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## **Decolonizing Local Governance: Impact Assessment of Alternative Development Models Inspired by Gandhi, Ambedkar, and African Socialism**

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### **KEYWORDS**

*Decolonial economic thought; Postcolonial development theory; Gandhi and Ambedkar; Moral economy; African socialism; Epistemic justice*

### **ABSTRACT**

In this paper, the decolonial economic ideologies of Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar are evaluated as alternative theories of postcolonial development, and their intellectual legacies are placed in comparative African and Indian contexts. Although it seems that the vision of swadeshi evolved by Gandhi, which was based on decentralized, village production and the moralistic restraint of accumulation, and that of constitutional socialism as developed by Ambedkar, which is based on state-controlled industrialization and economic democracy, are incompatible, both intellectuals were fundamentally opposed to Western models of the development of capitalism and the structural dependency that they reproduced. By making comparative analysis of Ujamaa philosophy of Julius Nyerere and Pan-African socialism of Kwame Nkrumah, this paper exposes the intellectual project of decolonization of development that was shared by the postcolonial world, with the reclaiming of the policy space, centred non-western epistemologies, and economic systems that would build human dignity and substantive freedom rather than capital accumulation. The paper shows that the modern criticism of post development theory of development as a system of Western knowledge justifies the intuition of these mid-twentieth-century decolonial intellectuals which emphasizes the contradictions between the morally oriented economy and structural change, between the village and the state, which continue to plague development policy in the Global South. Its academic value is in the fact that it focuses on non-Western economic thinking as intellectual assets and not as historical oddities, and contributes to epistemological decolonization that is needed to envision development outside the power of the Northern hegemony

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

A new world order post colonially faces a cyclical crisis in the development theory. In the last third quarter of a century the paradigm of neoliberal modernization, which is based on western industrial capitalism and which is delivered by the institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, has ensured prosperity to the Global South even though it has always resulted in the dependency, debt, and dispossession (Escobar, 1995). Structural intervention programs, which lay claim to trigger growth, have rather served as processes of neocolonial extraction scheme, privatizing the assets of the state, and amassing wealth in the colonial metropolises (Nkrumah, 1965). The world-system separates the nations into

industrialized centres and dependent peripheries, with the development paths that the Global South can take are inhibited structurally by unequal relationships of exchange which the colonialism itself entails (Prebisch, 1950).

But the same universalism that is inherent in the discourse of Western development obscures important intellectual resources which can be found in postcolonial societies. The belief that European historical experience can serve as a universal template of other countries, what Dipesh Chakrabarty, a theorist of postcolonialism, calls historicism, codifies a certain intellectual provincialism, disguised as objectivity (Chakrabarty, 2000). This epistemological hegemony has sidelined the advanced economic philosophies that have emerged in the minds of colonized and postcolonial thinkers and literally it has been an out-right rejection of wholesale adoption of Western philosophies. As two locations of the intensive anticolonial struggle and theorization, India and Africa produced a unique vision of the economic independence and development that should be reconsidered.

Here, Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar can be seen as giant, yet opposite figures in the economic ideology of decolonization. Such a radical criticism of industrial capitalism rephrased in *Hind swaraj* (1909) included freshly the concept of *Swadeshi* or self-reliance as put forward by Gandhi; *Swadeshi* emphasized decentralization of production and was based on village industries. On the other hand, the vision of the statesman and principal author of *States and Minorities* (1947), Ambedkar, advocated a state-directed industrialization, state-run agriculture, and what he called State Socialism and Economic Democracy on the argument that the political independence would be a mere fiction without structural economic transformation that would be favourable to the subordinated classes (Ambedkar, 1947).

Meanwhile, those leaders of Africans formulated parallel decolonizing development structures. The Ujamaa philosophy of Julius Nyerere focused on sharing communal self-reliance and education (Nyerere, 1968), and Kwame Nkrumah in his Ujamaa, the Last Stage of Imperialism, explained and established how political independence would conceal the economic subordination (Nkrumah, 1965). The paper questions the manner in which the non-Western thinker realm used to conceive economic sovereignty beyond the colonial draining and the neoliberal capitalism through the study of these two different intellectual genealogies across Africa and India. The comparative analysis shows not only past similarities, but relative philosophies of what development could and should become in societies which grew out of the colonialism -the facts which are even more important as post development theory demands alternatives to development based on local knowledge and on pluriverse forms (Escobar, 1995).

### **Theoretical Framework: Decolonising Development and Postcolonial Political Economy**

The postcolonial world got an ensemble of intellectual machinery that was based on the Western modernization theory. Nevertheless, the most powerful postwar development paradigm, perhaps, Stages of Economic Growth by Walt Rostow (1960), assumed a linear, universal path that all societies had to go through: traditional society through preconditions of take-off, take-off, drive to maturity and finally the age of mass consumption (high) (Rostow, 1960). This model assumed that the non-Western communities were simply at earlier stages in an already decided course of development already taken by the Western countries- a highly ethnocentric theory that wiped out historical particularity and turned the postcolonial countries into a passive depositories of the introduced models and not active agents of their own development.

Post development theorists have objected to this universalist rationale as a basis. The well-known critique of Arturo Escobar is the critical approach that views development as not a course of objectively neutral technicality but a discursive resisted of power that reproduces western epistemological and material hegemony in the name of progress (Escobar, 1995). On the same note, capabilities approach by Amartya Sen redefines development by not focusing on income metrics but human freedoms and substantive capabilities are the ultimate account on the development success (Sen, 1999). However, even the framework offered by Sen is still very significant but it cannot be referred to as sufficient to study the decolonization without the perspective of political economy postcolonial.

The idea of transformative social policy introduced by Thandika Mkandawire presents an important theoretical pivotal point. As social policy is no longer peripheral to development, and is not limited to mere social protection processes (such as the process of structural adjustment programs), Mkandawire bases development on the political-economic imperative of inclusive, autonomous, and democratic change (Mkandawire, 2010). His writing makes the point that in order to have meaningful development, it is necessary to reclaim policy space of the outside institutions, to build state capacity, and to have growth benefits equally distributed, which is directly opposed to the externally-imposed development models of the postcolonial era. This model paves intellectual grounds to place non-Western economic thinking at the heart such as the focus of decentralization of self-reliance by Gandhi and the focus of industrialization with social justice proposed by Ambedkar as valid decolonial options as opposed to romantic eventualities of modernity.

### **Gandhi's Vision of Self-Reliance: Swadeshi, Decentralization, and Moral Economy**

The *Hind swaraj* (1909) by Mahatma Gandhi is one of the most accurate postcolonial criticisms of the Western industrial civilization and a roadmap towards the economic independence of decolonial. Composed in a form of dialogue as he journeyed back to South Africa but after being in London, the piece is a statement of economic philosophy that was based on the idea of moral autonomy and village self-sufficiency, not capital building or industrial advancement. The essential element to this philosophical argument is that real swaraj, the transfer of political sovereignty and maintenance of colonial

economic systems can never bring economic independence; instead decentralization, the revival of local industries and the renunciation of machine-driven production systems are required (Gandhi, 1909).

One of the elements that Gandhi criticizes without mercy is modern industrial civilization. He believes that instead of emancipating labor, machinery, on the other hand, has been used to systematize poverty in India: "It is machinery that has made India poor. How far Manchester has been harmful to us is hard to gauge. Thanks to Manchester, Indian handicraft has virtually vanished" (Gandhi, 1909, p. 94). This criticism goes beyond nationalist bitterness; it is a more basic civilizational one. Gandhi argues that the Western civilization is dividing morality and economics leaving behind a system in which concentration and accumulation of wealth, as an element of competition replaces the moral principles of restraint and community welfare as principles of organization (Gandhi, 1909). Authentic civilization, in its turn, articulates itself as the self-imposed restrictions of consumption, sharing of economic authority, and correspondence between the personal behaviour and the support of the community.

The major concept of the alternative vision of Gandhi is *Swadeshi*- the idea of self-sufficiency through decentralization of local production. Instead of relying on factory-made goods imported into a country, *Swadeshi* ideas of a village as a self-sufficient economic unit involve agriculture, handicrafts (especially hand-spun khadi), and mini industries, which can satisfactorily meet lower needs without any exploitation. Gandhi stresses that ancient village republics of India had been an example of such a model: Our ancestors... placed a boundary to our luxuries... Each pursued his own business or trade and paid a regulation wage... They were thus contented with small villages" (Gandhi, 1909, p. 83). Such an illusion of pre-industrial village autonomy is not nostalgic primitivism but a statement that would even allow India to have institutional mechanisms of equitable, decentralized economic organization prior to colonial disruption.

It is also important to note that Gandhi applied the theory of *Trusteeship*- the moral doctrine that acquired wealth must be treated by the rich as being in guardianship to serve the society and not as property to be utilized as a means of owning gain (Gandhi, 1909). *Trusteeship*, together with *Swadeshi*, breaks the myth of individual property rights and collective good. It reinvents the connection between economics and morality: the decentralization of the economy, through the creation of village economies, will inherently hold in check the concentration of wealth and individual cupidity, and moral restraint will be made the basis of economic self-reliance (Kumarappa, 1945). Therefore, according to Gandhi economic autonomy (*Swaraj*) cannot be discussed independently of moral autonomy and democratic village level involvement.

#### **Ambedkar's Alternative Modernisation: State, Industry, and Social Justice**

The economic philosophy developed by B.R. Ambedkar was in stark contrast to the village-focused and anti-industrialism representation of economic vision developed by Gandhi. Where Gandhi idealized village republics of pre-colonial India and urged towards the decentralized production of handicraft, Ambedkar criticized the village economy as necessarily based on caste, one that systematizes occupational stagnation, propagates untouchability and confines the poor in poverty. His criticism of caste, best expressed in the book *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), predetermines the economic aspect of caste hierarchy: caste is not division of labor brought by nature but division of labourers, a closed system of inheritance that eventually imposes jobs upon people instead of occupations (Ambedkar, 1936). This professional tightness - imparted by religious doctrine, social stigma, and landlord-tenant abuse - forms a kind of structural unemployment and denies potential to sustainable development - the economic mobility. According to Ambedkar, someone who is hindered by caste system can never be useful as he maintained that caste system is the system that strangles, paralyses and cripples the people of being useful (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 45).

The other vision put forward by Ambedkar gave a lead to the state-based industrialization as the sole means of achieving economic development alongside emancipation. His *Writings and Speeches* (Ambedkar, 1956-1994) prompted him to argue that the most sound solution to the agricultural problem of India was industrialization. The industrial development would fulfil several roles at the same time: absorb excess agricultural labor, bring about capital formation, lessen the pressures of land fragmentation and provide people of the Scheduled Castes with job opportunities in areas they are not allowed to occupy. More importantly, as a mechanism towards this transition, Ambedkar opposed *laissez-faire* capitalism. Rather, he argued in support of what he described as "State Socialism" a model which he best defined in *States and Minorities* (1947), a document which he presented to the Sub-Committee of the Constituent Assembly on Fundamental Rights.

In the work, *States and Minorities*, Ambedkar was putting forward a constitutional model of economic democracy. His proposals included nationalization of all basic industries (mining, electricity, transport), collective resource of land where the state controlled farmland, system-wise land redistribution to wipe out landlord, tenant and the landless workers at the same time (Ambedkar, 1947). Instead of individual property ownership in land, he imagined village communities on collective farms, growing their harvests according to the instructions that were given by the state and the tenants had to divide their progressions among one another according to the established formulas. Another important aspect was that he insisted that political democracy cannot be empty without economic democracy. Based on the findings of economic justice scholars, Ambedkar used to consistently argue that political democracy could only be sustained by economic and social equality (Kumar, 2025, p. 102).

This state-socialism went beyond just economic theory to the constitutionalism and human dignity. Serving as the Executive Council member of the Viceroy Labour (1942-1946), Ambedkar transformed the vision of philosophy into policy: he became the first to propose the Minimum Wages Act, maternity welfare, health insurance schemes, and provision of social security to workers he was to bring about again the lost face of the manual labour and prevent the shaping of workers by the capitalist system (Ambedkar, 1945). His distributional justice issue, formulated in his *The Problem of the Rupee* (1923) also renewed this same distributional injustice concern: he proposed limited currency devaluation to ensure that inflation did not reduce the real wages of the earning classes and expressly opposed economic policies that would gratify one group of people at the expense of another (Ambedkar, 1923, p. 156). To Ambedkar development, devoid of social justice was nothing more than the re-creation of caste in new capitalist forms. It is possible to state it only through the state-controlled modernization along with radical land reform and constitutionalized economic rights which could break the chain of hereditary exploitation and produce real human freedom.

### **Indian Governance and Policy Debates: Gandhian and Ambedkarite Legacies**

The vision of development Jawaharlal Nehru had come to be known as the Nehruvian Socialism became a synthesis of the Gandhian and the Ambedkarite economic philosophies, which were still incomplete and unresolved with each other. Planning During the period 1950-1991, the Planning Commission of India directed scientific industrialization on the basis of Five-Year Plans modelled explicitly on the basis of Soviet planning, but placed in a context of a mixed economy, which was strictly defined by the Industrial Policy Resolutions of 1948 and 1956. Instead of solving the conflicts of decentralization and planning, of cottage industries and heavy industry, of collective property and the establishment of new enterprises, Nehruvian policy in action had to reconcile itself to the subordination of Gandhian village economy to the state-managed industrial capitalism at the same time abandoning the demands of the more radical ambedkarite to agrarian expropriation and economic democracy (Robinson, 2014).

The contradictions were possible materialistically. Nehru promoted megalithic steel mills in Bhilai, Durgapur, and Rourkela as the cathedrals of the Indian people, but still, anxiety about village industries, as an incidental welfare. In 1955, a partial form of socialist pattern of the society was formally adopted in the Avadi Resolution; nevertheless, this state socialism was still partial: the Planning Commission was actually determined over major sectors of the industrialization and infrastructure, but the landholding, agricultural trade and caste-based occupational framework were still left intact—these were the very structural elements that both Gandhi and Ambedkar, although differing in many ways, had singled out to change (Government of India, 1955). The growth of the public sector enterprises was enormous, and at the same time the accumulation of private capital in the complementary industries took place, forming a so-called mixed economy which was not exactly socialist and was not very redistributive (Nayyar, 2006).

Historical analysis shows that Nayyar presents an irony, as the very model of planning that the orthodox critics accused of economic failure in 1980 resulted in more than respectable growth over the 1950-1980 period (3.5 percent per annum) and equipped the institutional backgrounds (higher education system, capital goods portico, technological capacity) to the dazzling speed in 1980 (5.6 percent per annum). It was not in the year 1991 with the economic liberalization that the contemporary ideology puts forward, but circa 1980 that this turning point of growth occurred, and this was as a result of accumulated investments by the state and capacity building during the planning era (Nayyar, 2006). This fact confounds backward retrospective statements that planning was a priori fallacious. Instead, it is the failure of the Nehruvian model not to incorporate the state intervention as such, but rather never to enact to the full the Ambedkarite program of economic democracy—land reform, collective agriculture, abolition of property based on classes, and the simultaneous relegation of the Gandhian vision of genuine decentralization and local self-governance.

### **African Governance Debates: Self-Reliance, Modernization, and Postcolonial Choice**

The postcolonial economic argument in Africa found itself mirroring and moving away at the same time with the intellectual traditions of India. The Ujamaa philosophy of Julius Nyerere, detailed in the Arusha Declaration of 1967, presented instead a conception of development based on collective self-reliance and mobilisation of the peasants (that had replicas the village-based economics of Gandhi), but with vital differences. Nyerere believed that independent is to be self-reliant. The fact that a nation is reliant on gifts and loans of the other to develop its independence makes independence not real (Nyerere, 1967, p. 12). This condemnation of dependency on the outside rejected what Nyerere described as the fake "weapon of money" as the driver of development but instead he contended that people rather than money was the driver of the development of a nation. Money... is an outcome and not a cause of development" (Nyerere, 1967, p. 18). It meant having to mobilise the labour of peasants in agriculture, but not foreign inflows of capital and foreign investment, but the converging idea of *swadeshi* came in terms of African socialism and collective property and state production.

But Nyerere took a radically different path with Gandhi on the role of industrialization. Although he recognized that industries would come and money would come but base on people and their efforts, particularly in agriculture, the Arusha Declaration clearly spelled out that the state should exercise effective expropriation of key means of production and nationalizing natural endowments (Nyerere, 1967, p. 24). This was more radical in accordance with the vision offered by Ambedkar of state socialism than decentralized in the form of trusteeship, which was offered by Gandhi. Another way was led by the Pan-African Socialism of Nkrumah: industrialization as the heart of the continental liberation. In Neo-

Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism (1965), Nkrumah held the view that political independence would remain empty without disconnection of economic links by fast state-owned industrialization and pan-African integration. Where Nyerere favoured agriculture self-sufficiency via collective working, Nkrumah favoured the Volta River Project and the heavy industries as the material basis of true independence (Nkrumah, 1965).

The political economy of postcolonial choice can be seen in these African socialist experiments. Both Nyerere and Nkrumah opposed wholesale adoption of Western capitalist programmes, wholesale imitation of Soviet mass approaches and based their vision on African values- community, pride, general good. However, they differed over the question of which side of development to make the priority, i.e. peasant agriculture or industrial transformation; whether self-reliance was village independence or state-controlled accumulation. The mental echo of Gandhi and Ambedkar is impressed: all the four intellectuals believed that political self-breathing was needed by economic self-reliance and social justice, that foreign dependence was the root of neocolonialism, and that the development had to mobilize native resources and rediscover native knowledge. However, even as Gandhi and Ambedkar discussed the correct form of development within a single country, Nyerere and Nkrumah found it difficult to institute such visions of development in extreme resource scarcity conditions in the backdrop of the Cold War and that is the tragedy of disillusionment between the theory of decolonialise and the practice of postcolonialism.

### **Comparative Analysis: Two Decolonial Pathways of Development**

The decolonial economic visions that were analysed in India and Africa showcase an underlying conflict between aiming at the moral change and structural reconstruction. The views of Moral economy as proposed by E.P. Thompson, which do not relate to values as such, but to the social relations, practices, and contextual perception of economic action, are analytically useful in this context (Thompson, 1971). Thompson contrasted feudal moral economy, in which the importance of an exchange was subordinated to social subsistence requirements, with capitalist political economy, in which social requirement is subordinated to the demands of personal gain in an impersonal market. Gandhi acted along this moral-economy web: his argument that economic action must be morally restrained, moral trusteeship, economic autonomy of the village put the economy in the realms of moral principle, not profit-maximization. Swadeshi was essentially morality: a call that economic actors turn to regarding the common good instead of personal gain (Gandhi, 1909).

Ambedkar in turn realized what Karl Polanyi developed into theory: the disembodied logic into capitalism systematic and inevitable, which could not be defeated by moral persuasion alone (Polanyi, 1944). When the forces of the market are released, they make society subservient to economic needs. According to Polanyi, modern capitalism overturns the usual natural condition of human being: society is absorbed in the economy rather than the economy being absorbed in the society (Polanyi, 1944, p. 60). The structural issue that moral economy was unable to address was solved by Ambedkar through his solution, which included state control of the means of production, constitutional guarantees of the economic democracy, collective ownership. State Socialism was capable of fulfilling the role of embeddedness as a constitutionalized restriction of capital accumulation through the redistributive systems.

This tension was manifested in the African socialist experiments. Ujamaa by Nyerere contained moral vision (community, self-reliance, dignity), structural proposals (state farms, collective ownership), but could not work when moral discipline proved to be no match to structural resource scarcity. Nkrumah placed regional structural prerequisites of a fast-tracked industrialization on the first measure but placed inadequate emphasis to distributional equity. Modern decolonial thought, as explained by writers such as Dussel and Escobar, injects in much-needed epistemological sense: ways of development, which continue to be authored by Northern institutions, reproduce coloniality despite local morality or organization (Dussel, 2011). In order to achieve true decolonization, it is necessary to not only discard Western development universalism in a moral sense, but also to be delinked in relation to Northern dominated institutions. This is the challenge of the Global South nowadays: going beyond North-South binaries, but preserving structural criticism of the continuing inequalities founded on colonialism (Gillespie & Mitlin, 2023, p. 8).

### **Contemporary Relevance for the Global South**

The decolonial economic visions discussed in this paper are important lessons to modern Global South development policy, provided with significant caveats against romantic revivalist tendencies. The efforts of Amartya Sen to use development as freedom in assessing growth not only based on the increase in the GDP but in increasing substantive human freedom reflected as political participation, social access, and the safety of security give an alternative rigorous perspective to the postcolonial period of narrow economic measurement (Sen, 1999). This is the capacity approach that would coincide with the implicit argument made by Gandhi, Ambedkar, Nyerere, and Nkrumah; that development needs to spread ultimately rather than accumulate capital or income, and that development should be more about expanding human agency as well as human dignity.

But there arise three warning signals. To begin with, academics stand a chance of idealizing pre-capitalist or non-western economic models especially in attacking capitalistic development. Romanticism, the myth of more traditional economies being genuine, has broken through the prism of capitalist ideology, and, on the one hand, it hides all the hierarchies and deprivations inherent in village economies, which, as is modernized, become themselves mystified by romanticism (Watts



and Houtman, 2024). Gandhi swadeshi and Nyerere ujamaa are well-meaning in terms of moral wisdom, but without either betraying or ignoring the patriarchal, caste-based, and authoritarian systems under which they lived.

Second, the key to inclusive development should be considering the relations of power in the production of knowledge, rather than simply including the indigenous knowledge as an additional source of data. The latest literature on knowledge co-production shows that where the power imbalance is maintained, solutions to bridge between the indigenous and Western paradigms will fail to achieve their aims; an actual solution lies in sharing the epistemic authority, not collecting the local knowledge and using it in foreign interests (Weaver et al., 2023). The same thing can be said about a restoration of decolonial thinkers: they are not the museum artifacts but the active material which needs to be shaped within the specific circumstances.

Third, the modern practice should be selective and not wholesale revivalism. Policymakers are not able and are not supposed to revive village economies or re-create ujamaa villages. Rather, the Global South has the challenge of scooping particular wisdom: the focus of Gandhi on the incorporation of an economic dimension within the values of the community; the obsession of Ambedkar with the constitutional provisions of an economic democracy; Nyerere with the realization that self-reliance must be a matter of state capacity; Nkrumah with the fact that industrialization can be liberating provided it is directed appropriately. The present systems and policies of inclusive development demand the seizure of policy space by Northern institutions, which emphasize human capabilities and freedoms as measures of progress, and the systematic treatment of the limiting effects of colonialism, patriarchy, caste and class on substantive choice (Rigon Cast, 2023).

### Conclusion

Even though the philosophical differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar were profound, they led to one major finding: postcolonial development could not be just a nationalist imitation of Western capitalism. Swadeshi and village self-reliance brought about a moral economy led by Gandhi that disapproved of the concept of industrialization as one that was destructive to the dignity of the human being and cohesion in society. The constitutional socialism developed by Ambedkar, on the other hand, demanded structural change of property relations and state-managed industrialization as the necessary conditions on economic democracy. However they both denied the artificial distinction between capitalist dependency and socialist authoritarianism; they both insisted on the fact that development be used to benefit human freedom and justice and not abstract accumulation.

This tension was the same to be confronted by the African socialist experiments of Nyerere and Nkrumah, in which development and economic self-sufficiency on the one hand, and social justice and equality on the other were found to be mutually exclusive. Modern post development theory justifies the basic objection these intellectuals made, which is that the discourse of Western development is not neutral and objective, but is a distinct, historically-specific project of knowledge creation and power.

The intellectual value of studying these decolonial economic visions does not lie in finding recipes to be implemented today, but rather in realising that non-Western intellectuals developed advanced economic philosophies to solve the dilemmas that still persist: how growth is possible and how to reconcile this with the human condition, how states should act and how they can remain democratic, how one can know locally and how to adopt modern technologies, how material progress can be made, how to be a moral man. When decolonizing the development theory, it is necessary to focus on these intellectual traditions as valid sources of reconsidering the economic future, but not as historical artifacts. The crisis of Global South today is the same as that which has been on the independence; demanding an authentic policy autonomy within the institution dominated by the North, and establishing developmental trajectories which should be satisfactory to human freedom, not merely to the accumulation of capital..

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