

Decrypting Development, Rethinking Development

The Sambhaavanaa Institute at Kandbari, Palampur recently concluded a ten day workshop with 25 youth from across the country on 'Decrypting Development, Rethinking Development'. The participants were youth (age group 18-25) from small towns to metropolises across the country, with diverse educational backgrounds from social sciences to engineering to law to education: what united them was a quest to understand the Development model that promises to transform India (and much of the developing world) from 'poverty to riches'.

The group grappled with this vexed but extremely pertinent issue through lectures and discussions, film screenings and collective reflection, interactive exercises and group-work, and, live experience sharing by activists and scholars.

The workshop started with sessions on economic history of humankind – from foraging tribes to village economies to capitalism to socialist experiments and the neo-liberal economic model of today which has been willingly or unwillingly adopted by almost the entire world today. In the process, one figured how 'Development' emerged as a post second world war phenomenon– ostensibly to address the concerns of poverty in the decolonised nations of the South, but on closer examination seemed to be more a front for the survival for the predatory capitalist economies of the North!

It thus became evident why there was such a huge gap between its promise of 'generalised abundance and happiness for all' and its actual delivery of rising inequality, ecological rampage, and an increasing annihilation of democracy – be it via state oppression of all dissenting voices regarding its policies or via the capture of political parties and institutions by corporates. However, the biggest quandary that emerged from this analysis was: Does GDP growth (which has become the sole measure of 'Development') even equate to human wellbeing? If human wellbeing, i.e., a good education, affordable healthcare and housing, secure and meaningful jobs for all, a safe society and environment, a sense of community, sufficient time with the family and for leisure is what we are looking for – would blindly trying to increase the GDP of the country ensure all that? Has this happened in the countries we are calling 'Developed'? A related question was: How much of per capita GDP is enough? Because the 'developed' countries like USA, UK, Germany, France etc. were 'developed in 1970, they were so in 2000, and are so in 2015 – but is there some cap to 'development', or is it an unending staircase? This question became critical when it was realised that all this 'development' uses up the earth's natural resources – and that the earth is a finite place!

The workshop then grappled with another critical question: Is bringing about a better world only about changing the systems around us like our economic system, our political systems, social systems etc., or is there a dimension within, that often gets overlooked by the 'regular' social sciences? In other words, can we usher in a new world without a value shift, i.e., without an overhaul of our worldview, our beliefs and assumptions about: What comprises success – self esteem – self actualisation? How can we have a harmonious relationship with fellow human beings in family and society? What is our relationship to rest of Nature? The big insight that emerged was that we as humans are not being able to differentiate clearly between our material needs (like food, shelter, means of production, transport and communication) and

between our psychological needs (like trust, respect, acceptance, commitment, love, self-esteem). We are often trying to fulfil psychological needs (of love, respect, self-esteem) via material means (of having a bigger house, a bigger car, the next position and exotic holidays). All human beings need both of these – and thus all of us have to have an assured program for fulfilling both of these kinds of needs– but we need to understand that while both are required, they do not inter-fulfill. In fact, we are unable to answer the question of ‘how much is enough’ for ourselves too as long as we do not see this trap we inadvertently fall into.

what is success? About a re-examination of our beliefs and assumptions, our worldview if you will look at what we deem today as the ‘good life’, as a ‘worthy human being’, as a ‘good society and polity’? Exploring some of our key assumptions, beliefs, and aspirations along the above dimensions would also constitute an important part of the program.

The broad conclusions were that while what is generally accepted as ‘Development’ these days is largely an economistic notion, valuing material abundance