

READING 'DEVELOPMENT' AS A DISASTER



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Reading 'Development' as a Disaster

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Our present-day world revolves around something known as the 'development' sun. This particular sun rises in the North and sets in the South. The industrialized, Christian, white North becomes 'bright and beautiful,' while the agricultural, mostly non-Christian, colored South stays dark and dreary. The North is the home of the "industrial civilization," the South is the jungle of "traditional backwardness". In developmental terms, the North is hailed as 'developed,' while the South is belittled as 'developing,' or 'under-developed.' Then, there is a whole other set of countries called 'least developed.'

These terms are obvious enough, and don't warrant an explanation, suffice to it say that the South is considered to be not quite mature, not quite caught up to the established standards of the North, not fully grown, incapable.

The 'Holy Trinity'

Every human society has or had its own understanding of pathways to development. Development may be simply defined as progressive change within a passage of time, managed by people who consider the internal impacts and external costs. The problem, however, is not with that concept of growth. Development in today's world has come to mean the imposition of one particular interpretation and organization of economic growth onto the whole wide world.

Such is the history of the world: Non-Western developmental systems violently denied full evolution by invading forces of colonialism and imperialism that imposed their 'Holy Trinity' -- "oil, steel and cement" -- on violated peoples. These are the symbols which represent the three ideational elements of the so-called industrial, developed civilization: "speed, super-size, and strength."

Much of the scheme, as we well know, is based on speed. The faster you are in colonizing, dominating, cheating, and/or putting down the other, the greater you will be. 'Hit fast' is the first principle. The second principle, 'hit big.' Northern civilization desires the 'big': factories, corporations, markets, profits, cities, roadways, most everything. The logic is, of course, the bigger your endowments, the better you feel about yourself. Small may be beautiful for some of the misguided (E. F. Schumacher), but big is powerful. The third principle is 'hit hard.' The heavier the blow, the greater

you are, the weaker your enemy gets. In order to avoid such vulnerability, one builds everything tough: the state, the bureaucracy, the army, the guns, the machines and the like.

The message of the Western world: if you are not excited about this divine development, there is something fundamentally wrong with you.

You must be an outright procrastinator, a West-hating revolutionary, a lunatic Chavez-lover. You cannot appreciate “the civilized way of life.” If you are not interested in speed, super-size and strength, you are “slow, small, and soft.” In other words, you are feminine, senile, childish, traditional, unpromising, retarded, and tribal. Put simply, you are *under-developed*. You are not a quick moving, big time, prime life, and risk-taking, strong and stout masculine entrepreneur. Poverty and misery is your fate. And, if you claim that the “slow-small-soft” combination suggests that you are careful, sustainable and equitable, you are mistaken: you are anti-civilization. You are the enemy.

Suppose, for a second, you do believe in “industrial civilization” and you do work hard to develop your country. Will you become developed? Not necessarily! Take the example of the national elites of Singapore. January 1, 1996 was the day Singapore, the rich Southeast Asian country, expected to be announced as a ‘developed’ nation. Even in this moment of optimism, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong warned his 2.9 million compatriots in his New Year message not to get carried away with their new and prestigious status of being ‘developed.’

Alas, the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) removed Singapore from the list of ‘developing’ countries, simply dumping them into a different bin: “more advanced developing countries.” The Singaporean government had planned to use their new status as a tool to ‘develop’ themselves even further. The Singaporeans, to say the least, were quite embarrassed.

No matter how hard they try, Asians, Africans and Latin Americans are still not ‘developed’ enough and cannot seek entry into the closed club of ‘civilization.’ Nonetheless, the hopelessly colonized national elites of these continents still set their aim to fully fledged ‘development.’ After all, it is part of their survival package.

The Nature-Development Dualism

We humans tend to see Nature, in its pristine form, as an untamed monster or an unregulated entity. We assume, and appropriate totally, complete ownership over it

without giving any due consideration to other living species and their needs. This is an arrogant “Masters of the Universe” mentality, and leads to selfish proprietorship. We exploit Nature for our own exclusive use and profit, rather than using it for our needs and sustenance. So, ‘development’ becomes an instrument of taming Nature, domesticating it and appropriating it for our own exclusive use, abuse and over-use.

The complications which arise from the Nature–Development dualism inevitably lead to disasters. We can discern two types of disasters: manifest and latent. Manifest disasters are rather rapid, visible and remarkable focusing events. Latent disasters, on the other hand, are slow, invisible, inconspicuous and non-focusing events.

MANIFEST DISASTERS

Human-Caused		Natural	
Error	Terror	Mitigable	Unmitigable
Unintended	Deliberate	Carelessness	Helplessness
Bhopal Chernobyl	Nuclearism Subjugation	Hurricane, Tsunami	Asteroids, Heavenly Bodies

Many disasters can be directly related to what has been discussed as the contemporary “development” scheme. Manifest disasters are either human-caused or caused by Nature. Human-caused disasters occur due to either error or terror. Those disasters based in terror are deliberate, typically based in various domination, subjugation and intimidation schemes carried out by forces of colonialism, imperialism, nuclearism, racism, sexism, fundamentalism, and so forth. Often, symptoms of the diseases such as bombings, hijackings and kidnappings, are investigated and heeded upon; root causes are overlooked.

Terrorism directly relates to “development.” Most acts of wanton violence occur due to historical injustices (slavery, occupation); colonial exploitation; imperialistic expansion; nuclear and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threat; social exclusion; exploiting others to entrench “our (Western) way of life” and so forth. This is not to endorse terrorism in any way, but to reiterate that it does have a larger context, one which is bound to the notion of “development.”

Natural disasters can be mitigable or unmitigable. Mitigable disasters, such as hurricanes, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, are just as natural as rain, wind, autumn or spring, etc. Mitigable disasters are relatively temporary phenomenon that may occur suddenly and infrequently, but are nonetheless powerful and chaotic. But, they are natural -- part and parcel of Nature.

These natural disasters may become even more disastrous due to our own recklessness. We pay a heavy toll both in terms of human lives and material damage when we are not careful or selective about where we live, how we live, and so forth. For example, Bangladesh and the Indian states of West Bengal and Orissa are hurricane-prone; however, humans deliberately choose to live in these places. We have no one to blame but ourselves when we put ourselves in harm's way. If Mount Etna is an active volcano, we should keep clear of its surroundings. If certain sections of various fault lines are shaky, we should keep away from those areas as well, avoiding disaster.

It is our "more powerful than Nature" attitude and arrogance that render humans vulnerable to disasters. We believe that humans are civilized, while animals are not. We rarely hear of the hundreds of thousands of buffaloes or zebras that have died in earthquakes or hurricanes. We humans, as part of "civilization," confront nature by building homes, auditoriums, movie theatres, factories and industries, roads and airports – always "developing." But, when what we "develop" collapses in an earthquake or hurricane, we call it a disaster.

That is quite pathetic. The very basis of any civilization should be preservation and the nurturance of life; if that is not the case, what good is that so-called civilization or its so-called development? In 2004, a great tsunami left the tribal peoples of Andaman and Nicobar islands, as well as the animals of Yola national park in Sri Lanka, all unaffected. However, "civilized" humans died like flies, in large numbers.

If we are truly "civilized," "rational," "scientific" and "objective," we should devise ways and means of nature-friendly cohabitation techniques. In an earthquake-prone area, we should build light-weight flexible structures to avoid building collapses and heavy casualties. In Bangladesh and Florida, areas where hurricanes hit often, we should avoid building permanent homes there and instead utilize the land for agricultural purposes, or other productive activities. We could even build seasonal homes, keeping out during the hurricane season, thereby avoiding heavy human casualties and material damages.

Surely, there are mainstream scientists and technocrats who counter-argue the “development as disaster” scheme, noting that our modern scientific-technological prowess and equipment (direct achievements of our modern development) help us understand many hidden truths of life handle many situations and so forth. But none of this will be of any use or help whatsoever in the event of an asteroid or meteoric collision. If, and when, an unmitigable disaster strikes, we will all be done with. We will suffer the same end the dinosaurs experienced: extinction.

Let us now turn to latent disasters. As pointed out earlier, they tend to be slow, invisible, inconspicuous and non-focusing events. Just like manifest disasters, latent disasters may be either human-caused or natural. Human-caused disasters occur due to error or terror.

LATENT DISASTERS

Human-Caused		Natural	
Error	Terror	Mitigable	Unmitigable
Unintended	Deliberate	Carelessness	Helplessness
Unquestioning Acceptance of Northern Values, interests	Megaprojects militarism	Depletion of resources	Abrupt ending

Errors may produce catastrophes, a result of our conquering of Nature through industrialization, globalization and other such unquestioningly accepted Northern “development” values and interests. The result is pollution of air, water, land, and sky; absence of health and presence of psychosomatic illnesses; undercut and unsafe futures; fear, anger, hatred and anxiety; weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and perpetual preparation for war; spending of resources for life-killing purposes rather than life-enhancing goals, and etc. We do many of these unknowingly. Oftentimes, we fail to see the long-term effects of our own commissions, and our own omissions.

Even after we have realized that these mistakes are avoidable, we persist with modern “development” precepts and practices. Countries of the North do not want to acknowledge mistakes and admit that their “way of life” cannot be sustained for too long. The elites of the South continue to believe that the Northern model is the only way

their countries can “develop,” continue to try desperately to beat the former in their own game. Now, we are facing an assortment of crises that gives rise to a new, creeping disaster.

Terror-type human-caused disasters include mega-projects such as nuclear power complexes, mines, industries, gigantic dams like Three Gorges Dam, in China, or Narmada Dam, in India, and so on. These projects have disastrous consequences. Nuclear power stations leave huge amounts of dangerous nuclear waste to be dealt with and radioactive decommissioned plants to be taken care of. The Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest hydropower project with a generating capacity of 18,000 MW, will create a reservoir 600 kilometers in length and permit ocean-going ships to navigate more than 2000 kilometers from the East China Sea to the inland city of Chongqing. One can imagine the impacts of such a humongous project on the Earth, and on the local environment. Besides such concrete projects, abstract concepts and ideas such as militarism, Nazism, Fascism may cause havoc on human communities as well.

Latent natural disasters can also be divided into mitigable and unmitigable ones. Depletion of resources due to our indiscriminate use and reckless attitude towards Nature produces latent disasters. Deforestation causes rain failure; sea-sand mining causes sea erosion and tsunami vulnerability etc. If an unmitigable disaster strikes, our fate will be sealed forever.

In the Nature-human interactions that aim for development, most of what humans do is not in the best interests of either Nature or humans. Similarly, humans take Nature for granted, refuse to see possible unmitigable disasters, and pay no attention to their own helplessness and vulnerability. An acknowledgement of this ‘smallness’ could result in better treatment of Nature; however, we fail to do that out of fear or vanity, or both. The ‘God complex’ of modern man just as much as the intellectual arrogance and the scientific and technological prowess make things much more complicated for humans. Clearly, we ought to reassess our understanding of Nature, our attitude towards it, and our relationship with it. We should also see development in terms of Nature’s sustainability and our own survivability. So any developmental effort has to develop both the giver and the taker, not just the taker.

Development-Disaster Connection

Nature is an entity of finite resources; we humans can utilize it with an appropriate development model to achieve normal growth, or exploit it with an inappropriate development model to achieve abnormal growth. Growth, too, has desirable and

undesirable aspects. While we celebrate normal growth of cells in human bodies, we abhor abnormal growth of cells as it is cancerous and disastrous.

Nothing can keep growing. Every growth has to stop at a point, mature differently, and complete the cycle of progress. Human bodies stop growing at a particular point, mature, begin to age, and die. Similarly, a fruit ripens, withers, falls to the ground, and completes the circle of life. One can never keep building a tower forever; it has to stop at a point on the basis of its foundational strength and capabilities. Normal growth is good, and that too changes its nature and scope at some point. But the contemporary development paradigm, marked by recklessness and indiscriminate use of Nature, gives rise to abnormal growth which ultimately leads to disaster.

After all, development (of the powerful) is often defined by the powerful, for the powerful. How would we explain the execution of mega-projects – the hurting, harming and even killing of human beings and their interests? Moneylenders, developers, policymakers, bureaucrats and middlemen with vested interests are all interested in *their* own “development,” making quick and easy money under the pretext of developing society. These mega-projects absorb huge amounts of money, over long periods of time, with so much room for corruption and wastefulness. They are so huge and complex that no meaningful transparency, accountability, and popular participation are possible. These highly centralized, authoritatively managed, arrogantly executed projects put vested interests in full command and control. The enormity and complexity of these mega-projects allow them to take care of their interests amply well. The costs and consequences of their takes and mistakes can be conveniently hidden or written off. The serious unforeseen complications, environmental impacts, social costs, future-bearings, and all other externalities become public liabilities while the elites take their loot with little or no responsibility whatsoever.

In the name of development, ruling elites actually bring about disasters. After a disaster, they rebuild the same backwardness. This ‘disaster to fix a disaster’ approach has come to stay with us, influencing our current understanding of development, disaster management, governance and so on. This self-centered and calculated violation of public resources and trust typically revolves around these following precepts:

Super-man	No humility; full of arrogance
Super-speed	Go-getter; never mind the consequences
Super-size	Bigger the better

Super-science	Science, more science, and more and more science
Super-market	Sell and sell and sell everything
Super-money	More and more and more
Super-power	My way or Highway Arrogance
Soullessness	No reverence for life, no mindfulness

Precepts prescribing never-ending growth wound Nature, and Nature, wounded, gets us back on its own time, by its own terms, at its own place of choosing. For instance, the numerous nuclear explosions which have been released all over the Earth must have their consequences if Newton's Third Law of Motion (to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction) is true. What goes around comes around. "Our (wasteful) way of life" has resulted in increased CO2 emission, ozone depletion, global warming, climate change, melting of ice, sea-level rise, sea erosion, displacement, IDPs/refugees, disputes, disharmony, violence, fear, hatred, wars, weapons of mass destruction, militarization...the vicious cycle rolls on. In fact, the Geneva-based International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) has warned that the reckless handling of our environment heralds requires of the world preparation for new kinds of climatic disasters.

When this "civilized" way of life is inflicted upon a traditional society such as Native Americans, or a tribal people, the progress creates desperate suffering and total destruction of the whole group, rather than producing favorable outcomes. *Progress Can Kill*, a report published by Survival International, attests to this fact. According to the report, tribal peoples are sometimes forcefully removed from their traditional land in order to make way for "development" projects such as large-scale mining, dams, logging, oil and gas exploration, or road-building, all for the greater good of the national society. At other times, progress is imposed upon these people with the thought that it is for their own good. For instance, the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert in Botswana were evicted from their ancestral lands and herded into resettlement camps enabling them to access schools, clinics – to lead more "developed" lives. But what actually transpired was just the opposite. The Bushmen were exposed to diseases such as HIV/AIDS and problems of prostitution and alcoholism. This is an example of how outsiders' notions of development can destroy tribal peoples, their self-sufficiency, pride, livelihoods and health. [1]

In another case, a well-meaning developmental project of a Northern developmental organization complicated the traditional life of a community in Western Samoa. When the workers of a particular European organization found out that the young women

from this community had to walk several miles to fetch water, development workers thought village women would appreciate having a water source in their midst. The organization dug a bore well in the middle of the village for the young women. Unfortunately, this development project resulted in several young women losing their family peace, even committing suicide. Because these young women did not have to go a distance to fetch water, their mothers-in-law had a firmer grip on the young women, harassing them even more. The long walk, the privacy the young women once enjoyed had provided an occasion for sharing, a time and place where mutual support existed giving the women a kind of informal group therapy. When this was destroyed due to the construction of the well, the young women had to suffer the tight grip of their family elders. As the above examples instruct, 'underdevelopment' is not completely unsuitable for some communities or societies; in other words, development that is measured in terms of wasteful Northern comforts and luxuries is not entirely desirable.

As in the last case, underdevelopment is often confused with poverty. Poverty is disastrous; it denies the basic necessities of life and is one of the root causes of misery. As poverty proves to be disastrous, so do disasters cause or worsen poverty. The loss of loved ones, homes, possessions, jobs, educational prospects and health and well-being often trap people in poverty and misery. Developmental efforts carried out to mitigate the disaster and to eliminate poverty should not recreate the same old poverty and misery. For instance, post-tsunami reconstruction in most coastal villages in India rebuilt the same old backwardness that had existed before the tsunami.

Ironically, when Nature acts up and we are confronted with a disaster, our development can hardly help us. Hurricane Katrina: case in point. All the "development" of the United States, its advanced technology, high-tech communication, intelligence networks, round-the-clock media coverage, highways, cars, military and modern paraphernalia could not help the people of New Orleans. On the contrary, traditional people tend to withstand the impact of a disaster better than modern "developed" people. As mentioned previously, indigenous tribes in the Andaman and Nicobar islands who had moved deeper into the forest when the tsunami struck in December 2004 were found to be safe after the disaster. [2]

The Way Out

Pondering a way out of this "development" quandary, I can think of a few possible options. The easiest would be to persist with the concept of development/growth/progress as we know it today. Many deliberate and reckless

mistakes are committed in the name of “development/growth/progress,” but typically we do not show any courage or have enough integrity to admit our own mistakes, or explore a willingness to rectify them. Never mind the lopsided nature of development, the costs of the externalities, other inherent problems, the people who have been left behind, the disgruntled voices. This disastrous development/growth/progress scheme, what we can call “development of mass destruction,” often leads directly to developmental disasters. In this scheme of things, one man’s development is and has to be another man’s disaster, and his disaster can be fixed by yet another developmental effort. Even as capitalistic disaster is undermining our global society, our human relationships, our living environment, our politics, and our future, we relish in the fact that even disasters can be turned into money-making and profiteering capitalistic opportunities. We have disaster capitalism. Consider this; after a disastrous war, companies immediately secure reconstruction contracts and calculate net profits before counting the number of dead bodies. Similarly, the issue of disastrous climate change is exploited to promote an anachronistic nuclear power business. So even if development begets disasters, we do not care as long as disasters bring more money and more growth. The road to disastrous hell is paved with developmental intentions.

Countries that are "developed" see development as a higher standard of living, transforming the concept into a series of aggregates such as “raising the Gross National Product, assuring a certain rate of growth, in turn fulfilling a series of production functions, consumption functions, utility functions and other 'principal components'.” Viewing development in terms of GNP, the so-called "modernization" approach emphasizes providing market for manufactures in international competition, warranting large investments in industrial growth and infrastructure, providing the basis for diversification, and creating a critical mass in technical personnel and investment resources. The aim of this kind of economic development is 'never-ending-growth' and the strategy is 'never-mind-the-path.' Take more and more, care less and less, the end justifies the means. In this day and age of bubble economies which can burst at any second sending millions of people into financial loss and misery, Warren Buffett rightly calls it “financial weapons of mass destruction.”

Another option would be adopting a ‘no growth’ or ‘zero growth’ approach. As George Monbiot wrote in one of his columns, “Governments love growth because it excuses them from dealing with inequality. Growth is a political sedative, snuffing out protest, permitting governments to avoid confrontation with the rich, preventing the construction of a just and sustainable economy.” The ‘no growth’ approach would not be easy for the government, the ruling class, the downtrodden, or for anyone for that

matter. Moreover, as discussed above, vegetating is not a viable option for a dynamic human community. A living organism must have a sign of life and that means movement of some sort.

An even more fanatical approach would be aspiring for regress. Regress generally means 'sliding backward' to the previous worse or less developed state. 'Regress' is better understood in relation to 'progress' since both words contain a sense of movement and a "discoverable sequence" in them. The contemporary meaning of 'progress' retains the 'improvement' sense with a twinge of 'change,' "the working out of some tendency, in evident stages." Depending on the chosen criteria, 'progresses' may be approved or disapproved. Progress, being a dynamic process that keeps on developing with the changing times, surroundings, and the overall environment, suggests that a society cannot be considered to be 'stuck' in its developmental efforts. If it is not pressing ahead with the continual process, it is actually falling behind and hence going backwards. 'Regress' in such a case is not an innocent opposite or reverse of 'progress' but a deliberate opposition to and willing reversal of the forward movement. Though the sequentiality and discoverability are commonly shared by both the movements (in forward and backward directions), the tendencies at play in regress are destructive, the processes undesirable, and the developments debilitating. To use developmentalist lexicon, regress is neither lop-sided development nor underdevelopment nor lack of development, but a complete departure from the very developmental path toward a degrading downturn. Swirling with social disintegration, civil war, and violence, an already demoralized poor and underdeveloped society spirals down to state collapse and chaos.[3]

Yet another option would be "the road less taken" approach. This is conservationist sustainable development. When European settlers or colonizers violated indigenous peoples, the first thing they invariably did was sap their victims' strength: usurping the land, pillaging resources, breaking traditional customs and beliefs. Having succeeded in making natives feel weak and worthless, intruders imposed their own values and ways of life on their victims. Indigenous models and methods were interrupted and an alien system was imposed in their place. So, agricultural societies may be better served going back to their land and their traditional development models.

Shunning nation-states, mindless industrialization, heartless commercialization and careless consumerist culture, instead, hugging a communitarian world society with a green model of economy, appropriate technology, and participatory democracy, a biological definition of peace must characterize our struggle. Resisting the State's relentless pursuits of 'development,' and demanding concerted efforts at eliminating

poverty by redirecting resources from military and mismanaged initiatives to education, health and agriculture, village communities should be able to remove the misery of their poor by reviving traditional customs of caring and sharing.[4]

It is also high time we restore harmony with Nature, enhance local governance, improve health, and education for all. In fact, we have already started a discussion around “green growth” strategies such as creating low carbon growth pathways, carbon emission reductions, Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), developing environment- and resource-friendly technologies, and so forth.[5]

Using Johan Galtung’s conflict theory we can see disaster as a combination of bad attitude, bad behavior, and bad contradiction. Our “Masters of the Universe” attitude combined with negligence and indifference, along with our misappropriating of Nature without ascertaining sustainability and safety gives rise to our current imbroglio. The answer is empathy, accepting our smallness and feeling and being part of the larger scheme; nonviolent approaches to Nature which emphasize utilization and not exploitation. Creativity that underscore devising new interdependent ways of life. We need green growth and clean growth. Not “‘development’ terrorism”[6] that is *inherently* disastrous.

End Notes

[1] Jo Woodman, “Progress can kill,” *The Hindu*, January 13, 2008.

[2] Suresh Nambath, “All primitive tribes safe,” *The Hindu*, December 31, 2004.

[3] For more discussion on regress, see S. P. Udayakumar, “The Deadly Slide: Understanding Regress,” *Gandhi Marg* (July-September, 1999).

[4] For more discussion, see S. P. Udayakumar, “Landing Peace Theory on Solid Grounds,” *Peace Review* 10/1 (March 1998).

[5] Sigmar Gabriel, “Strategies for green growth,” *The Hindu*, November 17, 2008.

[6] “‘Development’ Terrorism,” *The Movement of India* 2/2 (March-April 2007).



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