

DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

by *Sulak Sivaraksa*

Abstract. Western-style modernization and economic development have devastated the once fertile lands of Southeast Asia and impoverished and demoralized its people. Recently, however, indigenous movements in the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia suggest a return to a notion of development based on core values of Hinduism, classical and Zen Buddhism, and Taoism. These traditions preserve an alternative understanding of the relation between humanity and nature and promote a simpler but dignified economy and lifestyle in harmony with the environment—notions which Western nations must begin to take seriously if the “global village” is to have any real future.

Keywords: Eastern wisdom traditions; modernization; the new physics.

The lands of Southeast Asia, fertile and rich in natural resources as they are (or rather, were), could undoubtedly provide sufficient food and a simple pleasant life for their inhabitants. Why, then, are 60 percent of the children in rural Siam suffering from malnutrition? Why are the small fishermen on the coast of the Malaysian peninsula finding it difficult to survive? Why have millions of Indonesian peasants migrated to the slums of Jakarta? And why have so many Filipinos left their farms to be migrant workers in the Middle East and elsewhere?

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PAST AND PRESENT TRENDS OF MODERNIZATION

There is an old Siamese saying: "There is rice in the fields; there are fish in the water." This saying does not simply describe the abundance of food resources available to the population of the region in the past; it also aptly describes the simple life of self-sufficiency that existed among village communities of Southeast Asia before the advent of colonialism and neo-colonialism. In those days, the communities farmed their own land and wove their own cloth. They were governed and protected by their own institutions: the family, the community, and the seniority system. Production was carried out by means of cooperation rather than competition and was geared to self-consumption, thus maintaining the unity and balance of nature.

I do not wish to imply that this was an idyllic life, free from suffering and exploitation. Of course there were disease, natural disasters, warfare, and the cultural repression of women. Also, village communities were not living in complete isolation; with the establishment of state power structures, land rights came under the control of the kings or state rulers. Village communities were required to pay taxes and could be enlisted to dig canals or to fight wars. Nevertheless, the relationship between the state and the peasantry was of a special nature in that the state dealt with village communities as a whole rather than with individuals or families. This allowed village communities largely to maintain their own independence in carrying out their production and in dealing with their own problems.

Colonization and semi-colonization by the Western powers brought about a basic upheaval in the village community production system. Buying and selling of commodities was introduced at the village level, resulting in the decline of traditional village handicrafts, and a change from agricultural production for self-consumption to agricultural production for national and world markets. The self-sufficiency of village communities was gradually destroyed, while market forces over which the communities had no control dictated economic and social changes in the lives of the peasants. The establishment of agricultural export markets brought larger proportions of agricultural land under the direct ownership of the local aristocracies, thus increasing the numbers of share-cropping tenants. At the same time, foreign companies took over large tracts of land to establish rubber, sugar-cane, coconut, and banana plantations, thus creating a new class of peasants—the agricultural laborers.

During the past fifty years, colonialism has been replaced by neo-colonialism and "modernization." National governments who took over from colonial governments have continued and accelerated the penetration of market forces and capitalist systems of production

throughout the rural areas of Southeast Asia. Rural development policies have concentrated on extending and strengthening infrastructures and on promoting investment in agriculture-related industries. Modernization has forced the peasants to depend on the market for clothing, electricity, water, fuel, construction materials, fertilizers, pesticides, livestock, and agricultural tools.

Undoubtedly, "rural development" and modernization as carried out by most of the Southeast Asia countries have brought about more efficient agricultural production and an average increase in the income and standard of living of the rural population. But the costs have been extremely high. Most of the benefits have fallen into the hands of the wealthy few, the upper and middle classes, such as the exporters, traders, landlords, plantation owners, agri-businesses, rice and teak-mill owners, farmers with large land holdings, and businessmen, professionals and high-ranking government officials in general. Economic growth has brought about a comparative growth of the upper and middle classes. Rural development has created new power structures at the local level in rural areas. The growth of the elite has led to an ever-increasing demand for consumer goods from Japan and the West. This, in turn, requires higher agricultural exports and greater exploitation of the actual agricultural producers.

Modernized agriculture has brought about large-scale depletion of natural resources. Forests are rapidly disappearing and with them much of the wildlife. The mudfishes and edible frogs that thrived in the rice fields and served as a rich source of food for the peasants are being killed by the use of chemical fertilizers and insecticides. Large-scale trawler fishing is depleting fish stocks and destroying the livelihoods of the small fishermen. It should be noted that the huge appropriation of natural resources and the resulting upheaval of the balance of nature has been mostly for the benefit of the "advanced" societies in Japan and the West, and for the privileged elites in Southeast Asia, not for self-consumption by the agricultural producers themselves, the peasantry of Southeast Asia who form the vast majority of the population of the region.

The plight of the peasants has actually been worsened in many respects by rural development and modernization. With population growth, the loss of natural resources, and their increasing dependence on market forces, they are finding it more difficult than before to obtain enough food for their own subsistence. They find it necessary to sell their produce at whatever the market price is, in order to pay their debts for supplies used in the production process. Many do not have enough produce left for their own consumption throughout the year and have to buy food from the market, thus increasing their debts. Their problems are multiplied during years of drought or flooding.

The trends are common throughout the region. The wealthy farmers with enough land to produce a surplus easily obtain bank loans to modernize their production and benefit from government support schemes. But they are a small minority of the rural population. The agri-businesses are also flourishing and gradually extending their operations to the more remote rural areas. They run their own farms or plantations through the use of hired laborers working at subsistence wages, or they supply the raw materials and technology for groups of farmers to carry out agricultural or livestock production on their own land. They then purchase the produce from the farmers, deducting their loans of raw materials. While they do benefit some of their contractors in that the farmers may receive higher incomes than before, they have, in fact, placed the farmers under their control, since they tend to monopolize the markets in their areas of operation. They also drive the small farmers further towards bankruptcy.

As for the vast majority of the rural producers—the middle peasants with only sufficient land to feed their families, the poor peasants with very small plots of land, the share-cropping tenants who lose up to half of their produce as rent, and the agricultural laborers—they are finding it increasingly difficult to survive. They have no bargaining power concerning market prices, land rents, and daily wages. To obtain loans they have to resort to the local traders and money-lenders to which they pay exorbitant interest rates. Their costs of production are increasing in relation to the income received from their produce. The peasants of Southeast Asia are, therefore, plagued by mounting debts. (In Siam, for example, the five million rural families have accumulated a total debt of over one billion dollars, US currency, while the average annual cash income per family is only \$170.)

Under these conditions, it is not surprising that malnutrition is on the increase among the food producers, and that a large proportion of rural families can no longer survive on agricultural production alone. The poor peasants are gradually losing their land through debt, and millions of peasants flock to the cities each year to seek seasonal or year-round employment. The young girls work as servants, unskilled factory workers, or are forced into prostitution. Children work illegally in small workshops under the harshest conditions. Some of them are even “sold” abroad. The men do heavy labor for low daily wages.

The massive influx of peasants to the cities (in Bangkok, the population has increased from three million to five million in a period of only three years, and the same is true of Manila and Jakarta) clearly spotlights the misery of the rural population. But migration to the cities does not solve the problems of rural poverty. Industry is not well enough developed to absorb the rural population. The workers from

the rural areas receive barely sufficient wages for their own subsistence. Only a small proportion manage to send back money to their families. Living in the slum areas, they are faced with rising urban unemployment. Many are forced to resort to crime.

The worsening situation of the peasant has contributed to the growing strength of many underground revolutionary movements in the region. In retaliation, the governments have introduced repressive measures such as martial law, detention without trial, censorship, and violations of many fundamental human rights. Most of the Southeast Asian governments are military or military-backed authoritarian governments. Under these conditions, the peasants are subject to atrocities and find it extremely difficult to group together to protect their common interests and struggle for their right to a better life. Growing peasant movements have been crushed time after time. Most farmers' organizations such as agricultural cooperatives and farmers' unions are tightly controlled by the governments and mainly serve the interests of the wealthy farmers. When governments form a link like the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), they share repressive methods against the peasantry, indirectly serving the interests of the richest nations such as Japan and the United States.

Women, who form half the work force of the region, have traditionally suffered from cultural repression. In the present age, they are also the objects of extreme economic repression. They carry out the hardest work for the lowest wages. Millions are forced into semi-slavery, working as servants or prostitutes. The Southeast Asian sex market on which the tourist industries of the region thrive is famous throughout the world. Many of these "girls" have also been "exported" to Europe, Hong Kong, and Japan.

Thus the results of rural development policies, as carried out by the governments of Southeast Asia and supported by Japan and the Western governments as well as international financial institutions, have mainly been to widen the gap between the rich and the poor. The policies have increased the misery of the rural populations for the benefit of the local elites and the wealthy societies of Japan and the West.

ALTERNATIVE MODELS FOR MODERNIZATION AS IT SHOULD BE

The present trend of development is wrong because people at the top equate modernization with Westernization and the gross materialistic values of a consumer culture. The poor have been educated or brainwashed by schools or mass media to imitate the rich, who must lead their lives luxuriously, wastefully, and exploitatively. Modern persons must, therefore, be employed in urbanized and industrial societies. He

will have no time to be alone or to be with nature; she will have to think like others, be busy, and live superficially. Hence, the status quo is maintained at the expense of social justice and personal liberation from greed, hatred, and delusion.

Not only do the poor suffer; the rich are also unhappy. All feel insecure and are afraid of old age, loneliness, and death. Those who want to do good or to be good can only do so on the surface, in the name of philanthropy or charity—or in an academic symposium, which only leads to more volumes of publication. But the vicious circle remains the same.

The only solution for the present human predicament is that we have to challenge the present trend of modernization fundamentally. We must move beyond the material approach to development; otherwise we will jump from the frying pan of capitalism into the fire of communism. Fundamentally, there are no human rights or personal happiness for individual creative artists in the state socialism of the Soviet Union, China, or Indochina. To be recognized materially in the so-called free world, one almost has to be a commercial artist or a researcher for business and industry (not for truth). Likewise, in the socialist countries, one has to be a clever propagandist for the regime. This is human degradation.

Human development towards truth, goodness, and beauty must be the order of the day; one must return from the profane to the sacred. Luckily, in Southeast Asia the spiritual tradition is still available from Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, not to mention indigenous traditional beliefs. It is true that institutional religion as well as local witch doctors and charlatans can be harmful to people, but if we can apply the essential teachings of the great traditions of the Buddha, Christ, Mohammad, and many saintly masters to contemporary society as a hard core value, we will have the foundations of the science and art of human development. We will have resources for taking into account collaboration, not competition, and respect for other beings—seen and unseen—without exploiting each other or the natural environment. Not investing too much in “livelihood,” we would have more time for others. One could also be alone with oneself and with nature. What is needed is education beyond the intellect; emotional growth must accompany our intellectual striving. If one could develop personal self-awareness through zazen, prayer, or meditation, one could restructure one’s ego to be less selfish, more selfless. One would then be in a position to listen, to be aware and to see things as they really are. One would not be so easily biased by Western scientific theories of growth and by sophisticated technology which pressures us to think and live alike.

One positive trend is that some leading Western thinkers such as Ivan Illich, E. F. Schumacher, and Fritjof Capra have now recognized the limits of Western science and technology, which have become so materialistic and exploitative. Now a body of writing is emerging to show that there can indeed be a convergence of Eastern thought and the viewpoint of the "new physics," and that this could be the promise of a holistic worldview which could well constitute a "paradigm shift" of far reaching consequence. Among the works which treat this convergence of Eastern thought and the new physics a few can be mentioned: F. Capra, *The Tao of Physics*; J. Needleman, *A Sense of the Cosmos*; A. de Reincoirt, *The Eye of Shiva*; R. G. H. Siu, *The Tao of Science*; H. Smith, *Forgotten Truth*; M. Talbot, *Mysticism and the New Physics*; G. Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*. A provocative introduction to this convergence can be found in L. Leshan's *The Medium, The Mystic, and the Physicist*. Leshan depicts the strikingly similar maps of reality which have been charted by the mystics, both Christian and Asian, who have known the mysteries of inner space and inner-connectedness and by the physicists who are learning so much about the worlds of the very large and the very small. In Leshan's work one discovers that it is a modern physicist who is speaking when it sounded like a mystic; and a mystic who is speaking when it sounded like a physicist.

In this convergence the voices of the pre-modern wisdom traditions show great affinity with the post-modern physicists—those who have broken from the restrictions of the Newtonian mechanistic model. This new promising conjunction can make us more attentive to the Asian traditions of Hinduism, classical Buddhism, Taoism, and Zen Buddhism in new ways. It also makes us anxious to see what will happen in other scientific fields, as well as in society at large, when older, outdated scientific structures are modified or replaced and the perspectives of the new era are taken seriously.

Already in the Philippines, non-violent actions among some Christians have made the regime in that country more democratic, although it will take a long time to rid the cultural subconscious of Spanish and American domination. The Peasantren in Indonesia is a real Islamic educational alternative using indigenous culture as a basis for modernization and real self-reliance within their own culture. The Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka is applying Buddhism ecumenically to awaken local inhabitants at the village level and make them proud of their local culture. They do this through appropriate technology to survive meaningfully with dignity. The movement hopes to awaken people individually as well as collectively at national and international levels, so that different trends of development may be learned by all. In Malaysia ALIRAN, a national, non-partisan action

group, is involved in raising social consciousness and encouraging social action that it hopes will lead to social justice. In Siam, more peasants are now cultivating self-reliance—using traditional methods and culture—avoiding an export or sale orientation, refusing chemical fertilizer and machinery. They may be poor, but they are no longer in debt; thus ploughing and harvesting become a time of joy and real participating once again. Some monks use meditation and Buddhist ceremonies to help the poor start their work mindfully and selflessly; hence collective farms, rice banks, and buffalo banks are now possible in many areas.

These infant trends are not perfect and are fraught with uncertainty and error. But if the spiritual values of each tradition and locality could be adapted to contemporary society, a great variety of approaches to modernization or post-modernization might be possible. We may yet develop our own science and philosophy beyond those dictated to us by Newton and Descartes. The danger is whether the superpowers, the multi-national corporations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and even the Asian Development Bank will allow alternative forms of development. Often this outside power is unseen, using outmoded Western science and education to brainwash our Asian elites into oppressing their own people—people who seek release from the present oppressive system.

Can an international gathering of intellectuals and a scholarly journal contribute to the complex processes by which a relatively powerless people can live with dignity and look for development alternatives with spiritual values at their base? If so, the likelihood of long-term human survival on this planet will be more assured.