Prefatory Note

BY HISTORICAL STANDARDS of long-term economic growth, the record of developing countries during the last two or three decades is not unimpressive, particularly if the preceding economic stagnation, or in some cases economic decline, and the colonial control extending over four or five centuries, with its economic power concentrated, are kept in proper perspective. However, this economic performance pales into insignificance when it is expressed in terms of per capita growth rates. For, again by historical standards, the population growth rates have been fully twice as high as those experienced by the developing European countries of the 18th and 19th centuries. Annual population growth rates of 0.5 to 1.5 per cent were then common, with an average of 0.7 per cent for Europe as a whole. The corresponding average for all developing countries now is about 2.5 per cent.

If economic growth is measured in terms of progress made by the poorest 40 per cent of the population when ranked by income levels, the record is simply dismal. It is estimated that there are more people hungry, shelterless, sick and illiterate today than there were in the early 1950s. In terms of fundamental human needs of food, shelter, clothing, medical cover, and some education, the hopes and aspirations of reaching these underprivileged groups have been frustrated by, among other elements, the designs of economic plans and economic models inspired by the belief that the rapid economic growth of heavy industry and big projects will "trickle down" to the mass of the people. But these pious hopes have not materialized, at least in the past two or three decades. Perhaps the very purpose of economic development needs to be redefined as the development of human beings rather than the pursuit of economic growth per se.

In the field of education, for example, where the goals of reaching *all* the people in a reasonable time span of 20–25 years appeared relatively easy and within reach in the early 1950s, the available evidence is clear and loud that formal education has failed to meet most of the needs of the poor. While the strategies of formal education have amply provided schooling and skills to the urban population, the rural poor have been simply passed by. Rather than succeeding with them, the educational system appears to have been effective in convincing the rural youth that they are failures in the modern design and process of economic development. A 1973 survey by the Pakistan Planning Commission revealed that (i) 27 per cent of the population claims literacy, but when literacy is measured by the ability to read and understand a newspaper, only 14 per cent of the population is literate (19 per cent males and 6 per cent females); (ii) after almost 30 years of universal primary education, only 41 per cent of the present 15–19 age group of males has completed primary school; (iii) the children of upper-income families are over-represented by 2700 per cent at the university level compared with their relative share in the population, when, in theory at least, there is free education in Pakistan. It must be noted that the situation is no better in other less developed countries. In rural India, for example, in the 1971 census, 65 per cent of male and 90 per cent of female workers were recorded as illiterate, with only 25 per cent of the males reaching the primary level.

Like the market mechanism, the educational system has apparently benefitted those sections of the population who could afford to buy and pay for it rather than those who needed it the most. Similarly, the gains of economic growth in the agricultural sector have simply bypassed the landless labourers and small land-holders. In India, for example, 40 per cent of the agricultural working population lacks any secure economic base. Out of an agricultural working population of 130 million in 1971, more than 48 million were classified as landless labourers. Furthermore, the Agricultural Census of 1970–71 shows that out of 71 million operational holdings, 51 per cent with less than one hectare are classified as "marginal" farmers and another 19 per cent with one to two hectares are described as "small" farmers. In other words, over 70 per cent of the holdings are close to being uneconomic operations.

It is an emerging experience of the developing countries that excessive reliance on the market mechanism in the pursuit of economic growth rates, engineered by and for the powerful urban elite, has produced unhealthy as well as international features. In simple terms, the rich have become richer and the poor have become relatively poorer. In terms of numbers, the richest five per cent are said to engross all the economic gains while the poorest 40 per cent can actually grow poorer still. The efforts to establish a new international economic order were launched some thirty years ago when the United Nations signed its charter. On the other hand, the strategies to reform the present national economic order in many developing countries with the aim of initiating and promoting meaningful economic development for all, in which all participate and share the economic gains, have yet to receive full support from many national political leaders and policy-makers. What should be aimed at is an integrated system of economic and social development with appropriate location of work, size of units, and choice of technology which will ensure the dignity of human beings and respect for humane values.

This study attempts to bring together economic, social, political and anthropological analyses of some aspects of rural development in India and other developing countries.

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