

The Cultural Context of Development And Planning in Southeast Asia

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According to recent UN resolutions, all governments appear to agree that development must be seen as a global ideal that aims to improve the conditions of life of all people in terms of a more equitable distribution of income, opportunity, and social justice (Res. 2626 (XXV) and 2681 (XXV), 1970). The ways, however, in which these lofty aims of development are translated into policies, plans, and concrete practice, appear to vary widely among countries. Especially since development is no longer defined as a purely economic and technological pursuit, people have become aware of the fact that development should be understood in the national and cultural contexts in which it takes place. What is developmental and desirable in one national society may have non-developmental and undesirable consequences in a different setting. In order to understand the dynamics of development and its particular forms, we must understand the structural and cultural contexts in which politicians and planners, administrators and the general population operate.

This paper will concentrate on the cultural context of development and planning in the "Indianised" countries of Southeast Asia. This cultural context comprises the values, conceptions, and ideas that people use to find their way through life and by which they perceive and interpret their experiences and surroundings. Culture gives meaning, legitimation, and form to social behaviour and its institutional expressions, and limits the range of "logically" possible structural variations and changes. In developing countries this range may become overstretched when certain segments of society are expanding their cultural horizons too rapidly while other segments lag behind in tradition. In this process formerly self-contained systems may become discontinuous and conflict ridden.

Developmental and administrative efforts should connect with the socio-economic and the cultural realities of the people if they are to stimulate participation, motivation, and national integration. These very desirable factors in the developmental process, be their goals or means, can only be brought about if the governing elite and the masses operate as partners within one meaningful

cultural (or ideological) framework, which enables them to communicate with each other and to achieve common goals. It is therefore of great importance to have an old or a new ideology that is strong enough to bridge the differences between groups and from which all people can derive their meaningful motivations to participate. It is sad, however, to witness that most developing countries in Southeast Asia do not possess such a strong motivating unity of culture or ideology; they tend to be characterized by truncated systems of ideas which provide little in terms of common purpose.

I

Continuity and discontinuity of culture

More or less stable social systems are characterized by cultural continuity, that is to say, the acceptance of dominant value orientations by all of the participants. In pre-developmental days, and certainly still until the advent of the 20th century, most Southeast Asian societies were characterized by such cultural continuity in which, for instance, the poor peasant class would accept without challenge the position of privilege of its patrimonial elite; traditional thinking did not challenge the social system or its basic values. Since the beginning of this century and more so after the achievement of independence, this cultural integrity is challenged by new, mostly foreign values and by the pressures generated within society and its resource base. Most inhabitants of the region are still solidly embedded within peasant culture, only slowly adding new dimensions to their thinking without effectively challenging the old value orientations. Conflicts are generated, however, by the alienation of the elite from its cultural base, by modern education which accentuates the generation gap and by the infusion of so-called universal values or novel ideological orientations. Cultural discontinuity is further stimulated by the process of development itself and by poverty.

The peasant

All countries under discussion are still basically agricultural countries, whether in terms of population engaged in agriculture, contribution of agricultural income to total national income, or agricultural exports as a percentage of total exports. Some 70 to 80 per cent of the population live in rural areas and are most often directly engaged in agriculture. One would therefore expect that development of the rural masses would be a top priority in all of the countries under discussion and yet this does not appear to be the case.

In Indianised Southeast Asian thinking, farming is an honourable and necessary occupation and a prosperous peasant class has always been recognized as a sound basis for the prosperity of the nation. Yet to be a peasant and to occupy

oneself directly with agriculture is not thought to be enviable or worthy to pursue. The peasant, the basis of society, stands with his feet literally in the mud and is the lowest member of honourable society. His work is not thought of as being interesting; there is nothing to be learned about it; it is not respectable; basically it is an occupation to move away from if one has any chance to do so. The peasant feels inferior to the trader from the town and even more so to the civil servant, the teacher and other representatives of government. If he produces some surplus he will invest that in the education of a son who will become a teacher or a minor civil servant. In these terms upward mobility is defined as the move away from agriculture and preferably to be associated with town and government.

The peasant agrees with this outlook; he will agree that he is ignorant, that his occupation, although satisfying to himself, is not worthwhile; he will accept the fact that he occupies a status on the lowest rung of the hierarchy and accepts social inequality as a natural phenomenon. In his thinking and in the thinking of everybody else, people are unequal and of moral inequality. In this thinking the privilege that accrues to the top is accepted as a matter of course and what some may call corruption is in the eyes of the majority the normal due given to those who are status higher and from whom protection and benevolence may be expected. The top of society is the place to aspire to or at least the place to admire; it is also the place that should be further developed and where the benefits of development should accrue. This is precisely what happens: development finds essentially place in town, mainly in the capital and privilege and access to public services accrue to the numerically small top strata of society. Consequently agricultural and rural development lag behind and disparities in the distribution of income between classes and subnational regions are increasing. All this fully concurs with the basic traditional value system of society.

Peasants and agriculture are not something to spend excessive attention to. The peasant views school education as a means to gain access to employment in town or in the bureaucracy. He is reluctant to accept functional education that would prepare him to become a farmer with a better mastery of agriculture and its related technology. This point is rather academic, however, because there is hardly any functional education in the villages yet. The type of agricultural education that is offered, is essentially higher-middle and higher agricultural education, most often given to a majority of students with an urban background who are ill-fitted to play meaningful roles in the national agricultural extension apparatus and who will probably aspire to a desk job at one of the ministries in town.

The civil servant

Such is another of the problems related to the outlook of the people. It is not only the peasant who looks up to town and bureaucracy, the civil servant

does the same. The work in the countryside away from town and capital is often seen as a kind of exile and the civil servant will aspire to both rank and comfort in town. Upward mobility for him means that he should finish his career comfortably at a ministry in the capital. We cannot expect identification of the civil servant with the peasant whom he is expected to develop and to administer; on the contrary both peasant and civil servant aspire to town if they aspire to mobility and they will not naturally define development as something that takes place in the countryside.

Connected to these orientations is the satisfaction that is found in the achievement of status. Satisfaction and status are not derived from work or the direct confrontation with nature and the world of matter. Status is essentially a social phenomenon. Status implies relative privilege, recognition, self-respect and prestige, and needs to be demonstrated. Money, work and material results are not an imperative goal in life but rather serve to express status. This pre-occupation with status, hierarchy, stratification and moral inequality contributes to an essentially static view of society, the rejection of social change, and more so of basic social change or revolution. All this leads to an excessive pre-occupation with the maintenance of the status quo, the maintenance of status position and an absence of dynamic thinking at most levels of society. This is demonstrated by repressive youth policies and the thinking about higher education, and also by the faithful copying of western models and practices. Things are what they are and should not be challenged, innovated or changed : such is the law of respect for elders, respect for religion, respect for status quo and the order of the universe, and even respect for outlandish models and fashions.

The elite

The orientation of both peasant and civil servant is away from the place where they work. They feel inferior to persons who are higher up in the hierarchy and they look up to the elites. Formerly these elites were self-contented enough to consider themselves very superior, close to God, far away from the peasant, and beyond improvement. This has changed however. Nowadays the elites look up to whatever comes from the developed world abroad. For instance, models of behaviour are faithfully copied and so are foreign ways of thinking. The same regards fashion, living habits, recreation and the top of achievement in this style of life is an advanced degree from a university abroad, preferably in America or Western Europe.

The younger members of both old and newly emerging elites are forgetting their cultural background, do not feel pride in their nation's cultural achievements and history, and feel inferior to the West which they eagerly imitate. This ambiguous identity among those who will shortly be in the ruling positions

in their respective countries spells great danger, because the new elite is in the process of losing its roots with its own culture while plagiarizing the West. In this process there grows a kind of hybrid culture that is specific to a large part of the elites in many developing countries and that is discontinuous vis-a-vis the own cultural heritage in which the vast majority of the citizens participate.

Because of the elites' cultural uncertainty and the innate cultural tradition of preservation and conservatism as opposed to innovation, they will copy models, methods, ideologies and measures from the west that are literally far-fetched and totally out of place in the context of their societies. In this process the rulers become estranged from the mass of the population. Their ambition and ways of thinking cause a lack of communication between the rulers and the ruled and the tendency for the widening of the gap between these segments is reinforced, not only in terms of income distribution, but also in terms of the distribution of culture and ideas. An interesting indicator for this emerging cultural gap and disregard for the own cultural heritage is the number of students at the various universities who study the native or national languages, culture and history. While in the developed countries the students of the own language outnumber by far the students in any other single foreign language, the situation appears to be reversed in the countries under discussion where it is not uncommon that the study of English and Shakespeare attracts 7 to 10 times more students than those who study the vernacular; even out-of-place languages such as Italian may still draw more students than the national language.

The planners

Almost invariably there appears to be a great distance between planners and the reality of the population. Planners in their comfortable air-conditioned offices do not have the habit to consult those who are affected by their plans. They tend to show little concern for the social and cultural realities of their own society and sometimes even complain that their planning efforts are vain because politicians will go their own way anyhow, in spite of plan documents. Yet planning that does not take into account the political process and the power structure must be self-defeating since it operates outside the prevailing realities. Often it appears that planners are mainly concerned with the construction of impressive plans that more often than not contain a rather odd bundle of sectoral plans that are "integrated" by some sort of sociopolitical post-rationalization.

Planners invariably complain about the absence of reliable data. Many social projects in the national plans are only justified by the visible magnitude of the problem that they are supposed to solve. Serious data collection and research of an experimental nature are conspicuous by their absence. Such an approach spells danger, however. Programmes and projects that are so poorly linked to the

broad objectives of longterm national development can only result in an uneven growth of social sectors and population groups, causing imbalances similar to those caused by planning for economic development alone. This problem is aggravated by the absence of arrangements for the evaluation of progress.

Both politicians and planners generally have a very vague notion only of the society which they wish to build in the future and they are therefore not in a position to formulate long-range policies and plans capable of building a just and prosperous society. Short-term plans abound, but they tend to be poorly integrated, focusing only on immediately feasible programmes or political necessities. They will always fall short of achieving a long-term balanced development that integrates economic growth with social development and political stability.

There are grave discrepancies between planning and its goals, its means, and its data requirements, but more alarming still is the grave discrepancy between the perception of planners and the real needs and wishes of the population. Many policies and plans are directly detrimental to the rural population and the urban poor. Yet developmental programmes and alternatives will be viable only to the extent that they grow out of an understanding of the rural families, their communities and the lowest levels of government.

Consequences of these orientations

It is clear that the orientations of the social strata that we have described, are upward and toward the outside, away from the own group while eagerly looking for inspiration, social mobility, or modernization and its symbols to the next higher group or to foreign countries. The own group and its problems are hardly worthy of serious attention, let alone the next lower group. Plans and thoughts that originate abroad or that come from the higher strata must signify progress, are right and should be applied without questioning or consideration for the real life situation at the lower levels. In this pattern orientations are upward and communications from the top down.

It seems likely that under these conditions the peasantry will have a higher degree of identification with its upper classes than the upper classes have with the peasantry. The elites have a basic disregard, often bordering on contempt, for the peasants and the ordinary citizens which they command and rule. The real life situation of the rural and urban masses is not of interest and does not form the basis of national development. They do not form a problem as long as they work to fulfil plan targets and as long as they remain voiceless and quiet. Development plans therefore often connect poorly with the real needs for social and material improvement of the masses and preclude their spontaneous participation. Moreover, such plans tend to be unrealistic because they do not find their basis in researched and objective realities.

Often planning for rural development is guided by idealistic conceptions and prejudices about the village population which is pictured as a homogeneous mass living in rather poor but contented conditions, characterized by systems of basic democracy, mutual sharing and cooperation. Such conceptions cannot be maintained, however. At present it is sorrowful to watch the disappearance or the weakening of democratic procedures and forms that may once have characterized village society. The steady expansion of government down to the village level has tended to incorporate the village headman as the lowest level in the governmental hierarchy, making the headman a mouthpiece and an executive of the government. Accumulation of landed property in the hands of a few and the monetization of the village economy have contributed to the increase of inequality among the villagers themselves. Traditional labour relationships and rights to land have become monetized and businesslike, resulting in the proletarianization of a large segment of village society. For all these reasons fewer and fewer people have a say in the circumstances and developments that directly affect their lives.

The only remedy to reverse these unhappy trends would seem to lie in a basic restructuring of village society and its resource base. This would presuppose a firm and genuine interest in the village population and its plight. It would also imply that villagers should be respected and trusted as responsible adults who are not merely conservative, indifferent, or stupid if given the opportunity to take meaningful initiative in responding to the challenges of development. They should at the very least participate in making decisions that directly affect their lives. Yet basic cultural orientations and expectations, that are shared by villagers and elites alike, preclude such a restructuring of village society and its development; the same orientations stimulate the planning for the attainment of national targets irrespective of the basic problems of society, the distribution of social justice or the participation of the masses.

It is obvious that to bring about major institutional changes which affect the distribution of economic and political power and privilege within the system, will require a very strong political will. This is the more so when these changes are to be instituted by the present privileged leadership. Yet they should realize that the highly privileged are few and the desperately poor are many. When the gap between them is worsening rather than improving, it will only be a question of time before a decisive choice must be made between the political cost of reform and the political risks of revolution. One way or the other the imbalanced institutional frameworks will have to change.

In terms of development planning all these may bring the need to the fore of innovation and the re-ordering of targets and priorities. Development and growth tends to be concentrated in the modern, mostly urban sectors of the economy with little current benefit to the lowest income groups. The vast rural provinces

which surround the small islands of modernity have long experienced that development does not automatically spread as is often naively assumed in certain growth-centre theories. Another aspect of this pattern of development is public expenditure on health, transport, water supply, education and on many other sectors which benefits the already privileged far more than the mass of the disadvantaged, who here again only marginally participate in the structure of privilege and political process. All these demonstrate that development planning will need to re-orient itself in order to achieve a measure of justice and economic growth where it is most needed, namely in the countryside. Such a positive rural-oriented policy may also stem the transfer of poverty from the countryside to the urban slums by the rural migrants.

II

Predominance of social considerations

In evaluating development it must be realized that in Southeast Asian cultures the Western notion of objective truth is a foreign element. In Indianised Asia truth is located within the social and religious order, and depends on particular situations and its variables. There are few if any socially independent tests to measure a situation and to pass an objective verdict or judgement on it.

Judgement is situational and the situation defines right and wrong. This is in marked contrast to so-called objective thinking and measurement which derive from the spirit of the natural sciences, the rule of law, the notion of the essential equality of persons and Middle-Eastern monotheistic religious thinking. Indianised Asia, however, is basically religiously tolerant and allows for a great variety of religious practices and moral judgements. Behaviour is essentially evaluated within the social context in which it takes place and is seldomly measured against the absolute standards that are implied in objectivity, the rule of law, and monotheism. Things are wrong because they are seen, which means that they cause a loss of face. As long as the same thing is not seen it does not cause shame and is not wrong. This conception of morality stands certainly in the way of the social advance of the underprivileged classes who are voiceless and unseen. As long as they remain so there is nothing basically wrong or shameful about their condition. There is therefore little wish or interest on the side of the ruling elites to really know or to identify with the masses, who will at best receive development as a charity.

The social order is characterized by hierarchy, essential inequality of persons, strong feelings of loyalty towards the family, the small community or one's patron. The boundaries of a person's participation rarely go beyond these corporate groups in which he immediately participates, and positive loyalties to and identification

with the nation, of which he is a subject rather than a citizen, remain vague. His loyalties are defined within a system of personal relationships in which his obligations, rights, securities and protection are contained. The basis of morality is therefore to be found in this system of personal loyalties. Morality does not relate to the Western concept of "objective" law that applies to everybody with equality; Southeast Asian morality is variable and relates to position, duty and privilege.

Within this moral setting we find a remarkable degree of cooperation, mutual protection and responsibility, the corporate group serving as the moral backbone for the participating individuals. The ideal living pattern within these corporate groups is characterized by a stress on harmony and smooth inter-personal relationships. Outside these corporate groups and their strong loyalties, persons tend to be morally weak, often demonstrating rampant individualism and an absence of social responsibility within the wider framework of society. No wonder that in this social and moral setting Western institutions, such as modern cooperatives, generally have to fail. Since these latter institutions are based on objective rules and loyalty to non-personal "objective" goals in a businesslike style that disregards the person, they will stimulate corruption and the misallocation of funds. It were better that social re-ordering and development found place within the corporate and personalized organizational setting that is familiar to its populations, such as the Chinese communes or the Japanese corporations, rather than to force Western forms upon them that have a doubtful validity in the existing socio-cultural context.

The army in many of the countries under discussion provides an excellent example of traditional norms and tends to operate at the most powerful patronage group. Another example is the civil service which operates as a patrimonial bureaucracy, extending protection and privilege to its members. These vast patronage groups essentially serve the purpose of selfmaintenance and should not be viewed as public service organizations. Participation and identification of the bureaucracy with the man on the land and in the street should therefore not be expected to come about easily, as it is against the norms and expectations of the social order, the bureaucracy and the common man himself.

Another observation in this cultural framework is the attitude of people towards work and their appreciation of leisure time. Work is a thing that no doubt needs to be done to make a living but it is done more because one must and because it exemplifies status. Work is not done for the inherent pleasure of work itself or for the pleasure of manipulation and creation. The pleasures of work are essentially defined in the social setting in which it takes place and may be defined by the satisfaction that one can derive from pleasing one's master. Leisure, that is time to be spent with colleagues, friends and relatives, is therefore comparatively

more important than work and its result in terms of earnings, money and savings, even among relatively poor people. Work is done to achieve the necessary standard of living which, for the common man at least, is fairly low.

These attitudes towards work and leisure may help to explain the unsatisfactory nature of western economic development models with their built-in assumptions about human behaviour and social organization. The hypothetical "homo economicus" who is continuously motivated to improve upon his material well-being may be valid for western man; in Southeast Asia people rather improve upon their social well-being first of all.

This cultural context and all that it implies is of course strongly sustained by the early socialization processes which shape emotional and cognitive development. What happens to the children in their early life at home, will set the examples on which adult life and society will be patterned. The absence of challenging, stimulating and creative toys may for instance later on be expressed in the relative absence of interest in and satisfaction derived from the manipulation of the world of things. The world of things and toys never achieves predominance over or equality with the world of social relationships and the manipulation thereof. Togetherness and strong group loyalties will define right behaviour and psychological satisfaction. Many more instances of the extension of early experiences into later life can of course be given, indicating that child rearing and family practices may be a crucially important area of development planning.

Conclusion

The cultural context explains to a large extent the peculiarities of the developmental process. It explains why rural development has to suffer from a basic disregard by ruling elites and administrators. Goals are spelled out in terms of national self-sufficiency in food but not in terms of integrated rural development. It also becomes understandable why functional and vocational education is developing so slowly or not at all. School education and literacy first of all serve to gain access to the bureaucracy, and the social significance of work is very different from the developed countries. Most of the development efforts are concentrated in urban areas or serve the privileged classes, and this is naturally so. The culturally semi-alienated elites are at the same time still traditional and function in a personal framework where words and policies relate to different realities than what they are supposed to do in the developed countries; they also faithfully copy western models of development planning. There is an absence of creative thinking based on the own situation and the orientation is towards the outside. This is evident in both school curricula and planning. The concept of the bare-foot doctor comes from a country where planning is done from within the situation and although all planners in the region will agree that the present system of medical services is very expensive,

highly inadequate, and benefits the elite, they are still reluctant to initiate functional health programmes of a largely preventive nature. Similarly mass poverty programmes, the choice of technology, and propaganda for family planning have to be evaluated. There is a preference for great schemes and grandiose projects but very little political will for or interest in a basic re-structuring of society. The patrimonial bureaucracy works from the top down and tells people what is good for them without being interested in who the people are. This traditional phenomenon is now accentuated by the cultural alienation of the rural population from their rulers. In spite of the voicing of concern with poverty-stricken masses, little is done because of the acceptance of hierarchy, inequality, privilege and the sacrosanctness of the social order. Concomitant with the small interest in own culture and social environment is the absence of basic research which would be so necessary for meaningful social planning.

The Need for Cultural Integration

Underlying balanced growth are vitally related factors of a cultural and social-psychological nature which almost always tend to be left out of consideration at the planning stage, with the result that expectations are negated. Yet if the objectives of long-range planning are to be realized, the guidance is required of clear images of both the present and the future, and such long-range planning must accept the reality and importance of cultural and psychological factors and require social engineering as one of its prime requisites.

Some countries have started to realize that cultural engineering is a means to achieve development, national integration and possibly political stability. Countries like Malaysia and Singapore have realized that integration may be engineered by instilling strong unitary sets of national values that supersede the plurality of values held by the various segments of their populations. The unifying and developmental power of a strong national ideology and their developmental qualities are clearly demonstrated by countries such as China and Japan, where strong national ideologies muster discipline and the strength of the people to achieve common goals. Almost all countries of Southeast Asia suffer from minority problems, subsequent segmentation and demonstrate a lack of popular motivation for participation in development; for these reasons cultural engineering to create unity and motivation should be strongly recommended and be reflected upon by planners and politicians.

From the cultural context it may have become clear that this is an area of tremendous obstacles and challenge because it does not only mean the active participation of the vast masses of the population in the national polity, but also the identification of government and planners with the needs and cultural situation of these masses. Such total societal participation seems to be called for if development is to lead to social justice.

It may mean that bureaucrats and civil servants have to cut sugarcane like they are doing in Cuba. It may mean that urban students and youth will have to spend lengthy periods in the villages to learn, and to help, to participate in agriculture. It means a cultural revolution to break through the alienation of the rulers from their people; it means participation, understanding and mutual respect; it will also teach that development and policies from the top down will not make it; that people are not waiting to be "developed" by bureaucrats in town who hand down development as a charity, but that development can and should be generated through participation and identification with the real life situation of the vast majority of the population.