10 | Contesting development, reinventing democracy: grassroots social movements in India[1]

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It is more than four decades since grassroots-based social movements in India began contesting development[2] by critiquing its ecological and economic consequences for poor people surviving on the natural resources of land, water and forest, the resources that development wants to divert into industrial and commercial use.[3] Transcending a limited critique of specific development projects, these movements critique 'development', with its attendant rationale of technocratic growth, its binary construct of the world into poor and rich, its faith in the linear progress of people and countries from poor, backward and undeveloped to rich, progressive and developed, and the unquestioned desirability of this progress.[4] The movements instead urge that the ecology and economy of the poor, with their knowledge and culture, constitute the basis for the reorganization of society, economy and culture (Escobar 1995; Esteva and Prakash 1999; Shiva 1989). Under neoliberalism, the ruthlessness with which economic growth is pursued has led the movements to intensify their protest. People whose interests the movements articulate and represent include the rural poor – small and marginal peasants, landless labourers, people engaged in off-farm activities such as fishermen, and those who earn their livelihood by providing their services to the village, such as carpenters, artisans and weavers. In terms of their social composition, the movements' members include low castes, women and tribal communities inhabiting forests.[5]

The history of these grassroots movements reveals their power to shape the discourse of development to make it democratic in its form, practice and outcome. In this sense 'development' questions become questions about democracy. I argue in this chapter that the contestations over development are also contestations over democratic politics, for they raise the questions of equity, equality and inclusion. The movements have brought the old questions of democratic distribution of the material benefits of development back to the surface, but also infuse them with new meanings by emphasizing the democratic principles and practices

that development has undermined. The movements have filled the spaces left vacant in a formal democracy where neither the local governance spaces created by the state for participation nor the political parties have represented the interests of the poor and the marginalized. The movements have thus both rejected the spaces and emerged as depoliticized sites of alternative grassroots democratic politics. As such, the resistance movements can be looked upon as acts of deepening democracy.

In this chapter I examine the potential of grassroots movements to expand and deepen the democratic ethos of inclusion, equity and equality. I do so by examining what I call the 'deepening democracy tasks' the movements have come to perform in recent times. Five such tasks are:

- The movements replace the exclusionary narrative of state-led development with a counter-narrative of inclusion.
- The movements expand the non-party political spaces for social action.
- Public space is constantly being democratized by the movements.
- The movements renegotiate poor people's relationship with the state.
- The movements are sites of reconstruction of modernity through the discourse of citizenship and rights.

Before I elaborate on all this, let me give a brief account of development and dominance to put the movements in context.

Development and dominance: birth of a people's movement

When India embarked upon its path of development soon after independence in 1947, the national leadership under the first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, painstakingly tried to combine the agenda of development with the agenda of democracy. The leaders, most of whom had been part of the nationalist struggle against colonialism, saw three critical tasks they had to perform: build democracy in a society long ruled by authoritarian colonial oppression; address the economic well-being of the vast majority of its people reeling under poverty; and protect the sovereignty of a country that had just emerged from a long colonial subjugation. Development in the form of economic growth was considered the answer that would secure material prosperity for people and also protect national sovereignty. The development agenda, however, was not seen as independent of the agenda of democracy-building, but rather thought of as a part of it that would contribute to building a society based on the values of egalitarianism and social justice. A socialist element was built into the democratic agenda that development was intended to fulfil (GOI 1951).

Indian developmental planning, in the form of successive five-year plans, put the emphasis on industrialization as the chief vehicle of economic growth. Economic growth was termed 'national growth' and 'a public good', which the state was to pursue for the well-being of its populace. There were many streams of industrial development. One stream generated raw material for industrial use – mining and steel industries, for example. The power projects were designed to generate power for industrial, agriculture and domestic consumption – dams and thermal power plants were in this category. Another stream used technology to harness natural resources such as marine resources and fisheries for export promotion. And yet another stream captured the natural resources, primarily forests, for commercial use, such as paper and textile industries. Industrialization thus used nature as its primary raw material to generate material wealth. The public sector controlled industrial development, with a peripheral role assigned to the private sector in light consumer goods.

Economic growth through industrialization and commodity production thus became the core of the Indian economy, and industry, mining and giant irrigation projects took shape in quick succession to change the economic and social landscape. The developmental path of the democratic state was ideally designed to benefit the disadvantaged and promote equity and social justice. Ironically, though, the democratic developmental agenda of the state was subverted by the dominant forces as they appropriated the benefits of development, much to the disadvantage of the marginalized groups of the poor, the landless, low castes and tribal communities that had suffered social and economic vulnerability in the past and to whom the development projects were designed to bring benefit (Kothari 1986; Bardhan 1984, 1988; Kohli 1987, 1988; Dhanagre 1987). Not only did developmental projects not benefit them, but they added new dimensions of disadvantage to their already disadvantaged position. As the technocentric economic growth took off and huge irrigation, hydroelectric projects and heavy industries took shape, thousands of people were displaced from their original habitat, and in the absence of a comprehensive resettlement and rehabilitation policy, displacement became the inevitable outcome of development.

For almost two decades industrialization was accepted as a strategy of national growth, but during the 1970s voices began to be raised against it. The resistance movements articulated three issues: national growth and the public good had turned into a private good, benefiting only a section of the population – that is, the elites in a position to negotiate with the state; the natural resources of land, river and forest on which