Anthropologists, Development and Political Action[1]

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to address current debates: the political responsibilities of anthropologist in development setting. In addressing these debates such as development anthropology and anthropology of development literatures together and in several ethnographic contexts, the paper addresses some of the epistemological problems as well as problems of representation related to development of anthropogy. A critique is made of Escobar and other post-modern development critics as essetialising political action; romanticising anthropologists role in 'development' setting. The paper suggests, using ethnographic data, that anthropologists can contribute to their socio-economic and cultural conditions. Anthropologists can engage in such political struggles by critically examining discourses and practices that promote a true alternative to dominant development paradigms.

1. Introduction

The participation of anthropologists in 'development' has been debated and contested within anthropology.[2] This critique partly stems from a distinction between 'pure' and 'applied' anthropology (Grillo, 1985; Alam, 2002; Ahmed and Chowdhury, 2001), partly from a critical attitudes towards the involvement of anthropologists in development', because of the moral, ethical and political dilemmas it entails (Ferguson, 1990; Escobar, 1992). Although a growing body of those writings discuss development and anthropologists' involvement in it, most of it fails to come to any flexible conceptualisation of

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'development' as well as anthropologists positionality within it. This paper is an attempt to overcome those shortcomings by demonstrating how 'development' enters a series of relationships producing multiple meanings in multiple sites. By looking critically at 'development anthropology' and 'anthropology of development' domains on the issues of 'developmentí and anthropologists role in it, I shall try to show the inadequacies of each of these positions, before arguing that a post modern understanding of the problematic provides the most workable framework for the anthropologists.

In his thought provoking editorial "Anthropology "comes out"? in Anthropology Today (1991), Akbar Ahmed addresses the very basic question: can anthropology ever legitimate a political voice? My answer is yes. In this paper I would like to discuss the responsibilities of anthropologists in 'development' settings. It is broadly divided into three sections. In the first section, I will provide a brief discussion on conventional anthropological approach what is termed as 'development anthropology'. My intention here is to provide how anthropological insights are substantially different from other social sciences dealing with the very notion of 'development'. Then I present recent post modern critiques of development which distances itself from 'development anthropology'[3]. Here my aim is not to provide all the post modernists arguments at this point, but will merely sketch what difference anthropology is actually able to make. In the second section I present post modernists agenda on political action of anthropologists. Taking ethnographic examples I try to make a critique of 'alternatives to development'. I suggest our critiques are only useful when we take into consideration local peoplesí initiatives who themselves take the lead to criticise development discourse. In the third section I hope to show that what I have chosen to term a 'post development discourse' holds promise for anthropologists to engage themselves between anthropology 'of' and 'in'. I will argue that the epistemological problems related to the work of anthropologists, be they post-modernists or not, are central to the understanding of the ethical, moral and political problems.

2. Development anthropology vs. anthropology of development

Anthropology emphasises peoples perceptions, worldviews and values as well as behavioural patterns that can constitute ingredients of economic prosperity. They can therefore provide a useful critique of 'mainstream' developmental paradigms. From the 1970's onwards anthropologists have increasingly been involved in various development projects. Criticising the dominant development paradigm, anthropologists have argued that 'development' is portrayed as an institutional, administrative problem implying development being imposed from outside by 'expert' knowledge rather then from below by consulting local people and their knowledge.

Culture is seen as a residual category and an obstacle to development. Anthropologists contend that culture and development need not to be antagonistic, because development is always cultural if people can determine their own future (Hastrup, 1990). Throughout the 1980's some development anthropologists have deconstructed the world of planning and intervention suggesting that '...target populations were made up of heterogeneous groups, households and individuals, and highlighting the varied ways in which unity and individuals, could organise themselves, to appropriate, reject and modify the strategies and resources introduced by intervention' (Pottier, 1992:27).

Anthropological research also suggests a new perspective on the relationship between policy, implementation and outcomes, a model which portrays development as a negotiated, socially constructed, never ending, interaction between many social factors. Anthropologists agree that relative or absolute development can be achieved through what is regarded as 'traditional knowledge' but regarded by economists as synonymous with 'underdevelopment'. The importance of 'traditionalism' should not be undermined. It is important for people in emphasising their identity.

To achieve such goals some anthropologists (Belshaw, 1974; Pitt, 1976) argue that local knowledge should be taken into account for any development planning-be it agronomic, medicine taking or health nutrition behaviour. Thus development processes, according to those
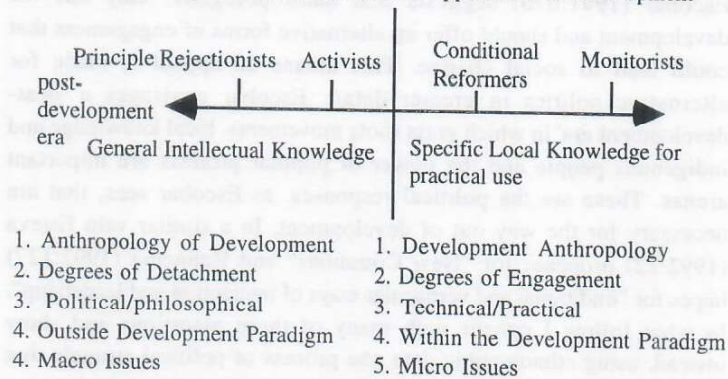
exponents, should proceed with the people to be affected, rather than for them, as approach which has been termed 'development from below'. This exponent also argues that internal development may be successfully generated by indigenous institutions and concomitant knowledge system.

The recognition of the internal dynamics as a pre condition for development planning stresses that indigenous culture may provide the framework for model building. It provides clues for development from below which essentially focuses on local needs, on local institutions as means of fulfilling those needs and understanding of local knowledge (Hoben, 1982; Cerneau, 1993). The new emphasis on 'culture' has opened up a space for anthropologists in engaging different development institutions (Hoben, 1982; Escobar, 1992). From this point of view anthropologists are believed to be able to make a unique contribution to 'development', stressing the centrality of 'bottom up' and 'indigenous' approaches as opposed to a top-down and quantitative approaches.

"Is it true that development anthropologists have a unique contribution to make ...because of their knowledge?" Arturo Escobar (1991) asks. The decostructionists especially Escobar have developed a radical critique of development arguing that the assumptions on which the development machine is based are inherently problematic. They see 'development' is itself as a Western-generated idea that has constructed 'Third World' as the underdeveloped 'other'. As a concept, they see 'development' is morally, politically and ethically violent and some anthropologists uncritical work on development projects perpetuates the discourse.

The above discussion outlines two broad lines of anthropological domains to development. The first one is characterised as development anthropology and the other one is anthropology of development (Grillo and Rew, 1985). The following table illustrates the difference of the two broad domains:

Fig: 1 Anthropological Knowledge and its Application to Development

| Principle Rejectionists | Activists | Conditional Reformers | Monitorists |

post-development era → General Intellectual Knowledge | Specific Local Knowledge for practical use

1. Anthropology of Development
2. Degrees of Detachment
3. Political/philosophical
4. Outside Development Paradigm
4. Macro Issues

1. Development Anthropology
2. Degrees of Engagement
3. Technical/Practical
4. Within the Development Paradigm
5. Micro Issues

The figure shows that within the development machine, the development anthropologists role is somewhat reformist, trying to make development smooth in a particular setting. On the other hand, the advocates of anthropology of development try to make their distance from the 'machine'[4]. Their role is largely devoted to comment on the discourses and practices of development establishments and locate themselves in a 'post-development era'. At the same time they are critical of their intelligence, knowledge and understanding within which these are embedded. According to these exponents, the development anthropologists do not question their power relations and uncritical about development projects, which in turn generates professional opportunism.

Ferguson and Escobar think development is nothing and they see no place for the anthropologist within the development institutions. It is argued that the role of the development anthropologists within development is related to the problem of representation. In other words, the development anthropologists' role as an intermediary or an advocate often leads to 'speaking for' the interests of some groups vis-à-vis those of others affected by development intervention. Because, as the post-modernists argue, those anthropologists cannot keep an 'objective' or 'neutral' distance to their object of research. A potential contribution of development anthropology is to 'repoliticise' development, usually 'depoliticised' in development discourse (Ferguson, 1990).

Escobar (1991:670) suggests that anthropologists "stay out" of development and should offer an alternative forms of engagement that could lead to social change. This means an appeal is made for alternative politics in greater detail. Escobar envisages a 'post-development era' in which grass roots movements, local knowledge and indigenous people and the power of popular protests are important arenas. These are the political responses, as Escobar sees, that are necessary for the way out of development. In a similar vain Esteva (1992:22) proposes for "New Commons" and Rahnema (1992:127) hopes for "traditional and vernacular ways of interaction and leadership". In what follow I concur with many of these assertions and show instead, using ethnographic data, the process of political struggle that must be initiated by the local people studied by the anthropologists.

3. Politics and the anthropology of development

I agree with Escobar and other deconstructionists who assess anthropologists' relationship to development critically and hope that our analytic position should be located within the 'anthropology of development'. We should thus distance it from 'development anthropology', in which the anthropologists do not question the power relations in which they are situated (Escobar, 1991).[5]

As we have seen above, for the 'way out of development' the deconstructionists especially Escobar (1995:) and Esteva (1992:22) suggest a general programme of political action. I agree with Escobar and others who appeal for the anthropologist to recognise her/his role as political. In such a project, which represents an emergent alternative to the dominant development paradigms, we are encouraged to be critical of development discourse and practice. To do so we are also encouraged by Escobar to position ourselves in relation to political struggles. The questions one may raise are: do people actually need directions from 'outside' for their political struggles? And what sort of role should anthropologists play in such struggles?

Post-modern theory enables us to understand hybrid discourses and practices by offering a position 'which does not seek to determine whether something is authentic, original, or uncontaminated but which

accepts cultural hybridity as a starting point in political projects that seek to empower subaltern, poor and marginalised groups' (Gupta, 1998:20). Whilst not denying that the preservation of ëindigenous knowledge' is useful for retaining the cultural identity of a marginal populace, it is also necessary to question for whom such knowledge is useful. Obviously, not all 'indigenous/marginalised people' have the same needs, perceptions and experiences and thus the same political agenda.

My own ethnographic evidence suggests that people like *char* inhabitants, whose livelihoods are threatened by unequal power relations in a risky landscape, find it less useful to conserve so-called indigenous knowledge (Ahmed, 1999). The evidence also shows that char peoples' struggle is centred around establishing land rights by which they mediate different types of risk. In such a situation we must not politicise the notion of 'indigenousness', by taking an analytic and political position just to oppose 'modernity', because both indigenous' and 'modern' are constructs in academic thought. Because *char* people do not distinguish knowledge in terms of such binary poles. Therefore, the deconstructionists' political project is highly problematic in changing the lives of local people, who have already borne 'the lash of modernity on their bare backs' (Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal, 1999: 18).

The *char* farmers demonstrated to me that discourses and practices of agriculture were constantly changing in terms of strategies they adopted to combat different kinds of risks and uncertainties. They acted from within that risky situation to renegotiate different forms of knowledge— actively producing a hybrid knowledge. I use the term 'hybrid' to denote the multiple knowledges and "knowledges" in its plural form which imply changes and variety.[6] Farmers' ability to recreate or renegotiate the constitution of their knowledges and practices are, precisely, a technique of survival: "cultural survival". This survival strategy raises fundamental question about the deconstructionists' political project: how local people are to be represented and by whom?

One may ask: if local people themselves take the initiative to overcome various oppressions ranging from local power politics to development hegemony by means of compliance and resistance, to what extent is it useful for anthropologists like myself to offer an alternative? If local

people themselves use their 'indigenous' understanding as a guideline for incorporating and dismissing discourses of development, just one example among many forms of knowledge, how useful is it to celebrate or conserve so-called pure and authentic indigenous knowledge from an academic courtyard? The *char* examples showed that the generation of farmers' knowledge was embedded in socio-political processes and was impinged upon by material conditions.

Two recent empirical works on discourses of development in India have important implications in this regard. One is on 'Forests, Politics and Governance in Bengal, 1794-1994' (1996) by Sivaramakrishnan, and the other one is 'Post Colonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India', (1998) by Akhil Gupta. These two studies bring together recent post-structuralist critiques of development and work in post colonial studies. Both authors have ethnographically challenged the notion of a monolithic post-colonial condition, drawing out the links between village life, national trends and global discourses. Let us see how these studies tell us about different post colonial conditions.

Following historical anthropology, Sivaramakrishnan argues that development is produced simultaneously in different sites. To do so he unveils how forests in West Bengal are used as development spaces in which social and state agencies act. His account of development, with reference to scientific forestry as a development regime, is not confined to a particular space or time. Rather he views development as a continuous process of production and negotiation of the relationship between governance and knowledge production (1996:27). Sivaramkrishnan's study challenges poststructuralist critiques of development which pay insufficient attention to the integral aspect of development's production in specific historical contexts and particular settings. I agree with Sivaramkrishnan that

> They [the poststructuralists] then risk denying agency and dynamism to the third world societies in the matter of interrogating modernity, understanding its instrumental manifestations, and distinctively reconstituting development in diverse sites (ibid: 9).

Akhil Gupta's (1998) study is also based upon recent critiques of development. He has analysed what development has meant to people in

a village in North India. Focusing on local agricultural practices in India since the green revolution of the 1960's, Gupta challenges the singular enterprise of development. Gupta examines narratives of local politics in 'Alipur', a North Indian village, by showing how certain discourses influenced national politics on the green revolution.

Gupta's micro-analysis also shows that farming practice in Alipur is not static, it is heavily influenced by indigenous understandings of agronomy and ecology, local politics, development projects and programmes and the politics of household and caste. Gupta demonstrates from his findings that 'global' discourses such as 'development' are profoundly resisted, reinvented, and reconfigured in different social and historical locations (ibid: 15).

The ethnographic evidence shows that local people themselves take the decision whether they should accept, reject or even modify development. They may totally resist or accommodate development according to their socio-cultural and material conditions. I think this is the point of departure in understanding how different people in different localities interpret development. According to Jackson (1997:148) the deconstructionists speak of texts, narratives and discourse, but are often silent on material conditions, particularly with regard to poverty (cf. Crewe and Harrison, 1999: 188). For example, as Jackson has rightly pointed out, "Escobar states that 'there is no discourse analysis that is unrelated to materialities' (1995:130), yet he fails to deliver an account of this relatedness which is other than that of determining and powerful discourse 'making' the Third World" (1997:148). The challenge to situate texts in material reality remains.

This emphatically does not mean that the anthropologists cannot engage in political action. It does mean that anthropologists can contribute to promoting and interpreting a critical development discourse undertaken by local people themselves in response to their socio-economic and cultural conditions (Little and Painter, 1995). It is 'they' who initiate the deconstruction of development discourse by engaging in the different social and political relations to which they are subjected. Anthropologists can engage in such political struggles by critically examining discourses and practices that promote a true alternative to dominant development paradigms.

4. Conclusions and Implications for theory

I have tried to sketch out that anthropologists role should be devoted to criticising development discourse; it goes furthest toward providing a useful theoretical basis on which a critical anthropological project in development setting can be established. I have argued that if we are to take the post-modern approach to development and understand it as discourse we have to show how it involves multiple sites and ever-changing realities and narratives. Recent anthropological both theoretical and empirical work show that there is varied meanings of development which are contested and negotiated (Ahmed, forthcoming). This suggests that we must move not only beyond the predominant development anthropology domain, but also, while acknowledging their importance of their intellectual capacity, beyond the rejectionists' view of development.

Gardner and Lewis (1996:75) have encouraged anthropologists to take a position in between development anthropology and anthropology of development domains in what they term 'post-development discourse'. Acknowledging the important task of deconstructionist, they urge anthropologists to change development discourse from within by utilising anthropological insights and methods. This in turn can help, as they hope, 'subvert and re-orient development, contributing to its eventual demise and transformation into post development discourse' (1996:75). How it can be achieved? Gardner and Lewis argue (ibid:76):

> We are not suggesting that anthropologists should become developers, nor that we should necessarily strive to mould our concepts around the rigid jargon of donors. Instead, anthropological perspectives can be applied by various actors, including local community organisations and NGOs. They can also help shift discussion away from development and towards a focus upon social relations of poverty and inequality.

Although Gardner and Lewis have argued for developing a critical outlook for 'post-development discourse', they have paid scant attention to their own political role. This concerns not only working politically in criticising development discourse, but also questioning our Western intellectual heritage in understanding 'other'. To do so, it is necessary to locate our epistemological as well as ontological constitutions of which they are part. As Grillo, paraphrasing Talal Asad (1973), has noted that

there has always been a fundamental structural context, formed by a global system of global social, economic and political relations, within which anthropology-pure or applied-could be constituted a subject discipline, and of which it will inevitably be part (1985:17).

Tala; Asad enables us to take into consideration the national and international context of development in which the anthropologists are likely to work. In my view, whatever the position anthropologists take, the ethical and epistemological issues of involvement and of the representation of people to be addressed. Which people are we talking about? Are they merely so-called affected, marginalised or voiceless people? What about the other section of people? Whose political struggles we should support? Our discipline of anthropology teaches us to take holistic approach taking into account the different conflicting interest groups involved. What we need to be aware of our epistemological problems related to the production of knowledge within development situation. It is in this context that we are social actors and our activities are definitely political as well as moral.

Notes

1. In this paper I would like to make an attempt to links between anthropologists, development and political action. I borrow the term 'political action' from deconstructionists (e.g. Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1990) who seek alternative forms of anthropologists engagement in favour of the marginalised people. Here I would like to use the term to denote 'counter hegemonic alternative points of engagement' (Ferguson, 1990:268). However, I am particularly interested in looking at the deconstructionists' general programs of political action which could lead to social change.

2. Development is a contentious concept in anthropology of development literature. In this paper I take it as a construct which is to do with modernity, rationality and so no (Sachs, 1992) I use the term to describe how it enters a series of relationships producing multiple meanings in multiple sites. To that extent I consider the term as a continuous process of social and economic change.

3. Scholars such as Escobar, Ferguson, Esteva or Sachs are considered as representatives of the 'poststructuralist' or 'deconstructionist' position in the development studies. In this paper I shall treat these scholars as deconstructionist, as they deconstruct 'development.'

4. Escobar sees development anthropology is rooted in the history of applied anthropology (1991:661) and expanded as a field in the mid –1970s in associations with the New Directions manadate of the US AID.

5. I should make it clear that the advocates of the new critique of development are not homogenous. Not all are share the same solution to alternative to development For example, Sivaramakrishnana and Agrawal (1999:17) have divided them into two sub-groups. One sub-group led by Ferguson (1990) denies to outline general programs for political action. As Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal observe that though Ferguson is very critical about development machine he does not provide any sort of prescriptions. Other subgroup such as Escobar and Esteva are very critical about development machine and offer a radical critique critique based upon direct political action.

6. Several scholars argue that 'local' cultures, social structures and environments mediate 'placeless power' and significantly shape the actual consequences of 'modernity'. As a result different types of 'modernity' exist, in what Appadurai (1991) terms "alternative modernities"; Watts (1992) "re-working modernity"; Bhabha (1994) "hybrid"; Gupta (1998) "hybridities" and Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal (1999) "regional modernities".

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