P. 038/I/D-3/87

RELIGION AND ETHNIC CONFLICT IN DEVELOPMENT

by
Soedjatmoko

Tugu, December 9-12 1987

When in the wake of the assassination of Mrs.Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India,communal violence erupted, and a progrom against the Sikhs began, while the police seemed to be paralysed or partisan, something important happened: groups of citizens, with no particular affiliation to the political parties, voluntarily banded together and went out into the streets in order to calm down the emotions that had been aroused, and where possible, to protect the Sikhs from further harm. They did so not only for humanitarian reasons. They acted because they felt that in a climate of governmental paralysis and inflamed political passions, it were the citizens themselves who should assert their national political values of civility, tolerance and civic responsibility..

That event, in my view, was indicative of the existence of a vigoroous civic culture, that transcended the primary communal loyalties and political passions, and represented political values and a political culture undergirding India's inclusive unity as a nation, that its citizens considered worth fighting for - if necessary on their own.
Its roots, I believe, reach back into the Gandhian tradition of voluntarism. It would therefore be wrong to look at it simply as a middle class phenomenon.

This event in India is ,of course, not an isolated case..
We have seen many manifestations of such civic action, sometimes sporadically, sometimes in more sustained forms, in other , democratic as well as non-democratic, parts of Asia. We have , in the last decade , also been made aware of how the strength of a civic culture has made possible the process of re-democratisation in Latin America and Southern Europe. Seen together ,these phenomena reflect two fundamental shifts in the conventional perception of the relationship between development and culture, and between state and society.

There has been almost a total reversal in the way we perceive the relationship between culture and development. In the past culture was seen as a residual problem in development, to be taken care of only after the more important economic decisions had been taken.
The religious revival in the Third World - although not confined to it - manifesting itself in all of Asia's many religions, the emergence of conflicts along the faultlines of religion, ethnicity and language, testify to the centrality of culture in people's responses to development and rapid social change.

Development has turned out to be a very destabilizing process. Inevitably it is an uneven process. Not all regions, not all ethnic groups in our pluralistic societies, not all castes or classes benefit equally , or at the same time , from the fruits of development. Traditional social equilibria have been upset, already existing disparitiess widened or reversed, old certainties have been destroyed while no new ones have replaced them. Especially in the large ,populous developing countries the gap between the rich and the poor has widened. At the same time political awareness among the poor has increased . Communications has further heightened their expectations The poor no longer passively accept their lot. The massive populationmovements from the countryside. to the cities, from one region to another, from one country -and even from one continent to another, in search of work, security or freedom, but also the rising rate of urban criminality in most of the primate cities in the Third World, are all responses to the success as much as to the failure of developmentefforts.

Especially among the large youthcohorts in the Third World there is profound alienation from the political system, whatever its ideological orientation, fed by the specter of permanent unemployment and their disgust with the excessive materialism, greed and corruption among the rich and the powerful , and their insensitivity to the plight of the young and poor, that development seems to bring in its wake. The spiritual malaise thus engendered , has led many to search for alternative societal models and moral certitude at the deepest existential level, i.e. that of religion. And undeniably, the persistence of poverty among plenty, and of continuing injustice do constitute fundamental challenges to all religions. Much of the rise in religious intensity everywhere should be seen in this light.

Another response of disaffected youth is their immersion in new grassrootmovements, not associated with any political party. These movements are often totally removed from national politics , and are determined to remain so. They concentrate on single issues , often of a local or regional character. However, the exhaustion of the great ideologies that have so much influenced the course of history in the early part of the 20th century, has at the same time facilitated an exclusive preoccupation with one's own primordial group , with no concern for any wider concept of social and political order, encompassing the nation as a whole. With the easy availability of arms and the constant readiness of external elements to supply them, the stage is set for the fragmentation of the national polity along communal lines and the slide from political conflict into an unending cycle of violence and oppression.

These developments have forced us to realize that the failure to keep developmental disparities within morally or ideologically acceptable bounds and the rapidity of social change , trigger reactions ,which , if the political system proves incapable of accomodating them, take the shape of ethnic, religious or language i.e. cultural issues. Culture has in fact proven to be the bedrock from which reality is perceived, aspirations are articulated, and choices defined. When these aspirations and the values underlying them are overlooked in favor of developmentgoals and methods that are perceived to be unrelated or contrary to those values, alienation sets in and resistance and conflict ensue.

The second phenomenon: the shift in the perception of the relationship between state and society, has resulted from the experience that the state as the manifestation of a nation's desire to be independent, as well as the most important instrument in a nation's struggle to secure its rightful place in the comity of nations, has in many cases itself become problematical. While its developmental role obviously remains indispensible, in setting the goals and parameters , and in establishing the rules of the game for economic, social and political development, the limitations of the state and its bureaucracy in initiating and implementing developmentprojects has become equally obvious. Bureaucratically driven development from the top down has quite often failed to ignite the spark needed to release the energies of the people, and to stimulate initiative, self-generated activity and self-organisation. These are essential conditions for self-sustained growth. In fact, bitter experience has shown that the state bureaucracy may at some point well become dysfunctional to the developmentprocess.

Development does not only mean the implementation of projects. Its heart lies in the dynamisation of society, the release of people's energies, and the flowering of initiative, innovation, continuous learning, self-organisation and self-discipline in the society as a whole. The dynamics of the social evolution of a society is to a large extent autonomous, although the state remains an important factor. One might even say that there is a direct relationship between the quality of government and the vigor of its societal evolution.

Looked at from another angle, the state needs the society it encompasses as much as the society needs the state. More and more have social changes, in the world at large as well as within the nation, begun to escape the capacity of governments - of developing and industrial countries alike - to control. The vagaries of the international economy, the national as well as transnational impact of modern communications, the rapid advances of science and technology and their social and ethical implications, have led ,and will continue to lead , among other things , to such rapid changes in the international division of labor and patterns of trade and employment, that unless society itself is capable of making the necessary adjustments in time, a nation will soon lose its competitive edge and is bound to fall behind. Governmentpolicies, even if correct, will not be enough to cope effectively with the rapidly changing demands and opportunities of today. It can be argued that the resilience of a society does, under present circumstances in the world, not so much depend on the government and its policies, but rather on the learningcapacity of the society as a whole, the mutual tolerance of its cultural components and the continous communication and trust between them, the vigor of its civic, educational and religious institutions, as well as the strength of the family. These are the factors that determine the internal cohesiveness of the national polity.

A society's willingness to learn, to adjust creatively to new circumstances, and to enhance its collective learningcapacity, of course, constitutes a radical break from the passivity, or at best, passive resistance of people in former colonies against past colonial or feudal governmental pressures. It also constitutes a radical break from its corollary: the paralysing dependency on government, another legacy of colonialism.
The need to make this break is further reinforced by the fact that governments, and more broadly, the existing political systems that we

know, are inadequately equipped to handle the longterm character and complexity of many contemporary problems, both within and outside the developmental field. Here again the societal response to these problems will be crucial.
One should however be aware that responses to complexity have often taken the form of simplification and reductionism, of a narrowing of the intellectual and ethical horizon, and of single issue politics or exclusive primary-group loyalty. Such responses therefore would also contribute to the fragmentation of the national polity and to the likelihood of ethnic and religious conflict , unless they are made in the context of a continuing political commitment to a larger concept of social and moral order, and to maintaining a sense of national unity and political cohesion as a public virtue, transcending religious or ethnic affiliation. It is only when people, collectively and individually, assume reponsibility for the state of their society as a whole and its culture ,that we can begin to speak of the existence of a civic culture.

The foundations for such a civic culture in Indonesia were laid by the nationalist movement for independence. Its principle of selfreliance.was exemplified in its independent schools. youth and women's movements as well as in its political parties..There is a renewed relevance of these values in our own contemporary situation and that of other Third World countries. A civic culture assumes that the state is not an end in itself, but an indispensible instrument of society in the pursuit of its aspirations. Consequently , in development it is the evolution of society that counts, and the skills, the drive and the energies of its people.. In this context selfreliance means that there is a distinct public role to be played by the citizen in discharging his responsibility in a whole range of areas, from keeping the streets and rivers clean, to the resolution of conflicts in one's own neighbourhood, including those of an ethnic or religious character, and the defence of basic rights and entitlements, especially of the weak and the disadvantaged..Civic courage,as an essential element of civic culture, is a function of the willingness not only to stand up for one's own rights, but also for the rights of others, in the context of an overarching concept of moral and social order. For development confronts each and all societies with ethical dilemmas and technology choices , that are ultimately cultural choices, requiring not only enhanced moral sensibilities and an enhanced capacity for moral reasoning, but also a clear notion of in what kind of society we don't want our children and grandchildren to live in.

It is this overarching concept, beyond each religion's claim to ultimate truth,and beyond the narrow selfinterests of any single ethnic group, that is the transcendent value undergirding the civic culture in our pluralistic societies in Asia. It recognizes that there is no viable future for our nations if based on the monopoly of any particular religious or ethnic group in national politics, in the allocation of resources or in the participation in the instruments of power. The irreversible reality of pluralism in our societies makes interreligious and interethnic equity and cooperation in the developmenteffort, in the formulation of its strategy and its implementation, mandatory This requires non-discriminatory particpation by all groups in development and its governance, and the confidence that the interests of any group, if threatened, will be defended by all other groups. To develop the necessary mechanisms and social and communication arrangements, as well as the trust in each other, constitutes a major social learning challenge that should be built into the formal as well as non-formal educational, social and religious institutions..

These are some of the nationbuilding measures that could help prevent ethnic and religious disputes from becoming violent conflicts. Once violence is resorted to, there is little that can prevent its escalation into a continuous cycle of violence , thereby also changing in a very fundamental way the nature of the particular nation concerned.

oooOOOooo