

### ***Book Review***

**The Report of the South Commission.** *The Challenge to the South.* New York: Oxford University Press, First Published 1990, Reprinted 1990, 1991.

This Report ought to be made essential reading not just for all governments of the countries of the South, but for each and every conscientious citizen of this part of the globe. The reason for this somewhat categorical statement will be made apparent as one reads on. For the time being it can be said without a shadow of a doubt that it gives a fresh, enlightening perspective on each and every aspect of world affairs and the world order, touching not merely the macro canvas but the individual, day to day existence of our citizens. To the extent that even a cursory scanning of the contents of the book transforms the reader's entire perspective and *weltanschauung* of life

A few words about the South Commission itself. At the time of writing of this Report, the Chairman was the then President of Tanzania, Julius K. Nyerere, a rare leader indeed, epitomising and perseveringly striving for the interests and well-being of the Third World. The Secretary-General was the former Finance Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, the whiz behind the structural adjustment programme and opening up of the Indian economy. The Commission was a veritable galaxy of stars such as Celso Furtado of Brazil, Devaki Jain from India, Carlos Andres Perez from Venezuela, not to forget Abdus Salam from Pakistan, each acting in their personal capacity.

The South Commission was formally established in 1987 for the member countries to together look at the South, its problems and solutions and the lessons to be gained from past experience. The intent in essence, was to improve the lives and living conditions of the people of the south, based on the ingredients of hard work, willingness to sacrifice and dedication and commitment both by the peoples and governments of the South.

Emphasis was given to augmenting South-South cooperation and the fact that the South itself would have to bear the ultimate responsibility for its own development.

The Report is divided into six chapters, beginning with an overview of the South and its tasks. To be labour the somewhat obvious, the South comprises the developing or Third World countries as they term it in common parlance. They are peripheral to the North, in the sense that thus

far they have been bypassed in terms of prosperity and progress. They are in their entirety not homogenous, but all share the common denominator of wanting to escape the clutches of poverty and underdevelopment. And with the increasing trend of globalisation in recent times, the result has been the further marginalisation and greater powerlessness of the South.

The South is dependent in the extreme on the North and hence subordinate to it. In growing, it is imperative for the South to have a vision which embraces the whole world, rather than isolating itself in an uncomfortable niche. What is the need of the hour is interdependence, each country on a par with the other. The implication of genuine development is therefore increasing self-reliance, both at the individual level and collective. This in turn calls for participation of the people acting in their own interests and under their own control.

The Report points out that the task of reversing the current trends is gargantuan to say the least, but possible nevertheless.

It next iterates the challenges to the south. To name but a few, the challenge to the South is to realise that the purpose of development is the well being of its people, to strengthen democratic institutions and enable people to realise the full potential of their talents and creativity.

In the following chapter, the authors discuss the state of the South in terms of its development record, flaws in the development experience, and the neglect of cultural dimensions. The Report revealingly tells how capital formation and technical progress may be essential elements of development, but that the broad environment of their effectiveness is a society's culture.

To quote: 'It is only by the affirmation and enrichment of cultural identities that development can be given strong roots and made a sustained process'. Further, that the South did not keep people as the focus of development efforts while instead attention was centred solely on increasing physical investment and production. Unfortunately, there has been a stereotypical imitation of the Western models, leading to social tensions and frustration amongst the peoples of the South.

According to the dictates of multilateral financial institutions, many countries had 'adjusted' or were in the process of doing so. The end result however, being a development decade in reverse, *sans* either redistribution or growth and bleak prospects ahead.

The next chapter talks at length about self-reliant and people-centred development from a national perspective and the need for a complete about face of development strategies. A strategy which conspicuously imitates the life styles and consumption patterns of affluent industrial societies is clearly out, while the need for social justice, people-centred policies and democratisation of political structures are the essential components of today's development in the true sense of the word. The Report then touches upon almost all aspects of development including the appropriate type of trade strategies, health services, educational opportunities and population policies.

How exactly to mobilise the South is the subject of the following chapter. The answer according to the Report, lies essentially in greater cooperation among developing countries. Interdependence and an appropriate form of North-South relations conducive to development of the South, forms the bulk of the next chapter.

And then follows rather 'philosophic' reading, a section on the South on the threshold of the twenty first century.

'The future is not foreordained. It will evolve from the interplay of many forces..... The South must not remain a passive bystander in this process of change. It must seek to exercise the maximum influence on the course of events.....'

In sum, the Report suggests the reform of national policies, the revitalisation of cooperation among developing countries, and the restructuring of the global economic system. The implementation of these proposals will enable the South to meet the challenges ahead, challenges which have to be met if the people are to have even the slightest chance to live a life of dignity, self-respect and freedom from want and exploitation. In rather poetic phraseology, the Report concludes with – the Northern locomotive economies will not for whatever reason pull the 'train' of Southern economies at an anywhere near adequate pace. The dynamic force for change has to spring from the Southern economies themselves. In other words, they are the builders of their own destinies.

What literature could be more pertinent for anybody in today's world, whether hailing from the North or South? Not meant merely for the academician or economist, it is comprehensive in its simplicity, and yet in its own subtle way has a certain sophistication about it. So flawless is it, that it is next-to-impossible to find fault with it, either in terms of contents or stylistically.

There is, however, a touch of the unrealistic about the ideals underpinning the entire philosophy of South-South co-operation and development, making it appear utopian, never to be arrived at. Sadly, historical developments have led to the virtual demise and gradual petering out of this ideal amongst the originators of the concept, on lines similar to the unfortunate fall of communism in most parts of the world. To my mind, the need of the hour is to resurrect the ideology spelt out in the Report, no mean task indeed, so that there is at least a slim chance that we, the nations of the South will one day have a better and brighter future. Perhaps that is hoping against hope, but then what is life without hope?

As a practical suggestion, perhaps it could be translated into the languages of the peoples of the south for it to be truly effective. I, for one, am a different person I think, having scrutinised it fairly meticulously.

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