

DEVELOPMENT AS LIBERATION: A Tribute to Dr K. Rajaratnam

Dr. Joshua Kalapati
Associate Professor, Philosophy
Madras Christian College

In his book, *Development as Freedom* (1999), Professor Amartya Sen writes, "Development consists of the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency". Professor Amartya Sen goes on to explore this relationship between Development and Freedom. Today, if one were to collect all the ideas of Dr Rajaratnam on Development, this title, *Development as Liberation* perhaps could aptly capture the diverse range of his ideas.

Throughout his life, Doctor grappled with and confront many unfreedoms, and explored ways of liberating the individuals and the communities from these unfreedoms. In this brief tribute, I would like to share three predominant dimensions of Liberation which Doctor pursued and articulated throughout his life—the economic, the social and the theological. All these three dimensions, which are intimately connected to each other, form the matrix of his Philosophy of development.

1. **The Economic dimension of Liberation:** While referring to the debt crisis in the United States, a columnist in *The Hindu* recently quoted the Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz to say that in the past 10 years, the income of the top one percent has risen by 18 percent, while that of the blue-collared male workers fell by 12 percent. A staggering piece of statistics, to which our own Mukesh Ambani's mansion in the air surrounded by a million slumdogs, adds it weight. It is this kind of gross economic disparities that troubled Doctor throughout his life. How to bridge the huge gap between the rich and the poor was a question that was central to his intellectual quest.

I had the privilege of participating in one of the big conferences on *Ethics and Development* organized jointly by CRENIEO in January 1997. The major theme of the conference was *globalization, self-determination and Justice in Development*. What impressed me most was multi-disciplinary approach to the issues of Development. We had economist, philosophers, theologians, church leaders and the NGO's discussing the issue of development. It was during that conference, for the first time I had the shock of what it takes to rub shoulders with the affluent Americans, who were in plenty in the conference. When asked to give their contact details, every overseas participant was giving his/her email. I was wondering what this 'email' was about. It also during that year that I myself had to get one, as a student of theology in Edinburgh university.

As a Developmental Economist, doctor pursued a holistic, integrated approach towards improving the living conditions of the peoples such as providing employment opportunities, creating self-help groups etc., He was a networker par excellence. He believed in establishing networks and alliances between the NGOs, between elite and the illiterate, and among thinkers of all religious affiliations.

2. **The Social dimension of Liberation:** Doctor clearly perceived that the economic dimension of liberation is inextricably linked to the social, communitarian dimension. Gross economic disparities are largely the direct outcome of the highly segregated Indian society. Unless the oppressive mindset of the elites is changed, there could never be true transformation of the people.

In one of my meetings with him, he showed me a letter addressed to him by a village head, who among others things, asked him, If dalits in our village are liberated and given

equal rights and privileges, who would remove our dead animals and people? Doctor was one of the pioneers in independent India to see the link between development and social justice. He was not naïve to believe that we could establish an utopia, a perfectly just, egalitarian society. Like Prof. Amartya Sen argued in a recent book titled, *A Theory of Justice*, Dr Rajaratnam believed that instead of attempting to establish perfectly just societies, but we should strive to create societies which are less unjust. This pragmatic vision was the bedrock of all his developmental initiatives.

In this endeavour of creating less unjust communities, the process of dialogue and discussion is imperative. Therefore he always facilitated dialoguing at all levels, in both religious and secular forums. In a Freirean zeal, he sought to create a critical consciousness in the oppressed communities.

3. The Theological dimension of Liberation: As the Chairperson of the *NCCI Commission on Dalits and Adivasis*, Doctor endeavoured to initiate several action-oriented programs for the upliftment of the subaltern sections of the society. In one of the workshops, he asked the audience as to what was their favourite book in the Bible. When they gave replies such as the Book of Psalms or Isaiah, and gave their reasons for their choices, Doctor said, for him the favourite book in the Bible was the Acts of the Apostles. He then went to narrate how the Church today needed action, faith based action. *Faith seeking Social Action* could well summarise Doctor's bold theological vision.

A unique privilege of Doctor had been his knowledge and expertise in both secular and Christian worlds. He constantly sought to interpret one in the light of the other. Hardly any experiment in the agricultural fields, or ecological zone had gone without him offering their theological underpinnings. *Christ the Liberator* was sought to be presented to the Dalits and Adivasis, just as Gutierrez and Jon Sobrino did in the Latin American context for the poor, oppressed and the victimised.

Every person is created in the image of God, and each one has the right to realize the full potential latent in him or her, and a right to his/her share of prosperity and well-being. It is this theology of human development that guided all his actions. In countless talks, he provided the spiritual basis for holistic development. Echoing the words of Dostoevsky, "Bread for me is a material thing; but bread for my neighbour is a spiritual thing", Doctor believed that it was a spiritual obligation to empower the communities to realize their full potential.

Conclusion: Development initiatives must come from below and from the grassroots was the firm conviction of Doctor. Today, the debates on Globalization are highly polarised. World is Flat, argued, Thomas Friedman in one of his celebrated books, as an apology for globalization. Far from creating a level playing field, it created a new caste of the elites, countered noted environmental activist Vandana Shiva. Dr Rajaratnam was always opposed to creating or amassing wealth for the few, and at the cost of the livelihood of the millions. His zealous advocacy of the Gandhian model of development always sought to counter the dehumanizing influences of the process of globalization.

The best tribute that we could pay to his memory is to strive to complete his unfinished agenda. Let me close with these words of prophet Micah (6:8): What does the Lord require of you? But to do justly, To love mercy and To walk humbly with your God?