

THE ROLE OF ETHNIC GROUPS IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Deepak Kumar Behera

Professor of Anthropology, Sambalpur University, India

Ranju H. Sahu

Research Associate, Nabakrushna Chaudhury Centre for Development Studies, Bhubaneswar, India.

Keywords: Ethnic group, social development, nation state, mobilization, ethnic solidarity.

Contents

1. Introduction: Social Development and Ethnic Groups
 2. Conceptual Framework
 3. The Nation State and Ethnicity: Cases of Third World Societies
 4. Conclusion
- Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketches

Summary

In this paper we critically examine the role of ethnic groups in social development in the Third World countries in general and South Asian countries in particular. The concept of social development is more comprehensive than economic development. Social development is possible only when the group mobilization and action. Ethnic solidarity is only one among many possible forms of collective actions, that have strong implication for ethnic resurgence in modern society. Under a dominant ethnic group, other ethnic communities became minorities without any claim in the national enterprise unless they could assert themselves politically. For the first time, ethnic distinction begins to be perceived in terms of political antagonism by the respective ethnic groups. Inevitably politicization of all possible manner followed. The term ethnicity is used by many with political purposes. Ethnic solidarity requires two elements, i.e. (1) the formation of specific goals or claims defined on the membership of the ethnic group in opposition to or in contrast with those of other groups in the society; (2) a degree of ideological and organizational mobilization of group membership for the implementation of these claims of group cohesiveness.

Essential concerns of social development are with social justice and the equitable distribution of the fruits of development. Group mobilization enhances the capacity of people to work continuously and more vigorously for their welfare. However, depending on the perceived needs, and results of social development, ethnic group mobilization can act either as a positive or negative force. Unequal distribution of resources leads to reactive ethnic solidarity that may cause social unrest and civil war.

1. Introduction: Social Development and Ethnic Groups

Today, no country is homogeneous in terms of race, religion, language, script, customs, ideas and ways of life. Society is the collectivities of people demarcated from other collectivities. Since the new objective of social development calls for a shift in emphasis from the individual to larger collectivities, the role of ethnic group in social development has been gaining momentum. This paper will discuss the role of ethnic groups in social development. We will first analyze the term “social development”

Relevant literature reflects that until the 1980s “development” was viewed mainly either as a linear process of causes and effects in terms of social evolutionism, or as being a historical stage in the “logic of capital” in terms of Neo-Marxism. In the former approach “development” was seen as an effort to fight poverty, to raise standards of living, and to promote some versions of progress. Usually a top-down approach to social engineering was followed; the focus was to locate what went “wrong,” to analyze why, and to implement policies so as to fix the problems.

In the latter approach, the radical critique of Capitalism was presented by neo-Marxists. Capitalism was viewed as an obstacle to true social development, because Capitalism was viewed as the cause of poverty, and it promoted only the interests of the elite and the large, global institutions such as the World Bank, USAID, etc.

Coetzee and Graaf see the latter theory of development more convincing and morally defensible. Development theory should, they say, spawn policies and research practices that avoid violence to ordinary people’s cultures and aspirations, to the environment, and to human dignity and self-esteem.

Social development objectives are not always clear, or are not always in touch with the reality of the daily lives of people. The current debate on social development objectives emphasized several significant dimensions. They are: equity in terms of entitlement, empowerment and resource use; human resources as a knowledge base and the significance of values and ethics; the contribution of institutions to needs and demands; and finally the role of ethnic groups.

In this paper we critically examine the role of ethnic groups in social development in the Third World countries in general and South Asian countries in particular. It is imperative here to examine two interrelated concepts, viz. ethnic group and social development, for the proper understanding of the problem at hand.

2. Conceptual Framework

An ethnic group is defined as a segment of a larger society whose members are thought by themselves and/or others to have a common origin and to share important segments of a common culture and who in addition participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients.

Cohen in his work published in 1974 defined ethnic group “as a collective of people who share some patterns of normative behaviour and form a part of a larger population,

interacting with people from other collectivities within the framework of a social system.” By normative behaviour he means the symbolic formations and activities found in such contexts as kinship and marriage, friendship, ritual and other types of ceremonies. Esman in his 1977 book observed that there are both objective and subjective attributes to ethnic groups: objective attributes are cultural properties expressed in language, religion, historical experiences, as common institutions. On the other hand, the subjective attributes include the individual’s awareness of identity, the sense of belonging, emotional solidarity, and common interests. Though it does have an objective base, ethnicity is also contextual in its manifestations. Ethnic boundaries, intensities and issue for any group may shift over time in response to changing experiences and problems.

Back in 1964, Gordon used the term “ethnic” to refer to not to racial, religious or nationalistic aspects of a group, but also to “sense of peoplehood” which these categories could evoke. Likewise, Glazer and Moynihan expressed that ethnicity include the sense of group-ness. For them, however, the common element is also political, as the capacity of an “ethnic group” is for its providing effective foci for group mobilization.

We have learned that ethnicity contains both observable factors as well as contextual and psychological factors. What is more ethnicity has political implications for mobilization of people. Let us know examine social development.

The concept of “social development” was initially used almost synonymously with social evolution. The major stages in the evolution of human society, identified in a macro-sociological perspective, presented a profile of social development. However, in more recent discussion the notion of social development has been detached from the evolutionary hypothesis and has focused on the questions of the satisfaction of human needs and improvement in the quality of life. The concept of social development is more comprehensive than economic development; it subsumes the latter, but aims at the attainment of certain social objectives and ideas. Neither these objectives nor the concept of social development have been rigorously defined. The dimensions of the concept are the subject of debate and some tentative formulations of the indicators of social development, as well as the quality of life, are beginning to emerge.

It has been observed and amply documented that economic development while it is undeniably necessary can also lead to certain undesirable consequences. Therefore, it has to be geared to specific social objectives. Growth rates, GNP and per capita income are often deceptive, those hide the ugly realities of the impoverishment and degradation of sizeable group. Thus it is time that instead of GNP, we must start thinking in terms of GNW (Gross National Welfare) and social development.

Coming to the point of operationalizing the term social development, it has both micro-interpretation and macro-interpretation. Micro-interpretation represents the socialization of the individuals and human growth. These have traditionally provided social workers with their individualistic interpretation. The macro-interpretation on the other hand has focused on economic and social change in developing countries, e.g. institution building and community empowerment. In this paper we focus on the macro-interpretation of

the concept “social development.” We treat social development more holistically, in our attempt to move the debate beyond the modernistic perspectives of economic and political planning.

Scholars such as Paiva, Meinert *et al.*, Omer, Olsson, Meinert and Kohn have begun to address a more holistic concept of social development. According to Paiva, social development has two interrelated dimensions, i.e. (1) the development of the capacity of people to work continuously for their welfare and the society’s welfare, and (2) the alteration or development of social institutions. He states that in addition to this empowerment process, a balance is sought between quantitative and qualitative meeting of people’s needs, that can be accomplished through changes in social institution and in the use of available resources. Therefore, an essential concern of social development is with social justice and in the equitable distribution of the fruits of development. The aim of social development is ultimately to achieve a more humanistic society with institutions and organizations that will respond more appropriately to human needs.

Meinert et al tested the commonality of understandings of social development concepts in an international study and published the results in 1984. These key concepts they examined were mixture of significant community values and operational methods: for example, they examined participation, social planning, institution building communication and feedback that were seen as essential to social development.

Omer stressed the interdisciplinary nature of social development. He argued for an inter-sectoral, inter-regional integrated approach, and focus on connectedness among various factors. If we focus on the multicausal nature of social issues, we will be able to avoid simplistic explanation of causes of the social problem. The multicausal approach will help us seek multilevel intervention.

Social development theories have stressed the links between economic and social systems. Countries such as Sweden have successfully operated within such links, defining employment as an economic rather than a social problem, and linking an active labor market policy to social welfare planning.

Likewise, Meinert and Kohn defined social development that involves reconnaissance, engagement, assessment, planning, implementation, evolution and disengagement.

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Biographical Sketches

Deepak Kumar Behera obtained his Master's degree (Gold Medalist) and Ph.D. from Sambalpur University, where he has been teaching anthropology since 1985. He has more than 50 research publications in reputed journals and edited volumes. Dr. Behera has published one book and edited eleven volumes. He has done intensive fieldwork among different tribal communities of Orissa. Dr. Behera is the editor of the international journal - *Journal of Social Sciences* (web site: <www.krepublishers.com>); is a member of the Executive Board of International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES), the chairperson of IUAES *Commission on Anthropology of Children and Childhood*, and an Officer-at-Large of the International Sociological Association, Research Committee-53 - *Sociology of Childhood* for the session 1998-2002. Dr. Behera is also a member of the core group of IUAES *Commission on Anthropology in Policy and Practice*, *Commission on Anthropological Dimension of Global Change* and *Commission on Urban Anthropology*. His current interests in research are childhood matters, inter-ethnic relations, gender issues, tribal studies, and development studies.

Ranju Hasini Sahoo received her M.A., M.Phil. and Ph.D. degrees from Sambalpur University, India. She did her doctoral degree on the problem "Socio-cultural Adjustments of the Telugu Speaking Immigrants in Western Orissa". She is at present a Research Associate in Nabakrushna Chaudhury Centre for Development Studies, Bhubaneswar (India). In this capacity she handles a number of research projects undertaken by the Centre from time to time. Ms. Sahoo has to her credit a number of publications on inter-ethnic relations.