

Nepal's Development Thinking : Twenty years on in Theory and Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Many elements of the development debates of the late 1970s, when the research for the book *Nepal in Crisis* was conducted (Blaikie, Cameron and Seddon, 1980), re-emerged in the late 1980s after having been largely eclipsed for the first half of the 1980s which are glaring if we compare Higgins 1978 and Sen 1987. This re-emergence follows a period of *neo-liberal individualist* dominance which has been the powerful assertion that market forces were necessary and sufficient for development everywhere. In the early 1980s, the position of former, mainstream, development theories appeared fatally weakened by criticism of the very concept of the *developmentalist* state and the assertion that market forces could replace the state as the prime agency of progress. Earlier doubts about the developmentalist state can be found in Myrdal 1970 and more trenchantly and irretrievably, in Bauer 1971. But Lal 1983 marked the culmination of the neo-liberal assault on mainstream development economics and the associated concept of the state, rather than market forces, as the mainspring of development.

But the *neo-liberal* proclamation of the end of development studies has proved as premature as that of Fukuyama's end of history. A decade of greater market force has proven as unsatisfactory for many people in a range of societies as the preceding decade of the 1970s with greater state intervention. But development thought in the 1990s is not merely rediscovering the 1970s, the decade is witnessing the emergence of fundamental demands to define development not seen since 1945 and one surface manifestation of this effort in terms of the Human Development Index which can be seen in Human Development Report 1993.

These attempts to re-define the focus and content of development have moved in the directions of both broadening the area of discussion by refusing to prioritise the claims of any particular discipline and deepening the debate by probing the philosophical assumptions implicit in all approaches to development (Cameron, 1992).

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Underlying this re-thinking is a recognition that we are no further on in understanding the sense of development than in the 1950s, when *cold war* divisions and post-colonial optimism combined to curtail debate over what was essentially meant by progress in the human condition. The fact that many of the poorest people appear to have gained nothing in any dimension of their lives from a decade of greater market force, and associated cultural, ecological and political changes, has added to the sense of practical urgency in forcing the development debate to an examination of its roots (Duhs 1993 and Krugman 1993).

Important contributions to re-opening a fundamental debt on development have come from the work of Amartya Sen and close associates on the philosophical dimensions of development choices (Nussbaum and Sen 1993). As part of this manoeuvre a basic reformulation of the concept of poverty has been offered as part of this debate drawing on *Kantian* moral philosophy (O'Neill 1986); a reformulation capable of finding much resonance in non-western moral systems.

Therefore, it seems appropriate now to review the history of development thinking as it has appeared over the last twenty years in Nepal, which circumstance has made an uncomfortable test-bed for development ideas, starting from the research for *Nepal in Crisis* to see what, if anything, can be taken into the developing development theory debate in the 1990s. But to undertake this task fairly require a meta-framework which can claim to do justice to the languages of all approaches to development.

DEVELOPMENT DEBATES AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Parallel to, but reflecting, the debates surrounding the concept of development, has been a much wider questioning in the west of the whole of *modernism* as well as *communism* as a particular manifestation of modernist thinking. A process of post-modernist re-theorisation has involved new approaches to human nature itself and loss of much confidence in all attempts at generalisation and in language itself as representing reality. The resulting debates have focused on the re-defining of claimed knowledge as discourse in which what is not prioritised and omitted has as much significance as what is emphasized and included. Revealing implicit assumptions and neglected factors, and rigorously examining claims of determinacy and objectivity are essential aspects of the most exciting of post-modernist thinking; as a recent exemplary contribution, the text of Deward Said 1993 essays can be cited to reveal the prevalence of implicit *imperialist blind-spots* in all Western culture, though the exemplary exposition of post-modernist method for me is Derrida 1991.

This fundamental reassessment of the nature of discourse is in parallel with the methodological crisis that has overtaken the social sciences in the 1980s. Thus reassessment has broadly been along two lines: one, the links between discourses and power, the emergence and consolidation of *dominant* discourse and the nature of the power relationships being played out in the areas of knowledge and ideas; two regarding social science method and the way in which empirical knowledge is constituted, as debates over the roles of logic, deductive reasoning, causality, falsification, and ethnographic, naturalistic inquiry problematise all observation of human subjects by others. Discourse analysis denies attempts to know reality in demanding a greater recognition of the complexity of processes in the real world and the problems of understanding them within any inflexible framework of methodological correctness, as the text of Foucault 1988 throws light on these claims at all levels of experience.

Positivist attempts of knowing, understanding, explaining reality can be seen in terms of approaching truth based on careful observation and the accepted rules of deductive logic. Critics of evolutionary positivism can refer to *Kuhnian paradigms* or *Lakatosian ascendancy* with eventual shifts due to accumulated evidence undermining the truth and power claims of the dominant theory of the time. Discourse analysis starts out from a more radically sceptical view of the knowability of reality and the inadequacy of the methodological tools we now use in the process. It questions and problematises every step of the theory-construction process beginning with language itself. This can lead to a profoundly pessimistic, relativistic position, where theoretical certainties are non-existent, empirical evidence is non-admissible, and methodological issues are non-resolvable.

Bringing such a discourse analysis approach to development studies a very *modern* and, hence vulnerable field of study run the risk of destroying the very subject it wishes to illuminate. But, used with caution, discourse analysis may be capable of illuminating the darker corners of previous thinking about development as regards philosophical assumptions, method, language and links with power. This paper only utilises discourse analysis in such a low voltage manner but hopefully serves to show that the approach is useful in reviewing past thinking on development and moving on to new ways of thinking about development in the present and future. Alvares 1992 attempts a much more complete demolition of development thinking and, more substantially, Miller 1992 does much damage to the claims of political science to be about politics or science.

A SCHEMATIC, STYLISED FRAMEWORK FOR LOOKING AT DEVELOPMENT THINKING

With this background of the present state of the debate on development and the use of discourse analysis to understand crisis in epistemology and methodology, we now turn towards Nepal in the last twenty year or more accurately, we turn to development thinking about Nepal in the last twenty years. To do this a meta-framework is needed to allow all the shifts in thinking to be presented in a way that makes each approach intelligible and non-dismissable in its own terms.

Despite the controversies around the construction of any neutral position, such a meta-framework is proposed here. This meta-framework is based on the assertion that all theories of development are inherently multidimensional and offer actual or potential insight into all aspects of the complexity of development processes. Thus the history of development thinking may be studied from an analytical perspective which views change as various combinations of dimensions of culture, ecology, economics, and politics.

Starting from such a multidimensional perspective, it is then possible to analyse the complex interaction of these four dimensions with a flexible approach to prioritisation, ranking, dominance, determination, and causality. Different development theories can then be seen as fundamentally holistic approaches combining the same basic building blocks in different ways giving rise to distinctive patterns with differing dynamics and causalities.

For expositional purposes, a crude chronology is used here breaking the last twenty years down into four periods of dominance by one particular theory. This is intended to be for convenience of a compressed argument. Brief *Lakatosian periods* of ascendancy have not been followed by eclipse and all four theories can still be found to persist as possibilities in texts in Nepal.

More serious is the ethnocentric criticism that the sequence of the theories and the forms they take in Nepal appears merely to mirror the broad debate on development in the west. The explanation offered here for this mirroring is that dependence of Nepal's official *developmental* efforts on Official Development Assistance has also produced an intimately associated, disproportionate exposure to shifts in western development thinking as far as the written texts on development about Nepal are concerned. This may well be changing, as is predicted and welcomed in the conclusion to this paper, but the claim remains that the development debate about Nepal over the past twenty years has been dominated by *fashions* for the West.

NEO-MARXISM IN THE LATE 1970s

Mainstream thinking about development since 1945 has been fascinated by the possibility of a strong, interventionist postcolonial state action as the agency of development, designing and implementing a logically consistent, breakthrough strategy. This view was reinforced by the social and political upheavals in many parts of the world in the 1960s, which highlighted the urgent need for such transformations. Development in this context meant a break with history and the agency for such a break was seen as the post-colonial, post-feudal state.

The fact that the much of the development literature of this time made over-optimistic assumptions about the nature of the post-colonial states and about the feasibility of universalistic economic growth strategies is important to the rise of neo-liberalism in the 1980s. But the point taken here is that until the late 1970s, it seemed appropriate to view development from a perspective which focused on control of the state and who had access to the developmental power that the state appeared to offer.

The Neo-Marxist perspective as a radical version of this approach informed the research for *Nepal in Crisis* which claimed to offer insights into the structures and processes in Nepalese society through the prism of class analysis to reveal why the Nepalese state had been ineffective as a development agency. Politics, in terms of the exercise of power, was therefore prioritised as a dimension. Concern with low productivity and poverty gave economics an important place with the ecological and cultural dimensions given much less significance.

From a Neo-Marxist perspective the main political features of Nepal during this period were : ci) the existence of a ruling elite with strong connections with external-mainly Indian-capital as well as with international developmental agencies and, cii) an inaccessible state that was characterised by its oppressive intimacy and developmental distance for the majority of the people of Nepal. Both these characteristics had important implications for Nepal's development experience in as much as they set limits for *development choices* and for the use of the formal political process to achieve wider social transformation.

The economy of Nepal was largely denied by the nature of its insertion into the world capitalist economy, a situation that may be loosely described as *dependency*. In Nepal's case, the dependency was exacerbated by being *the periphery of a periphery*. The resulting outcome of this process, could be seen in terms of unequal exchange, lack of manoeuvrability in terms of economic development options, and potential instability at the macroeconomic level. Internally, the economy was seen as based on modes or forms of production with

neo-feudal extraction means of surplus appropriation as well as some wage labour exploitation with the inequality, poverty and low-level productivity, lack of effective demand traps that such a combination can induce.

Nepal was seen as having a vulnerable ecology, but the main strain fell on the poorest people who take much of the strain through high levels of desperate migration. The ecology is politicised through the same relationships that dictate the political and economic dimensions, including the conditions which *sukumbasis* face in attempting to resettle in the terai.

In the cultural dimension, the caste system in Nepal functions within a framework of its own specificities, only developmentally significant in terms of legitimating class inequalities. Broadly, this means the stick of caste-legitimised violence for the poorer and the carrot of conversion, Sanskritisation for the richer non-Bahun-Chhettri sections of society resulting in the repression of a more rational, secular, socially progressive culture.

Neo-Marxism's claims to analytical and observational objectivity in thinking development were associated with a radical pessimism in terms of development strategy. The challenge was exposition, not recommendation, but the approach was always vulnerable to the accusation of being over-concerned with political forms and economically deterministic. But the position of UML as the major parliamentary opposition party in Nepal today, with its *Marxist-Leninist* credentials is an indicator that the obituaries for neo-Marxism may be as premature in Nepal as they are proving elsewhere in the world.

ENVIRONMENTALISM IN THE EARLY 1980s

In the middle of the 1970s, concern over finite resource availability in the west, notably non-renewable energy sources after a sharp rise in oil prices, found formal expression in the *Club of Rome* reports. Though the *Limits to Growth* thesis emerged as a concern for the West, it rapidly focussed on the South and the relationship between demographic change and the perception of irreversible, environmental degradation. The prioritisation of the ecological dimension also promoted value systems and the cultural dimension of development. Desirable political structures were seen as deducible from a careful analysis of ecological process and cultural systems. Finally, the prioritisation of the economic dimension was seen as the major problem of much previous development thinking, with the honorable exceptions of people like M. K. Gandhi in India and E. F. Schumacher in Europe.

These concerns altered the agenda for North-South discussions on development as well as for national development strategies, notably for Nepal which scored high on all the ecological vulnerability indices. The environmentalist perspective emphasised that the processes of development

could not be delinked from issues of environmental concern without being non-sustainable and eventually destructive of the species capacity to survive. Environmental issues and the theme of *sustainable development* became central to the development debate in Nepal in the early 1980s.

Nepal was seen as an important part of global environmental deterioration-albeit a complex mix of natural and man-made processes. Its natural resource base spans diverse topographical areas, ecological systems, which include diminishing bio-diverse temperate and sub-tropical forested areas.

The cultural dimension of environmentalism in Nepal, as elsewhere, was treated a highly significant but took two contradictory forms. The first looked at Nepalese culture as part of the problem in its apparent support for high levels of natality and ecologically irresponsible migration. The second saw many aspects of Nepalese rural culture as part of the solution with the need to build on indigenous knowledge and institutional arrangements for environmental management.

Depending upon the perception of the cultural dimension, formal politics could then be logically deduced as needing to either over-ride the pro-natal and migratory aspects of the cultural dimension or be reformed to reflect natural eco-cultural unit and give expression to cultural practices and survival strategies more conducive to sustainable long run outcomes.

At the economic level the environmentalist perspective was consistent with high prices of non-renewable resources plus a moral economy of simple, self-sufficiency, a consumption floor, and local collective control of common property resources. To this could be added responsible tourism as the major externally oriented sector though not without some ironical tension in terms of people from environmentally irresponsible, rich societies enjoying privileged access to the ecologies of environmentally responsible, very poor societies- the metaphor of a zoo has some bite !

The environmentalist position lost momentum with friction over natural as opposed to man-made processes in the volatile geological and climatic conditions of Nepal. The conflicting views over cultural progressivity also proved a weakness. Economic growth has powerful advocates from the directions of neo-Marxism and neo-Liberalism who are eager to expose, often opportunistically, de-prioritising of poverty in environmentalist thinking. In the 1990s, strong centres of environmentalist thinking can still be found in the work of NGOs-external and internal-with the visible deterioration of the environment in the Kathmandu valley acting as a spur to environmental concern by the elite.

NEO-LIBERALISM IN THE LATE 1980s

The debate on development was revolutionised in the late 1970s in the West and the new orthodoxy arrived in Nepal in the mid 1980s. The neo-liberal revolutionary reverberations were felt in every aspect of social reality worldwide and which led to a reordering of priorities, reframing of language and redefining of perspectives in the areas of economics, politics, culture and ecology in that order. Essentially this shift marked the ideological dominance of the neoclassical approach to economics with its confidence in market determined outcomes and a *rolled back* state to ensure autonomous self-interested decision-making by rational, far-sighted utility-maximising individuals.

Neo-classical economics claims that it could theoretically demonstrate efficiency, equity and stability outcomes from the operation of market forces were central to the 1980s practice of the IMF, where it always been influential and, more importantly for Nepal, the World Bank and many bilateral Official Development Assistance agencies. Though Lipton 1987 convincingly argues that the World Bank always contained internal tensions and was never totally converted to neo-liberalist faith in market force. Market-determined resource allocations based on price signal meant a whole range of what had been previously regarded as basic needs would not be assigned a priority and non-measurable goals like quality of life became purely a matter of individual subjective judgement not accessible for policy consideration. This meant that the concepts of poverty and inequality were displaced from the language of development and replaced by choice and comparative advantage at all levels from the household to the globalised market economy.

From this perspective, the logic of the political dimension was that the Nepalese state was primarily a problem not an agent of development. Intervention by the Nepalese state in restricting the operation of free market forces was the primary obstacle to the Nepalese people finding their natural position in the global economy. The Nepalese state had to become narrower but deeper, ensuring conditions for confidence in contract for Nepalese and non-Nepalese alike while withdrawing from day-to-day intervention in the economy. Thus the political implication of the neo-liberalist perspective often appear to be contradictory with freedom of choice desirable at the individual level combined with firm repression by the state of any anti-market tendencies.

The resolution of this contradiction is in the cultural dimension through modernisation, a concept with a history in the development debate dating back to the 1950s' though receiving periodic revivals for instance, even in 1970, Myrdal used the concept. Through the nurturing of existing private

sector entrepreneurs and discouragement of collective attitude among their employees, and, more generally, through exposing the whole population to the full impact of market outcomes in all areas of their lives modernisation looks towards an enterprise culture as a political project.

In the ecological dimension, neo-liberalism tends to be optimistic on the responsiveness of individual agents, market prices, and nature herself to rapid change, seeing ecological issues as primarily issues of market-induced technological change. In Nepal, neo-liberal urgent eco-technology concern to raise labour productivity through a market-led technological breakthrough is undoubtedly attractive. Also, neo-liberalism does offer solutions to ecological degradation and the crisis of the commons through individual property rights and pricing solutions.

The limitations of neo-liberalism as development thinking are well exposed in the reference mentioned in the first section of this paper. Sceptical perception of neo-liberalism in practice in the USA, as O'Connor 1987 provides a multi-dimensional image from a neo-Marxian perspective' have received global exposure, a metaphor of hubris may be apposite. But neo-liberalism still has powerful advocates in Nepal from Official Development Assistance multilateral and bilateral agencies. Also, prominent Nepalese can be found willing to advocate the neo-liberal approach to the state as a partial solution to a need for major public sector reform.

POST-MODERNISM IN THE EARLY 1990s

The popular struggles of the late 1980s and early 1990s in Nepal, paralleled others elsewhere, and produced an overwhelming sense of opportunity, uncertainty, insecurity a regards all the developmental perspectives which had been thought appropriate for Nepal, even though external agencies continued to pursue variants on environmentalist and neo-liberal themes with little regard to the dramatic events around them. But to many people, inside and outside Nepal in the early 1990s it had become increasingly clear that some of the underlying assumptions about state power, about civil society, and about processes of interaction between the economic and the ecological and the political and the cultural dimensions of existence had been over-simplistic in all earlier perspectives and needed to be radically reframed.

An alternative was arising in global and local forms drawing on dissatisfaction with the methodologies and epistemological frameworks which earlier debates had unproblematically assumed. The post-modernist approach to analysing social reality in the 1990s appeared to accept, even celebrate, fragmentation, while scorning the earlier claims of totalising theories. Reality was treated as problematic, being far more complex,

perhaps ultimately inaccessible, and certainly could not be accommodated within the limits of any one meta-narrative.

If this is essentially what the post-modernist contribution offers to theoretical debates on the method and explanatory power of contemporary tools of analysis, then applied to development thought, a post-modernist perspective requires one to focus more on specific issues, localised experiences, narrower concerns than to attempt to explain the whole of social reality within a single theoretical framework. A central concern with language itself (Cameron 1985) gives logical prominence to the cultural dimension, and especially the way power relations are embedded in all cultural forms and claims to objectivity and neutrality.

The cultural dimension's conceptual appropriation of vital elements of power exposes the limitations and frailty of the *sovereign* state as the basic locus of power. Ultimately, from this perspective, the *nation* state appear to be a rather insecure social construction in perpetual danger of collapse through cultural fragmentation without continuous ideological, and occasionally violent reinforcement (Pradhan 1994).

Politicised post-modernism can claim that human relationships to nature as ecology and to each other as economics as narrowly rationalised, imperialist dictated discourse reproducing patterns of power with over-restricted agendas for marginal change. Opening up that agenda by listening for repressed voices containing challenges to the ossified status quo is the major challenge for those who wish to contribute to the current development debate, and Nepalese themselves are in the best position to do this, though the hearing of more socially distant voices may still not be perfect (Bista 1993).

It is somewhat ironic that the role of post-modernism in development for Nepal, and elsewhere, may be itself to write a sophisticated meta-narrative and promote the cultural dimension thus completing the set of political, ecological, economic and cultural primacies in the pantheon of development thinking about Nepal.

THOUGHT OF THE WAY AHEAD

Nepal has had much experience of the shifting international fashions in development theory over the past twenty years. Each of these shifts in theory alters the development focus giving a new image of Nepal. Like photographs from very different angles, the same national subject can become barely recognisable from one photograph to another and no essence can be perceived. Seeing any essential reality becomes even more confusing when each photograph is claimed to be the one true image.

As said, this theoretical journey has been mere sound and fury signifying nothing – a tale told predominantly by outsiders with their own

concerns foremost. That case can certainly be made with some justification but this may be too dismissive. It may be that all the theories are right in their identification of significant phenomena but all were wrong in their deterministic over simplification, and tendency to internalise solutions within Nepal. Discourse analysis would suggest that all contain useful insights, but all are too adamant in claiming their value to be truth— though this suggestion sacrifices much in logic and prediction as characteristic of valuable knowledge. It must also be noted that the close identification of discourse analysis with post-modernism must leave a concern that the combination of both constitutes a closure of effective discussion of other modes of thinking development.

But 1994 conversations with Nepalese people do reveal wide ranging claims to be experiencing cultural, economic, ecological and political stresses in the 1990s in crudely equal measures. Also, documentary evidence indicates that external agencies are explicitly, and significantly, engaged in all these dimensions of Nepalese life—whether or not those intervention have begun or self-interested intentions.

From these tentative observations, it can be claimed that thinking about development in relation to Nepal should not only explicitly include all the four dimensions of change with roughly equal weight but also give each considerable autonomy before bringing them into inevitable interaction. Also that such multi-dimensional thinking should also explicitly include a global dimension, showing how the interests of external agencies condition the options available for internal choice. From this perspective, *Nepal in Crisis* can certainly be criticised as rushing to prioritise the more formal political dimension and a variant of economics while neglecting the cultural and ecological, though its concern with external relationships does seem a strength. But generally, the challenge to thinkers about change in Nepal is enormous— to be multi-dimensionally sensitive to the specifics of Nepal, while neglecting aware of global pressures in each dimension— explicit and implicit.

CONCLUSION

Every society in the world today faces an internal crisis in at least one dimension of development and an external tension which may, or may not, link closely to the dimensions of internal crisis. Some societies, like Somalia, face crisis in all four dimensions internally and externally and have virtually ceased to exist as collectives in any meaningful sense, and others such as Colombia, Bosnia, Ethiopia even without Eritrea, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Cambodia are at, or close to, breakdown as meaningful societies in which citizens can engage in peaceful day-to-day relations with large groups of suppressed fellow citizens, let alone the rest of humanity.

Past theories of development rested on prioritisation of one dimension or another and had prognoses of inevitable progress or at least sustainability through a government getting a manageable number of factors *right*. These theoretical arguments over grand, universal, long run model look increasingly irrelevant in a world where under-explained real violence or its threat, in both civil society and by the agents of the State, is of immediate concern. How can we organise ourselves as a species without large numbers of people living in fear of violence is the major development question of the decade. Violence can no longer be neglected as a development phenomenon. The need to bring the discourse on violence into the discourse on development is long overdue. Pointers from Latin America and Europe can be found in Debray 1977 and Thompson 1980. The civil liberties, human rights movement in India which contains many important insights, can be found in Ilaiah 1989. Struggles in South Africa have had to engage intimately with prioritising the diminishing of violence as part of the struggle for development which can be seen in Graham 1994 and Strathern 1993, is a useful contribution from Oceanian experience. Governance, and international intervention interference in the sphere of governance, have become key concerns in debates both about *national development* and the *new international order*.

Nepal in Crisis and even more so the closely associated book *Struggle for Basic Needs in Nepal* (Blaikie, Cameron and Seddon 1979), can claim to have relevance in the current circumstances of Nepal. Both books were concerned with the way the political, economic, ecological, and cultural structures though the last two were understressed in Nepal operated, often with more than a hint of violence, to deny many Nepalese people access to resources.

These processes rendered irrelevant the dimension of apparent access provided by the high standard motorable roads financed by tied, prestige seeking Official Development Assistance that also funded the original research as a by-product, albeit with unintended results. The book were also very concerned with the international historical context in which external agencies played a prominent role in changes in Nepal. Formal political structures were only one aspect of how internal and external power relations found expression, but a significant aspect.

The recent changes in formal political structure towards regular, multi-party elections with universal franchise at all levels of government could be seen as consistent with the arguments in *Nepal in Crisis*, but there is a wider agenda of governance both internally and externally, implicit in that text. Accountability of the whole apparatus of the State and influential external agencies to the economically poorer people of Nepal was at the centre of *Nepal in Crisis* and *Struggle for Basic Needs* as an academic project in the 1970s. The question of power and accountability is back at the centre of the

development debate in the much more sophisticated form demanded by discourse analysis in the 1990s. More importantly, the process of empowerment as a continuing challenge is being placed at the centre of the practice of development in Nepal by Nepalese development thinkers themselves as an intensely cultural issue (Baral 1993 and Bista 1993).

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