



THE POLITICS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Content

Introduction	1	A note on the film.....	11
Why study development as a designer.....	1	The structure of the film.....	12
Understanding the disconnect	3	Methods	13
Some views on development.....	5	Reading.....	13
Market Economy	5	Watching	13
Rural development	5	Writing.....	14
Grass-root knowledge.....	6	Travels.....	14
Urban development.....	7	Interviews.....	14
On-ground Experiences during project period..	8	Summary	15
Adigathur.....	8	References.....	16
Ambegaon.....	9		
Chennai.....	10		

Introduction

Why study development as a designer

A designer's approach today has become the one where a problem or an opportunity for a design intervention will be sought and a contribution is made by him/her to 'solve' that problem. While at the surface it looks like a problem has been solved, the core issue remains beyond intellectual reach. I strive to come out of this cycle and attempt to understand the underlying complexities of things around me, in this case, development.

People among us see those who live in urban slums and on the pavements as intruders while completely

being disconnected from the fact that they are migrants who might have been displaced by some project that was undertaken by the state to provide us city folks with electricity at the tap of a switch or running water at the turn of a tap.

While we strive continuously to 'solve problems', we are doing nothing more than applying quick-fix to what is visible. Having realized this, attempting to understand what really is going on around me in the name of development and more recently 'sustainable' development seemed important.

WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly
resolved to constitute India into a
SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and
to secure to all its citizens:
JUSTICE, social, economic and political;
LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;
EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all
FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual
and the unity and integrity of the Nation;
IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this twenty sixth day of November, 1949, do HEREBY ADOPT,
ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS CONSTITUTION.

- Preamble to the constitution of India

While our Constitution guarantees equality of state and of opportunity, the elite ditch that very basic promise and treat those unnecessary for our immediate needs as if they don't belong to the 'development' story. Such people who have been denied their rights don't always live in some remote village or on a hill. They live right here, among us as urban migrants denied of a decent living room, basic access to healthcare and decent wages.

Understanding the disconnect

In the name of development, we have destroyed what has naturally developed as a sustainable local livelihood and replaced it with very dismally designed systems that fail to be worthy replacements. This has been largely the approach of the colonialists to destroy any values and systems that are outside their control and replace it with something in which they can produce workforce that will do their bidding.

Ever since independence, the remnants of this system which continues to be, leads to wealth being accumulated in places where power is held. The top down approach of how the country is run is leading to a failure of delivering the promise made by the constitution and the people wielding power given by that constitution.

Even the efforts taken by the so called disconnected elite sometimes leads to widen the already growing gap with the underserved, as we continue to follow the colonial world's taxation, cash crops and monetization methods. This leaves the farmers with

small landholdings and the farm labourers disorganized and outside the system's reach.

An example is the drought we are facing in Maharashtra and elsewhere in our country. Much of the damage from the drought comes as a direct result of the local coping strategies being destroyed and market economy dictating what happens in these lands and in the lives of these people.

The international bodies are no different. Let us take the World Bank for example, whose stated official goal is to end poverty. But instead it promotes international trade and investments. These investments gives an alien organization control over influencing what happens locally, for example the issue of privatization of public water distribution system of Delhi. Also these international organizations use the debt to make the developing state like India serve their masters outside our borders.

The way out must be designed and executed at the local level. Our natural approach has been a learning process approach. We should bring it back and people's priorities must come first. The local communities must be made to feel secure about their rights and gains. The continuity of life and resources must be made an integral part of education at local level. Subsidies will never give ownership to the local communities. They are to be done away with gradually and a long term view of the society should develop at the local level and it will organically extent to the bigger macro level.

Much of the solutions to environmental problems, both rural and urban are created from a western/developed country's perspective and they may not work for India. Micro Specializations are sought out of the new generations that are being educated out of assembly line like setups. This fails to give them a bigger picture of how their thoughts and actions will affect others and the environment, the very environment they live in and their future generations are going to share.

It becomes important to take up the task of reconnecting the lost links and help ourselves see our relation with the world around us better.

Some views on development

For seventy years since Independence, the state has been promising development and quicker relief to all the societal weaknesses. However, the wait has been too long with multiple extensions to deadlines. It becomes important to understand what is working against the five year plans and MNREGAs and policies for the poor. I set out to approach this in three dimensions – the economic, the social and the environmental.

Market Economy

Market economy has had huge impact on the lives of peasants in our country as what they produce to make a living has largely been influenced by a demand or a lack of it elsewhere in the world disconnected to them. This in turn also leads to the local economy being very unstable and volatile. Though it seems at first look that the profit a small farmer makes is helping him climb up the social ladder, he is in fact serving the bigger lobby of large businesses and politicians who control the businesses that benefit from the market economy

and also the government which they wilfully influence for their personal gains.

There is a tendency for the elite of any kind to romanticise with the idea of primitive living, crafts, village life, minimal life, hard labour and other ways of living with nature. But the hard truth is, this category of intellectuals wouldn't last a few days in such ways of living without someone taking care of their food, accommodation and security.

What is a fight for living for the actual owners of a craft or occupation is now becoming an object of superior attitude and claim over understanding some deep meaning that is non-existent for the original owners. As the original owners move out and pick new occupations and ways of living, the dying labour will be hijacked by the elite, mostly urban with all their time to spare.

Rural development

Rural self-governance may not immediately lead to a revolution of sorts. The dynamics of power and

politics would still remain albeit at a local level and this will lead to the emergence of new leaders at the and through them a new kind of politics. This is perhaps a return to the pre-colonial days of administration where more power was given to the villages.

The 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution provides this opportunity for people to take power back in their hands and it is happening already. Though there can be criticisms on the widespread corruption accumulation of power within a family even at the Panchayat and even ward levels, space must be allowed for mistakes to made and rectified at the same local levels. Such a learning process approach seems necessary.

At the Panchayat level, people's priorities always comes first as the leader lives among the people. A simple morning stroll by the leader would be the best example of governance reaching the doorstep of people. Issues would be raised and information will be shared just on the go through casual talks and greetings. Addressing the concerns of the

people automatically becomes top priority for the leader and he would rush the panchayat machinery into service, be it water supply, health, electricity, education or housing, the basic ones the Government must provide for people.

The constitution also provides secure rights for people and control over their local resources. The local leadership become the enablers for people to execute their power. I will later in this report narrate examples at Adigathur village. Local control also leads to long term vision of people in the use of resources voluntary participation towards development without inducements.

Grass-root knowledge

Rural people's knowledge + Scientific knowledge = best combo and complementary.

While agriculture remains the major occupation of rural folks, the policies designed and innovations made are without reference to the people who have brought it this far over the last 10,000 years. The farmers particularly the ones holding small unites of

lands are almost never consulted or taken into account when these big changes are made.

Thought scientific knowledge and new innovations in this field becomes absolutely necessary, a complementary combination of rural people's knowledge and scientific advancements can achieve more while retaining the sustainability core.

Urban development

Urban development in India is closely linked to the rural development as much of the social problems in cities are due to the rampant migration and lack of opportunities outside cities. Though by law there is a rural minimum wage, it is not followed systematically

for it to be practical. This leads to inequality in opportunities and wages in rural areas forcing migration to cities.

Urban housing and community building are important aspects of development in cities. Importance of outsiders and their contribution to the as yet informal sectors like rickshaws, food outlets, maintenance services etc. must be recognized and protected structurally through legislations. However, these sectors are only seen as opportunities to make money in the parallel economy and to fund local politicians.

On-ground Experiences during project period

Adigathur

This is a village panchayat located in Tiruvallur district of Tamilnadu. I followed Mr.

Chidambaranathan who was twice the president of this Panchayat and captured the life in the village and his leadership role in maintaining social harmony and making people participate in the development activities. Below are some interesting observations I made.

1. This village panchayat decided to create a habitat for Irulars (a scheduled caste community) within the village limits in the year 2001. The colony has now grown into a full-fledged part of the village with the members of the community becoming active contributors to the local economy. An Irular woman has also nominated herself for the Panchayat President's role in the upcoming elections.
2. In 2010, a settlement for Narikuravars (a gypsy community) was created which is seen

as a great achievement of local governance.

While these gypsies were largely ignored by the state programs, the local body could decide and execute projects like this one.

3. The village is experimenting with organic farming and is aware of the harmful effects of using pesticides. Local varieties of paddy, particularly Seeraka Samba is cultivated here largely without pesticides.
4. Afforestation has been taken up in a big way and several ponds are being built.
5. Garbage segregation is being done and is providing income for about 10 villagers.

Ambegaon

After the construction of Dimbhe dam across the Ghod river, about 2200 hectares of land and along with it 11 villages, the families and their livelihoods were destroyed. M. Kusum Karnik and Mr. Anand Kapoor moved into this region to enable the tribal communities of this region to cope up with the changing world. I spent two days meeting the tribal leaders and the people.

Chennai

On 6th November 2016, I participated in a single day hunger protest organized by a collective of panchayat leaders from across Tamil Nadu demanding faster conduction of local body elections. Both the state government and the opposition parties are showing less interest in the election as they are eyeing political opportunities. However, since the term of the previous elected representatives elapsed already, local body administration has now been directly taken over by the bureaucrats. There is a growing disconnect between the people and governance and the protest intends to highlight this plight.

Outside the secretariat area in Chennai, the participating leaders most of whom are women put up a brave presence which attracted both media and people's attention.



A note on the film

The film is an attempt to summarize the core learning from this project in a short video which can raise questions and introduce the same awe and oh moments I went through to my audience.

There is a mix of archival footage I've used to evoke instances from the 70 years since independence to let the audience recall how promises were not kept.

The structure of the film

Text	Visual	Audio	Meaning
-	Leaders from the past	Promises of action	70 years of talk
Subtitles of audio	Scene from the protests by grass-root leaders	Exposing the system which is unhappy with emergence of local governance	Is the top down approach working?
-	Legislation on Panchayati Raj	Provisions for local governance	The hypocrisy
Facts on development in India	Superimposed with connected visuals	Intense music	The usual rant – I have no way but to do this because people enjoy facts
Adigathur	Village intro shots	Ilayaraja song, ambience, live sounds	Hey.. I went to a village, 1500 kms away from the IIT bubble and lived there
Irular colony	Chidambaranathan	Anna giving instructions, greeting people, seeing to local needs	We have a local boss
Facts	73rd and 74 th amendments	Street noise, political speeches etc.	Well.. Participation
-	Fly to Bangladesh	Interviews	Rising up and doing something means you run a parallel government
Observations – Presented in order	Footage from the protests, parts calling for public participation in governance	From the video	What possibly is required now to exit this cycle of repeating events
Dinosaurs were here	Clips on dinosaurs, shot at Natural History Museum	Narrator	You don't have to look at the dinosaurs of the past. There are dinosaurs among us right now.

Methods

Reading

1. Everybody loves a good drought, P Sainath
2. The Prince, Niccolò Machiavelli
3. Arthashastra, Kautilya
4. The one-straw revolution, Masanobu Fukuoka
5. Silent Spring, Rachel Carson
6. Homo Deus, Yuvaan Noah Harari
7. Political economy of Agrarian Change - M.S.S. Pandian
8. Brahmin & Non-Brahmin - M.S.S. Pandian

Watching

1. Food Inc.
2. Ripe for change
3. Inequality for all
4. Bombay our city
5. Timbaktu
6. P Sainath - My vision of India: 2047
7. MJ Akbar - Why the idea of India is a modern idea
8. Mario Savio - Operation of the machine
9. P Sainath - Unequal is Unsustainable
10. A collection of television documentaries by Al Jazeera

Writing

My observations were summarized as short writings once in a while which constitutes much of this report.

Travels

1. Mann Deshi Bank and Foundation, Mhaswad, Satara, Maharashtra
2. Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Baramati, Maharashtra
3. Walked with Prof. Anil Gupta for 7 days and 150 KM through the villages of Sindhudurg and Goa and the tribal forests in between
4. Thanal, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala
5. Grameen Bank, Dhaka, Bangladesh
6. Grameen Bank operations in Nawabganj, Bangladesh
7. Ambegaon, Dimbe dam and tribal settlements around it in Pune District, Maharashtra
8. Adigathur, a village in Tiruvallur district, Tamilnadu
9. A one day hunger strike by local body leaders demanding elections in Tamil Nadu

Interviews

1. Prof. Anil Gupta, IIM Ahmedabad
2. Dr. Sudharshan Iyengar,
3. Ms. Usha and Mr. Jayakumar, Thanal, Thiruvananthapuram
4. Mr. Rajamurugan Rajamanickam, Thiruchengode, Tamil Nadu
5. Mr. Krishnamurthy Krishnaswamy, Physicist, Mumbai
6. Ms. Kusum Karnik, Ambegaon, Maharashtra
7. Mr. Buddhaji Dhamse, Ambegaon, Maharashtra
8. Mr. Chidambaranathan, Adigathur, Tiruvallur, Tamil Nadu

Summary

1. The tangible result is this film created as a reaction from the experience of Project 2 along with a worn out pair hiking shoes, burnt toes, scratches on my camera and a tanned skin.
2. The intangible results include among many, my ability to write this report and articulate my views - and a paradigm shift in the way I see the world and the design discipline.
3. Complementing with the Project 2 are the electives I took recently and the courses I crashed, particularly the ones on Visual Culture and Experiential Learning.

References

1. Violence of the green revolution: third world agriculture, ecology and politics – Vandana Shiva
2. Introduction to sustainable development: the developing world – Jennifer A Elliott
3. Social nature: resources, representations and rule in India – Arun Agrawal, K. Sivaramakrishnan
4. Principles of sustainable development – F Douglas Muschett
5. Introduction to the constitution of India – DD Basu
6. Draft resolution submitted by the President of the General Assembly: Outcome document of the special event to follow up efforts made towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals
7. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25th Sep 2015: Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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