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Development narratives and the intellectual traditions in Bangladesh

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1. Introduction

To allow reflexivity I will begin to talk about my social identity that has helped in writing this paper. I am a Bangladeshi 'native' who wears two hats. I have been deconstructing development and yet I am simultaneously part of it. My doctoral thesis was financially supported by Department for International Development, DFID (formerly Overseas Development Administration, ODA), and Social Science Research Council (SSRC, USA). In addition my analysis is constituted in terms of the Western academic heritage of anthropology. Most importantly I am inextricably attached to the discourse of development which has a profound impact on contemporary Bangladeshi identity. As aid discourse is so deeply embedded in Bangladesh, 'development' is now everywhere and everybody speaks of it. It is in that intersection that I recognise the importance of social identity of the 'indigenous' academics in Bangladesh. This has two implications. Firstly; to understand what the 'indigenous' academics have had to say about development, Secondly; what sort of knowledge they themselves represent. In other words, how knowledge, power and agency are represented and responsibility attributed are central themes of this paper.

To do so, this paper deals with the ways in which development literature in Bangladesh is heavily reliant on one particular form of knowledge, e.g. 'developmental knowledge' based upon the exclusionary constructions. I am concerned here with highlighting how the discourse and practice of development excludes local situation in favour of what Hobart calls 'world ordering knowledge' (1993: 1). Apart from the introduction and conclusion, this paper is divided into two sections. I begin with the term 'development narratives', paying attention to its relevance in the context of Bangladesh; this will be used

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in the second section to help us to understand the nature of what 'indigenous' academics conceptualise 'development'. Analysing one report and one policy proposal, I will show how agricultural 'development' in Bangladesh has been constructed by policy makers within the modernisation framework. The main aim of this section will be to show how discourses of modernisation have legitimised its intervention through providing what Roe calls 'development narratives' (1993:20). Let us first discuss the concept of 'development narratives'.

2. The concept of development narrative

Development interventions offer various schemes and implementations, which are manifested in structured and power-laden form in what Roe (1991) calls 'development narratives'. According to Roe, these narratives provide scripts and justifications for interventions by which development apparatuses make assumptions about the problem to be addressed and the approach to be taken (cited in Hoben, 1995:1008). Fairhead and Leach further elaborate: "Narrative construction is the stuff of synthesis overview writing within development agencies and policy research institutes, and of interagency analytical alignment in development approaches. Development narratives help decision makers confidently fill the gap between ignorance and expediency" (1997:35). They have become institutionally embedded policy paradigms, that are difficult to dislodge[1].

Taking such an approach this paper will examine two different narratives surrounding agricultural development in Bangladesh. In particular by examining the discussions about the nature of agricultural 'problems' and their solutions, I would like to describe how these narratives conceptualise development, through interpretations of policies and documents. Let us first look at the policy narratives, which address the 'agricultural problem', and justifies the action to be taken.

3. Development strategy in Bangladesh: two case studies

Because of the dominance of development economics in policy, Bangladesh is, at one level, a text book example of the development discourse and power relations that Escobar (1984) is talking about. For example, Escobar argues that through establishing numerous disciplines such as 'development studies', development discourse has involved experts removing from the political realm problems which would otherwise be political and to recast them into the apparently more neutral realm of science (Escobar, ibid:387). In what follows I will

discuss how development literature in Bangladesh is heavily reliant on one particular form of knowledge, e.g. 'developmental knowledge' based upon the exclusionary constructions.

In most of the development literature in Bangladesh, 'development' has been understood according to the cost benefit approach of conventional economics. Two examples will suffice to describe the development strategy in Bangladesh.[2] One is the 'Reports of the Task Forces on Bangladesh Development Strategies for the 1990s' and the other is a series of publications by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). If we look at 'Managing the Development Process' in Task Force Report, Vol.11, we notice that the authors have frequently emphasised the under use of technologies such as the pump machine, chemical fertilisers etc as responsible for agricultural 'stagnation' in Bangladesh. It is also suggested that there are 'under-exploited growth opportunities', and expansion of HYV can ensure higher productivity to solve the food problem in the country.[3] The Centre for Policy Dialogue echoes the Task Forces reports by identifying 'the lack of governance' as responsible for dysfunction of the development process in Bangladesh. The core narrative is: " The market is one area of such lack of governance, by failing to distribute urea to the doors of farmers" (ibid). As a result, the CPD scholars suggest good governance of market, subsidies and public management of fertiliser distribution (Sobhan, 1998:237).

The narratives have produced a number of elaborations: they call for 'modern' agricultural programme towards a capitalist economic systems approach, reduction of the existing agriculture and shift it to new cropping system and so on. The underlying appeal of these narratives is that for the nation, 'good governance' efforts were responsible for failing to reach the goal. It is important to mention that these development narratives tend to echo the dominant development discourse and they do not *by any means* bring us the direct voice of the 'developees', particularly the small farmers. Indeed, they are involved in efforts to promote new technologies without considering their potential for local applicability. They are thus rhetorical in their views, reflecting their isolation from grassroots and embeddedness in what Mozhar (1995:5) terms 'corporate ideology'. What they suggest, without providing convincing statistics, is a picture of 'agricultural stagnation', particularly in comparison to industry, to which most of the efforts of the government are devoted.[4]

However, 'stagnation' was identified by the scholars as being due to under use of the 'modern' inputs that I have mentioned above. What is interesting about the rhetoric of development strategies is that the CPD scholars claim that their role is 'independent', in what they term 'Independent Reviews of Bangladesh's Development' (IRBD), which belongs neither to the government nor to the international donor agencies. The CPD's role, it is argued, is to identify the flaws in the work of the state functionaries, providing clues for them to strength their 'development' efforts for the civil society. For example, CPD's Third Volume, (1998) Chapter-9, 'Managing Agricultural Development: urea distribution and pricing' (p-227-238), and Chapter-12, 'Managing Agricultural Development: public expenditure, extension and research' p-277-304) can be mentioned in this respect. One notices that to 'manage agricultural development', it is suggested that urea be made more available (p-207) and to make development more 'effective' extenstion efforts should be measured (p-302).

Given this way of seeing 'development', the way forward is quite clear. The most notable fact is that the entire 'independent' outlook is profoundly elitist. The CPD scholars frequently mention "in-house dialogues' as well as 'national dialogue' to bring together a 'higher degree of professionalism, high-level policy makers, entrepreneurs and the state" (Sobhan, 1998:27). This narrative of policy dialogue indicates clearly that the dialogues are centred around on the uppermost class in society. As the dialogues occur in Dhaka and the medium of communication is English, it is not surprising that these dialogues exclude the majority of the populace in Bangladesh society.[5] The message we find is the way in which the CPD academics call for 'independent' position as the means to attain 'development' is closely associated with the mainstream and what is clear from their policy dialogues for a search for 'effective development' is that it resonates the project of modernity. As such the 'indigenous' academics doubtlessly represent the imperative of dominant development discourse, taking its logic for granted and focusing on the technological and agricultural specifics of markets, pricing, water, fertiliser, agriculture extension in the domain of 'good governance'. It seems evident that 'development' can be achieved by the state if the 'good governance' is staged following modernity paths: as head of the institution of the modern state; as promoter in the increasingly global market; as responsible guardian in the agriculture, health and education sectors; as good performer increasing GDP and as efficient negotiator with the aid agencies. Why is this case? Let us see what sort of knowledge the academics themselves represent.

4. Intellectual traditions and the development thinking

In the above two examples, knowledge of and links with 'recipients' was often minimal. Such conceptualisation also means that there is little recognition of the processes of internally generated change. The development paradigm is also based upon conventional economics, which reduces the notion of development to economic growth. People's aspirations and values are virtually ignored in such a paradigm. As Rahman, an economist in Bangladesh, comments:

> ...its [economic] presupposition of the devaluation of culturally determined behaviour has made it alien to popular efforts for authentic development. In order to serve authentic development, economists need to know with what values people administer their scarce resources - in particular when the people mobilise to assert their own consensus values and take collective initiatives to promote them as part of their own concept of development- and what implications this has for the very concept of resources and for assessment of the resources at the disposal of a society (1994: 225).

In addition, Sarah White (1992) argues that because of the aid discourse, most academic writing on development issues such as "women in development" in Bangladesh serves the interest of the donors. This academic practice, as she argues, is centred around the elitist domain where English is dominant. Hence, "it restricts opportunities for the aid discourse orthodoxies to be challenged by indigenous voices with quite different perspectives" (1992:17).

Again the above two examples can be mentioned in this regard. The Task Force report was produced by a number of leading 'indigenous' academics who have expressed their views freely from two standpoints. Firstly, there was no political pressure from the state apparatus, as a neutral caretaker government was in power when the report was produced. Secondly, there was no donor obligation, both national and international, because the academics did not claim money for their contribution. The same is true for the CPD academics who enjoy freedom to express their own views.

Why, despite the freedom of their academic practices, did the 'indigenous' academics produce development strategies, which are so closely akin to the dominant development discourse? In my view, it is important to understand what Ferguson (1990) calls the 'academic discourse' in which the particular ideology is embedded. This academic

discourse emanates from a terrain which is significantly detached from reality. In other words, this is a question of the ways in which knowledge is generated. As Rahman forcibly argues: "The generation of knowledge in this paradigm is a specialised professional function that is described by prescribed methods which requires *observation from a 'distance'* as opposed to getting involved. The premise is that from one's 'superior' vantage point it is possible to look down and assess what an inferior life lacks and needs in order to formulate development policy and action to improve it" (1994:217, emphasis is in the original).

Combined with these issues of the influence of global discourses of development we have to understand the academics' class and status positions. The 'indigenous' academics are members of the privileged class in Bangladesh society and actively share state power. Not surprisingly, their ontology and epistemology have served to legitimate a particular culture's normative assumptions about development and knowledge. This makes an alliance between the donors and the academics, enabling both to perceive 'development' as a 'problem' to be solved in more 'effective' ways. In such joint ventures the 'indigenous' academics provide development narratives, such as Task Force (military metaphor?) Report and CPD strategy, that give the donors a rationale for the continuation of aid, a blueprint of development. 'Development' is thus everywhere in Bangladesh society, as it is defined by the 'indigenous' academics as their career path in Bangladesh.

5. Conclusion:

I have examined how development literature in Bangladesh is heavily reliant on one particular form of knowledge, e.g. 'expert' knowledge. Taking examples from two development strategies in Bangladesh, I have tried to argue that policy institute and its donors needed narratives that would give them a rationale for justifying the continuation of agricultural supports in Bangladesh. I have shown that the development narratives justified their intervention by claiming that farmers and their farming were very 'backward' and needed to be changed in order to know 'modern' agriculture. 'Underdevelopment' was portrayed as the lack of particular knowledge which ensures more productivity. Technical advice, accompanied by material support such as 'modern' inputs, were suggested under the banner of good governance. In fact, the narratives of progress are employed as a point of contrast in order to promote the 'modernity' that lies behind development discourse. The development narrative is, therefore, enhanced through the incorporation

of dominant ideologies[6]: The final section of the paper has analysed ways in which an alliance between local academics and external development discourse in Bangladesh is created, supported with documentary evidence.

Notes:

1. This point is made by Allen Hoben, "Paradigms and Politics: The Cultural Construction of Environmental Policy in Ethiopia", World Development, 23(6): 1007-21, 1995.
2. I have chosen these studies, because they have been centrally important in shaping development policy in Bangladesh.
3. Interestingly, this is also suggested by the World Bank, which suggests expansion of HYV along with STW and DTW by which 26 hectors of land would benefit.
4. See for a critical discussion on Task Force Report, Mozhar, 1995: 3-44).
5. For example, if we look at the participants of the Agriculture and Environment session we see that all the participants (twenty-three) have an elitist background. The participation was also gender biased. Out of twenty-three only one was female and undoubtedly she represented the Ministry as a head, not as a woman (see. Agriculture and Environment Participants' list, (Sobhan, 1998:38)
6. According to Roe (1991) development narratives are like a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end that purports to describe and explain the problem to be addressed (quoted from Hoben, 1995:1008).

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