

# Religious Values in India's Economic Development

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**Abstract:** Religious values in India's economic development since ancient times, Indian society, having different castes and working groups, developed a deep inter-relationship between religions, values and economic activities. India's religious traditions always affected by the economic interests of various social groups of various life-styles. Our economy always grew as a by-product of efforts to achieve our spiritual ideals and as a result of our philosophy of work culture.

**Key Word:** *Economic, Development, Tradition, Moral, Spiritual, Religion*

**Introduction:** This essay seeks to explain the contribution that Indian traditions can make to development theory and to assess the possibility of evolving the new development in India based on some of the basic values of this tradition. The Indian tradition is not a "position" or a static, firmly determined set of doctrines. Rather, it is more like a movement, or an assimilating and growing organism. It is regarded as eternal not because it is "changeless" but because it is "ever-changing" in response to the needs of time. Historically, religion in India has long been used as a tool of dissent. It has therefore been able to adjust itself to, and to assimilate in varying degrees, the different religious traditions that have appeared in the land as well as the cultures of a large number of people who have decided to make India their home. Development economists and practitioners have focused on the economic and political factors that underlie religious conflicts, such as the insecurity of the poor.<sup>1</sup> Indian tradition tends to be a universal humanist tradition that has not dogmatized a given set of beliefs or glorified a single cultural pattern or life style. Instead, it consists of a plurality of cultural patterns or life styles, each of which can enable an individual to reach fulfillment. It also advocates the view that it is better for an individual to seek fulfillment basically within his own tradition than to uproot and try to do so in an alien one. Writing of her impressions of India in 1953, Eleanor Roosevelt incisively states a widespread view of the strategic role of cultural values for India's economic development: ... Prime Minister Nehru is trying to develop a democracy that, though perhaps not exactly like ours, will ensure all the people personal freedom. But if an accompanying material prosperity is also to be achieved - and the government will not be successful unless it can demonstrate certain progress on the material side - considerable education and re-education of the people will be necessary. For a belief in the virtue of renunciation is not an incentive to hard work for material gain; but only hard work by all the people is going to bring any real betterment of their living conditions. Somehow a spiritual incentive, a substitute for renunciation, will have to be found. Somehow they must be made to realize the living and exciting possibilities of the freedom and democracy their new government offers them.

Our material wealth has come to us almost as a by-product of our effort to fulfill our spiritual and democratic ideals and as a result of our philosophy of work. But our ideals are peculiar to our culture; they satisfy us, but they would not necessarily satisfy the Indian people, ... My own feeling is that with their religious and cultural background something different will be required to spark in them the conviction that the modern struggle of a highly technologically developed state is worth while.<sup>2</sup>

There are many Indians and non-Indians who would agree with Mrs. Roosevelt's diagnosis, although they might not agree on the particular set of ideals required to spark in the Indian people "the conviction that the modern struggle of a highly technologically developed state is worthwhile." In the same year when the World Bank and the IMF were established in 1944, the economic historian Karl Polanyi published "The Great Transformation". His account of the origins of capitalism remains the best account of the social consequences of a capitalist economy: a reversal of the traditional relationship between a society and its economy. In pre-modern societies and in traditional ones today, markets are limited in place, scope and time, because they tend to disrupt social relations. Such societies make no clear distinction between the economic sphere and the social sphere, because economic roles are subordinate to social relationship<sup>3</sup>. While the purpose of establishing these international institutions is not as the development strategy but to empower the corporate strategy.<sup>4</sup> According to Polanyi, pre-capitalist man does not act so as to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods. Today, however, our emphasis on freeing markets means that instead of the economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system.<sup>5</sup> The moral role of religions is difficult for most western-trained economists to accept, since their discipline is a legacy of the eighteenth-century enlightenment project that contrasted scientific and social progress with the regressive weight of privileged churches. They consider that India's traditional ideals and values – asceticism, fatalism, the cyclical view of time, the low value put on manual labour, the village-centred caste society etc. are major obstacles to economic development, than on the positive cultural conditions for such development.

These implications are perhaps more commonly drawn by westerners than by Indians; at any rate they underlie the strong sense of paradox which westerners in India feel when they hear pandits sing vedic chants over a public address system in a temple yard or meet a western educated lawyer at an orthodox wedding ceremony with his western clothes replaced by a simple dhoti. In the every day behaviour, too, Indians do not show less of that propensity to trade, barter, and exchange than Adam Smith found in the mainsprings of the wealth of nations. Every village has its shopkeeper and every town its bazaar. The mutual exchange of services among cultivators and artisans in village and town has over the centuries been developed to so regular and precise a level that western scholars have found in it a special system of economic exchange which they call the Jajmani system.<sup>6</sup>

The fundamental human problem is not the technological and economic issue of meeting all our material needs – something psychologically as well as environmentally impossible but the psychological and spiritual need to understand the nature of our own minds. Economics cannot avoid reducing the good to the amount because it factors all desires into its basic equation of scarcity which derives from comparing limited means with potentially unlimited wants. Two words namely Development and Religion help both. Development as commonly used, concerns economic, social and material aspect of life. The development projected by modern national and international agencies is often aimed at creating an economy which will provide jobs and generate money while religion is supposed to concern internal, personal and spiritual dimensions of life. It is commonly believed that money is wealth. Vinoba Bhave challenged this view. He believed that a sense of community, a sense of belonging, as well as clean air, unpolluted water, access to land, the skills to make things and grow food are true wealth. With this philosophy he was able to bring about a change of heart in landlords and landless alike.<sup>7</sup>

According to the accepted development model, the cause of poverty is not a major issue. Poverty is the normal condition of undeveloped peoples, since it can be alleviated only by technological and economic development. From a Buddhist perspective, however, there is something odd about this indifference to

causes something we want to cure. Studies of stone-age economics have concluded that the first humans in some ways had a comfortable life more leisurely than ours. Archaeological research into early hunter-gatherers has found that they usually survived quite well on a few hours work a day with a diet more nutritious and varied than the farming settlements that supplanted them. We look at some of the difficulties of the relationship between religious and the mainstream development thinking of our time in order to show the commonalities of both idealism and pragmatism on both sides of the divide. AT. Arivaratne, founder of the Sarvodaya Shramdana Movement in Sri Lanka, sees development as a process of awakening for all. As he said in a speech to UNDP in 1997: the of

"This awakening has to begin with oneself, with ever individual, then extend to the family, the country, the nation, the world. The awakening must be an integrated whole where spiritual, moral, cultural, social, political and economic aspects of life are included.<sup>8</sup> One implication arising from such an understanding is that the usual division between developed and developing countries (and peoples) is a false one. Ariyaratne continues: In first place the concept of poverty as used by macro-organizations and national leaders and politicians is a very limited way of looking at the lives of people. In our concept of a good life, even those in the so-called developed world are poor in many respects.<sup>9</sup>

The concept of development normally focuses on economic and material growth, whereas religions usually transform human problems by way of spiritual development. Buddhism is one of the world religions that claims and proposes a path to rid humanity of conflict, violence, social injustice and environmental disaster through Buddhist beliefs, attitudes and practices. Buddhism puts human beings at the centre 'human-centred development' in dealing with the world.<sup>10</sup> This can be likened to the current strategy of development which focuses on people-centred development instead of the traditional notions of economic or political development.<sup>11</sup> The Indian world view encompasses both material and spiritual values, and these can be found in the behaviour of the ordinary Indian existing side by side and in functional interdependence. Indian thought, too, particularly the work of Tagore, Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan, Raghavan, shows a balance and complexity in these respects which is far from that overspecialization on the spiritual, the sacred, and the life-denying to be found in the interpretations of some western scholars."<sup>12</sup>

The Indian asceticism is very helpful in the rise of socialism because the philosophy of renunciation smooths the transfer of holdings from generation to generation within the family, and it may also be used to lever a redistribution of property. In neither of these functions does renunciation constitute an obstacle to economic development and in performing these functions it furnishes an incentive for hard work on the part of the younger generation which is going to inherit the property renounced by the elder generation. The connection between asceticism and economic activity does not appear a farfetched one, particularly to anyone who has read Max Weber's, 'The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism.'<sup>13</sup> According to Weber, the Calvinistic emphasis on self-denying activity in a "calling" as the path to salvation was easily converted into a "this-worldly asceticism" that provided both the discipline and spiritual sanctions for the economic activities of the early industrial capitalists. During the 1950s and 1960s, it underwent a process of interpretation which brought it quite close to the type of "this-worldly asceticism" which Weber described in Europe and the United States. A leading influence in this re-interpretation was of the views and example of Mahatma Gandhi who crystallized a vigorous and continuing effort to bring the religious force of Hinduism into the service of modern social reform. Gandhi himself found the source of this social philosophy in Hindu religious traditions and particularly in the message of that "spiritual reference book", the Bhagavad-Gita, whose meaning he sought to enforce in his own conduct for an unbroken period of forty years.<sup>14</sup>

The Gita shows, according to Gandhi's readings, that the best way to reach self-realization and the perfect peace of salvation is through the renunciation of the fruits of action. He who being thus equipped is without desire for the result, and is yet wholly engrossed in the due fulfillment of the task before him, is said to have renounced the fruits of his action.<sup>15</sup> This doctrine applies to economic life, for the author of Gita : The Gita teaches that what cannot be followed out in day-to-day practice cannot be called religion. Thus according to the Gita, all acts that are incapable of being performed without attachment are taboo. This golden rule saves mankind from many a pitfall.... Murder, lying, dissoluteness and the like must be regarded as sinful and therefore taboo, Man's life thus becomes simple and from that simpleness springs peace.<sup>16</sup> How this path of desireless action may lead to that mechanically disciplined behaviour which Max Weber believed necessary for industrial life is suggested by the editor, Mahadev Desai, of the Gita. According to Gandhi:

Man must reduce his daily conduct to mechanical regularity and precision, but he must do so intelligently.... One has but to withdraw the self, withdraw attachment to fruit from all action, and then not only mechanical precision but security from all wear and tear will be ensured.<sup>17</sup>

I have not sought to suggest that Gandhi's reinterpretation of India's otherworldly asceticism will produce in India "a protestant ethic" and "a spirit of capitalism" which will stimulate a development of industrialism similar to the European counterpart analysed by Weber. A book on the Indian case would more accurately be titled "The Hindu Ethic and the Spirit of Socialism." I have merely wanted to show that the traditional Indian philosophy of renunciation is not a major obstacle to economic development, that it has in fact been all along functionally linked to the material side of Indian life, and that as interpreted by the religious social reformers of the last hundred years, especially by Gandhi, it is perfectly capable of providing the spiritual incentives and disciplines of a modern industrial society.

The Gandhian concept of development also involves an emphasis on simplicity and on the reduction or limitation of the wants of the "haves", partly to release the scarce resources needed to raise the standard of living of the poor, but primarily to save the "haves" themselves from being enslaved to consumerism. It is indeed fortunate that the life style of our upper and middle classes in India which is both intellectually and emotionally coming to resemble the consumption-oriented living pattern of the people in the developed country more than the traditional Indian values of plain living and high thinking – is unfortunately exercising an extremely corrupted influence not only among the affluent themselves, but also among the poor, who are beginning to want things that are inherently neither good nor desirable. It is of course true that in the past fifty years poverty has fallen more than in the previous 500 years. And it has been reduced in some respects in almost all countries.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, absolute poverty, remain a major scourge facing humanity at the beginning of the twenty first century. This is who the great task that awaits us in the twenty-first century is to provide a moral foundation and a moral framework to the monumental challenge of eradicating poverty. Indeed, all economic Endeavour should be guided by spiritual and moral criteria.

## References

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- <sup>10</sup> Samyutta Nikaya 1:62
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- <sup>16</sup> . Ibid. pp. 128-29.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid. pp. 179-80.
- <sup>18</sup> UNDP, 1997, p.2.