

Viewpoint

Development Without Culture*

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Prologue

Not long after joining an international grant-making foundation, I was invited to a meeting at its headquarters in New York. I had been told that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss aspects of the foundation's culture programme, but I had no idea how I was expected to contribute to the discussion.

Desperately wanting to clarify my role, I approached the Chair of the meeting¹, ten minutes before it was scheduled to begin.

“Is there anything in particular that you would like me to talk about?” I asked him. “Just tell us why culture is valuable,” was his breezy reply.

I was stunned. This was the last question that I had expected to be asked. Here was a foundation that had supported cultural institutions and initiatives in South Asia for a decade. It had an even longer history of grant making in the arts in the USA. Would any foundation, after years of working in community development, ask itself why community development is valuable?

My astonishment quickly gave way to confusion as I began to consider why culture is valuable. The more I thought about the question, the more it seemed to resist any but the most paradoxical answer.

Soon it was my turn to speak. I saw curiosity and expectation on the many faces that turned to look in my direction. I was forced to inject a long pause into the proceedings – not for dramatic effect, but only to buy time for an idea, any idea, to stir in my mind. Then, all of a sudden, I understood why the question had so baffled me.

“Culture cannot be ascribed a value,” I began. “On the contrary, it is the limiting point of our ascription of value and meaning...”

* Indore Management Journal gratefully acknowledges the permission to reprint this article, by Anmol Vellani.

¹ The meeting was chaired by the late Dr John Gerhart, to whose memory I dedicate this paper.

Development's View of Culture

Today I am better able to appreciate why a foundation – one that primarily supports developmental work – might ask itself about the value of culture, even when it has been active in the field for many years. Behind the question lurks the foundation's persistent uneasiness about being involved in the field of culture. How does it justify supporting cultural work in societies struggling with grinding poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, inequality and injustice? The apparent lack of integration between its culture programme and other areas of grant making becomes another source of anxiety. And how would the foundation defend itself against the charge that culture and development are not just unrelated but incompatible areas of work? Is culture not a barrier to development?

Beyond the presumed incompatibility of developmental and cultural activity is a deeper problem, unarticulated and little understood. It is that the *concept* of culture is incompatible with development discourse, or at least with the terms in which it has been conducted until very recently. Understanding the nature of this tension might help to throw light on a number of questions, including why foundations are reluctant to enter the culture field; why such culture programmes as do exist within foundations, form a parallel stream of activity, isolated from other grant making; and why culture appears on the developmental agenda in an instrumental role instead of becoming an integral part of development thinking.

Development thinking has focused on the external world – the social, political, economic, cultural and natural environment – and how it impinges on human well - being. Its primary preoccupation has been with the outer changes that need to be effected (rather than the possible link between inner change and outer change) to improve the quality of human life. Naturally it has also been concerned to weigh initiatives that would alter the conditions of life for the better against the costs of bringing about desirable changes, such as whether those changes would weaken the social fabric, result in environmental degradation, or narrow the prospects for future generations in some other way.

Within the limits of this discourse, one is confined to thinking about culture as a feature of the world that human beings inhabit. Conceiving of culture as an *object*, it becomes legitimate to look upon it as a good, like health or education, or as an evil, like corruption or child labour. It also seems apt to appraise culture, as one might the state of the economy, and ask whether it can be 'improved' to facilitate development. One could then consider strategies to suppress or strengthen aspects of the cultural environment, depending on whether they hinder or promote development goals.

This discourse, in other words, does not assume culture to have its own inner dynamic that might have a bearing on development thinking or strategy. Rather culture is viewed from the outside, as a relatively fixed domain to be confronted, evaluated and acted upon from within a developmental frame of reference. Culture can be admitted into this frame of reference only as a feature of the environment that one might want either to overcome or utilize to ensure the success of development programmes.

Because it is seen as part of an inhibiting or facilitating environment, culture plays no role in determining the nature of development strategies or initiatives. As an object, however, culture finds a place on the developmental agenda in two ways. Firstly, it is acknowledged to have instrumental value. Cultural expression is used by development agencies to spread literacy, for example, or to communicate health or environment programmes. As a medium of communication, it is accepted as having a role in contributing to social change, building constituencies, raising consciousness, and even helping to overcome cultural resistance to development ideas. Secondly, development agencies might be involved with cultural expression as an offshoot of their interest in sustainable livelihoods. Under this rubric, support mostly goes out for projects that enhance the income-generating potential of crafted or performed forms of cultural expression in rural and tribal communities. The main thrust of such projects is to give these forms access to wider markets.

These 'development' programmes sidestep vital issues of culture. The first sees no harm in altering the content of traditional cultural forms to reflect development messages, the second one, in treating these merely as products to be bought and sold. Both ignore the fact that rural and tribal communities attach specific meanings to their forms of expression – meanings that derive from the local context in which, and purpose for which they are presented or produced. In the case of the crafts, for instance, it is not just the materials, colours or motifs that are used; even the very process of creation might have ritual or symbolic significance. As prevailing but ever fickle market tastes and preferences increasingly dictate the nature of the craft product as well as the mode of its production, cultural agents are being reduced to contract labourers. They are being alienated from their act of creation and its result, which is emptied of cultural meaning to serve a milieu entirely unrelated to their own. It is not surprising that such projects – rooted in the development concern with sustaining or altering external conditions for the sake of human well being, – should disregard this intimate relationship between culture and meaning.

Culture's Critique of Development

Within development discourse, I have suggested, there is nothing obviously wrong or illogical about asking if culture has value. Nor, therefore, would it seem unreasonable to ask whether

culture has more or less value than, say, education or health. How often has one heard the lack of philanthropic or developmental attention to culture defended on the ground that it falls low on any scale of priorities? But culture, as I argue below, belongs in a different category, and cannot be placed on the same scale as education or health for the purpose of comparison.

To begin with, there is something exceedingly odd about regarding culture as an object or state of affairs. One can speak sensibly about good or bad health or education, but not about good or bad culture. It is not culture itself but the expressions of culture that can be assessed in different ways – as good or bad, meaningful or trite, influential or insignificant, and so on. Indeed the assumption that culture and development are opposed rests on equating culture with cultural expression. After all, it is only cultural habits of perceiving, thinking and acting that could possibly overturn the best-laid development plans.

But to equate culture with cultural expression is to lose sight of the fact that the locus of culture is not the external world, but the transaction between the self and the world. Culture – unlike food, shelter, education or health – cannot be given a value because it sets the limits to our ascription and production of meaning and value in the world, and to the changes in our world that we are able to tolerate. We do not pursue culture as we pursue happiness; rather culture determines the boundaries of what we might regard as a life worth pursuing.

At the same time, culture should not be seen as a framework or foundation that determines or fixes human habits of perception, action or response. This would make it difficult to account for cultural change. One should instead think of culture as a bubble, which has the elasticity to accommodate a certain range of ways of seeing and doing, differences in tastes and preferences, and even rival conceptions of the meaningful or worthwhile. It can allow considerable room for negotiation and manoeuvre with respect to competing interests and contested positions. It also has the elasticity to absorb and be transformed by alien influences without losing its identity. But like a bubble, culture also has a bursting point, beyond which lies all that it is unable to contemplate, tolerate or digest².

Culture, therefore, is the limiting point of what we might countenance as worthwhile, meaningful or acceptable. It limits our ascription and production of meaning in the world. It limits, for example, whether we are able to ascribe meaning or value to a historical artifact, whether we discover or understand it to have some significance to our lives. It limits as well the *range* of possible meanings we are able to assign to that artifact. Culture also limits the array of meanings that we could assign to a ritual practice in which we participate. Within those limits, the

² I am indebted to Mr George Jose for the bubble analogy, which he had heard Prof Dipankar Gupta use in a lecture to critique theories of cultural determinism.

meaning we assign to that practice may change, without implying that our culture has changed. On the other hand, a change in the significance of a ritual practice may well be a sign that the limiting point of our culture has expanded or contracted.

Culture also sets limits to the acceptance of fresh meanings that might be produced by the invention of a new cultural form, or by the introduction of new elements in an existing one. The new intervention might be rejected, but if it is tolerated or accepted, it would be because either (1) it is compatible with the given universe of significance in our culture, or (2) it has altered the cultural limits of meaning ascription and production. At one level, a community witnesses cultural change when new meanings are introduced and accepted. At a deeper level, it changes when the limits of meaning ascription and production have been redrawn.³

It would be fair to argue that development discourse, as I have characterized it, is associated with an older model of development. Top - down, remote-controlled development has been out of fashion for some time. The idea that workable solutions to the problems of poverty and underdevelopment can be thrashed out in the boardrooms or by the staff of development agencies has few if any takers today. Nor does anyone believe that following the route to development taken by the advanced, industrialized countries is feasible or sustainable. And it is only very rarely that development breakthroughs and insights from one disadvantaged context have been transplanted to another with any degree of success.

The weakening hold of prescriptive notions of development promises to bring culture to the forefront of developmental thinking. For some time now, development programmes have been concerned with empowering groups that suffer social or economic privation. Development-as-empowerment appears to shift the discourse from initiating change in the best interest of the disadvantaged to enabling the disadvantaged to play a growing role in determining what change is in their best interest and how best to achieve it. Two reasons can be adduced in favour of handing over greater control to weaker groups to address their own problems and situation of disadvantage. Firstly, people who experience a problem, and best understand the local conditions in which it obtains, are the most reliable source of ideas and strategies to address it. Secondly, one empowers people or communities to enable them to decide what matters to them, what priorities or goals to set, indeed even to decide what *counts* as a problem.

³ For contrasting views, see Milton Singer's survey of anthropological interpretations of culture in *The Concept of Culture*, International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences 3 (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1968) p. 527-43. For a more recent account, see John Monaghan and Peter Just's *Social & Cultural Anthropology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2000) Chapter 2. Culture has been defined, for example, as the domain of the most elevated human values (Matthew Arnold); a complex whole of shared patterns of learned belief, knowledge and behaviour (Edward Tylor); rules of conduct (Claude Levi-Strauss); standards for perceiving, responding and acting (Ward H. Goodenough); and the organizing principle of human experience (Renato Rosaldo). More recent views of culture have denied that it is an integrated whole or refers to an underlying pattern.

If empowerment is about enabling people to take greater control over their lives and their future, culture must occupy a central place in development thinking and strategy. Culture is expressed in many ways – in the food people eat, the rituals in which they participate, the stories they tell, the myths to which they adhere, for example. Cultural expression reflects and reinforces deeply held values and beliefs, providing people with a secure basis for taking decisions about the future of their communities and social and economic lives, but it does more than that. Referring specifically to the arts, Joan Erdman has written:

(T)he arts embody culture in a distinctive manner incorporating myth and history... It is in the arts, in cultural performance, that a civilization reconsiders its values, teaches them to its young, restores them to immediacy, and accepts changes in their significance or importance.⁴

It is in and through the arts, one might add, that a community views its past, speaks about what matters to it in the present, and envisions its future. The arts occupy a special place within a community, the place from which social critique can emanate, and received wisdom and values interrogated. If the cultural superstructure of a people is under peril, they can no longer feel certain about their identity and place in the world. They are then profoundly disempowered, rendered incapable of taking control of their lives.

This has the obvious implication that projects to empower a particular group must go hand-in-hand with efforts to sustain if not strengthen cultural expression's role in grounding that group's self-understanding, sense of purpose, and capacity for self-examination. But does it not also have the dismaying implication that decisions regarding the future of that community would be circumscribed by the range of possible values, norms, perceptions and beliefs that might be prevalent in the culture? Not really. A culture, as I have suggested, has the elasticity to accommodate new ideas, perceptions and knowledge within certain limits. It also has the ability to redefine those limits. Only a self-assured culture, however, can retain this elasticity, producing new meanings and remaining open to external influences. This, again, underscores why it makes little sense to divorce programmes that aim to strengthen people's participation in the development process, or legitimize local knowledge and decision-making, from parallel work that addresses issues of cultural dynamism and vitality.

Why have donor agencies and NGOs overlooked this close connection between culture and empowerment? Part of the answer lies in the concept of empowerment that dominates development thinking. Echoing the emphasis given to external changes in development's older

⁴ *Arts Patronage in India: Methods, Motives and Markets*, edited by Joan L. Erdman (Manohar, 1992) p. 13.

discourse, empowerment has been understood to mean ‘democratizing the ownership of productive assets, capacities and opportunities’⁵ and sharing decision-making powers with the dispossessed or marginalized in matters that directly impinge on their lives. Perhaps it is assumed that empowerment in this sense (which gives the disadvantaged a greater *say* in matters affecting their lives) would lead to empowerment in the sense in which I defined it above (which *enables* people to take control of their lives). But would a change in power relations necessarily be enabling, in the sense implied, for weaker groups? And does it not remain an open question whether the shared power would be exercised responsibly to promote the common interest⁶, or the acquired power used to achieve the purpose for which it is intended?

This exteriorized concept of empowerment, apart from banishing culture from the development fold, runs up against familiar reservations about the exercise of power at the grassroots: that it easily falls prey to indefensible caste-based, feudal or patriarchal values and prejudices. Unfortunately, though, the development sector is likely to welcome this observation as supportive of its perspective on culture as a hindrance to progress, rather than read it as criticism damaging to its perspective on empowerment.

Properly understood, however, cultural expression is an ally of development rather than a means to it or, worse, an obstacle to it. The arts make it possible to stimulate development from within cultural contexts, and integrate processes of development with processes of cultural change. The arts, I have said, provide communities with a handle to examine and critique established values, beliefs and perceptions. It is the place from which authority and its prescribed meanings are often contested, and the limit point of a culture tested, stretched and reworked.

The residue of earlier thinking has prevented the development world from embracing empowerment in its fullest sense, and from acknowledging its intimate relationship to culture. To be empowered is to be able to take decisions based on an awareness of the link between material change and cultural change. But it is more than that. Taking decisions about your material future, very often, requires taking decisions about your cultural future. A fully empowered community, therefore, is one that is able to ask itself questions like: To what extent do we want our cultural values to determine what we might be willing to countenance as desirable material change? What cultural changes are we willing to tolerate to improve our material circumstances?

People are empowered not when they can take decisions about their future based on their own

⁵ As articulated by Michael Edwards & Gita Sen in NGOs, *social change and the transformation of human relationships: a 21st-century civic agenda*, (Third World Quarterly, Vol. 21, No. 4, 2000) p. 609.

⁶ Ibid. p. 609

cultural values and priorities, but when their culture, and their relationship to it, has become for them a subject about which they can take decisions. People are not empowered unless they can appreciate *how their culture works through them*. To be a victim of one's culture is to be as disempowered as to be alienated from it.

Epilogue

I began this paper by recounting an incident that took place early in my tenure with an international foundation. I had then been confronted with a provocative question: why is culture valuable? Later in my term with the same foundation, a colleague told me a story that provided the answer, although I failed to connect the dots at the time. This is what she said:

“I've been making a lot of field trips lately and met many people who want to know what our foundation does in India. So I tell them about our work in reproductive health, women's empowerment, human rights and social justice and so on. But it's frustrating because mostly I find them listening to me with polite inattention. Sometimes, though, I remember to mention – and I must confess it's usually an afterthought – that the vitality of cultural expression, especially the arts, is also an important concern for the foundation. And I've been struck by the reaction this produces. Suddenly I find them all ears. They lean forward or sit up and they say, almost with amazement: “You mean you're interested in *us*? You mean it matters to you who *we are*?”

Author's Profile

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The author is the Executive Director of the India Foundation for the Arts and has been a theatre director for the last 35 years. His essays have critically viewed the dominant discourses of globalization, nationalism, development and creative industries through the lens of culture. He studied philosophy at the Universities of Poona, Oxford and Cambridge.