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ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

Abstract

The human development approach has emerged in the development literature as a broad-based paradigm for development, with a focus on issues of poverty, inequality and deprivation, which are especially relevant in India. The academic literature and policy discourse on the human development approach is however largely dominated by economics and there is an immense potential and relevance for anthropology as a holistic science of humanity to contribute towards an understanding and advancement of the human development approach, both in theory and practice. In this context, this article discusses some of the key aspects of the interface between anthropology and the human development approach and its applications to the development discourse.

Keywords: Anthropology, Human Development, Poverty, Inequality, Public Policy, India

Introduction

Clyde Kluckhohn in his classic book 'Mirror for Man' stated that 'Anthropology holds up a great mirror for man and lets him look at himself in his infinite variety' (Kluckhohn 1949: 11). If we apply this perspective in today's global development context, we would see a world with uneven development, in which a large section of the human population is still struggling to meet their daily survival concerns. Issues of poverty, inequality and human deprivation are therefore predominant concerns of humanity today and may be regarded as an important research agenda for anthropology. This is especially so in the Indian context, as India is still considered among the poorest countries of the world in terms of the absolute magnitude of poverty, as well as ranked among the bottom countries in terms of various human development indicators and the human development index (United Nations Development Programme 27025).

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It may be argued however, that these development issues have still not moved to the centre stage of anthropological research and it is the development economics research on these issues, which dominates the academic literature as well as the policy discourse. Based on the writings of eminent development economists, the human development approach has emerged in the development literature as a broad-based paradigm for development, which in its programmatic form is also reflected in the United Nations sustainable development goals. Anthropology is known to be the only discipline which seeks to study humanity holistically in all its aspects. However, the rich potential for anthropology to contribute towards an understanding and advancement of the human development approach, both in theory and practice remains unfulfilled. In this context, the objective of this article is to discuss some of the key aspects of the interface between anthropology and the human development approach and its applications to the development discourse. The article is organized as follows - the next section outlines a brief overview of the human development approach, which provides the theoretical framework for the discussion; the following section discusses anthropological perspectives and methodological issues in relation to the human development approach; and the final section concludes.

Human Development Approach

The contemporary discourse on human development as reflected in the development literature needs to be understood in its historical context. After the end of World War II, a process of decolonization was initiated in which countries such as India, which had been under more than a century of colonial rule became politically independent and were faced with the challenges of addressing the development concerns of its citizens in the immediate post-colonial period. At the same time, Western countries which were ravaged during the war were faced with the challenge of post-war reconstruction. In this context, the newly independent countries needed to build the productive capacity of their economies so that the material requirements of its citizens could be addressed, while the task in the Western countries was to rebuild their economies from the aftermath of the destruction during the war. The development discourse in this period was dominated by economic growth as the major strategy of development, so that production of goods and services in the economy may be increased and at faster rates. In the countries coming out of colonial rule, economic growth was also envisaged as a major strategy for poverty reduction and increasing the average levels of living in society. However, the experience in India as well as other newly independent countries in the decade of the 1950s and 1960s was that though growth rates of the economy had increased, it had not made a significant dent on poverty. This led to a critique of national income as a major indicator of development (Seers 1969).

Following this, the development discourse shifted to 'redistribution with growth', which implied that economic growth accompanied by a reduction in inequality would bring about a faster reduction in poverty. The development strategies suggested however continued to focus on the economic aspects of development. In the late 1970s, the 'basic needs approach' to development became prominent, which suggested that developing countries should directly focus on meeting the basic needs of its people understood in terms of minimum levels of food, clothing, housing, safe drinking water, sanitation, public transport, and basic education and health care services (Streeten 2005). This especially applied to those countries, which were still heavily reliant on foreign aid and the donor governments and agencies could monitor how the aid was being utilised in terms of basic needs indicators. However, the basic needs approach did not materialise into development practice, the major reason being the foreign debt crisis faced by many developing countries, especially in Latin America and Africa, in the context of the oil price shock. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund advocated structural adjustment and stabilization policies for those countries, which approached them for financial assistance, in which the key aspect was a reduced role for the state in the economy and a corresponding greater role for the private sector and the market mechanism. This resulted in these countries cutting back on their government expenditures, including in the social sector and the focus of development strategies shifted back to macroeconomic aspects and economic indicators.

The decade of the 1980s also witnessed the beginning of the fall of communism in the Soviet Union and allied East European countries and movements for democracy in various parts of the world, including China. The human development approach emerged in the development discourse in this context through the writings of development economists such as Amartya Sen and Mahbub ul Haq and the institutional backing of the United Nations. Amartya Sen argued for a broader notion of development, in which economic growth is only a means to an end and not an end in itself (Sen 1988). He used the term 'functionings' to refer to the various components or activities in our life that we have reason to value, for example, to be well nourished, to have access to knowledge and to participate in the life of a community. The question then posed is whether the individual has the 'capability' to achieve these functionings and the notion of development is articulated as expansion of capabilities. This was also expressed as development as widening of choices, in which the question is whether an individual is being able to lead the kind of life that he or she would choose to lead. Another related perspective in Sen's writings is the notion of development as freedom (Sen 1999), which also focuses attention on the process aspect of development, i.e. the process through which particular development outcomes have resulted.

These writings by Amartya Sen, provided the philosophical basis for the concept of human development. Mahbub ul Haq in his related writings developed this concept further in which human development was understood as an improvement in the quality of people's lives. People and not income are regarded as the real wealth of a nation. Thus, a society does not have to be rich to be a democracy, to respect equal rights of women or to provide clean drinking water to its people. There is no automatic linkage between economic growth and human development and the quality and distribution of economic growth also matters in addition to the quantity. The objective of development is defined as creating an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives (Haq 1996). Human development is described as a holistic concept, in which all aspects of life – economic, political, social and cultural are incorporated. Haq describes the four pillars of the human development paradigm as equity, sustainability, productivity and empowerment and any policy action for human development should be based on these pillars and a people-centred approach (ibid).

The institutional backing for the idea of human development was provided by the United Nations, when Mahbub ul Haq joined the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as a special advisor. From 1990 onwards, the UNDP started publishing the annual Human Development Reports, in which countries are ranked according to their level of development, not on the basis of per capita income, as was the predominant development classification, but on the basis of a human development index, computed for the purpose. The human development index comprises indicators across three dimensions, viz. standard of living, education and health, and the index is computed as an average, in which each dimension is given equal weightage. Each human development report by UNDP has also focused on a specific theme beginning with the concept and measurement of human development in 1990 and then various other thematic development issues in subsequent reports such as poverty, human rights, gender, human security, democracy, climate change, inequality and international development cooperation.

India has consistently been ranked among the bottom sixty countries of the world in terms of the human development index. The government of India has also prepared two national human development reports in 2002 and 2011 respectively, which seek to focus on the human development issues and challenges at a national level and also rank various states in terms of the human development index. Within India, various state governments have prepared their respective state human development reports, which have sought to bring out the human development achievements and challenges at the state level and also rank various districts on the basis of their human development index. These reports and ranking have contributed towards a

statistical profile of human development and the uneven development within the country in terms of spatial and social group categories.

While the human development approach is now at the mainstream of the global development discourse, it has been observed that its depth and breadth remain to be fully understood in the development sector and in the policy discourse. This is so even within international organisations such as the United Nations, which has adopted it as its main intellectual framework in its domains such as international development, peace and security, human rights and sustainability (Jolly et al 2004). The human development approach is also often confused with related terms such as human resource development, or is understood only in terms of the specific dimensions of the human development index. The potential of the human development approach for development theory and practice therefore remains to be fully realised. Anthropological perspectives on the human development approach may be insightful in advancing understanding in this regard.

Anthropological Perspectives and Methodology

Anthropology has been described to be the most scientific of the humanities and most human of the sciences (Kluckhohn 1949). It is a science for understanding humankind in its totality and holistically. Thus, anthropology is in a unique position among all the sciences to reflect among the most pressing and deepest issues of humankind (Peacock 2012). Human development has been understood as an improvement in the quality of people's lives and the human development paradigm as conceptualized by Mahbub ul Haq understands human development not only as a concept but as an approach to think about development. From an anthropological perspective, the human development approach may be understood as having four key inter-related features, viz. holistic development, people-centred development, sustainable development and equitable development.

Holistic development implies that development is multi-dimensional and different aspects of development are inter-related with each other. Culture is a key concept in anthropology and as discussed in the anthropological literature, culture is understood to be an integrated whole. In the context of holistic development, this implies that all aspects of our life are interlinked with each other and together they contribute to our sense of well-being or ill-being. This holistic understanding of development is a key anthropological perspective which is relevant also for development practice (Cerneia 1995). Thus, while many development programmes and policies are based on a narrow sectoral or departmental approach, the anthropological perspective draws attention to the relevance of inter-sectoral coordination which recognizes the inter-linkages among different aspects of people's lives. For example, an improvement in

health outcomes in a community or region with high infant mortality rates will require interventions not only towards better health care, but also in other aspects such as food, nutrition, housing, drinking water, education, public transport and connectivity. A holistic understanding of development from an anthropological perspective also implies giving importance to the qualitative aspects of development, in addition to the quantifiable or measurable aspects. Thus, issues of human dignity, equality, and respect for each other as human beings may be considered as key components of human well-being, though they may be difficult to measure and quantify. This is especially relevant in the context of the mainstream development literature and development policy literature, dominated by economists, which is biased towards quantification.

Holism in human development may also be understood in the context of development enquiry and research, wherein it is important not to be bound by disciplinary boundaries. Myrdal (1975) in his Malinowski Award Lecture remarked that in dealing with a problem, it could never be an excuse that some economic, social or political issue lay outside one's domain of knowledge. He discussed the principle of circular and cumulative causation in the development process, wherein development was understood as an upward movement in the entire social system. Anthropology through its theory and methods is in a unique position to provide such inter-disciplinary perspectives. As expressed by Peacock (2012: 10), 'Anthropology encroaches on the territory of the sciences as well as the humanities and transcends the conventional boundaries of both while addressing questions to the distant past and the pressing present, perhaps with implications for the future'.

A holistic understanding of development also extends to understanding the evolution of humankind and the contemporary development patterns, both globally as well as within countries. Many development textbooks written particularly from a Western perspective start with the question about why some countries are rich, while others are poor and what the poorer countries should do to bridge the disparities with the richer countries. However, the historical context of colonialism and slave trade is often not given due attention leading to a largely ahistorical perspective, which is misleading in terms of its interpretations (Hickel 2018). This illustrates what Tylor (1871) has described as much learned nonsense, being due to attempting to explain by the light of reason, what must be understood in the light of history. For example, none of the human development reports published by UNDP have focused on discussing the global disparities in human development indicators, based on historical factors. Anthropology through its rich literature in the socio-cultural, biological and archaeological dimensions provides this historical understanding and helps us in addressing the question of why we are, what we are.

A key aspect of the human development approach is that development is about people and people are the real wealth of a nation. The term 'human' in human development is a sensitizing term, which draws attention to this aspect. But the operational aspects of the meaning of people-centred development and what it implies for development practice are not clear. From an anthropological perspective, the most important aspect of people-centred development is that an understanding of development should take into account the emic perspectives. For example, there is a rich development literature on the meaning of development, but this is largely academic in nature and may reflect the understanding of economists, sociologists, political scientists or philosophers. But the emic perspectives are largely ignored in these understandings. This is especially relevant for the most deprived sections of section whose concerns and priorities may not be reflected in the academic definitions of development. For instance, Amartya Sen's understanding of development as expansion of capabilities has been critiqued as being an individual centred understanding of development. Anthropology emphasises that individuals cannot be viewed in isolation, and thus the well-being of an individual may also be related to the well-being of others in society.

The neglect of emic perspectives is also reflected in various development policies wherein programmes and schemes are often formulated and implemented without taking into account the concerns and priorities of the people for whom they are intended. For example, the government scheme of public distribution system in India provides subsidised foodgrains and other rations for the population classified as below poverty line. But the dietary patterns and food requirements of the poor population are rarely taken into account in the uniform implementation of the scheme. Categories of 'poor' and 'non-poor' are itself based on criteria, which does not take into account the emic perspectives of the needy sections of the population, which would be based on their lived experiences.

In relation to this, people centred development also may be interpreted to mean a sensitivity to the human beings behind the development numbers and quantitative data. For example, development programmes and schemes are often monitored and evaluated in terms of the money spent and how many of the intended beneficiaries have been reached. But the human aspect of the monitoring and evaluation would also take into the survival experiences and concerns of those needy sections of the population who were supposed to be provided with social assistance but whom the scheme did not reach. In the development sector, people are often looked upon as 'beneficiaries' of programmes and schemes, but an anthropological perspective of people-centred development would focus on people themselves being active agents of change. People centred development from an anthropological perspective would also imply reaching out to people. The most deprived people such

as marginalized sections of society face constraints in accessing the social assistance programmes intended for their welfare and people centred development would also involve improving the capacity of the most deprived sections of society to demand and access such programmes.

In relation to this, in the human development literature, there is an emphasis on empowerment and participation being important aspects of the human development approach. But these are ambiguous terms, which have often been interpreted in different ways (Gardner and Lewis 2015). Anthropological perspectives can contribute towards deeper meaning of these terms and their potential use and misuse (Crewe and Axelby 2012). For example, a participatory research approach which seeks to capture the 'voices of the poor' may lead to rich qualitative data on this aspect (Narayan 1997). However, it would be misleading to then interpret this data from particular ideological perspectives. Similarly, while the notion of participatory decision making could lead to decisions by majority, a stronger interpretation of the same could also mean participatory decision making by consensus. Thus, while the notion of participation in people-centred development implies that people should be able to participate in decisions that impact their lives, the nuances of the term can be made clearer through anthropological understanding. With regard to the term empowerment, the literal meaning translates as giving power to. The development literature mentions different aspects of empowerment such as social empowerment, political empowerment and economic empowerment and also different mechanisms through which empowerment may be achieved. However, a deeper interpretation of the term empowerment requires an understanding of the various power relations in society operating at various levels as empowerment of someone may involve disempowerment of someone else. Participation and empowerment are also good examples of qualitative aspects of development and which are not easily amenable to measurement. These qualitative aspects are not the focus of the human development literature particularly in the economics domain and requires anthropological understanding at the field level.

In the human development literature, sustainable development has emerged as a key word. This is most commonly related to the environmental aspect of development, wherein it is understood that development today should not be at the cost of future generations. Global warming, climate change and related environmental concerns at the local level such as air pollution, water pollution, land degradation and solid waste management have become relevant issues for sustainable development policies and interventions. The development economics literature indicates the tensions between economic growth and the environment, as increasing production of goods and services may lead to increasing consumption and degradation of natural resources, which are finite in quantity. Anthropology challenges the fallacy in which

human beings can be regarded as separate from nature as any organism that destroys its environment destroys itself. The unit of survival is therefore not the organism, but the organism plus the environment (Peacock 2012). This anthropological perspective in this regard is akin to the ecological approach and is vital for survival of the planet (ibid).

Sustainable human development from an anthropological perspective would also include the challenges of global peace and addressing conflicts between and within countries. As expressed by Kluckhohn (1949) and which is still relevant in the contemporary context, 'Anthropology provides a scientific basis for dealing with the crucial dilemma of the world today: how can people of different appearances, mutually unintelligible languages and dissimilar ways of life get along together?' (Kluckhohn 1949: 1). Anthropology helps us to understand the common institutions found in all societies, the interdependence of cultures and the biological oneness of human beings, which are far more significant than the relatively superficial differences (ibid). An anthropological understanding of how to promote global peace through emphasizing on the basic unity of humankind would therefore be crucial in addressing the contemporary challenges in this regard.

The literature on the human development approach mentions equity as being among its key principles. The term equity has been interpreted in various ways, but a common meaning underlying the term is a notion of fairness. In the context of the human development approach, a focus on equitable development raises the question of whose development is implied by the term human development. There are two perspectives to address this question viz. the 'conglomerative' perspective and the 'deprivational' perspective. The conglomerative perspective understands human development to be improved quality of life for all, whereas the deprivational perspective is motivated by the concerns of poverty and inequality. The anthropological perspective would lay emphasis on the deprivational perspective, wherein it is the issues of the most deprived sections of society which would be considered the priority issues of human development. This is especially relevant in the Indian context where large sections of the population continue to be socially, educationally and economically deprived and India continues to rank among the bottom countries of the world in terms of various human development indicators.

There are various aspects of poverty and inequality in India that require anthropological understanding. In the last official estimates of poverty in India, which were available for 2004-05, it was estimated that more than 80% of the rural poor in India belong to either scheduled caste, scheduled tribe or other backward classes category (Radhakrishna and Ray 2006). Secondary data from government data sources indicate that there is a social group hierarchy across a range of development indicators for rural all-India,

with scheduled tribes at the bottom followed by scheduled castes, then other backward classes and then the category of others. Further, there are known to be ethnic group disparities within these social group categories. There are also social group categories such as de-notified and nomadic communities as well as sections of population among particular religious groups, where also one may observe issues of poverty and deprivation being related to social group identity. This indicates that poverty in India may be understood as not only an economic phenomenon, but also a social phenomenon.

The human development literature based on a development economics perspective has been unable to satisfactorily explain this group-level phenomenon of poverty and inequality in India. While the economics literature based on analysis of secondary data has been able to establish statistical patterns in the data, the causal mechanisms need more understanding. Thus, for example, why is it that being born in a particular scheduled tribe community may lead to a higher probability of particular socio-economic outcomes such as higher infant mortality rate, higher malnutrition rate among children, or higher maternal mortality rate has not been fully understood from the perspective of the development economics literature. Using the terminology of the capability approach, it may be asked, why is it that the capabilities of an individual with regard to various functionings may also be related to which social group category or ethnic group the individual belongs to. Addressing the policy research gaps relating to poverty and social group disparities in India requires a holistic framework of analysis, understanding of emic perspectives based on qualitative research and in-depth micro-level studies based on fieldwork, which are all the strengths of anthropological research. This is especially with respect to the scheduled tribe communities, who are the most deprived social group category in India across a range of socio-economic indicators and among whom there is a rich tradition of extensive anthropological fieldwork.

Anthropological research can also greatly contribute towards the larger literature on assessment of human development, which is largely based on quantitative development indicators and indices and on human development reports prepared at a global, national or sub-national level. Anthropology is the only discipline, which is based on fieldwork as its central methodology (Peacock 2012). It therefore has the analytical capacity and methodological strength to provide an understanding of the processes underlying various development outcomes, based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative data at the field-level and understanding the linkages between the micro and macro level. For example, while gender disparities in human development indicators are well documented in the literature in terms of secondary data, the processes underlying these disparities require an understanding based on anthropological research.

There are various other examples in this context relating to indicators with respect to multiple aspects of development, in which anthropological research can lead to a better understanding of the processes underlying the development outcomes. Many of these indicators are also represented in the global development discourse such as the sustainable development goals (SDGs). The seventeen SDGs as adopted by the United Nations are comprehensive in terms of the dimensions of development covered such as poverty, hunger, health, education, gender, water and sanitation, economic growth and decent work, infrastructure, inequalities, energy, environment and sustainability and peace and justice. However, the SDGs and their corresponding targets and indicators reflect a top-down approach and the micro-level aspects of the dimensions of development as reflected in the SDGs need to be better understood through anthropological perspectives and research. In this regard, it may be relevant to study what is the meaning of terms such as development, quality of life and the indicators of well-being as identified by the poorer sections of society, through their own lived experiences and emic perspectives.

Anthropology has a rich tradition of village studies in rural and tribal areas. In the contemporary development context, village studies based on anthropological fieldwork could incorporate development issues such as livelihoods, migration, food security, living conditions, health and nutrition, education, environment, socio-economic inequalities in various dimensions and the functioning of government programmes and schemes. Such studies could provide a voice to the development concerns of the most deprived sections of society and also capture the socio-economic changes taking place among various communities and different regions of the country as part of the development process. The studies may be presented in the form of village-level or gram-panchayat level human development reports, with the ownership of these reports being with the respective village or gram panchayat themselves and the anthropologists playing the role of a facilitator. Such reports could also incorporate a process of micro-level planning and contribute towards a greater role for anthropological research in policy planning and interventions for human development.

Conclusion

This article has sought to reflect on various aspects through which the interface between anthropology and the human development literature may be strengthened. This is especially relevant in the contemporary development context in India, as anthropological research on human development issues can provide insights, which would be extremely relevant for policy planning and interventions for human development. The potential for anthropological research in this regard has also been pointed out in earlier decades by social science review committees and by eminent anthropologists themselves.

The Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) in its review committee report on social sciences in India (ICSSR 1979) made the following observation with regard to anthropological research: 'In the field of applied anthropology, emphasis should be placed on the poorer sections of the community. In this context, the study of poverty - the concept of poverty, its socio-cultural determinants, levels of poverty, its manifestations and ways of banishing it –in the context of tribal culture and social structure should be given top priority' (ICSSR 1979: 38). The same report also provides the following observations about policy research in anthropology: 'Policy oriented research in anthropology is also much needed. Anthropologists particularly must turn their attention to studies intended to provide the much-needed information base to the government so that it can formulate and implement suitable policies' (ICSSR 1979: 39). A similar observation was made by S.C. Dube (1983), that in the years to come anthropology will have to be increasingly sensitive and responsive to the key problems of public policy, which besides being socially useful will also enrich the discipline both in theory and methodology.

The need for a greater engagement of anthropology in issues of human development and public policy is especially relevant when the government has a multitude of programmes and schemes, intended for the welfare and development of the people. The functioning and impact of these programmes and schemes need to be carefully assessed through anthropological field studies, wherein the role of the anthropologist should be understood as a social architect and not merely a project evaluator (Cernea 1995). For example, tribal development has always been a priority area for government intervention in India, based on constitutional provisions, resulting in large budgetary provisions and expenditures, including a separate tribal sub-plan and distinct administrative structures for implementation. Similarly, there have been legislations such as Forest Rights Act, Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act, and distinct programmes and schemes for tribal health, education and livelihood. However, inspite of such legislations, programmes and schemes for tribal development, various state human development reports indicate that the bottom ranked districts in various states with a notable scheduled tribe population continue to be the tribal districts. For example, in Maharashtra, the tribal districts of Nandurbar and Gadchiroli continue to be the bottom ranked districts respectively, in the human development index ranking, in both the human development reports prepared for the state so far. These may be considered as examples of important issues for anthropological research in contemporary Indian society, in which it would also important to have a systematic understanding of the micro-macro linkages and perspectives of policy makers and government functionaries, in addition to the emic perspectives of the tribal people themselves.

With the Indian economy having emerged as one of the fastest growing and largest economies in the world, the nature and direction of changes in the quality of life of the most deprived sections of society need to be understood towards strengthening equitable policies. A stronger engagement of anthropology with human development issues, based on its holistic theoretical framework and fieldwork methodology can therefore greatly contribute to the understanding of human development both in theory and practice and lead to a 'people's anthropology' (Xiaotong 1980), which is relevant to the most pressing concerns of humanity.

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