

PROBLEMS
AND
STRATEGIES
OF
DEVELOPMENT
IN THE
EASTERN
HIMALAYA

BY

ANJU R DHAMALA

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Problems and Strategies of Development in the Eastern Himalaya

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

There is a growing acceptance of the fact that problems facing the hill region differ from the plain zone because of its topography and ecological setting. This calls for the formulation of different strategies for the development of these regions. It was with the objective of identifying the problems and suggest measures which will help in the formulation of strategies of development in the Eastern Himalayan region that the Centre for Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal organised a seminar on the 'Problems and Strategies of Development in the Eastern Himalayan Region'. This volume contains most of the papers presented at the seminar.

'Development and Environment : A Perspective for Hill Region' (Rabindra Nath Bhattacharya) focuses on the concept of sustainable economic development and its relevance to the problem of development and environmental transformation in the Eastern Himalayan region. The sustainable development approach stresses not only the basic need strategy but also that the strategies which are being formulated and implemented should be environmentally sustainable. It entails a dynamic interacting process, whether biological/ecological, economic or social. The author has attempted to formulate an analytical framework by assimilating the ideas advocated by Norgaard, Sachs and Barbier. He proposes that given the diverse ecosystem of the Himalayan region, the sustainable economic development perspective is

pertinent to it. This, he has illustrated with the help of some examples from the field of agriculture.

In 'Basic Approach to Planning and Development in North East India' (B.K. Roy Burman) the author underlines the need for the consideration of various contexts of North East India like geo-political, historical-political and historical and social environment while formulating the development strategy for the region. Problems confronting the region are unique. He speaks of demographic paradox and paradox of too much and too little development in terms of statistical parameters. Besides, the region is inhabited by numerous tribes having various indigenous rules of law; communal land holding system and so on. Hence, implementation of any developmental schemes based on an all-India pattern may not produce the desired result, and in some cases, may even become a source of trouble. These necessitate the formulation and implementation of plans at the grass-root level in which the village council shall play significant role. To achieve this, he stresses on the need of undertaking a pilot project in one of the villages of the region to find out the viability of programme, after which it can be tried in few other villages with diverse ethno-social, techno-economic and historical-ecological settings. Only a sustained study of this type, he maintains, will enable us 'to define more sharply the contours of an appropriate strategy of planning and development in this region.'

'Some Sociological Aspects of Development in the Eastern Himalaya' (Gopal S. Nepali) takes up the issue of reconciliation between indigenous culture and the implementation of developmental schemes in the context of hill regions of the Himalayas like Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. For him any formulation of development strategy should also consider the ecological and cultural setting and cultural framework of the people for whom the development is intended. Failing to do this, he says, may result in many dysfunctionalities. Nepali substantiates this point by referring to many developmental experiences in Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. To prevent any disorganisation and to counter any dysfunctional consequences arising out of development a bunch

of innovation may be introduced for the implementation of which the local leaders could play an effective role.

'A Small Tribe in the Eastern Himalaya : An Appraisal of its Problem and Development' (R.K. Kar) tries to present the social framework of the Singhphos of Arunachal Pradesh. He has highlighted the problems confronting the tribe and prescribes various remedial measures which will also help in evolving a strategy of development.

'Changes in Tibetan Economy : 1959-76' (Dawa Norbu) discusses the development of Tibet in the field of industry, agriculture and animal husbandry. It not only provides the official account of the progress achieved in these areas between 1959-76 but also examines it in the light of statements of refugees crossing the Himalaya during the early 60's and 70's and the viewpoints of scholars and journalists who visited Tibet during the period.

From Tibet we shift our attention to Bhutan. It is the least populated country whose economy is traditional with subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry contributing a large part of the gross domestic product. 'Problems of Economic Development in Bhutan' (Manas Dasgupta) focuses on such problems in course of presenting a survey of the main developmental programmes undertaken by the Government, Bhutan. The study shows that the priorities in the plans have been development of infrastructure, development of human resources and rural upliftment. However, the fruits of development have failed to percolate to the masses in spite of the 'basic need approach' of the planning process and he attributes this to the adoption of the 'top down approach' which inhibits the participation of the masses and modernisation remains confined to certain areas of production. Bhutan is also dependent on India in respect of financial and technical assistance which has created some problems in the social and economic field. Its desire to overcome these problems is reflected in its policy of diversifying sources of loans and acquiring membership of regional and international organisations.

'Economic Development of Bhutan: Problems and Strategies'

(B.P. Misra) highlights the strategies of plan formulation in Bhutan. It gives the socio-economic condition of Bhutan before the introduction of planned development and the pattern of Indo-Bhutanese relations as these have important bearing on the formulation of the country's plan strategy. The author points out that development in Bhutan has been primarily a political decision because of its desire to ensure its status as an independent monarchical state as also a common perception of problems by both Bhutan and India arising out of Chinese presence and its design in the north. Keeping these points in mind, the emphasis has been on the development of infrastructure, development of human resources and to establish links with foreign countries besides India.

There are three papers on problems and strategies of development in the Darjeeling district. 'Development Strategy in the Hill Areas of Darjeeling: A Critical Appraisal' (Saswati Biswas) presents a critical review of developmental strategy in the hill areas of the District covering a period following the Independence upto the Seventh Plan. Considering the distinct character of the region as compared to other parts of West Bengal in respect of topography and culture, she opines, a different approach should have been adopted, but a study of the plan programmes belies this expectation. There was, of course, acceptance at the governmental level of the need of separate approach to hill development and accordingly the Hill Development Council was set up with this objective but it did not usher in any change. She concludes that the 'quick return approach' of the government relegated the 'long term development perspective' to a background of triviality. The development planners have not as yet laid out a detailed plan for a strategy of development.

'Hill Villages of Darjeeling : Aspects of Economy. Ecology and Agricultural Modernisation' (N.C. Choudhury and Kanchan Sarkar) is based on the finding of a study conducted in ten villages located at different altitudes in Kurseong and Sadar sub-divisions of Darjeeling district. It investigates the immense pressure emanating from an increasing population, ecological degradation and explores

some possible ways out through scientific management of agriculture without further disturbing the ecological balance and also by creating employment opportunities through the setting up of small scale industries or encouraging self-employment schemes.

'Problems and Strategies of Development in the Darjeeling Himalaya' (P.K. Chakravorty) identifies the various problems confronting the developmental process in the region, recommends a number of objective and strategy and steps for the implementation of developmental programmes so that the goals of development may be achieved.

'Panchayati Raj Institutions in Sikkim as an Instrument of Development' by this editor is a study on the working of PRIs in Sikkim.

Although the paper focuses on various regions of the eastern Himalaya all the authors have emphasised on the need of grass root participation and the maintenance of ecological balance, both social and biological while formulating the strategies of development.

The primary task of organising this seminar was shouldered by Professor B.P. Misra, former Director who was also the Seminar Director. Without his involvement, the seminar and this volume would not have materialised. It is my privilege that the responsibility of editing was entrusted to me. While organising the papers, I have tried to maintain a thematic and area-wise continuity. However, some inconsistencies in the arrangement of papers in terms of area might have crept in. I hope to be excused for this.

I wish to thank the members of the staff of the Centre for their kind cooperation and secretarial assistance. I acknowledge with thanks the swift and efficient typing done by Shri Jiten Sarkar.

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1

Development and Environment—A Perspective for Hill Regions

RABINDRA NATH BHATTACHARYA

Recent years have witnessed a new kind of awareness in development perspective. The new outlook stresses meeting the basic needs of the poor, advocates cultural diversity and recommends 'grassroot' participation in the developmental process. It emphasises that 'real' improvement cannot occur unless the strategies which are being formulated and implemented are environmentally sustainable. As a result, there is a growing 'recognition that the overall goals of environment and development are not in conflict but are indeed the same, namely the improvement of the human quality of life or welfare for present and future generations'.¹ This paper limits itself to discussing the sustainable economic development perspective in a general way and points to the relevance of this perspective to problems of development and environmental transformation in regions like the Eastern Himalayas. Issues having close resemblance

to the problems and strategies of development in hill regions have been raised by different scholars as well as by several global organisations. Attempts were made to formalise them in terms of developing some analytical framework. Three of them seems to be more promising. This paper, without being original, attempts to assimilate them in one conceptual framework which may be utilized to identify problems and formulate strategies of development for regions like Eastern Himalaya.

The Perspective of Sustainable Economic Development

While subsuming the 'basic need strategy'² the sustainable development approach emphasises that for a 'real' development in Third World countries the strategies which are being formulated and implemented have to be inter-generationally and environmentally sustainable, consistent with social values and institutions (which may not, though, remain static), and have to ensure 'grassroots' participation in the developmental process. The emerging idea of achieving continuous economic and social development along with rational management of environment pre-supposes a re-definition of objectives and methods of action. "The environment is a dimension of development, and must, therefore, be internalized at every decision-making level."³

Poor people for their survival are forced to damage environment with long-term consequences (sometimes irreversible). Their livestock over-graze their shortening fallows on steep slopes and fragile soils induce erosion; their need for off-season incomes and fuel drives them to fell and consume/sell fuel wood and to make and sell charcoal; they are forced to cultivate and degrade marginal and unstable land. 'Putting people first, and enabling them to meet their needs, can be then, to reduce these pressures, to reduce degradation, and to maintain potentials for sustainable agriculture and sustainable development at higher levels of productivity. And this, in turn, means that more people in future can have adequate, secure, and decent levels of living.'⁴

It is true that rapid population growth and uneven distribution in some areas complicates natural resource management, it is also undeniable that population pressures on resources usually reflect an extremely skewed distribution of resources. When local inhabitants encroach on forests or cultivate erodible hill side, population pressure is blamed, but the pressure usually stems from the concentration of land-holdings and from the conspicuous absence of meaningful alternative (less resource using) economic activities.

Thus, the basic premise of sustainable economic development is that 'many environmental problems in developing countries originate from lack of development, that is from the struggle to overcome extreme conditions of poverty.'⁵ Poor people, in the absence of alternatives, often have to opt for short-run economic gains at the expense of the long-run sustainability of their livelihoods. For instance, one of the consequences of deforestation and the depletion of fuelwood availability is that it compels the poor households to divert dung for use as fuel rather than for fertilizer. It is to be noted that 'the context is one where there is no choice anyway since there are neither fuel nor fertilizer substitutes to which households can gain access.'⁶ The result, however, is invariably a decline in soil fertility, low levels of productivity, and loss of future economic welfare.

The primary concern of sustainable economic development is ensuring that the poor have access to sustainable and secure livelihoods. To attain this, national level macro economic approaches are not enough. Ultimately the focus must be on the needs, capabilities, priorities and involvement of the people who are supposed to benefit from them. Otherwise attempts to reduce environmental degradation will be counter-productive. The social forestry programmes in India have failed in the past to have any significant impact on the landless, small and marginal farm households. This was because of a limited commitment to serving community needs, the lack of involvement of poor women (who collect fuel-wood and fodder), and the distrust of social forestry programmes by the landless.⁷

The following criteria then underlie sustainable economic development:⁸

- (i) 'Sustainability' pre-supposes total development of society and depends on the interaction of economic changes with social, cultural and ecological transformations;
- (ii) Its quantitative dimension (e.g., to increase in food, real income, life expectancy, etc.) is associated with increases in the material means available to those living or destined to live, in absolute poverty, so as to provide for adequate physical and social well-being and security against becoming poorer;
- (iii) Its qualitative dimension is multifacet, (e.g. cultural diversity, social cohesion and stability, improvements in environmental quality, greater self-esteem, etc.), and is associated with ensuring the long term ecological, social, and cultural potential for supporting economic activity and structural change.

A Tentative Analytical Framework

Analytical framework to capture the criteria underlying sustainable economic development is yet to develop in full bloom. In what follows, this paper by assimilating the ideas thrown by Norgaard,⁹ Sachs¹⁰ and Barbier¹¹ tries to record some basic steps required in formulating such a framework.

Since sustainable economic development entails a dynamic interacting process, Barbier views this process as an interaction among three systems, the biological (and other resource) system (BS), the economic system (ES), and the social system (SS). Norgaard considers a co-evolutionary interaction of the ecosystem and the socio-system while Sachs looks into three sub-systems within the environment: the natural environment, the man-made techno structures, and the social environment. Barbier's approach captures the other two. In his framework, each system has its own set of

human-ascribed goals.

- (i) Biological system goals: genetic diversity, resilience, biological productivity.
- (ii) Economic system goals: satisfying basic needs (reducing poverty), equity enhancing, increasing useful goods and services;
- (iii) Social system goals: cultural diversity, institutional sustainability, social justice, participation.

The general objective of sustainable economic development, then, is to maximize the common elements of the three sets of goals. In contrast, the conventional approach to economic development attempts to maximise only 'ES' goals.

Since over any relevant time horizon it is not possible to maximize these goals all at a time, sustainable development involves a 'process of trade-offs' among the various goals of these three systems. For example, as the economic process of production and consumption is dependent on resource use, increasing even useful goods and services may conflict with ensuring the maximum productivity and genetic diversity of the biological and resource system. The process of trade-offs must also be 'adaptive'. As individual preferences, social norms, economic conditions, etc. change over time, so must be relative weights attached to the various goals.

As economic, social and ecological conditions vary in different location and situations, priorities among goals should also differ. For instance, in the mountainous Himalayas, biological and resource productivity, resilience and genetic and cultural diversity, are clearly a high priority.

The Himalaya and Sustainable Economic Development

The ecosystems of Himalaya from east to west appear in the following order: the tropical rain forest zone, succeeded by the

terai foot-hills zone, then horizontally above them in succession, the temperate forests zone, the alpine and tundra zones.¹² The tropical rain forest zones covers the foothills, lower valleys and flanks of the lesser Himalayan ranges upto a height of 5000 ft. Human habitats are mostly located here. The ecosystem here is the most complex of any found in the Himalaya. It has three important characteristics: (i) the unperturbed natural system has an unusually large number of different species competing for living room in the midst of dense undergrowth, (ii) even with a highly specialised system of nutrient re-cycling the recovery path of the system after a perturbation is not easily predictable and generally show a poor regenerative capacity, and (iii) the real economic productivity is low and uncertain.

Given this ecosystem, we now propose to illustrate, with the help of some examples from the field of agriculture, the relevance of sustainable economic development perspective to areas like Himalaya. This does not, of course, preclude its relevance to other forms of economic and social activities including industry.

Odum¹³ characterizes agricultural development as a transformation of the eco-system to reduce number of species and usually lower combined efficiency of nutrient re-cycling, higher but less stable rates of production, and low biomass stocks relative to natural conditions. As man pushes an eco system to suit his own needs, he intervenes in some of the nutrient cycles and disturbs some of the equilibrating mechanisms which has evolved within the natural system. Sustainable development occurs if the social and economic systems compensate for these losses within the natural system. Functions of new social and economic systems might include managing legumes to replace portions of lost nutrient cycles, weeding to offset natural succession, and combating herbivorous insects to compensate for lost natural pest control mechanisms.¹⁴ These new socio-economic functions may entail managerial effort, the acquisition of knowledge, the use of exhaustible natural resources, and modification and support of institutions. Additionally, the socio-economic systems may have to combat an increasing social polarization and more inequitable

distribution of income that the whole process may entail (as happened in "green revolution" areas).

Using plain-zone energy-intensive approaches to agriculture in a hilly tropical rain forest entails high transactions costs. The social and economic systems must maintain better roads, storage facilities, and exchange systems for cash crops using produced inputs. More sophisticated credit, risk-sharing, and extension programmes are required to counteract the unpredictable yields of mono cultures of crops unsuited to this biological/ecological system. The necessary layer of businessmen, bureaucrats and technicians on top of an otherwise agrarian society also increases the diversity in education and values and hence, the difficulties of defining and attaining social and economic goals. The resulting high transaction costs (involving trade-offs) are symptoms of the social, economic and biological/ecological mismatch. The consequent process of social degeneration is shared with the environment. Habitat transformation, species extinction, and soil destruction are the likely environmental costs.¹⁵

The key characteristics of the social and biological/ecological systems in Himalayan tropical rain forests suggest that for sustainable agricultural development an initially compatible social and economic systems would emphasize (1) a multiple product (including perennials), regional, near-subsistence economy, (2) participation of native people with knowledge of the natural system, (3) technologies that evolved in the indigeneous environment, (4) formal and informal risk sharing, and (5) decision-making power in the hands of people close to the dynamic eco system/biological system.

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