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Book Review

THEORY, POLICY, PRACTICE: DEVELOPMENT AND DISCONTENTS IN INDIA

by Suman Nath and Debraj Bhattacharya (ed), Routledge, India, 2021,
pp. 294, ISBN 9781003159940 (e-book)

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Theory, Policy, Practice: Development and discontents in India by Suman Nath and Debraj Bhattacharya (ed), Routledge, India, 2021, pp. 294, ISBN 9781003159940 (e-book)

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The idea and praxis of development have witnessed multifaceted alterations since its inception. Development has become undeniably complex because of the post-globalization ventures. It has been argued that a thorough investigation of the intricacies involved in the developmental process is a product of the postmodernist intervention. This intervention gravitated development towards an alternate localized bottoms-up approach instead of the hegemonic technology-based development and modernity. In many post-colonial democracies, one has observed a paradigm shift in policy regimes from Keynesian democratic policy regimes to neoliberal policy regimes. India is a success model for the latter through its high rate of GDP, increasing 'capital intensive' industrialization, projection of 'cultural industry' etc. However, scholars like Amartya Sen and John Dreze have called these phenomena an "uncertain glory" and questioned the methodology of these results. The existent development discourses don't consider those marginalized sectors supposedly benefiting from the phenomena but are sacrificed earliest for it. It is thus termed as "anti-poverty discourse" by Peet in 2011. There is an under-representation of most of the population who doesn't fit in the legalized and formalized parameters of these ranking systems. Even after many interventions and complexities with which the developmental process happens, one still observes widening inequalities between the poor and the rich and a lack of inclusivity. There is existence of 'policy paralysis.' Why is there still a disconnect between the three paradigms of policy theory, which further leads to its formulation and then implementation? How does this disconnect impact the achievement of policy objectives in the country? How has the interplay of the role of the state (policy formulators) and bureaucracy (policy implementors), democratically decentralized institutions, and the existing socio-political conditions like gender, caste, and class affected the three paradigms after the neoliberal reforms?

The book, "Theory, Policy, Practice: Development and Discontents in India", edited by Suman Nath and Debraj Bhattacharya, tries to reckon with this process. It has 12 chapters in total (excluding the introduction), which firstly aims to understand development as a process, investigate the three paradigms, and open a discussion about the causes and consequences of failure of the public delivery mechanism. It has authors contributing from across the country who take assistance in both qualitative and quantitative methods to substantiate the argument for the need for development to have a microscopic view. The book's central premise aims to explore the paradox linked with theory, policy, and practice and how they function in problematized areas.

In the initial chapter, the author does an ethnographic study of two different forms of governance, i.e., rural governance and agro-cooperatives, in West Bengal in a politically turbulent decade (2008-18). He tries to understand the effect of political setup on institutions and their influence on public service delivery mechanism. The next chapter discusses the Community Development Program- its evolution, alterations from pre- to post-colonial, visions and reasons for its failure. Institutional and social hierarchies, role confusion, bureaucratic blockade, inadequacy in financial fluidity to decentralized centers, and lack of participation from the community in transforming the process itself were some of the attributed reasons for its failure. The third chapter is based on a case study of Bawana resettlement in Delhi which deals with the paradox of rural development vis

a vis urban and implementation deficit. It further highlights the plight of the marginalized sections, which occur under the pretext of development through arbitrary displacements, crushed aspirations, etc. It also analyses their negotiations with the powerful state authorities.

The fourth chapter looks at the most overlooked region of the country- the northeast. It explores the changing socio-economic and political trajectories from colonial times to contemporary times, focusing on Look East policy. The author, after examining it, concludes that there is a problem of inclusivity due to negligence on the part of the state, which causes policy formulation, the first stage, to become imbalanced. The problem of landholdings has been an intrinsic feature of the country since ancient times. Chapter 5 elaborates on this eternal problem through a self-reflexive multi-site ethnographic study in the Medinipur district of West Bengal. He unveils the dichotomy of the ends of cultivators and the policymakers in policy-based decisions and how the latter's influence and means met with resistance from the former. The next chapter deals with another eternal issue, i.e., water. It studies water policies for a long time and uses Wittfogel's idea of a "hydraulic society" to understand the crisis of water management. The authors highlight the continuity in water policies despite the established policy regime. Chapter seven of the book focuses on the financial aspect of globalization and its overarching effect. It discovers the financial traps within which the marginalized section of the population, especially in rural areas, find themselves after momentary satisfaction. The eighth chapter is inspired by the idea of Orientalism, which favors one epistemic knowledge over another. He elucidates on this paradox of development through the example of global health governance, which ignores the diseases relative to developing or underdeveloped countries and treats them as "other" world problems. For example, the problem of snake bites, which was tropicalized, is discussed in this chapter. The ninth chapter examines the negotiations of marginalized communities with the state, civil society, and NGOs. It discusses how their sociocultural and economic background has led them to the brink in the spectrum of development and how bodies like NGO's can assist them to realize their aspirations as a citizen. The tenth chapter looks at the rise of the right-wing in the state of West Bengal and how it affected the three paradigms of theory, policy, and practice. Through the rise of the BJP in a state long dominated by left parties, the author emphasizes the need for political parties and their narrative of development to be inclusive and microscopic. The second chapter shifts its narrative towards e-governance and its proper implementation, which can harness the redundant public delivery mechanism in the country. The last chapter's unit of analysis is the prevalent family businesses in the country. He explores the inadequate literature on corporate finances and tries to forward an understanding of tax and its nuances in Indian cases and how it can be improved.

Through all these chapters dealing with different predicaments, the book attempts to solve the paradox of the paradigms and present an alternate set of suggestions to resolve them. The book successfully unpacks the dilemmas present in the policy prescription and its practice. It maintains its relevance by constantly unmasking the much-ignored and unreported inconsistencies emerging from various dominant factors beyond the sovereign territory. Through its chapters, it also adds another epistemic understanding of development, which is rooted in the welfare of the marginalized, exploited, and ignored sections of the society. Adding a South Asian experience to the current American-dominated public policy discourse was imperative to make it more relevant. However, while exploring various concepts of policy theories, the book throws around a set of theoretical concepts whose meaning and relevance could've been explained in detail in the chapters. Most of the empirical research is restricted to the state of West Bengal, which does not

justify the country's extensive and varied political culture. The problem or the solution discussed can become particularistic in nature and, hence, might not be applicable across the country. It also fails to consider the limitations of the authors' methodology to prove their claims.

This book, however, is one of its kind, which takes up this mammoth task of interlinking theory, policy, and practice. Its suggestions, empirically arrived at, lend a hand to future policymakers, analysts, and researchers to help India develop its most accurate and inclusive self. This book is also helpful to readers of South Asian history and politics and urban and rural developmental studies.