

Culture, Environment and Development- Understanding the interrelationship

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Abstract:-

Culture and environment constitutes an integral part of the new paradigm of development. Nature becomes an important factor in the context of development as it is regarded as commodity according to the classical economists. On the other the human life world is always dependent on environment. Hence culture, environment and development should be discussed with taking care of people's perspective. But this sphere is being neglected on many occasions which has created situation of turmoil.

This paper will concentrate on the issue of development particularly in Assam. This region is one of the great repositories of natural and cultural diversity as many ethnic communities choose this place as their homeland. The need of economic development, the need to protect or conserve the natural environment as well as the rich cultural heritage of this region have become the matter of political debate in recent years. At the same time certain other issues are interconnected with it. This paper is an effort to examine the inter-relationship between culture, environment and development strategy per se. It will help to understand the interconnected roots of all those issues of cultural, environmental, political and sociological importance.

Key Words: Culture, Environment, People's Perspective, Development.

INTRODUCTION:-

Culture and environment is a highly contested terrain in the context of development. The world wide environmental movement has played a great role in shaping a critique of development in recent years. It has tried to highlight the closely related issues of livelihood and the cultural as well as ecological security of the people. In India as

elsewhere, the colonial model of development failed miserably in incorporating the indigenous perspective of the natives. The western model of development commercialized the natural resources causing great ecological strain on the commons. However, the present development policy of India continues to be largely an imitation of the western model, particularly the inherited one of colonialism.

DEVELOPMENT –A GENERAL INTRODUCTION

“Development is an unstable term? It is an ideal, an imagined future towards which institutions and individuals strive? Or is it a destructive myth, an insidious, failed chapter in the history of western modernity” (Escobar: 1995, Edelman and Haugerud: 2005). Today, it can be safely assumed that there is no universally agreeable notion of development; in fact, it has come to be seen more in terms of the perspective from which it is looked at. In any case, the idea of development originally fed on western notions such as capitalism, modernization and progress. In this sense development was associated with industrialization. Modernity was conceived as the outcome of development process and modernization was always equated with development. Development, it was thought, meant “higher living standard” and “modern attitude”. Till the first half of the twentieth century, development implied the changes brought about by capitalist expansion. It promised a better life and future for human being. Development, from this perspective, was closely linked to progress. The progress was mainly in terms of economic advancement. This understanding of development emerged out of the optimism of the project of enlightenment. Conventionally “development” may connote improvements in well-being, living standards, and opportunities.

The industrial revolution gave a new meaning to the process of development. It seriously impacted our understanding of what constitute natural resources. “When colonialism followed industrialization, the scale of resource flows between and within societies hugely increased. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the invention of new technologies within and the colonization of new lands without, together led to a massive expansion of the resource catchments owned by Europeans” (Guha: 2010: 6). The industrial revolution inspired the colonial masters to expand their colonies across the world. The colonial masters enjoyed the fruits of the industrial revolution and the entire system of production got a new fillip. These production processes increasingly depended more and more on natural resources. The relationship between the global north and the south thus underwent a change. Large scale production of goods entailed subjugation of nature leading to serious consequences. “In the heydays of colonial expansion, the colonial territories constituted not only a source of wealth, to be exploited by the colonial administration, but also a convenient workshop in which to invent and try out the new development doctrines.”(Schech & Haggis: 2000:7)

The vast literature on development shows that it was earlier identified with material progress as well as with the improvement in quality of life. But after the Second World War, the very idea of development was viewed from new perspectives. The colonial intervention of development was deeply criticized. “It appears as if today, near the end of the century, a cycle is coming to a close. It was opened by

Columbus, as he set out on his journey across the Atlantic Ocean, more than 500 years ago. With his departure from Palos in search of a direct route to Asia-thinking of God, Spices, and gold-he unknowingly set the sails for the expansion of Europe to the ends of the world” (Fischer and Hajer, ed: 1999:23). The consequences of development led the thinkers to rethink about the development.

The post- development theorists viewed development as a pervasive cultural discourse. They have applied Foucault’s notion of power and control. Escobar the famous post-development theorist has described nature as constructed category which becomes immersed in discursive and material struggle. They criticize western development as hegemonic development and it is behind the construction of all the aspects of social reality in the third world. As a result of that several other new concepts of development evolved out. The concepts like; “another development”, “participatory development”, “socialist development” are the result of that. Nature, culture and livelihood become the important factor here.

Culture and Environment: Key Players

The emergence of the environmental movement has generated a fresh evaluation of the process of development. Of late, drawing on the inputs presented by perspectives such as that of Ecofeminism and postcolonialism, culture and environment have come to occupy a position of some importance in the path of development. That development entails change and transformation seems to be one issue on which there is universal agreement. However, what was discussed less frequently not so long ago was the fact that this change is always manifested in the culture of a people.

Culture is therefore directly or indirectly central to the ways and means of development. Development can be defined as a cultural discourse in this sense. “The meanings attached to the term development are produced within and by a particular cultural context, that of the so called West – or, more precisely, the political, economic, and social institutions of Euro-American Societies, generating a particular discourse of, or way of talking about, development.”(Schech and Haggis: 2000:1) It means that development is not an objective but a subjective concept.

The present crisis of the environment and the consequent crisis of justice have dramatically changed the established notion of development. “Any attempt to ease the crisis of justice threatens to aggravate the crisis of nature, and vice versa; any attempt to ease the crisis of nature threatens to aggravate the crisis of justice.”(Fischer and Hajer, ed: 1999:28) Quite obviously, this perspective excavates the importance of culture and environment in the context of development. Such trends of thinking has led to the search for alternative ideologies of justice- Gandhism, Budhism, Ecofeminism, Environmentalism of the poor, environmental Justice, Cultural Studies. “Feeding on indigenous ideologies of justice – Gandhism, Budhism or Catholicism – and emboldened by a more general assertion of ecofeminism, the environmentalism of the poor has contributed to a profound rethinking of the idea of development itself.” (Guha: 2000: 119) To a large extent it has criticized the existing model of development, which is insensitive to the cultural and ecological factors. These indigenous ideologies of justice have criticized the industrial way of development,

resource-use and government-policies.

“Development as conventionally understood and practiced has been attacked on a philosophical plane, but critics have been forthcoming with nose-to-the ground, sector-specific solutions as well.”(Guha: 2000:122) According to these critics development affects the organic foundations of life and opposes the neo-capitalist developments. They envisage a viable model of development, which will be beneficial for local people, not in the pattern of the capitalist model. In this context the culture and tradition of the people become key factors. They ask for an alternative model of development where local knowledge and tradition will get a space. The question of culture and environment becomes central to this new model of development. “It is easy; however, to see that the base from which the dilemma rises is the conventional notion of development; for if there were development which used less nature and included more people, a way out of the dilemma would open up. Small wonder, therefore, that in the last two decades committed minds from all corners of the world have been calling for an ‘alternative model of development’.”(Fischer & Hajer, ed.:1999:28) These kinds of thoughts have persuaded the emergence of concepts like “sustainable development”. It involves both the process of conservation of nature and the conservation of development for the future. Development is conceived as an intersection of society, economy and environment. But this perspective of development can not be taken as innocence.

The so called third world model of development claims about the importance of culture and environment. It values the traditional culture in respect of development. “They drew in different ways on what they perceived to be the cultural essence of the country, and these cultural traditions gave direction to their development strategies, and at the same time shaped a specific cultural and national identity.”(Schech & Haggis: 2000:40) Ramchandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil (1992) in their book point out that the debate around the forest and the environment is firmly rooted in the matter of production and use of resources.

THE STORIES FROM ASSAM

Assam is situated in the north-eastern part of India which is famous for its biodiversity as well as cultural diversity. It is a fantastic mosaic of hills and forest, valuable flora and fauna, beautiful river and land. Geographically Assam can be divided into two parts – hills and plains. The domestic population of Assam shows a distinctive identity where diversity flows in a rhythmic manner. The early Assamese literature describes nature as an integral part of life of Assam. The indigenous life of Assam depends on the environment in respect of resource-use and production. The early geography of Assam shows that the place was ecologically benign. In due course of time, Assam became a part of the British Colony. The signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo on February 24, 1826 literally paved the way for handing over the administrative power of Assam to the British Raj. Since then the entire meaning of resource-use and production mechanism underwent a change. The nature and the natural objects became the source of capital and got a new meaning. The British adopted a new forest policy by which forest resources became one of the greatest

sources of revenue. The upland areas of Assam were transformed into large tea estates which coincided with the migration of various groups of people from outside. In real sense, the domination and control over resources has been transferred from the commons. This process of transferring the control immediately leads to the transmission of power. It has changed the structure of power relation. One single authority has snatched the power from the hands of many which leads changes in the entire structure of social fabric. "British imperialism could not wipe out the population of India – ironically, it set in motion a process of demographic expansion – but it did certainly disrupt, perhaps irrevocably, the ecological and cultural fabric of its society"(Gadgil & Guha: 1992:242).

The colonial model of development had its adverse impact on the socio-ecological structure of the society which was far from the traditional methods of resource-use. "In India, elsewhere, the British usurped the ecological niches occupied by the hunter-gatherers, many of whom also practised shifting cultivation, and diminished substantially the niche space occupied by food producers, by alienating them from access to non-cultivated lands.....They out-competed and usurped the niche space of Indian handicraft workers and artisans, as well as of itinerate traders."(Gadgil & Guha: 1992:242). Simultaneously, colonial administration created a class of people, particularly from the literate castes of pre-British India, who played their role as clerk and assisted the colonial rulers as trading partners. The notable point is that the colonial rulers discouraged native people from using modern technology in the process of resource-use. The main motive of colonial expansion was the extraction of raw materials for the development of their own economy. As the time passes this resistance was broken down and India's journey towards industrialism started. As a result, a new class of industrialists emerged within India. In the Post- Independence period these newly-emerging Indian capitalists started to gear up the process of development which is still prevalent. But the colonial model of development is still continuing. This has caused serious tension of cultural, political, economical as well as environmental insecurity in the various regions of the Indian subcontinent particularly in North East India.

Assam is currently facing the clash or conflict between the stakeholders of development and the native dwellers and question of human security has become extremely pertinent for all the players. Within the Indian subcontinent, Assam is generally regarded as culturally vibrant, rich in bio-diversity and natural resources but slow in terms of economic progress. At this juncture, development is a crucial question that needs to be freshly addressed.

Various strategies of development adopted in this region have caused serious concern about the cultural tradition as well as the environment. The crisis of nature and crisis of justice need to be taken as crucial in this regard. The region is in the grip of environmental insecurity. Population-explosion, various development initiatives such as road construction, oil extraction, coal mining, dam construction and natural calamities have led to environmental insecurity in Assam. This is not only in the case of Assam; the entire North-Eastern region is seriously facing the problem of environmental insecurity. The main effect of environmental insecurity is felt in land ownership, deforestation, soil erosion, changes in the pattern of cultivation

particularly in hill areas. These have impacted the local populations who have pursued their livelihood for ages by interacting with the environment in a sustainable way. This has encouraged the internal displacement subsequent to the passing away of the earlier way of life. The present scenario of Assam provides several examples in support of this. The use of water resources for economic gain inspired the stakeholders of development to construct large dams on several rivers in huge numbers to generate power. This may cause serious problem in respect of environment as well as in continuance of the culture and tradition of many communities. The power problem of Assam or entire region is quite grave. Hence the civil society members believe that the government can do far better than building mega-dams in a highly seismic zone of the region. They claim that the industrial and urban bias of the government is only the continuation of capitalist expansion in the post-independence era. The 'ecological watershed' which coincided with the destruction of cultural tradition during the colonial period is still continuing in the name of development. A kind of internal colonization is prevailing in Assam in the name of development. The post-colonial elites have continued the process of exploitation. They used to take every decision regarding development of this region. Their activities are nothing but only the imitation of colonial masters. Like the colonial masters they have used the source of natural resources for their own interest. The native dwellers do not find any space in the matters of development.

This kind of development initiative taken by the government has changed the pattern of land use. Many projects of development have their immediate impact on the agrarian structure of the state. In any agrarian society the access to land, land quality, the regenerating the capability of land is very crucial in respect of human security. The post-independent period witnessed a steep increase in the number of internal displacements due to various development projects. The growing numbers of landless people in the region poses a serious threat to human security. It leads to rapid deforestation and several other problems in the society. Displacement from the land is also a displacement from culture. It will destroy the socio-cultural fabric of the society.

Contemporary Assam is thus; facing serious challenge from development and serious threat from environmental security. Development is at crossroads now. Recent stories of mega-dam construction in this region have initiated a serious debate in the civil society where the matter of culture and environment is frequently debated. The construction of the large dams poses serious threat for environment which will lead to the destruction of the socio-cultural structure of the society. The cultural traditions of Assam, from food habits to performance traditions, are all connected to the environment. Therefore, the protest against dam-construction has brought to center-stage the victims of development, peasants and different indigenous communities. As for example; the cultural ecology of Assam is the most important thing needs to be understood. The development initiative in Assam is largely the exercise of power or hegemony. But the point is that necessity of development is the crucial question need to be addressed here. The commons do not know the theory of development as such but they have some hopes and aspirations. By asserting their absolute right, the stakeholders of development have alienated the commons of their traditional way of

living. In a state like Assam, culture and ecology situate in the same line. If we analyze the present ethnic conflicts among the various communities; it becomes clear that the destruction of the ecological structure is the root cause of such situation. As such the destruction of ecological structure leads to another social movement.

CONCLUSION

This paper was an attempt to highlight those pertinent questions regarding development, its impact on the culture- environment relationship. The relationship between human being and nature is the primordial condition for the evolution of social structure. Due to various causes natural environment is losing its harmony. Assam is not exception to that. In comparison to other parts of the world Assam does not figure in mainstream environmental discourse while Assam inherits long cherished tradition of culture-environment harmony. If this sphere discuss scientifically, then many questions will be answered and many disputes will be resolved.

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