

Refashioning India's development story

Infrastructure is vital, but it should only be the consequence of human development and not its purpose.

By R Balasubramaniam

In the recent World Economic Forum meeting, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley proudly proclaimed that India was one of the few countries whose GDP was growing and is the envy of other nations. In his budget speech to parliament, he reiterated this fact while maintaining that our GDP would continue to grow in the forthcoming year.

Whether it is the finance minister or our prime minister, they do not spare any opportunity to remind the nation of our economic growth. While economic growth is a necessity and welcome, will this alone be enough to shape the destiny of India and its future? Will the narrative of 'economic growth' that our political system and government is fashioning be enough?

Announcements of schemes like 'Make in India', 'Start-up India', 'Stand-up India' and MUDRA will not mean much to the millions of toiling millions, especially in India's rural areas if we do not see development from a perspective that is different from a blind pursuit of income growth alone.

Development is not just about building airports and highways; it is not even about more roads, hospitals and schools. They are surely necessary and important, but should only be seen as the consequences of human development rather than the very purpose of it. Development has also become a buzzword in the past few years and has been used and abused to shape the political and economic discourse of entire nations.

It is projected as a broad purpose and justification of all activities, often without answering the questions of whose development and how. Development, in my view, should be a 'constant expansion of human capabilities' and it can be most meaningful and lasting only when human and social capital is created and expanded.

This raises the question on whether the many government welfare and social interventions announced in the recent budget will really bring about any change in the lives of the poor? Or will it go beyond the political rhetoric and change the face of India. And what is this change that we desire?

As one thinks about it, one is left wondering if we can bring about change in our attitude, mindsets and physical environment without a change in the entire ecosystem. Will mere income growth and economic progress assure us of these changes? Or do we need to usher in change at a much deeper human and social level before we begin to reap the ensuing

economic consequences?

What kind of human capital are we talking about? Is it merely the capacity of human beings to acquire enough cognitive information and skills to meaningfully participate and contribute to the economy? Or is it something more than that? What about all the other human capacities that allow him to function freely, responsibly and with dignity?

Nature's creation

What about the qualities of compassion, humanism, spirit of enquiry, humour, mindful existence, positive thinking and the intent to be good and do good? Imagine a world that is led by humanity that is responsible in its consumption, respectful of all of nature's creation, constantly striving for both internal and external peace, harmony and good will.

Such a world would be wonderful indeed, where sharing and caring would be second nature to human kind and the mad rush to acquire everything just for ourselves a thing of the past.

Imagine such a world where these self-evolved humans are interconnected and live with the awareness of mutual trust, interdependence and reciprocity. That is the 'social capital' that this world badly needs, if it needs to stop hurtling towards self-destruction.

India now needs a new narrative that talks about creating and expanding this human and social capital. Sustainable development will then not be a mere slogan or a fashion statement that is talked about, but a practical and realistic attempt to build this new India. In that new vision for India, development will also be seen as securities and liberties for communities and individuals.

This means that people will have the political space to voice their problems and choose the solution that bests represent them. Dominant players of development – whether they are the government or civil society or the corporate world will then take the time to listen to people with respect and to provide them the platform to articulate their just and legitimate aspirations.

India needs to become a pioneer in translating this vision of development into concrete reality where the rule of law is the norm rather than the exception.

Where no Indian will go hungry, where human rights is not a mere slogan but a way of life, where democratic participation is not a fanciful aspiration but an everyday expression of citizenship, and where food, nutrition, livelihood, infrastructure, education, health care and religious freedoms are not mere political promises but entitlements of an empowered citizenry. Only when this happens can we call India a developed nation.

(The writer is a development activist and the founder of Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement)