



## Mass Participation In Development: A Conceptual Construct

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To augment people's participation in development has been a growing concern all over the world with the changing relationship between society and polity. But given the structures of the governments and dispositions of bureaucracy on the one hand and the attitudes of the people on the other, it is not easy to achieve this goal. The problem is far more difficult in the countries of the third world where the gap between state and society is wide. It is, however, unfortunate that the concept of participation is not clearly explicated conceptually as well as operationally. The frequent use of this concept, thus, resembles what Bachrach and Baratz describe as the strategy of non-decisions' (Bachrach & Baratz, 1970).

In the Indian context, the process of centralized planning and its implementation through bureaucracy is a clear example of the use of non-decisions to exclude effective and meaningful participation by those who are at the lower levels of the pyramid. It is amazing how long decisions take, or how they are distorted or even shelved, on their long march between New Delhi and the state, district, block, down to the village levels. Paradoxically, at the higher levels one comes across planners, administrators and politicians talking about the participation of people in the developmental process while what they actually mean is mobilization. A deeper probe will reveal that there is little distinction made between mobilization and participation at that level. Often, while complaining about the lack of participation of the people, what is implied is their lack of willingness to uncritically accept and endorse development policies and programmes and extend support and cooperation in their implementation.

The bureaucratic culture, overshadowing the political system, neatly combines the residual legacy of colonial rule with naive authoritarianism and works as a powerful barrier to meaningful participation. The sensibility of the bureaucrats and politicians is so blurred that they make no distinction between participation and mobilization.

Essentially participation has the element of the volition of an individual in the making of the general will. The process may range from attending a village meeting to contacting a public official or a political leader to influence a decision having a bearing on the welfare of the individual. The process may also entail participation in a development project or withholding one's support through non-cooperation in its implementation.

On the other hand, mobilization has an element of force or compulsion where in the mobiliser assumes power to give direction to the people and expects them to follow the same without questioning it. The individual has little or at times no choice left in determining his priorities. He is reduced to mere instrumentality in realizing the goals, determined by those claiming to protect and safeguard his interests. The mobiliser rationalizes his behavior on the ground that in doing so he is acting in the best interest of the people. To Karl Deutsch, social mobilization is a process in which old social, economic and psychological commitments are eroded or broken and people become available for new patterns of socialization and behavior (Deutsch, 1961:493-94). Deutsch is not talking hypothetically. The empirical referents in our politico-administrative system consist of planners, development commissioners, functionaries at various levels and 'non-officials' of all descriptions. The words 'people become available' are significant. The obvious question is: available to whom? The implicit reference is to the mobiliser. The implicit assumption in such a formulation is that people are incapable of articulating their needs and aspirations and this task has to be left to specialists in the bureaucracy and in politics.

Using participation as a key concept, literature on theories of social, political and economic development reveals little by way of precise definition or meaningful operationalisation. Its populist overtones easily cater to the needs of practical politics, leading to its use in widely aired contexts. Consequently, the concept continues to be vague and imprecise. A more contemporary approach equates participation in development: squarely with the distribution of benefits, particularly state subsidized inputs. In this sense, enjoyment of the fruits of the development is an important indicator of participation in it. When used as a sole indicator, however, it merges the concept with that of distributive justice. The study on poverty in India by Dandekar and Rath is a case in point (Dandekar & Rath, 1970).

Measurements based on calorie intake or various forms of consumption expenditure are subject to interpretations that can be quite misleading. The usual practice is to first assume a certain common minimum level of calorie intake and then compute poverty or welfare in terms of the differential. It does not take into account the individual's subjective sense of satisfaction or relative deprivation. Nor does it encompass the individual's sense of efficacy and his evaluation of the institutional structure—all of which are important components of his welfare. Consequently, the level of poverty or welfare computed on the basis of these



statistics remains necessarily partial and static. It is incapable of reflecting historical trends in the increase or decline of welfare. It cannot anticipate future developments because it treats individuals as objects of a scheme made for them by planners and not as effective beings who participate in the making of their history. Since participation in general is often equated with participation in the structure of the economy, writings in this genre serve to keep the concept at the level of a cliché, unless used as a tool for systematic investigation. Literature on economic development and modernization has not shown a deeper appreciation of the concept of participation either.

The emergence of new nation-states following the liquidation of colonial rule after the second world war, has unleashed social forces which militate against the centuries old traditions of subjugation and strive to build a social order based on freedom, equality, justice and non-exploitation. This has meant a substantial change in the nature of relationships between the society and the state. People who were subjects till recently in the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa acquired the status of citizens and emerged as new force asserting their power to influence their own destiny. This seems to be the dominant ideal of nation-building in the third world countries today. However, while people remain an important part of the ideal of nation-building, the transformation of this ideal into substantive strategies of development has not always been possible. In fact, the dominant bias in the classical models of economic development is decided by anti-people constructs. This point is effectively made by Barrington Moore (Moore, 1967).

Classical modes of development have been presented by Moore in terms of three 'routes' to modernity. There are the capitalist, the fascist and the revolutionary paths through which a society moves from a pre-industrial state to a modern industrial economy. A common attribute of all three is a form of squeeze applied on the peasantry and industrial workers at the earlier stages of development. The savings thus made possible go into the laying of the foundations of a modern capital intensive economy. The squeeze thus becomes a necessary precondition for development. The instrumental modality of the squeeze may be the impersonal market, or Stalinist collectivization of a fascist regime intent on taking rapid strides towards becoming a modern industrial power. But the end product is always the same because it is the most marginal that pay for the cost of development.

Thus depending upon the ideological perspective of the theoretician, people or humanity or a class may be the ultimate goal of development, but in its planning and execution people could not be the means. Participation in the structure of development could thus be that of an input contribution of labour to a reconceived development project. In this analysis, Moore does not ratify the three routes of modernity. Instead, the impressive range of evidence presented by him suggests that the classical routes may not hold forth in view of contemporary sensibilities that clearly dictate against the use of people as objects.

In the literature on political development the counterparts of the economists are no less skeptical of the notion of participation. The dominant emphasis, at least in the fifties and early sixties, has been on the building of a 'modern', 'democratic' structure first, and political participation in it only after people have internalized the values inherent in it. Participation is to be discouraged and even curtailed by law, until institutions, and rules necessary for the same have emerged and stabilized. At least Samuel Huntington was an ardent advocate of this position in the sixties (Huntington, 1968).

It is thus obvious that the literature of the early decades of development gave precedence to institutions over people. Institutions in any country at any given time also represent certain interests. Curbs on participation in the interests of institution building itself may result in safeguarding the interest of certain social groups. But in most countries that gained independence after the Second World War, there has been a decline in the legitimacy of the institutions themselves. From this point of view, development in the literature on participation is instructive because of the shift in its emphasis on political dynamics that characterize the real world of development.

Studies of Verba, Nie and Kim in 1971 and Verba and Nie in 1972 first presented participation in a cross national context. The landmark studies based on survey data from several countries, identified a set of activities, namely voting, contacting of public officials, involvement with community activities and participation in campaigning as common minimum indicators of participation. This is an improvement upon the earlier practice which left the concept vague and imprecise or defined participation merely as an extension of suffrage. Another important aspect of their findings was the attempt to identify the paths to participation. Their analysis of the data from India, the United States, Nigeria, the Netherlands, Austria and Japan indicated that high socio-economic status was the most important determinant of participation. Verba and Nie further validated this finding on the basis of a secondary analysis of the data generated by the Civic Culture study conducted by Almond and Verba in 1963.

The inclusion of activities other than voting and non-electoral activities such as citizen initiated contacts and participation in community activities made the concept more meaningful. It must, however, be noted that the concept used by Verba and Nie served only a limited purpose. This was so mainly because it did not incorporate certain forms of behavior in which the desire to participate may manifest itself when the normal channels or modes of participation are not available.

A minimal definition of participation makes sense in stable western democracies where the concept of equality is accepted, legitimized and, most important of all, where a comprehensive network of institutions corresponding to all kinds of needs of the cross-section of the citizenry is in existence. This, of course, is not the case in most countries of the non-western world. Changing socio-political and economic conditions in these countries have created an urge among the masses for participation in shaping the



world they live in. But the institutional structure that has emerged seems incapable to channelize these urges. Thus there is need to create an institutional structure capable of satisfying such an urge, otherwise people will tend to seek the solutions of their problems outside the institutional structure. The political system may try to defend the power and authority of the institutions by turning violently against those settling scores in the streets, or it may widen its base to co-opt them. Of course, the choice will be determined by the nature of interaction between the society and polity.

Against this background we can work toward a complete and vigorous definition of the concept of people's participation in development. Since participation takes place in the sphere of public decision making we need to discuss the concept within the context of a relevant political system. For such a political system to exist, there must be a set of institutions and normative modes with adequate authority to make legitimate decisions that affect the allocation of values. A participatory act aims at the preservation of, or change in the existing allocation of values. Allocation of values is an abstract construct. But we can observe it in its more practical manifestations. It is linked with action in everyday life through a hierarchy of levels, from the legal and normative structure, and institutions to executive decisions. The individual affirms the existing allocation of values by confirming to executive acts that are most proximate to him. He challenges the legitimacy of the existing allocations of values by questioning the legitimacy of executive acts and by voicing his protest within as well as outside the institutional structure.

Acknowledgably all participatory acts are necessarily political but all political acts are not participatory. Thus a political discussion without any action component may still be a political act but not a participatory act. Furthermore, not all participatory acts are necessarily egoistic. While self interest as commonly understood, is a powerful motive force for human action, it may not be the only one. For instance, mobilization of the potential beneficiaries of a legislation by an individual who may not stand to gain from it, falls within the class of a participatory act. In order to understand the ramifications of this problem further, we need to consider the duality between man and society that goes back in the history of philosophy at least to the debate between the idealist and the liberal schools.

Defending the moral absoluteness of the individual, liberal thinkers had sought to refute the legitimacy of the medieval natural law. Natural law severely delimited the role and functions of the individual. Viewed from below, it, easily became an instrument of the dominant group in society for the maintenance of the prevailing authority structure. Later, over-emphasis on the notion of the abstract individual led to the loss of a sense of community giving rise to conservatism and idealist reactions. Marxism was a valiant attempt to combine these two strands-of individual and societal interest in the concept of class. Class is at once the concrete manifestation of the interests of a group as well as a prototype of society.

In the real world of politics, developments have not fulfilled the promise that the logical structure of Marxism once offered. Instead, in the on going Marxist system, the pre-existing authoritarian traditions have found its way into the prevailing authority structure. On the other hand, societies that have seen ideological and philosophical confrontations between the proponents of man versus society have moved in the direction of a fusion, characterized as political pluralism. True, alienation, i.e., loss of community and repression due to concentration of power, continues in specific areas. But the thrust of development has been towards a wide dispersal of power and participation in making meaningful decision in major social institutions.

It is the existence of this phenomenon that we intend to identify and measure under the concept of people's participation in development. 'People' for us combines the specificity of individual as well as group interest, at the same time, it also suggests the institutional context that society provides to its members. Both are necessary for participation to exist. Development refers to the totality of activities that are designed to achieve a breakthrough in the system or production and life styles.

People participate in development either by taking advantage of the institutional means that society makes available to them or by forming groups to alter or create a new institutional order itself. When the institutional measure, for some reason or other, is not available to them, they participate by creating alternative channels of communication with the power centre through radical action. The base line where both institutional and extra-institutional participation are absent may be characterized as apathy. The nature and extent of people's participation in development will be largely determined by the nature of the institutional structure, the prevailing value system, and the relationships between the elite group and the citizenry.

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