

Culture: limits of development

Neglecting presence of culture in social processes would be unwise for policy planners. Culture plays an important and over-bearing role in any development process in the society despite development being a specialised economic function, writes Fazlul Alam

In most development projects, sustainable economic goal is the major ingredient supported by well-intentioned proposals. In these proposals, culture-sensitive statements are sometimes made as necessary reference to personal practices, habits and relations on one hand, and community norms and injunctions on the other. It seems that 'culture' is thus taken care of, and therefore, there is no need to be concerned with that element in development matters. Is that really so?

Norbert Elias, reiterating a Marxian idea that social development occurs above human consciousness in the direction he desires and demands, has recognised that an unplanned development takes place behind all human plans. Elias calls this unplanned development "mysterious and unexplainable" and recommends that "systematic research will make long-term unplanned processes more accessible to human understanding".

This 'unplanned development' which may also be unwanted development within a planned goal in developing countries is considered a major problem. 'Culture' as developed from 'social relations' in a society which has accepted the capitalist world's formulary of development is a stumbling block.

Development is deeply socio-logical since the process of development which attempts to bring about changes affects people in their social situations. Conceptually, development may be interpreted as a 'change' from one situation to another which is thought to be better. It has been observed by many that development goals are not always achievable. Usually such a change is a social process, but this is not explicitly stated, defined and researched.

Despite such recognition, it has not always made clear what kind of 'systematic research' Elias would be recommending. If he could at least have given us a conceptual

framework to understand his theoretical-empirical insight. One aspect, though, is certain from his other writings that the conceptual framework for such a research could be uneven or asymmetrical economic developments in the world resulting in the study of modes of production and relations of production. This would move the whole study in the spheres of social relations which, whether Weberian or Marxist, would present how the cultural norms in society are set.

Neglecting presence of culture in social processes would be unwise for policy planners. Culture plays an important and over-bearing role in any development process in the society despite development being a specialised economic function. This is because economic functions are aimed at people who have social functions to perform. If relations of these two functions are not recognised and thereby taken care of, desired outcome (meaning economic progress) is likely to produce undesirable consequences.

A simple example is 'urbanisation' in developing countries which is known as progress, but it does lead to undesirable consequences. This is not to say that the development endeavours should be abandoned. Development needs to be related to social functions, not only to its economic functions. These social function in turn are related to 'culture'.

There are several hundred definitions and interpretations of culture. For analytical purpose of this paper, we may have a priori that culture underlines social asymmetry. To be precise, culture being a representation of social asymmetries it involves power, and therefore, can be used as an instrument for domination and subordination.

Culture of a certain group of people as the collective expression of social norms, habits, practices, achievements (or failures), advancements (or backwardness) may be inter-

preted in various ways. It may be reflection of a collective consciousness of people of a location or region or that of a nation. It may also be an acceptance of the hegemony of the socio-political infrastructure. In the social arena, religion is an important factor. In the political sphere, developed and geared-up national consciousness based on historical references play an important role.

This interpretation of culture leads to two specific questions: what are the forces shaping up social norms, habits etc.? And, how does historical consciousness develop? The answer to the first question is that economic factors are the forces to construct social institutions which act as the agents to shape up social relations which in turn determine the norms, practices etc. The second question may be answered with Gramsci that historical consciousness is developed by the ideology of the dominant groups.

Cultural patterns and practices of a society are changeable only as the forces that initiated them are changed. Unaltered continuance of social norms and practices for a long time is interpreted as tradition. So, culture and tradition can both be evolving elements in the society. Social relations are determined by culture and tradition of a society. This proposition requires some support. According to Marx and Engels, human agents in the market place are united by predominantly economic connections.

They call this 'cash nexus'. This cash nexus explains social relations in a capitalist society. Later in the follow up of cash nexus theory, Marx argues that economic determines the character and place of various institutions within the entire social formations. At the same time the economic dominates the cultural, legal and ideological relations in society. Individuals in such a society experience social relations as purely economic relations and the entire structure and character of so-

cial system is explained by and seen in terms of economic reality (Marx; Giddens).

Weber attempted to provide a typology of social relations as part of his historical sociology. According to this typology, western societies have been transformed from systems based upon 'closed communal relations', such as church (restrictive membership) and village (closed community) to 'open associative relations', such as market and political parties. By this transformation, modern societies go through a profound historical process of secularisation. This Weberian model also provides an analytical tool for understanding the changes from feudal estates based upon traditional values to a society organised around the market and economic class (this is well explained by Giddens). Despite differences in approach, both Marx and Weber meet at a point that in such societies (Marx clearly stated 'capitalist societies', and Weber vaguely called 'western societies'), the economic is the organising force in determining interpersonal and cultural relations.

As argued in the beginning, development means effecting a social process for change from one position to a better position. It may be empowerment, or it may be offering better health-care or education for all, etc. In all these processes, social change becomes a necessary objective, either directly or indirectly. This means that people involved in that social process should have altered social relations when the change takes place due to the development activities.

In reality, this is not happening. It is not happening because social institutions that determine social relations in the first place have not changed. In other words, culture arising from social relations remains unaltered since social relations have not changed. At the same time, power structure exerted by social institutions remains the same.

For example, in Bangladesh, the housebound role of women has always been taken of, and it has been stressed that such houseboundness is part of the country's culture and tradition. But with the advent of garments industry requiring female workers, hundreds of thousands of women have come forward. Surely, the proclaimed 'culture' is not existent in this case. The garments industry did not require experts in development planning to obtain their women labourers. So, culture of houseboundness of women in Bangladesh is nothing but a myth.

A similar example, on a grander scale, comes from Europe of the 18th and 19th centuries. Women there remained housebound (or informally farmbound) until the industrial revolution took place. Later in the 20th century, the two world wars created shortage of male manpower in factories. Women's active participation in the formal economy happened because of the altered social relations due to the industrial and economic restructuring. Stereotyped interpretation of culture proved to be a myth everywhere, and 'culture' developed by formations, re-formations and alteration of social institutions through the pressure of new relations of production determined everything.

Since most development works are carried on at the surface level without altering the structure of 'social relations', effects of development works remain transient and non-deep. Sustenance of a pre-established power structure, replication of age-old social stratification and social relations coupled with modes of production (from colonial times), despite minimal 'empowerment' and adjustments cannot overthrow the 'culture' in a developing society following capitalist paths and being about the necessary social change. Therefore, 'culture' remains the most powerful limiting force resulting in the unintended consequences of intended social actions.

It's time indigenous people get back their health

We cannot accept that the people who hold our cultural heritage whether away at the margins of an increasingly prosperous world, writes Gro Harlem Brundtland

INDIGENOUS people have a life expectancy at birth which is 10 to 20 years less than the rest of the population around them. With few exceptions, infant mortality is 1.5 to three times greater than the national average. Malnutrition and communicable diseases, such as malaria, yellow fever, dengue, cholera and tuberculosis, continue to affect a large proportion of indigenous people than the surrounding population around the world.

These are shocking figures for any population group. But this group is different. Not only because of its size -- indigenous people number more than 300 million or 5% of the world population -- but because it is spread across 70 countries on every continent. Indigenous people form 5,000 to 6,000 distinct ethnic groups with a great diversity of culture, language and heritage. Just as we all know now that biological diversity is of vital importance to humanity, the diversity of indigenous people within a specific period of time. WHO will also define its own clear policy on the health of indigenous people that will include guidelines for improved health services and interventions.

Sadly, disease was the first weapon used by conquistadors and explorers to take hold of their new 'discoveries'. Smallpox, influenza and measles may have played a larger role than gun powder in the demise of many indigenous civilisations. We cannot accept that the people who hold our cultural heritage whether away at the margins of an increasingly prosperous world. These people must be brought into the health revolution that has transformed -- and drastically

lengthened -- the lives of the majority of the world's population over the past fifty years.

We at WHO are ready and anxious to accept this challenge.

Last week, representatives of the world's indigenous peoples came together at WHO in Geneva to create a partnership to improve health for their populations. The four-day meeting brought together representatives of Australian aborigines, New Zealand Maori, Arctic peoples from Norway, Russia and Finland, Tuaregs from the Sahara, Kenyan nomads, African pygmies, Inuit from Canada, Greenland and USA, and native Americans from South, Central and North America.

The conference agreed that WHO will work closely with a group of indigenous people to produce an action plan for bringing measurable improvements to the health of indigenous people within a specific period of time. WHO will also define its own clear policy on the health of indigenous people that will include guidelines for improved health services and interventions.

The challenges are great. We are dealing with complex problems that are rooted both in economics, discrimination, culture and environment. The environmental problems alone are formidable.

Certain Arctic populations are among the most exposed in the world to environmental contaminants. Some of these contaminants are carried to the Arctic and accumulate in animals as traditional foods. Radioactive contamination has

made the inhabitants of the Bikini Islands dependent on food aid because the locally grown food is too radioactive to eat.

Development is taking its toll in lives as well. Development ventures on the Indonesian island of Kalimantan since 1970 have resulted in the degradation of the world's oldest rain forest and the disruption of the lives of three million Dayak people.

Indigenous people argue that improvements in their health will depend on improvements in their wider socio-economic, political, and cultural situations. To achieve this they are organising at the local, regional and global levels.

The groundswell of the indigenous movement in recent years is very important. Clearly, indigenous people have the knowledge, the cultural base, the ability to build healthier societies. But they cannot do alone. WHO will do its part, but our part is the one of an adviser and co-ordinator. The main responsibility for indigenous people's health lies with the national governments that have these people as part of their population.

If we want lasting results, it cannot be a top-down affair. Partnerships between governments and the indigenous people movement are essential. Good health is a right. It is time that indigenous people achieve what is taken for granted by the majority of the population in the countries they live.

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Quiet flows the River Shangu

THE launching workshop for preparing the National Environment Management Action Plan (NEMAP)-Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) was held at Rangamati on 26 October and attended by people of the three hill districts of Khagrachari, Rangamati and Bandarban. The workshop decided to organise more than a dozen and half other grassroots workshops in the three hill districts in order to get views and concerns of people of the locality on their environment. While having group discussion with the participants from Bandarban, it was decided to hold four workshops at Thanchi, Bandarban, Lamsa and Naikongchhari. Although, Thanchi is located in one of the most inaccessible areas of the country, we decided to start our journey from Thanchi, the difficult one first.

We were a group of officials, consultants and journalists from the Ministry of Environment and Forest, UNDP and Forum of Environmental Journalists. Our maiden journey started from Bandarban in one early morning of end-November. We left long before the sunrise. It was densely foggy. We were warned by many in the town not to undertake the long journey to Thanchi, a God-forsaken place, not visited by many even in Bandarban. We were determined to go for it, no matter what comes on our way. We were eagerly awaiting a sunrise. The sun finally appeared over the valleys enveloped by mist. One should not miss the spectacular sight. Our two minibuses stopped by and Bulbul of the Daily Independent was the first one to jump out with his huge cameras. A photo session continued for a while. Without wasting much time, we continued. The two-hour road journey through a winding hilly road took us to a place called Kolkongchhari. We are to board here on two boats for the next episode, yet to be unfolded.

It was the Shangu, the hilly river that flows from south to north and northeast, unlike many rivers in Bangladesh. Born within the territories of Bangladesh, the river meets the Bay of Bengal in the west. There is another river in the south, named the Matamuhuri that follows the same pattern. Our experience of a plain land river betrayed us. Shangu flows down the gorges and the towering walls of sandstone gorges all along from Modo, a place 40 km south of Thanchi. There is another one down in the south named Bankkhali, which flows beside a thana of Bandarban named Naikongchhari. Characteristics of these hilly rivers are that they remain navigable for few months of the year. With torrential rain, they cause floods on both the sides, although water remains not more than a couple of days. The year last, the Shangu flooded Thanchi bazar with water rising on the rooftop and remained there for two days. The same happened with the Matamuhuri, which flooded Lamsa last year. These are high velocity rivers and boatmen fear to trade soon after the rain apprehending to be drifted away by the river current.

Finally, our boat journey be-



gan. We found ourselves well settled in two dinghy boats of ten-horse power engines with makeshift rotors underneath. These are narrow wooden boats with low height hoods. The unbelievably small cabin with smoky and noisy engine was very uncomfortable and unwelcoming indeed. We had no choice. We were told that they were the two best boats available in the locality with good engines. Altogether, we were sixteen. TNO, Thanchi Mahbub was also accompanying us from Bandarban. A young man in his thirties, Mahbub unlike his predecessors, stays at Thanchi for at least a couple of weeks at one go with occasional meetings at Bandarban in between. Mahbub was sitting quiet underneath the hood, when most of us were crowding near the deck. He has been in Thanchi for a year. His predecessor, Nazimuddin Ahmed Choudhury was abducted from the Shangu two years ago by a Burmese insurgent group while he was on his way to joining the post. Prasenjit Chakma, our colleague from Rangamati started teaching some Chakma terms. 'Tui bhai dole' [You're very pretty]. Chakma language appeared closer to Chittagonian and not very sweet tongued to us.

Our language class was interrupted by occasional engine break down. The thin layer of water down the rocky bed made our journey a hazardous one. Failing to locate the flow of current, the engine blades broke down several times. They had a readily available hammer to fix them up. The river was getting narrower and the water level lower, as we progressed upstream. We could hear the engine blades ploughing the rocky river bed, as the water could not support to keep the boats afloat. We were told that from the week next no boat would ply between Bandarban and Thanchi. Shangu remains navigable for a few months of the year. With torrential rain, they cause floods on both the sides, although water remains not more than a couple of days. The year last, the Shangu flooded Thanchi bazar with water rising on the rooftop and remained there for two days. The same happened with the Matamuhuri, which flooded Lamsa last year. These are high velocity rivers and boatmen fear to trade soon after the rain apprehending to be drifted away by the river current.

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gan. By Dr Mahfuzul Haque

The US Congress may have a record number of women members, but female candidates still face discrimination in their quest for political office, writes Arlene Getz from New York, she sheds light on an American initiative to counter prejudice and launch a woman into the White House

WHEN Elizabeth Dole was running for the United States presidency earlier this year, she issued an unusually strongly-worded statement on gun control. Her comments on the controversial topic generated extensive media coverage -- but so did the colour of the clothes.

That mixed message came as no surprise to the leaders of the White House Project, an initiative aimed at opening the Oval Office to a woman within the next 10 years. To them, Dole's aborted campaign helped highlight some of the obstacles faced by American women seeking higher political office.

It is very hard in this country for a woman to enter into the pipeline for the presidency, says White House Project president Marie Wilson. "In a parliamentary system, women can move up through their parties. That is not the case in the US system."

Hence the Project -- a non-partisan, non-profit effort launched by a group of philanthropists and activists in June last year to pave the way for female politicians of all persuasions.

We felt that there was a need for a project that addressed democracy in its purest form, which is that everybody gets to be represented, Wilson told Gemini News Service.

Women remain distinctly under-represented in the US political establishment.

Although the 1998 congressional elections saw a record number of women elected to the House of Representatives, they still fill only 13 per cent -- 56 of the seats in the House. And although women make up 52 per cent of the US population, only nine of the nation's 100 Senators and three of its 50 governors are female.

The incremental pace of change says something about women's acceptability, observes Wilson. "We launched the project because we felt it was the right time to do it."

The White House Project does not want voters to support candidates solely on the basis of their gender. Rather, it hopes to educate them about the number of competent women politicians and encourage others to get involved in the political "pipeline."

Among the Project's attempts to reshape attitudes are the "ballot box initiative," a 1998 hypothetical straw poll in which voters were asked to choose from a list of accomplished women not competing in elections last year. More than 100,000 people cast their ballots, selecting a top five list comprising First Lady Hillary Clinton; former American Red Cross president Elizabeth Dole; California Senator Dianne Feinstein; Army general Claudia Kennedy; and New Jersey gover-

nor Christine Todd Whitman.

Future projects include compiling a programme for elementary schoolchildren during "women's history month" and support for the manufacture of a "president Barbie" doll.

Nobody wants gender for gender's sake, but there are many women out there who are qualified to run for office, says Wilson. "I don't think you should vote for someone just because they're a woman. It would not help to have a woman in the White House unless there are many women seeing themselves that way."

In the longer term, the Project is also trying to address one of the most persistent problems facing women candidates: lack of money. Dole, for example, was widely regarded as a credible candidate with an impressive track record that included two Cabinet positions. Nonetheless, she was able to raise only a fraction of the unprecedented \$57 million war chest gathered by George W. Bush, son of the former president and Republican front-runner for next year's presidential nomination.

Dole's problems were not solely related to her gender. Men, too, face the voracious financial demands of US electioneering and Dole's tactical errors during her short-lived campaign undoubtedly contributed to her early withdrawal last month. Still, says Wilson, "Men have had the networks of years to amass wealth."

Women also still face plain old-fashioned prejudice. "As long as the world is in a state of turmoil, I believe we should not have a woman for president," one man wrote to an electronic forum on the Project's Website.

"We are the leading country of the world and will carry the responsibility of maintaining discipline of the not-so-free countries. This is not the time to experiment. Perhaps in another 20 years."

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