

Development and Resistance

...

Reflecting on the assumptions and beliefs that a development professional has as he enters a community, the author explores the need for greater awareness, sensitivity and acceptance of villagers' abilities, requirements and choices

Colonialism needs to be looked at from a global perspective to understand how the colonisers plundered wealth from the colonies all over the world. By and large, the erstwhile colonisers are present-day developed nations although not all developed nations have been colonisers and not all colonisers became developed. Many of the developed nations have become so as a result of the unprecedented 'loot' conducted during the colonial period of more than 200 years, in the name of 'civilizing the uncivilized natives'. These countries are, at present, the richest countries in the world and, as a result, the most powerful countries too.

They decide and dictate (through IMF and World Bank) what needs to be done for the underdeveloped countries in the world and they do it in the name of development. These countries, in a way, decide the fate of this planet.

The colonial period was characterized by loot and plunder (Habib, 1975). Scholars such as Partha Chatterjee claim that loot and plunder are still continuing to fuel the current neo-liberal regime (Chatterjee, 2008), only the form has changed. The vast Central Indian Plateau, the homeland of tribes, is rich in mineral resources. Minerals are being extracted for capitalist development and, as a result, either forests are getting destroyed, impacting

Significantly, the term 'community' is used by development agencies, especially NGOs, to mean something similar to 'natives' as used by the colonizers

tribal life, or entire tribal villages are getting displaced. At the same time, big,/multinational companies are steadily capturing this vast market to sell their products, which include luxury items as well as items such as pesticides and plant hormones. This leads to change in the tribal way of living. The discourse on 'development' rationalizes all these changes. However, there are instances of resistance against development at the micro-social level. In this essay, I am going to narrate three instances of resistance against development, based on my own experience.

The development-*wala*

—

After the end of the colonial era, the discourse of development needed to be kept up in order to continue the power-relations that existed during the colonial time, at the international as well as the national level, argued post-development scholars such as Arturo Escobar and Gustavo Esteva. The concept of underdevelopment, as postulated by Harry Truman, helped to build a discourse around development (Escobar, 1995) (Esteva, 1992).

Franz Fanon (1963) argues that due to the long colonial history,

for the colonized people, race becomes as important as class: "You are white, so you are rich." At a micro-social level, within the underdeveloped nations, the discourse of development makes a group of people white. These new white people are rich, cultured and, above all, developed. These are also those who set the boundaries of the discourse (Foucault, 1980) of development and these include scholars, NGOs, donors and corporate houses.

One of the manifestations of this power, and resistance (Foucault, 1980) to it, can be observed in the relationship between the implementers of development projects and the community. Significantly, the term 'community' is used by development agencies, especially NGOs, to mean something similar to 'natives' as used by the colonizers; communities are also considered non-white—underdeveloped and backward, and, above all, homogeneous—in its suggestion of horizontality, not recognizing the vertical power relations within and with the outside. And just as the colonizers were on a mission to civilize the 'natives', development-*walas* (those who promote development) are on a mission to develop the 'communities'.

The community shows resistance to both the idea and discourse of development and against development-*walas*. This resistance comes up suddenly and it also disappears very fast. In this write-up, I will show how the strong resistance of a community can drive out a development-*wala*, at least temporarily. I will share three incidents, very briefly, to show how I've experienced strong resistance in the community against my development intervention and how even then I didn't change my idea about development, because my development discourse taught me to treat these incidents as isolated failures.

1. Makra village, Lohardaga district

In 1997, I was working in a tribal (Oraon tribe) village called Makra, situated in Lohardaga district, of the then Bihar. It is a very small village, where the houses were situated in the foothills of three small hillocks. To enter the village, one had to cross a culvert, constructed over a very narrow stream. I formed a lift-irrigation group from among the villagers for the implementation of the lift-irrigation scheme. The work of the group included collecting cash contributions, opening bank

I asked him why no one had started preparing their land for the winter crop. He said that no one was interested in *rabi kheti* (the winter crop)

accounts, contacting the Block Development Officer (BDO) for the schemes; organizing labour for digging up channels for laying the underground pipeline, etc.

Once the lift-irrigation was installed, I initiated a discussion around improved agriculture (which meant, at that time, HYV/HB seeds plus chemical fertilizers plus pesticides plus irrigation) with the group. However, even after four or five consecutive meetings, no one from the group began work on preparing the land for their winter crop. One day, I went to the village and I saw Bhukla Oraon standing on the culvert—the entry point of the village. Bhukla was around 25–26 years old at that time and was the most educated person in the village, having studied up to class VIII; he was the Secretary of the lift-irrigation group.

I asked him why no one had started preparing their land for the winter crop. He said that no one was interested in *rabi kheti* (the winter crop). Surprised by his response, I asked him why they had installed the lift-irrigation then. His voice was loud now and he said, “*Aap us samay ghar-ghar jaake kutta jaise bhonkte the, is liye humko lift lagana para.*” (You used to go to every house and bark like a dog and that’s why we had to

install the lift-irrigation). I was absolutely shattered, speechless, and slowly went to my motorcycle to return to office. I didn’t tell this to anybody in the office.

Two to three months later, a women’s Self-Help Group (SHG) was formed in the village through my initiatives. I was so sure about my idea of development that I kept on pushing the agenda of an irrigated, winter-crop cultivation in that group. Subsequently, I could convince some of the villagers to try out a winter crop.

2. Hudu village, Lohardaga district

This happened in a village called Hudu, adjacent to Makra, a year after the first incident. A Watershed Committee was formed through my intervention, to plan and implement the watershed project sanctioned for the village. My role was to influence the plan to utilize resources better. A vast field lay unused in Hudu. The villagers used it mainly to graze for their cattle.

My training on watershed management had taught me that land could be used more productively through timber plantation, that free grazing should be stopped and that cattle

should be stall-fed. However, the villagers were reluctant to plant timber on this land; they said they wanted to have the plantation on a rocky hillock. This hillock, according to them, was once covered with trees and they used to collect firewood from there. I did not like the idea of planting trees on a hillock because the grazing land looked much more fertile and I assumed that the growth of the trees would be much better if planted on that land.

The matter was discussed in the meeting of the Watershed Committee and they were apparently convinced that if they could raise timber species on that land, they would be able to fetch a huge income; also, at the same time, they would get grass to stall-feed their cattle. One day, therefore, as per schedule, the Watershed Committee planted saplings on that field and fenced the field with bamboo and GI wire. I was present for the planting. The very next day, when I went to see the condition of the plants, I was taken aback. The entire field was empty, all the saplings had been uprooted and the fence had been completely removed. When I asked what had happened, the Watershed Committee members said that it

When I asked them why they hadn't expressed this earlier, they told me that they had tried, but they were not educated enough to explain things to me.

was I who had insisted that the plantation be on this land; the villagers, however, needed this land for grazing. When I asked them why they hadn't expressed this earlier, they told me that they had tried, but they were not educated enough to explain things to me.

Subsequently, they planned for a plantation on a hillock and that plantation survived.

3. Purulia district

This happened as recently as in 2016, in Purulia district, West Bengal, 19 years after the two incidents in Lohardaga. I would attend the weekly meeting of a women's SHG. I did it for six consecutive weeks to see if the women could identify the reasons for their plight from the perspective of gender, caste and class. After the first three weeks, I was very happy to see that the women had started discussing how social norms made men more powerful than women and how women faced injustice in their family and in society.

The situation changed in the fourth week. On that day, the women didn't let us facilitate their meeting. Instead, they started asking us direct questions such as, "You are telling us that

our Santhal society is unjust, what about your society?" We admitted that our society was also unjust. Then they said, "Then why are you not doing this kind of meeting with your women, why are you coming to tell us about inequalities when your own society has so much inequality?" This reminded me of my earlier incidents at Lohardaga all those years ago. I had no answer to their question.

Conclusion

—

I have tried to demonstrate here, through my personal experiences, how development is a hegemonic idea (Gramsci, 1971), wherein the involved parties believed that development was better than underdevelopment. However, I found that even if there was an apparent acceptance of the idea, there were also voices of resistance that challenged the idea of development. I have also tried to show that subalterns could not only think, they could speak and they could act to take the reins of power back into their own hands, as happened in the third incident. All the acts of resistance were small, and didn't last long, and yet these were very powerful. However, it was difficult for the development-

wala, that is me, to accept and acknowledge this resistance because it means a loss of power that s/he/I was enjoying.

The development-*wala* has a particular idea of development which claims that, a) societies/nations that haven't followed a particular path of economic growth are underdeveloped, b) some communities such as the tribals are backward, c) it is possible to convince them that, in order to catch up, they need to efficiently use their resources, d) once they are convinced, they participate in development activities. The third story, though, doesn't talk about resource-use efficiency but moves around the theme of backwardness of tribal society. It also shows, like the other two stories, how tribal people, (in this case, the women) spoke out against what appeared as a progressive discourse.

The stories also tell us how the so-called backward tribal people *also* accept that the non-tribal, city-dwellers are better off—a phenomenon described by Fanon (1963). In all the three stories, the community first accepts the development-*walas*.

The incidents reveal that although there was occasional resistance to

Blocking of the road affected the construction in Tilaboni village because vehicles could not enter with the required construction material

the discourse, the development-*wala* did not reflect on this. It is true that he was too shocked, to further explore the setback at the time of the incidents; he did not explore it later, either.

In the first story, if the villagers did not like the lift-irrigation, was there any attempt to explore whether the community had any alternative views on how to revive agriculture? Or did they have some understanding of why they were in a situation where there was need for lift-irrigation, a concept contrary to their understanding of how agriculture must be done? Or did they simply feel that the push from my side was very overpowering and, therefore, the resistance was

just to stop me from pushing for things and to let them do things in their own way and at their own pace?

The second story also displays the capacity of the community to understand their own realities much better than the development-*wala*! I now realize how the people in the village displayed a complex understanding of land use, a harmonious sense of coexistence with different species (human, animals, flora, fauna) and, of course, a crackling disregard to run after MONEY.

Probably, the development-*wala* didn't want to reflect. Was

this was because he thought his knowledge of development made him powerful? Definitely, this knowledge and power made the development-*wala* view underdevelopment, and hence development, as true facts (Foucault, 1980), whereas these are also socially construed concepts just as any other concepts. However, if the resistance is accepted as a fact, the truthfulness of development is then under question. This will, in turn, challenge the power of the development-*wala*. Nobody wants to lose power. Definitely not the development-*wala*!

—
Dibyendu Chaudhuri is based in Adra, West Bengal

The references in this article are available on request at newreach@pradan.net