

COMPETING CONCEPTIONS OF DEVELOPMENT IN SRI LANKA

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Most of the writings on Third World development are either criticisms of theories for their inadequacies in explaining underdevelopment or discussions about economic strategies for solving planning problems. In both cases there is an underlying assumption that the concept of development is similarly understood throughout the world. This assumption is based on the notion that the western concept of development is applicable anywhere. The result is a tendency to homogenize the concept of development according to a western model.

However, in this paper, I argue that there is an overwhelming diversity in the way people of different backgrounds think about development; the concept of development is highly influenced by not only economics but also by the history, politics, and culture of a people. This produces not only different conceptions of development but also competing conceptions as well. Sri Lanka, one of the poorest countries in the Third World, is a case in point. Since Sri Lanka is viewed as a country with considerable human and economic potential, the issue of competing conceptions is a timely concern.

The language of development in the post-independent Sri Lanka draws on two primary conceptions; a western-oriented meaning, which has a colonial legacy, and a vernacular meaning, which developed as a nationalist movement to counter the western concept. Thus, today, the vocabulary of development includes notions of both "adjustment to the world economy" and a "historical recapitulation of a glorious past." This paper demonstrates how these competing conceptions of development have survived, sometimes with integrity and complementarity and sometimes with contradictions.

LANGUAGE OF DEVELOPMENT

Goonatilake (1974) describes the birth of these competing conceptions as follows:

After the imposition of a total blanket on the country in the 19th century two broad views of what is development (in the fundamental sense what was desirable for the country) began to emerge.

Firstly, there was the view of the colonizers, for example, that the growth of plantation sector, with an associated growth of a socio-economic infrastructure of railways and other means of transport, together with the colonial bureaucracy was best for the country. The opposing views, held by such reformers as Anagarika Dharmapala and later by nationalist leaders such as Bandaranaike emphasized self-sufficiency, self-reliance and sovereignty. I will call this a counterview of development.¹

This competing conception of development has survived up to now. Scholars who are interested in development have usually employed orthodox definitions of development in which the explanatory primacy is always given to the "economic" point of view. The whole discourse of development has followed a similar path until recently. Therefore, little attention is paid to opposing views. This narrow perception has been reinforced by two major factors. The first factor is a "rigid disciplinarianism" that scholars have adopted in social science; this perspective is particularly entrenched in developmental studies, where the political, cultural and economic aspects which are influential in development tend to be treated in isolation. The second factor that has restricted the concept of development has been the incorporation of Goonatilake's "counterview" into nationalist movements in Sri Lanka, which in turn has resulted in a very partisan complexion to thinking about development. A review of development approaches pursued by different governments of Sri Lanka illustrates that the most politically important policies have been associated with a notion of indigenization, which is the theme of the counterview. Different governments have endorsed this notion with varying degrees of subtlety. In 1956 this counter perspective was described as a "silent revolution"; whereas in the 1980s it is described as a "symbolic revolution." Although the western model of development and the indigenous view of development are somewhat different in terms of content and objectives, both of them can be considered as reflective of the vernacular meaning of development.

An analysis of the vocabulary of development in the local language is supportive of my argument. Sri Lanka has had a very rich literary tradition through which nationalist sentiments are often mediated and strong vernacular concepts are drawn. As part of the same process, new vocabularies are invented

¹Goonatilake, Susantha., "Imperialism and Development Studies: A Case Study (Sri Lanka)," *Race and Class* 2, no. 6 (1974): 127-44.

and reproduced to capture the essence of imported concepts of development in a strictly vernacular context.

An examination of the vocabulary related to development illustrates how the meaning of this term is expressed in this local language. Most of the English words related to development are translatable in Sinhalese. But once they are translated their meanings tend to be somewhat modified. Within this context, let us examine the two key words related to development *wardanaya* and *sanwardanaya*; these words are equivalent to growth and development, respectively.

Wardanaya ("growth") stands for any kind of identifiable improvement. Adding various noun adjectives, one is able to talk about any kind of growth, for example, *sharirika wardanaya* ("physical growth") and *lama wardanaya* ("child growth"). However today this word is extensively used with the adjective *arthika* ("economic"). It should be mentioned that the term growth as it is used here is not exactly equivalent to economic development because *wardanaya* only means "growth." A more complete vision of development is given by adding a prefix rather than an adjective, and using the word *sanwardanaya* to mean "development." The meaning added by the prefix *san* to the word *wardanaya* has two important aspects, the first being linguistic. The prefix *san* stands for a qualitative achievement or improvement. In other words, this prefix as it is used with other Sinhalese words does not refer to an increase of quantity, but rather to an increase in quality. Thus, *sanwardanaya* becomes "qualitative growth". This expectation of qualitative development is best explained in relation to Buddhist ideology, which emphasizes the spiritual development. Thus, a leader of a philanthropic organization (which arose under the influence of the Gandhian movement in India) explains this as "political and economic progress however democratic and progressive they may be socially will be empty if they lack spiritual moral motivations."²

A second aspect of the meaning added to the word *wardanaya* by the prefix *san* is revealed by the way people have analyzed its meaning in textbook discussions. Consider, for example the first

²Ariyaratne, A.T. "The Role of Buddhist Monks in Development," *World Development* 8, no.7/8 (1980): 587.

introductory lesson of a development geography course for high school students in the standard textbook produced by the government Publication Bureau.³ The introduction begins with the word *wardanaya* ("growth") and follows with the question, "What kind of growth is development?". According to the textbook, the teacher is then supposed to introduce the word; Is it not synonymous with "development" as a whole?" At this point, the necessity of other components such as culture, society, and religion are supposed to be emphasized. Thus "development" is explained as a total growth in all sectors of a society. This usage reflects the holistic view of the concept of development which has emerged in a largely Buddhist society.

The word *sanwardanaya* ("development") has been extensively used since the 1970s. Interestingly, this word is not commonly used in relation to other English concepts such as human development or psychological development. Two other aspects of development conveyed by *wardanaya* and *sanwardanaya* should be mentioned. The first aspect their implication of a direct progression from a simple concept of economic growth to a more holistic concept of spiritual and cultural as well as material growth. In other words, there is an implication of an evolutionary movement in development from a state of poverty, to economic growth, then finally to be a holistic state of progress that includes all the aspects of the society. The second aspect is that the word *sanwardanaya* can only be an affirmative noun. In English development can become a negative noun, but in Sinhalese *sanwardanaya* cannot become a negative noun because of the very nature of this language's structure. Thus, *sanwardanaya* in Sri Lanka carries only a positive conception, and it is well-suited to the extremely optimistic attitude of the Sri Lankan policy makers, who believe the country is fast becoming another developed nation in Asia on the model of Singapore or Taiwan.⁴

It is evident from the above discussion that the meanings of two key words, *wardanaya* and *sanwardanya*, are affiliated with the concept of development in Sri Lanka in several aspects. They express: (1) a qualitative aspect which emphasizes a spiritual development; (2) a holistic view which

³*Human Geography* (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Government Publication Bureau, 1985).

⁴"Sri Lanka: A Small and Solvable War," *The Economist*, 296 (3 August 1985): 35-38.

emphasizes culture and religion as well as economics; (3) an evolutionary nature through progressive movement towards holistic development; and (4) an optimism conveyed by the linguistic structure of the term.

There are many other words used by individuals, ranging from average citizens to scholars and politicians, to express their view of development. A neutral language (one which is not rhetorical) is used by the average Sri Lanka citizen, which simply implies a betterment of life. Scholars, mostly economists, who work in the field of development or in related fields, tend to use a language biased towards the western concept of economic development. They have actually failed to incorporate the local language of development into their professional analyses. Thus, the scholarly vocabulary of development in Sri Lanka corresponds more to the contemporary international vocabulary of development.

In Sri Lanka it is most important to analyze the vocabulary used by the politicians.⁵ They tend to use an extremely rhetorical and literary vocabulary of development. They use many words and phrases from the traditional literature to amplify the prevailing meanings of development with a historical perspective. Terms that are often used are equivalent to nation, language and religion. These words carry very nationalistic overtones and are imported from the historical literary tradition of Sri Lanka. Some other words and phrases in this vocabulary refer to the "revitalization of the nation" and "renaissance of the nation." Such phrases are often used by politicians at meetings or opening ceremonies. Not only do they use these words to persuade people toward their views and to legitimize their causes, but they also assimilate this political rhetoric into the symbolic landscape by naming of buildings, new projects, etc., with language that conveys their optimistic views of development. The most prominent idea implied by their rhetoric is a romantic notion of the reconstruction of the glorious past. One could speculate cynically that this language tends to be manipulated by politicians in the

⁵The vocabulary used by the politicians are abstracted from Sri Lankan daily newspapers such as *Dinamina*, *Divayina*, *Davasa* and *Silumina*.

interests of legitimating their power and their capitalist policies.

FINAL COMMENTS

An analysis of the vocabulary of development points to three important considerations. Firstly, it precisely demonstrates the complex nature of the concept of development within the local context. Secondly, it suggests that these competing conceptions of development have been manipulated in the political realms as a way of achieving social power, legitimating political power, and justifying the liberal economic policy adopted recently by the Sri Lankan government. Finally, this analysis explains the contradictory survival of the vernacular conception of development in a Third World nation. It suggests that it might be fruitful to undertake studies of vernacular conceptualizations of development in other languages in order to better understand cultural, historical, and political changes.

In Sri Lanka, in recent years, the vernacular concept has manifested in a movement of cultural revivalism--a recapitulation of the glorious past. To enhance this concept, the government has launched a variety of programs by which a symbolic vision of the future is presented. While it should be acknowledged that some people have benefited from these programs, the manipulative nature of the symbolism and terminology should not be ignored by anyone who studies about development in Sri Lanka.

Since independence, the concept of development in this country has emerged within a framework that combines western and local ideals. The development agendas of the political regimes have attempted to manage this combination while attempting to attach a nationalist sentiment to this hybrid concept of development. Unfortunately for the minority groups in Sri Lanka, a conception of development based on a recapitulation of the past of *one* ethnic group in what is in fact a plural society may be detrimental to the nation. Despite these political implications, I would argue that the concept of development is historically and culturally complex, highly politicized, and inherently manipulatable. The concept is also more all-encompassing in its connotation than it appears to be to many geographers and economists who often tend to be overly economic in their approach to the study of development.