

Rethinking Development in South Asia

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*Issues, Perspectives
and Practices*

Edited by

Farid Uddin Ahamed, M. Saiful Islam
and Amir Mohammad Nasrullah

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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This book first published 2022

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-7715-5

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-7715-2

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is a culmination of an international conference organized by the Social Science Research Institute (SSRI) at the University of Chittagong, Bangladesh. Thanks to all the paper presenters who participated in the conference. Selective papers were later on chosen and incorporated into this edited volume. Thanks to all authors who closely worked with the volume editors and took the painstaking process to revise, rewrite, and finalize their papers for publication. We highly appreciate their patience in staying with us during this lengthy process of publication, which was affected by Covid-19 situation. Thanks to many authors who, despite being Covid-19 positive, continued to their commitments and maintained deadlines.

We would like to take the opportunity to convey our thanks and gratitude to the University of Chittagong, University Grants Commission (UGC), Bangladesh, and other sponsors for their generous support. It would have been quite impossible to organize such an international conference without their support.

At the Cambridge Scholars, UK, we owe special debt to the editorial team members for their invaluable suggestions and recommendations, which allowed us to improve the manuscript and make this publication possible. We also thank to the anonymous reviewers who spent their valuable time to read the manuscript and provided useful comments to further improve it. Our deepest appreciation to Adam Rummens for commissioning this publication project and finally making this happen. Thanks also to Marlene deWilde for her excellent proofreading of the manuscript, Mhairi Nicol and Amanda Millar for typesetting, and Sophie Edminson for her beautiful cover design. It was a wonderful teamwork of all who worked hard to make this publication project successful. Nonetheless, responsibility for accuracy of data, and interpretation of the facts and information included in different chapters of this volume rests with the individual authors and not with the publisher or the editors.

Farid Uddin Ahamed
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PREFACE

OUTLOOK FOR SOUTH ASIA

MASIHUR RAHMAN¹

The special geographical features and political history of the subcontinent shed light on how to shape our beneficial future and remove the barriers encountered on the way. The size and centrality of India relative to the adjoining states as well as its stage of development define the need for its proactive role. Strains in bilateral relations are among the barriers. India's relationship with Pakistan is a special case generated by the balance of political forces in Pakistan – some not political in the normal sense – and the historical territorial dispute over Kashmir. The elected political government in Pakistan seeks to normalize the relationship while the military government –which Pakistan has to an excess–keeps up, or rather intensifies, the dispute.

Decolonization (1947) split the subcontinent into two states – Pakistan and India – and in 1971, the latter split from Pakistan and became a sovereign state. Sri Lanka became independent in 1948. Nepal recently transformed from the Hindu kingdom into a democracy with a reformed Maoist presence. Afghanistan, which for a while had communist convolutions followed by *jihadi* excesses, is yet to stabilize. Bhutan and Nepal have special trade arrangements with India where product taxes collected on purchases in the Indian market are refunded, they have access to sea across India, and there is an alignment of currencies. Bangladesh has no such special relationship, notwithstanding the strong assistance it received during the war of liberation.

Cooperation in the management of shared rivers and water resources is beneficial for both Bangladesh and India. The flows of the Ganga – named Padma in Bangladesh – are crucial for the southwest part of Bangladesh (greater districts of Kushtia, Jashore, and Khulna) for the prevention of salinity intrusion, which threatens human health, agriculture, livestock, and

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the Sundarbans. The Brahmaputra enters Bangladesh having run through Bhutan and China. A dam on the Brahmaputra in China will have an adverse impact on Bangladesh and India. The data-sharing agreement between China and India has not been affected by security or conflicting territorial claims between them, however. The Ganga/Padma Barrage project proposed by Bangladesh pends on the clarification of issues relating to technical/engineering design, financing, mode of cooperation, etc. The tardiness of the current Ganges talks now contrasts with the speed with which the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty was concluded in 1996 – the first time the Awami League returned to power since the assassination of Bangabandhu (August 1975).

India's attitude to trans-state rivers within India and trans-border rivers shared with other sovereign states is expedient or ambivalent at best. The Act of India 1935 and the later Act of India 1947 recognized the rights of lower riparian provinces and princely states in British India on shared rivers. The Constitution of India retains most of the features of those constitutional acts but grants more power to the federating states over economic use. The constitution denies the traditional rights to lower riparian sovereign states. Brokered by the World Bank, the Indus Basin Agreement restored pre-1947 arrangements: the canal headworks are located in India but there is guaranteed flow into Pakistan. Recognition of India's international obligations with respect to the lower riparian sovereign states is necessary to resolve the issues with Bangladesh.

The rights of the peoples living in lower riparian federating states were recognized – reinforced rather – in the recent decision on the Godavari-Cauvery dispute. The upper riparian cannot divert water to their advantage such that the life of the lower riparian people is radically affected; repair to the damage may require the upper riparian people to readjust their lives and occupations so that the people on the lower riparian do not take on an excess burden. This enunciates the strong principle of the right to water. The recognition of access to river waters as a universal human right redefines the legal perspectives – and the political obligations of the upper riparian sovereign state.

Cooperation in power generation and distribution, especially hydropower, can provide the region with low-cost clean energy and make it, supported by other infrastructures and policies, a significantly competitive exporter in the world. Power trade between Bangladesh and India has commenced. Imports from India are planned to increase over time. However, imports from the northeastern states (NEST) are constrained by the costly transportation through the Siliguri Chicken's Neck. Transportation across Bangladesh

makes hydro-generation in Arunachal viable; Bangladesh can charge for the rights of passage and wheeling.

Bangladesh has signed bilateral agreements with Bhutan and Nepal for investment in hydropower in those countries. Though a party to cooperation in principle, India is yet to formally sign an agreement. The largest consumer of hydropower from Bhutan and Nepal will be India, without whose participation the projects are not viable. Evacuation from Bhutan and Nepal to Bangladesh is not possible except across India – trilateral agreements (Bhutan and India, Nepal and India) or preferably one multilateral agreement (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal) is necessary to make cooperation feasible. One can think of a corporate entity outside the state domain handling electricity subject to regulations and in conformity with the best practices agreed by the parties.

The denial of evacuation across its territory – by Bangladesh to India from the northeastern states, and by India to Bangladesh from Bhutan and Nepal – acts as mutual veto, the exercise of which also entails self-denial.

The shared generation and consumption of hydropower needs a lot more work/preparation on grid alignment or compatibility, ownership and management structures, financing arrangements and shares, institutional arrangements and legal framework/legal jurisdiction, etc. It is standard practice that when an economic enterprise could be subject to the law in several jurisdictions, the parties agree to designate one jurisdiction in preference to and different from others. Countries investing to increase their respective power supply and join the cooperative regime require considerable engineering modifications for compatibility. Delays increase the cost of alignment – the longer the delay, the higher the cost, and cooperation may not be achieved within the foreseeable time.

Special consideration needs to be given to the surface transportation connectivity for NEST. Because of its size, India requires differentiated treatments of transportation connectivity with its neighbouring states. Connectivity with Bangladesh is most complex. Mainland India is connected with NEST by the thin thread of the Siliguri Chicken's Neck. The most convenient access for NEST to mainland India and to the sea [rest of the world] is through Bangladesh. Strictly speaking, technical and legal access of NEST to the sea is not blocked by Bangladesh – these states have access to the sea through India.

The above qualification applies to Bhutan and Nepal also, which are landlocked by India, not by Bangladesh. India provides dedicated facilities through the Kolkata port. Bangladesh provides access to Bhutan and Nepal by bilateral agreement, which is of little use in the absence of an agreement with India allowing uninterrupted movement. Transshipment at the

Bangladesh–India border entails additional costs and time. As such, the agreements with Bhutan and Nepal are rarely used and are routinely allowed to lapse.

Since 1971, bilateral agreements regulated transportation by river as well as by railway. River routes are negotiated periodically. By and large, the routes have remained unchanged while the charges have been revised upward. The charges are divided into two parts. A lump sum is paid for use of the protocol routes; the other parts comprise the charge the vessel operators pay for specific services they use. The lump sum is treated as the share of the maintenance cost borne by India that could be treated as the charge for the right of way. The term seems to have been derived from the practice prior to 1947. The routes were maintained by a single authority in the undivided subcontinent.

Some people argue that India should pay part of what it saves for transportation through the shorter distance. The alternative argument is to follow WTO principles for landlocked LDCs, i.e., the use of the routes by LDCs should not be treated as an opportunity for raising revenue which should be based on marginal cost. Marginal cost pricing allows the recovery of any investment made for the other LDC users and reasonable return; pricing in deviation from marginal cost involves the extraction of monopoly rent. The separation of charges for maintenance (public good) and operation (private cost) sheds some light over the issue. The government buys the right to use the routes, which is public good; individual operators pay for the services they use within Bangladesh, i.e., the cost of private services.

Putting the issue within a contestable market paradigm indicates the charge that would be agreeable to both sides in the long run. While governments will have to provide Indian transport operators with access to NEST, the operators will pay the service providers the price of the specific services they use. If the price for services used for transportation through Bangladesh is higher, the Indian vessel operators will use the alternative, i.e., the chicken's neck. The Indian government cannot neglect the convenient connection with NEST or leave the Indian operators without convenient access for too long. In fact, all-weather road and railway connections exist between NEST and mainland India.

The two railways have a long-standing protocol; unlike navigation, railway protocol is not subject to routine renewal at regular intervals. The two railways use each other's wagons as necessary; the railway of the concerned country takes responsibility for the wagons when they are in its territory; the railway that uses more of the other's wagons pays for the excess use. The rates fixed by the concerned railway are paid by the user, not by the state railway enterprise.

The coastal shipping agreement signed recently allows operation along coasts and calls at designated ports, including seaports; most significantly, it will allow vessels to operate through the east–west canals in India (planned by GOI for reducing the distance between the East and West coasts). The use of ports in India, situated mostly on the west coast, reduces the cost substantially below that for shipment to Singapore, which improves export competitiveness. Transporting export cargo from Chattogram for loading onto larger mother vessels in Singapore takes longer and raises operation costs. By oversight, the coastal shipping agreement left out a provision for the use of Indian ports for third-country export although such a provision is included in the inland navigation agreement. An amendment is under consideration but it takes an inordinately long time for the rituals of meetings to propose and agree on an agenda, discuss issues, agree, and finally ratify it. Air traffic operates over Bangladesh in accordance with an international convention. The suspension of operation or concocted impediments are inconceivable adversarial acts!

The import substitution policy coupled with a high level of protection, which is especially pursued by India, the largest market in South Asia, explains the low level of trade in the region. Additionally, similar policies were followed by other countries in the region; when they started opening up, they looked westward. An anti-export bias persisted from the trade-industry policy regimes of the past although efforts have been made to offset the distortions through tax relief and cash incentives. The remedies are based on subjective perceptions, interest group persuasions, or impact analysis; there is no guarantee that the corrective measures are moving in the right direction.

Bhutan and Nepal have special trade arrangements with India where the tax on purchases made in India is refunded and their currencies are aligned with the currency of India. This constitutes a customs-and-payments union of sorts. Sri Lanka has a special trade agreement that provides preferential access to each other's market and investments, especially by India. The initial results have shown that the agreement favours India. However, access to a larger market is predicted to ultimately favour Sri Lanka although it will entail modifications of the export bundle.

There are no special trade arrangements with Bangladesh, which gets access under India's common GSP for LDCs. Bangladesh faces competition from imports into India from other countries that are covered by the same GSP except for the advantage of proximity. Bangladesh was not interested in an STA, arguing that there were not enough products but overlooking the dynamic opportunities that preferential cross-border trade creates. An agreement to facilitate the flow of Indian investment into Bangladesh would

increase production and enlarge the market. The attitude shown by the bureaucracy and policymakers in Bangladesh was incorrigibly fixated. India is seeking Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPA) with several middle-income countries. Bangladesh may consider the option of having an STA similar to those with Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and now with other countries. In fact, the Hasina-Manmohan Joint Communiqué 2010 and the Framework Agreement for Cooperation for Development 2011 laid the foundation for such cooperation – unfortunately neglected in practice.

Investment in value chains is an option that should be considered as it would permit each economy to produce according to its comparative advantage and, at the same time, move up the value chain, acquiring dynamic comparative advantages. Exports generate gains by scale and scope that reduce costs and produce a wide variety of goods to satisfy the demand of a wide variety of consumer groups, and thus access larger markets. In the long term, customs cooperation that adopts uniform rates and procedures among the members and a common external rate and procedure for outsiders will create a larger common economic space for trade and investment. Such an arrangement will need access to funds to meet the likely shortfall of revenue experienced by particular members. There is a risk, however, that such arrangements may exclude cheaper goods from other countries, which needs to be avoided by carefully crafted interventions.

Industry is becoming increasingly knowledge-based. India has already demonstrated a corporate capacity to engage in industry to generate knowledge and use it for production. Individual knowledge is distinguished from corporate knowledge. Individual knowledge is the elements that builds corporate knowledge; individual knowledge is transformed into corporate knowledge when the knowledge of several individuals is pooled together to produce an object that can satisfy the demands of other individuals who are prepared to pay a price for it and is capable of transaction in the marketplace. Simply and summarily, corporate knowledge is the capacity to combine separate bits of individual knowledge to produce a useful whole object, whether tangible or intangible. Robert Solow pointed to this phenomenon when he questioned that productivity of computers was not demonstrated – it could be observed only after computer was incorporated in the production and management processes. Cooperation with India in knowledge-creation and dissemination is beneficial.

India has done well in the service industry – especially health, for example – and draws many medical tourists, including those from Bangladesh. India provides the western health industry with a large volume of health-related services, such as analysis of pathological tests, initial

screening, etc. Science and technology scholarships provided by India for tertiary level education may be privileged. Cooperation with institutions in India in health services and education – especially vocational and technical education – may generate larger benefits at the same cost – or even at a lower cost.

The nation-states in the region have embraced liberal social democracy as the standard political system. It is the most complex governing principle in that universal human rights are established alongside the obligation of the state to intervene to establish equity and social justice. The contents of social justice and the limits of intervention are played out in the course of power politics. The reality is compared with – and graded – according to ideal notions of justice and equity. The countries adopt democratic constitutions and practices, though with occasional departures from the ideal notion of liberal democracy. The focus by the people on social justice and improvement of the quality of human life is stronger. The government is evaluated in terms of achievements in the areas of equity and social justice – and voted in or out accordingly.

Nepal, having abolished the only Hindu kingdom in the world, has established a democracy in which reformed Maoism plays a legitimate part. Sri Lanka ended a violent ethnic conflict that had lasted for two decades. The era of family rule and personality-based authoritarianism that followed has been replaced. Apparently, there were differences within the ruling groups, and one of the kabbalah broke out, defeated the ruling president, and tamed the rising illiberalism. Tension between states and the federation provides a balance in the large Indian democracy notwithstanding that the states often stand in the way of fulfilling the bilateral/international obligations of the Union, which diminishes India's standing. Democracy has been institutionalized in Bangladesh, notwithstanding the occasional criticism from somewhat subjective notions or partisan/private perceptions of pristine democracy.

There is no – and there never has been –pristine democracy. The most important virtue of democracy is that it allows change towards that goal but it is never achieved in full. It moves in an asymptotic curve. John Stewart Mill was confronted by the question regarding the relative priority of progress and order. He answered that progress is a higher order goal in which order is contained; the pursuit and achievement of progress automatically comprehends order. Hobbes also asserted that art and science cannot flourish without order. Political and social order is a prerequisite for liberal democratic rights.

The Hasina –Manmohan Sing initiative of 2010 adopted a method with which to choose specific areas of cooperation, expand them to cover the

countries in the region, and finally expand project-based cooperation into broad general cooperative arrangements. Such an approach could deliver benefits speedily. Multi-member cooperation covering wide areas take a long time to agree on programmes – sometimes too long or never. The Hasina –Manmohan approach aimed at avoiding such tardy or negative outcomes. The initiatives were incorporated within the existing administrative structure, and no separate structure was created. In retrospect, it seems the attempt depended too much on the enlightened understanding of the major players or negotiators; when they left, the effort lost momentum. Cooperation seems to have split into departmental endeavours, is narrowly conceived, and is without an integrated broader vision.

Looking back, it seems it would have been better to set up a small joint unit to identify specific operations that would use professionals on an ad hoc basis for developing individual projects. That would help internalize the need for cooperation. There is a strong instinct against setting up an organization outside governments which develops a personality of its own, produces papers, and approaches the participating governments for the endorsement of its ideas. In the absence of such an organization, the need for cooperation in a particular area comes from the need felt by one or more participating governments: the cooperative projects are built in the organizations of the government. The EU followed this principle; for example, Eurocoal, Eurosteel, etc., preceded the European Union. Such sector or industry-specific initiatives, however, need a central body to organize the whole range of cooperation otherwise individual operations may be left hanging

World trade and economic policy regimes are becoming uncertain and are impervious to openness. Closed economies slow down growth and keep the South Asian nations from realizing the opportunities created by their population dynamics. The ageing population in developed countries has created a shortage of labour supply and additional burdens to maintain people who are not engaged in production. Developing countries have a growing working age population and should realize the benefit of this demographic dividend by increasing their technical/vocational skills and creating employment. An open world trade regime creates additional jobs and conditions for realizing potential demographic dividends. Given the uncertainty of the world trade regime, the next best thing for the developing countries is to expand trade and production among themselves. The question lurks in the back: How long and how deep will the opposition to an open trade regime be? Closed trade regimes and beggar-thy-neighbour policies cannot be sustained for long; though such policies may bring short-term gains to hegemonic economies, their production and employment tend to

contract in the medium-to-long term. It will not be too long before the major economies understand the follies of their inward-looking policies – and relent.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

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The way the concept of development has been understood, explained, and practiced has been a matter of much contestation since its inception during the rise of industrial capitalism and colonialism. The history of European colonialism, which is mostly constructed as a mechanism of exploitation, discrimination, and domination, particularly shaped the development of African and Asian countries (Escobar 1997; Wills 2005). Postwar development, as an ideology and practice, was nothing different from its earlier preconceptions but only exerted “a particular form of order, rationality and the principles of modernity” (Escobar 1997: 497). The establishment of the World Bank, IMF, and GATT further institutionalized development in many ways, from the growth model to neoliberalism. Critics argue that these institutions reinforced the control, creation, and management of the “third world” (Dhar and Chakrabarti 2019; Escobar 1995). The prescription of modernization and promotion of development in the 1960s through mass industrialization and macroeconomic growth apparently failed as trickle-down effects were rare. Despite decades of development initiatives, underdevelopment, poverty, and inequality persist globally in the postwar period.

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Conceptually, the term development itself is also complex, elusive, and contested; what Esteva (1992) calls an “unstable term”. For many scholars, development is “positive change” that allows people to achieve their “human potential” (Eversole 2018:2), whereas significant others consider development as “patriarchal”, “hegemonic”, “devastating”, a “destructive myth” and an “insidious failure”, no longer a useful idea and that needs to be abandoned altogether (Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1990). However, development is also very much part of our everyday life. It connotes improvements in well-being, living standards, and opportunities as well as the politics intricately connected with the state and bureaucratic institutions (Marc and Haugerud 2005). Furthermore, development can also be broadly defined as a process rather than an outcome. In development *practice*, social and economic change is considered to be a process, whether intentional or unintentional, so it is dynamic in the sense that it involves a change from one state or condition to another. Ideally, such a *change* is believed to be positive in holistic terms, recognizing the social, cultural, political, and environmental contexts (Eversole 2018).

Likewise, development is often regarded as something that is done by one group (such as an agency) to another (such as rural farmers in a developing country). Thereby, peoples’ differential views and ways of thinking about their own development clearly demonstrate that development has many vocabularies, a range of ideas, and multitudes of meanings and nuances that are linked to the political process. This multiple idea of development certainly raises questions about power relations: Who has the power to do what to whom? Who benefits from the change process? Nevertheless, by definition, development depends on the context within which the term is used and may be used to reflect and justify a variety of different agendas held by different people or organizations (Eversole 2018: 35). Therefore, the conceptualization of development depends on how we focus on it, whether as discourse or a project blueprint. The concept of development has increasingly become contentious with its differential understandings and meanings so the succinct point of departure here is to emphasize that development is a matter of much politics subsuming various conflicting and vested interest groups.

Another very disturbing aspect of the postwar development practices is that they did not result in enough tangible positive impacts on the actual beneficiaries on the ground. Over the last decade, ecological economists have increasingly mobilized the term “degrowth” as an alternative to capitalist development, seeking to decolonize dominant imaginaries centred on GDP, growthism, and acceleration (Demaria et al. 2013; Latouche 2009). Political ecologists, in turn, emphasize the contradictions of “capitalist

relations and metabolisms” and warn against the “agrarian myth”, along with de-colonialism (Gerber 2020). These alternative perspectives and practices compose the pluriverse – “a world where many worlds fit” – along with the emerging global tapestry of new or resurrected concepts and practices studied primarily as “narrative and discourse” (Escobar 2018). Despite the various alternatives to hegemonic development discourses, however, many questions remain unanswered. What is a transformative alternative in practice? How do people with different power relations and intersectional interests work together to design alternatives to capitalist development?

Anthropologists potentially regenerate these efforts through their emphasis on participant observation and praxis. They can present stories from non-capitalist societies, countries and cities that have adapted to stalled growth, and emerging intentional communities (Kallis et al. 2018). The broader aim is to unsettle the myths and values of self-devouring growth, encourage dialogue between pathways of change, and nourish activist links between the North and the South (Livingston 2019; Paulson 2017). Anthropologists are increasingly using their creative capacities not only to negate what emerges beyond the power of their discipline and its colonial knowledge forms but also to work with differences to disrupt the nature-culture divides. Recent dialogue between indigenous collectives and anthropological studies proposes the pluriverse as analytic, as “heterogeneous worldings coming together as a political ecology of practices, negotiating their difficult being together in heterogeneity” (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018:13). The ethnographic case, thus, can be a particularly rich mode of analysis to illustrate what is uncommon and potentially situate the macro in the micro (Yates-Doerr and Labuski 2015). What might we learn about the alternatives to development from ethnographic cases of the “pluriverse in practice”?

In fact, understanding the alternative is complex, partly because different types of knowledge inform the debate, all of which have their own truth and understanding of political reality grounded in the vastly complex and changing social, economic, and political world. Some scholars from post-structural perspectives have even rejected the “desirability of development”, which they see as a “destructive and self-serving discourse” propagated by bureaucrats and aid professionals that permanently entraps the poor in a “vicious circle of misery” (Marc and Haugerud 2005; Escobar 1995; Esteva 1992). They argue that the time to rethink development is now up, and the focus should be on alternative development modalities. Alternative development entails the “abandonment of the whole epistemological and political field of post-war development” (Escobar

2005; Nustad 2001; Ferguson 1990; Nederveen-Pieterse 1998). It rejects the mainstream development paradigm because of its authoritative and hierarchical orientation towards maintenance and preservation of a development that is exploitative in nature.

On the contrary, the notions “community”, “local autonomy”, “culture”, and “indigenous” knowledge have become reservoirs of an alternative development (Escobar 1995; Rahnema 1997) that promotes equality, social justice, and participation through people-centred approaches by focusing on how actual beneficiaries prioritize their own development. It highlights the plurality of culture and the different layers that impinge on development. It means full community participation at decision-making and implementation levels. Moreover, development must be sustainable and environmentally sound. The question of sustainability has been central to recent discourses on development that recognize the importance of development initiatives operating across economic, social, and environmental domains. Majid Rahnema (1997) asserts that the idea of sustainability has at its root the need to protect nature and to not take away from the Earth. However, for the privileged powerful, it means sustaining oneself no matter what the cost. There is no denying the need for economic development; however, if economic development grossly diminishes the Earth's natural resource base in the process, it is self-defeating. Post-development critiques argue that current development projects, while fulfilling basic immediate needs, do not necessarily offer sustainable, long-term solutions (Escobar 2005; Nustad 2001; Ferguson 1990). Such differential understandings and meanings of development have important implications for the task of promoting sustainable development. Rethinking development, therefore, maintains that it is the ideology that needs to change for a fairer and more justified sense of sustainable development.

This book *Rethinking Development in South Asia* tends towards a critique of the existing paradigms of development. It is about rethinking the local contexts and learning from them in terms of transformative social change against statist developmental interventions; what Escobar (1995) terms an “alternative to development”. The idea of transformative social change is to rethink and regain agency by collectively exploring alternative pathways of development. In the context of South Asia, the question of economic and social development has long been debated since the objective of achieving the optimum well-being of the millions who live there remain unfulfilled. Not only have equity and justice not been achieved but inequality and poverty continue to grow unprecedentedly. There is no denying the fact that despite the many mistakes and failed initiatives in the past, there have been many signs of hope for a brighter future. Therefore,

we need to rethink the debates on development: what has worked well so far and what has gone wrong. We need to rethink development, building upon alternative standpoints by rigorously rejecting failed approaches.

Rethinking development in South Asia requires taking into consideration a future of growing uncertainty in which crucial factors such as the environment, health, education, and development agencies have begun to bring about serious social, economic, and geopolitical changes in this region. As the world is becoming more complex, it is imperative to challenge the conventional wisdoms in the current conceptualizations of hegemonic development practices with original, empirical, and analytical insights. This book *Rethinking Development in South Asia*, therefore, pushes thinking of new or alternative ideas of development and combining the experiences of individuals, communities, and development practitioners with thought-provoking overviews of contemporary issues related to livelihood, gender, and development practices across South Asian countries.

Heterogeneity of Development Discourses in South Asia

Although this book focuses on South Asia as a geographical region, it does not consider South Asia as a homogenous socioeconomic, and political entity; rather, there are ample heterogeneous cultural practices across South Asian countries that shape development practices in many diverse directions. An appreciation of such heterogeneity ensures diversity in development practices and promotes alternative development modalities. Therefore, the precise objective of this book is to deconstruct the way development has been conceptualized and practiced in South Asian contexts and rethink it in a way that would allow freedom, choice, and greater well-being for the millions living in this region. Far from a benign view, the book takes development as conceptually contested and practically multifaceted and dynamic.

Critical of both the conceptual and practical issues of current development practices in South Asia, this book goes beyond the conventional top-down development practices and highlights how development could be seen as “praxis”,⁴ a matter of practice, by incorporating peoples’ interests, priorities, and participation. It bears two particular implications: Theoretically, it challenges the conventional notion of development and proposes alternative meanings, and practically it generates ethnographic knowledge, which

⁴ The turn to praxis – which brings developmental theories and practices to dialogue – makes space for questioning the development sector obsessed with intervention and implementation.

would be of great interest to academics, policy planners, development practitioners, and anyone interested in alternative ways of promoting development. Methodologically, the book is qualitative in nature, with firsthand primary data collected from South Asian countries.

We are also aware of the fact that academics and practitioners are anxious to differentiate their tasks in the field of development. In fact, the uneasy relationship between academia and development organizations has always been an issue when it comes to the application of development knowledge (Mills 2003). In academia, development discourse has always been portrayed as “pure”, with academic purists of knowledge arguing for theoretical development to be prioritized, while development practitioners hold their ground by emphasizing the “policy and practices” of development and their impacts on the local people (Pink 2006). This disengagement has, in fact, provided the space for the academic and practitioner dichotomy to persist for so long.

Thus, we argue that in the “era of post-development” (Escobar 2005), the culture of development practices has changed spectacularly. The nascent idea of development practices now not only advises building upon the modalities of know-how and the ethics of practices but also advocates nourishing traditional community practices through the recognition and values of distinctive socio-economics, politics, culture, and nature; what Dhar and Chakrabarti (2019) identify as “capabilities of localities”. Therefore, any mutually exclusive dichotomy between academics and practitioners is not simply undesirable but also clearly misinformed about development practices as a whole.

Alternative approaches to development practices will bridge the gap between academia and development institutions by involving community-based researchers and development activists. From the perspective of rethinking development, we believe there is scope for reinforcing mutual learning from each other to potentially harness the benefits of development knowledge-sharing. Academics and practitioners together could play a pivotal role in understanding theories and practices of development. The scaling-up of knowledge efforts in development context is important for translating research and evidence into policy practices and social transformation. In fact, without a good knowledge strategy in development practice, we might miss the opportunity to influence policy decisions.

Active dialogue and engagement among the academics, policy makers, and practitioners at regional, national, and global levels could contribute to discovering what critical reflexive pedagogies will best enable us to tackle the conceptual challenges in the field of development in South Asia today. This book goes on to argue that alternative modalities could be seen as

means of resolving the development challenges in South Asia, especially by emphasizing the challenges of sustainability, NGO activities, and many other important issues related to policies and practices.

Rethinking ‘Doing Development’: Questioning NGO Activisms

There is a growing need to rethink the old school way of doing development since the mainstream frameworks are increasingly proving to be inadequate to tackle the challenges of contemporary development issues and practices. Development practices themselves are becoming more pluralistic and multidimensional, as are the organizations involved in the development processes. It is argued that development is no longer considered “as just the responsibility of the governments and government-to-government assistance” (Eversole 2018: 8); rather, there has been a major discursive shift in global development circles towards non-governmental organizations (NGOs), ensuring the participation of local communities in their own development. In recent decades, NGOs are increasingly taking a leading role in the development sector, particularly in South Asia, amid the political space created by globalization and the declining role of nation-states across many regions of the world. Many NGOs are now working in issues like poverty alleviation, participatory development, community empowerment, human rights, and gender equality as they are often either inadequately addressed or ignored by the states. However, NGOs are yet to prove they are effective alternative agents of development ensuring equity and social justice among the poor and marginalized.

In fact, in their ideology and practices, NGOs are envisioned as having the capacity to mitigate the weaknesses and flaws of mainstream development, being potential vehicles to challenge political power and having the ability to transform community aspirations and well-being. There are certain key elements that come to the fore in the discussion about the role of NGOs play in the development sector in South Asia. These include participation, empowerment, locals, community, and politics – which have a variety of meanings linked differently to the objectives, capacities, and origins of the terms. James Ferguson (1990) stresses the appropriate role of NGOs “as being inclined towards the development industry”; on the other hand, William Fisher (1997) argues that it is essential to take into consideration both conventional and non-conventional notions of development, governance, governmentality, and the changing relationships between citizenry associations and the state.

In South Asia, therefore, the rethinking of NGO activities signals an understanding of the local and trans-local connections, which enables an examination of the flow of ideas, knowledge, and funding between people. Much of the scholarship on collaboration has focused on the relationships between communities and NGOs (Lewis and Kanji 2009) so taking the notion of participation into consideration in the local processes of development carried out by the NGOs is important. In many cases across South Asian countries, however, NGOs have failed to include the local people in the development processes in a significant manner. Participation is foregrounded in policy documents, in reports, and in conferences and seminars, but there is not much real participation of the subaltern and marginalized. The quality of participation is rarely shared; a few “empowered women” are presented as proof of participation; numbers (so many participated) tend to replace the depth of participation; what are the percentages – percentages/fractions of class, gender, religion, indignities, and so on – in the standard representations of participation?

Scholarly engagement with and critique of participation has increased exponentially. The post-development critiques, however, emphasize the need for critical analyses at the grassroots level and their inclusion in the larger discourses on development (Everett, 1997). They look at the locals as potential vehicles and valuable sources of indigenous knowledge and development. However, at times, the covert *modernism* of developmental practices leads to the undermining of indigenous knowledge, especially in our rush to “educate”. Lewis and Kanji (2009) make a broader argument about the ideology and practices of development by NGOs from a historical perspective. They provide examples of how NGO activities are increasingly plunged into “managerialism and bureaucracy”, while facilitation has become “technicalized and instrumental rather than empowering. NGOs often adopt many innovative approaches in their project implementation involving community members as beneficiaries, volunteers, and facilitators, but the guiding principle of this approach is ineffective in terms of community participation and development. The mechanism is simply to achieve project outcomes and transform them into impact; as Rahnama argues, “For, more often than not, people are asked or dragged into partaking in operations of no interest to them, in the very name of participation” (Rahnama 1992: 127). Thus, NGOs’ engagement in development programs raises questions about whether they ensure overall change and improve the well-being of the lives and livelihoods of the poor and disadvantaged. Many stories testify to the failure of NGOs to address poor peoples and their issues.