is easy to see that where there is inequality, the powerful feel much more free to plunder those resources from others. The greater the plunder, the greater the displacement and the further impoverishment of the weak till they reach the point of social and ecological collapse. **It is important to realise that it is not poverty or wealth that creates environmental destruction or human underdevelopment. The root of this underdevelopment and destruction indeed is inequality or injustice.** It is only when there are conditions of equality, that it will be difficult for one group to alienate another from their physical resource base.

In view of what has been said about wealth and money centred orientation of the new economic policy and its root which is Globalisation, it is important to realise that sustainability means bringing both consumption and population levels into balance with what nature can sustain. **Both depend on the elimination of gross political and economic equality.**

We have to move away from the centralising role played by the IMF, and the World Bank, GATT and the Multinationals, in order to arrive, at sustainability, it is important to move towards an institutional framework that **decentralises, distributes and roots economic power in community and in one's own place and environment.**

Hence, in order to undo the harm that is being done by Globalisation and the new economic policy, it is absolutely essential that first of all, there must be a strong orientation of the international institutions and of our own ruling powers to bring about an equitable sharing of resources among our people. No peace, development, or progress can be built up unless on a foundation of justice and equity.

## NEED OF A GENUINE SPIRITUALITY

On the basis of this justice, a genuine spirituality has to be our unifying force. What does spirituality mean?

This spirituality is not something linked up with any institutional religion, but rather, it is a secular spirituality that is rooted in our ancient traditions. It is primarily a realisation of the inner force in each person which provides commitment and dedication to one's community, to mankind and to nature. It involves a recognition of the personhood of every human being one deals with. This is not to be identified with mere altruism. Rather it is an essential component of the building up of one's own personhood whose fulfillment is recognised only insofar as it authentically

exercises relationship and is able to treat others with the same dignity and respect that one would wish for oneself.

Everyone must find out what brings her or him peace and serenity and commit some time, at least half an hour daily, to that practice. No matter how dismaying one's circumstances, this discipline can bring one relief, even comfort. If a person is on the fence about whether there is any such thing as a higher power in the universe, she or he might want to try acting as if he did believe, even if he doesn't. Beginning to turn over what one cannot manage to a power greater than oneself can bring enormous relief.

We, in Asia, and very specifically in India, have from time immemorial regarded our human existence as being constituted by relationships. Our culture and national dynamism has long been grounded in the most fundamental of all spiritual insights: All life is an expression of a single spiritual unity with all other beings, and spiritual growth of the individual consists of advancement towards the full, conscious realisation of this unity. Spirituality, community and a strong bond to the place in which we live are central values that have unified the Asian cultures over centuries.

These traditional values hold that balance and harmony should govern relations in mankind. This means that every human being will find his peace and the development of his personality in the measure he retains his relationships with the Supreme or the Atman, with the whole of cosmic creation, with all living creatures from the tiniest plant to the largest animal, to all fellow creatures and ultimately to the intra-personal relationship within himself: of his mind, his will, his emotions and his body to each other.

Central to all these relationships is the one he holds to his fellow men. Only in his efforts to bring justice, peace and love to others will he find himself. This is the central point of his search for Satyam, Shivam and Sundaram, that is truth, goodness and beauty.

To become truly people-centred, our social practice must become life-centred. We must replace an anti-life development practice, which is consumerism, with a life-affirming social way of life. An important starting point will be to replace the prevailing economics of alienation with its antithesis, an economics of community.

This is expressed in a beautiful story from the past. A Guru once asked his shishyas when would be the dawning of the true light. One shishya answered; the true light dawns when along the road you notice an animal and can tell whether it is a fox or a dog. "No," replied the Guru, "That is not the answer." Another shishya said, "The true light dawns when you look out of your window and can distinguish an apple tree from a pear tree." Again the Guru said, "No, that is not the right answer." Then in frustration, the shishyas together asked the Guru to give them the right answer. He said, "The true light dawns when

you look at a man or a woman and can recognise your brother or sister.”

This harmony of relationships is manifest in several ways. It is manifest in the injunction that when a tree is harvested, two must be planted. When nature is scarred, it must be given time and opportunity to heal. It is manifest in traditional massive Asian irrigation systems, that work in harmony with natural forces. It shines forth when we respect our natural habitat as the fount of our spiritual and material wealth. It resounds whenever the people from a city condominium actively show their concern for justice on behalf of their

neighbouring slum dwellers. It breaks new ground when the landlord in the village treats his Dalit landless labourers like brothers and sisters. It is firmly rooted when social activists, at great personal risk and with self-sacrifice, struggle with the oppressed for justice. It is forcefully effected when we relate to our fellow human beings, however poor and suppressed, in faith and respect, recognising them as our brothers and sisters. It is finally proclaimed when a balanced and harmonious relationship in all these levels is strongly associated with a reverence for the spiritual unity of life and a strong bonding to community and place.

It is this spirit of brotherhood that will permanently sustain a distributive justice that provides a proper balance in land ownership, sees that all Indians have an opportunity to have an adequate education so that they can participate actively in a vibrant democracy. It is this brotherhood that will deepen the traditional values towards community and nature. It is this brotherhood that will be born of this spirituality that sustains every Indian soul.

**Desmond A. D'Abreo**

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