

Shifting Paradigms of Development

Review of *Unnayanchintar Palabodol* (Transitions in Development Theory): S. Aminul Islam. Dhaka: Dibyaprakash.

With the concept of development fragmented into numerous issue-based growth ideas like environment, women or gender, population etc., a comprehensive theory of development has faltered over the last few decades. Yet, the scholars over the years have sought to make sense of the problems faced by the Third world in particular and have ventured into various modes of explanations. Some of these have been followed in policy prescriptions while others have sought to demonstrate their inadequacies. Yet others have prescribed revolutionary transformation of the society. Most, however, have been proposed in relation to this or that ideology and as a result have failed to offer a unified and unbiased notion of development or a way out for the Third world countries.

Few books have been able to capture this range of issues and ideas associated with development and/or its theories particularly with a clear notion of the historical growth of these. And there is none in Bengali. The absence is felt most in teaching the subject to the students of development. S. Aminul Islam is one teacher who decided to face the issue directly by writing a book that could remedy the problem. And in trying to wrestle with the various opposing ideas of development, he has come up with an excellent analysis of the changing scenario by placing these in relation to the now famous notion of “paradigm shift”. By following Kuhn, Islam has worked out an explanation of development theories that offers not only a basis for their analysis but also places these in a coherent order, a categorization of vital importance, which alone can make any sense of the contending perspectives.

Beginning with the explanation of the basic concepts like “progress”, “evolution” and “development” Islam traces the whole history of the growth of development theory to their current ideas. Although he touches on the initial explanations of the economists his focus is on the sociological perspective. Identifying the basis of most of the theories in the works of Weber, Durkheim, Spencer and Marx, Islam shows how they all culminated in the theories of the past decades like the modernization theory, the dependency theory and the various neo-Marxist theories.

The most penetrating presentation is his analysis of the “modernization” theory. He aptly calls the chapter on modernization as “the rise and fall of a paradigm” and traces the growth and development of the various aspects of the modernization theory and then goes on to show their inadequacies and how modernization failed as a paradigm of development. It was one of his earlier works on modernization theory that prompted him to use Kuhn and the notion of paradigm to evaluate the modernization perspective on development. In this work he again uses Kuhn to show how the “crisis” which followed in the wake of the failure of the modernization paradigm gave rise to the later theories. Thus, in many ways Islam bases much of his analysis of the development theories, particularly the dependency theory, as a response to the modernization paradigm.

Yet, his treatment of the dependency theory remains as the strongest point of the book. Here he offers one of the most comprehensive analysis of dependency theory that is to be found anywhere. He shows how from the 1950s on ward dependency paradigm developed in Latin America and how Frank brought it to the forefront of development analysis. Islam also deals extensively with the “world system” theory of Wallerstein, Samir Amin and theories of many neo-Marxists to complement his examination of the responses to the modernization paradigm.

The later chapters of the book focus on the recent developments including providing an interesting critique of the dependency paradigm. He also seeks to portray the growth of the mass

media and how it influences development, arguing that although the concept of “cultural imperialism” is yet to make its mark in sociology, it needs to be seen as a new facet of Western domination. He then shifts to the more recent aspects of globalizaion. This, I feel, is not a very well developed chapter. The reason may be simply that very little work has done on it by the sociologists. In any case this chapter needs further elaboration at least by looking at the numerous criticisms that have been launched against globalization and the WTO. Islam then rounds off with a very thought provoking section on “post-development” thinking, which I am sure will allow the reader to develop his/her own perspective on development.

The book, to say the least, is a very welcome publication. There is nothing comparable available in Bengali and few English volumes are as comprehensive. As the author notes, it will be of great service to both the academics and the researchers in the field. I feel an immediate translation into English is in order as the book goes far beyond being just another text on development. I see it as a major contribution to the understanding of the vital issue of development as well as an attempt at unraveling of the complex process of theory building in the area.

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