



## **Development from Within: Diversity, Freedom, and Agency Driven Path for Sri Lanka**

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As spelled out in the introduction and the opening article of this volume, both supporters and direct opponents of development share a similar notion. They conceive it at national scale, within an international context, with little or no room for play. Yet as evident in the above articles, development at people's level is diverse. Constructed in relation to particular contexts and constraints, people have individual life goals and objectives, and each life journey is different. It is important to ask: How can politicians, policy makers, development specialists, and planners acknowledge, accommodate, and/or support diverse life journeys without homogenizing and/or suppressing this field of difference?

Homogenization of communities, although never fully achievable, is imposed from outside (i.e., the state, the market, the professionals, and large-scale processes such as colonialism and globalization). Located within the European capitalist thought, the hegemonic development paradigm privileges the economy, one that is largely understood through mathematics. (Buarque 1993) According to this worldview, wealth and national economic growth is a prerequisite to a "good life" for citizens.

In practice, politicians, policy makers, development practitioners, and planners have a way of focusing on economic growth, pet projects, and personal interests. In 2014 the planner of Ahmedabad refused to implement a court order to grant a relocation site for the inhabitants of Maninagar who were evicted due to a highway project. When the bearer of the order asked the planner to be kind, he replied that he is a rational person who leaves emotions at home. (Gagdekar 2015) Per Scott Bollens' (2005) observations in Jerusalem, planners and policy makers easily dismiss everyday issues as "low-politics." They give priority to "high-politics"—that of authorities

about power and economics. This resonates with Jane Jacob's (1972) evaluation of the views of the planner she met at the North End of Boston: The planner's instincts said that the North End is a vibrant community, but his training informed him that it is a slum in need of renewal.

People are also socialized into this way of thinking that undermines the quality of their own lives and environments. In Sri Lanka, the discussions of the national budget in 2016 focused on "big" items (or "high politics") such as car permits, but not much on issues that affect people's daily lives except for a few lingering topics such as consumer prices. Ordinary people's views and desires are also influenced by these political debates, especially when on television, and the models they follow. They also have opinions about "big" debates such as highway construction and American bombings, much more than on issues that affect their livelihoods. The growth discourse is so hegemonic that most Sri Lankan men do not recognize that the bus did not stop for them to get off.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to homogenization, differences are produced from within communities. To be human is to be different. (Carrithers 1992; Spivak 1999) Values in Asia are diverse, and are represented in, among others, giving, giving up, tolerance, kindness, non-violence, incrementality, self-help, *jugaad*, *salim*, and *machizukuri*. Prosperity too has a broader meaning beyond money and wealth. People strive to live the lives they aspire but the hegemonic development discourse is unable to appreciate these life journeys and the values that drive them. Development is therefore not a good that can be provided by an outside agency like the state.

An effective response to above issues calls for a different mode of thinking than the one that

caused them (i.e., the hegemonic development discourse) (See Perera this issue). Instead of focusing on nations, populations, and their assumed homogeneity, Amartya Sen (1999) conceptualizes development at an individual level. For him, development is a process—not a destiny proscribed by numbers—that enhances the capability of people to live the life they value as long as naturally possible. Building on this, I view development as the improving and harnessing of local strengths, potential, and capacities, largely at individual and small institutional levels, helping them to enhance their life journeys and achieve their aspirations.

Development needs to be built upon specificities, particularly the strengths of the nationals and their communities, but in a way that corresponds with larger social and political structures and guarantees social justice. (Rawls 1971; Sen 2009) The state can provide a supportive environment (and infrastructure) that enables people to articulate their aspirations, map out the paths they want to take, and achieve life goals. (cf. Turner and Fichter 1972; Sirivardana 1986; Hamdi 2004) It can facilitate and support people's life-journeys by removing *deprivations* (or obstacles) and enhancing their capabilities to achieve their *aspirations*. (cf. Sen 1999) In this, people become the *provider* of their own development and the state the *supporter*, facilitator, and arbitrator when individual efforts come into conflict.

Sen (1999) also questions the relationship between the means and ends in the dominant development practice. He finds that the four tigers (i.e., Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan), which changed their position within the world-economy in the 1970s, were able to capitalize on the then open economic opportunity because they had healthy and educated people. While resources are necessary to develop them, healthy, educated, and free people are able to capture development opportunities, produce wealth, create better quality lives, and develop nations.

The three post-tsunami recovery projects discussed in the opening article highlight the difference in supporting people's processes.

Banda Aceh, Indonesia, received the most aid, but the beneficiaries of relocation projects were the least benefitted. Even by early-2008, the victims were still struggling to get back on with their lives; many new houses had very little access to services; some projects made the inhabitants use open drains for sewage disposal. Although the King's project in Phang Nga, Thailand spent the least money, the beneficiaries familiarized their homes and housing the fastest. By 2008, the settlement was lively, houses were diverse, and the people had embarked on their post-disaster life journeys.

More than amounts of aid, it is the level of imposition that caused above difference. While helpful, capital, power, the provision of houses, and other forms of aid are antithetical to development at people's level. People's life journeys cannot be fully accessed through mainstream economics and politics. It requires the paying of attention to people's cultures, particularly the way they carry out their life journeys, the infrapolitics involved in these, and the translocalities and transtemporalities they construct. (See Perera 2016)

In view of developing more grounded knowledge, I approach development from a people's perspective, but in relation to the complex socio-political structures and development policies. This study was conducted at the people's scale, employing methods such as lived-in experience and collaborative ethnography, (Lassiter 2005; Ratnapala 1999) paying attention to small reactions to existing structures and conditions.

Providing context to this study are place- and society-specific developments that have been tried in various other states. Bangladesh continues to be highly successful with the Grameen Bank. The idea of microcredit has been incorporated into neoliberal practices, but I refer to the local production of the idea and the project. Bhutan pursues the idea of happiness, technically, Gross National Happiness (GNH), as a metric for development. The background to this was the curiosity to find out how and why people in Bhutan are happy even though the GNP is low, (Gross 2016) a question hardly asked by Sri Lankan leaders in the 1950s.

In the context of current debates, and some examples I use, it is important to clearly separate the study from neoliberal, libertarian, and anarchist positions; the arguments relate to the extant political-economy and how it could become a facilitator of development. Going beyond the mainstream economic focus, and combining politics and culture, this article argues that the state and capital alone cannot develop societies; people can, but with the necessary external help.

This is precisely the development potential the leaders and experts in Sri Lanka and Kerala did not acknowledge at independence. They overlooked the strengths of their own citizens and failed to capitalize on the opportunity to develop from within.

As a way to draw attention to everyday politics, which is extremely significant for any grounded development policy or program, I briefly highlight nine main deprivations that the state and/or cultural authorities can attempt to address. This is not a comprehensive list, but a preliminary one to instigate discussion.

**1. Mobility:** People's freedom to go wherever they want safely and in a timely manner, without harassment, is an important indicator of development. The movement of people is not prohibited in Sri Lanka (except for particular groups such as prisoners and patients), nor is it prevented for the large majority by lack of affordability. Yet, free mobility is sorely lacking in Sri Lanka; comfort in travel is a luxury. The government cannot provide mobility simply by constructing highways, buying busses, or spending large sums of money; while some of this is useful, more can be a hindrance. This is precisely why different thinking is needed.

Transportation is a significant indicator of development. People-centered development should make (affordable) public transportation a privilege, one that is envious to those who can afford private vehicles. Although they may not be envious, many mayors and politicians in countries such as the UK and cities such as New York use public transportation. In Sri Lanka too, the leaders too used to rave about the Ceylon Transport Board (CTB; SLTB from 1972) as one of the

best public bus service in the world. Almost everyone, except a small group that owned or had access to vehicles through the workplace, used public transportation until the privatization of busses in the late 1970s. No government maintained a healthy balance and competition between public- and private-owned transportation systems in a way that would enhance people's travel experience. The quality of public transportation radically declined since privatization, (elaborated below) making passengers feel that travel is a privilege, and not a right. The contemporary experts also lack vision.

Travel time in Sri Lanka is exorbitantly high. This limits the amount of travel that one can do within a given time period. During the evening rush, a bus from Pettah to Athurugiriya (19 km) easily exceeds an hour; one and half hours is common. It takes close to two hours to travel from Colombo to Panadura (30 km) and Malabe to Panadura takes two hours. Going to work in Colombo, from Katana, requires over 4.5 hours travel time, quarter of the non-sleeping day. Leaving before 5:30am, the commuters are very tired to do much after returning home. This issue is partially addressed through capital-intensive profitable programs such as road widening and highway construction. After several road widenings, and billions of Rupees, the duration of the Pettah-Athurugiriya trip has not changed much.

Second, and the most important, busses hardly stop for passengers to get off. The crew is keen in getting passengers in and the earnings they bring; so they stop the bus, only if needed. They have no time for passengers to get off the bus; it is largely viewed as a waste of time. The drivers make "rolling stops." According to my observations on the local bus route I used in July and December 2015, every time the bus pulled away as soon as I got on the first step, even before I gained my balance. On the main route, I almost always had to get off when the bus was moving; even when I insisted, the bus only stopped less than thirty percent of the time. Yet they stop to make offerings to gods.

Many people were injured and some were killed simply trying to get off a bus. This

certainly does not indicate development.<sup>ii</sup> During July 2015, the bus took either the person that I met or myself to another bus stop over five times. During the same period, I came across three people who were injured while getting off and three people I met knew someone who was killed getting off a bus. I have not encountered this situation in over fifty countries I have visited. Transport specialists conveniently marginalize these as isolated incidents and not patterns.

Third, the quality of travel is very poor. People are not entitled to personal space and much dignity. The high number of passengers on each bus and the way they are packed makes travel very stressful and tiresome. The conductors are not content until they fill the bus, but busses have infinite amount of space for them. They keep squeezing new passengers in, making those on board press their bodies against the others.' The conductor constantly yells: "*Issarahata yanna, issarahata yanna, issarahata yanna, lang wenna, lang wenna, lang wenna*" (literally: go forward// and get close//). This makes emergency exit impossible.

Overcrowding is reinforced by the mentality of scarcity (see #9 below) of the passengers who will make a huge attempt to get on the first bus. At the scene of the bus, they physically and mentally get ready to rool over the others into the bus.

Passengers too invade others' personal space and privacy. Especially men reduce women's personal space making their bodies touch, sometimes thrust on unknown females in a country where couples are not allowed to show affection in many (public) places and unauthorized men and women are not supposed to touch each other. The harassment of females is much more widespread..

Fourth: While they desire passengers, the conductors do not welcome their bags. Even so-called long distance air-conditioned buses have people standing (and traveling short distances) and bags limit this space.

Sri Lankans do not keep their bags on the floor. Hence in busses, the passengers who are standing expect those seated, especially

women, to hold their bags, or whatever they carry. During my research, I met several women who were given bags somewhat forcefully, even on days they were sick; one had a burn on the thigh but still a man insisted on storing his bag on her lap. On some busses, the passengers are made to buy an extra ticket if the luggage is large (i.e., a suitcase).

Fifth: Making it a privilege to travel. Passengers are expected to bring correct change. This practice is not limited to busses. Sri Lanka is one of the few countries where businesses believe that bringing exact change is customers' responsibility. In this sense, most businesses in Sri Lanka are informal businesses. It is seeing the emergence of "modern" businesses such as supermarkets, but they too, although to a lesser degree, request the correct change.

If a passenger pays with a large bill most conductors ask her/him to collect the balance when s/he gets off. Most of the time, especially in the mad rush to get off (before the bus stops), passengers forget change. This seems more like a business: Many conductors give out small denominations much faster, voluntarily running out of change.

In all above instances, personal space is violated, overcrowding is normalized, and safety is devalued. In addition, the passengers are subjected to loud music. Almost all long distance busses blast their music, increasing the sound pollution the passengers are forced to endure.

Sixth, travel is not facilitated by public amenities such as toilets. This makes the travelers, especially women, wanting to return home soon or visit an acquaintance to use a toilet (see #3: Discrimination). Toilets in public places are hard to use. The recently emerged Western fast-food restaurants and local chains such as Keels have toilets. These substitute for "public" toilets for middle-classes, but are not open to poorer non-customers.

Railways, which complements busses, have hardly been improved in any significant way since independence. Three-wheelers and taxi

services are the newest additions to public transportation. They operate well, but women do not feel safe, especially if they are alone. This condition is changing due to new taxi services such as Fairtaxi and Pickme. They leave a trail of information about the driver, the passengers, and the path, making both the passengers and the drivers feel safer. On January 2016, I also met a female three-wheel driver who works for Fairtaxi. She is not afraid, she said, as the company knows who hired the vehicle. Taxis are an expensive substitute for poor transportation planning and provision.

As long as public transportation is seen as inferior to private transportation, its riders are perceived as low-quality human beings who are not entitled to have the bus stop for them to get on and off, to ask for change, to travel without getting touched and groped, and with no blasting music, there is no development. Mainstream infrastructure projects and transportation studies of which the context is the West and the middle-classes miss these local issues.

## **2. Poverty and Access to Resources:**

Although money and wealth cannot guarantee happiness and satisfaction, the opposite is well-accepted: poverty is a deprivation to wellbeing. Eradicating poverty is a crucial step towards enabling equitable access to resources, social justice, and securing people's right to live the lives they value.

Social justice is not strange to Sri Lanka. The main anti-colonial movement, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) not only fought for independence but also for social justice, especially for the equitable distribution of resources. It established a substantial amount of rights from the mid-1930s through the late-1970s. The fact that Sri Lanka was on a higher developmental state at independence, and into the 1970s, is owed to some colonial policies and largely the hard work of the LSSP (later joined by the Communist Party and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party). What they established was strong; even the Jayawardena regime of 1977 which adopted structural adjustments could not totally rollback the above gains. (Goonatilleke 1984)

Yet poverty is getting worse and the issue of poverty is getting stale. In regard to India, Ashis Nandy (2004) observes that the expansion of a particular middle class in the recent decades has prompted the idea, among middle classes, that poverty is disappearing. In Sri Lanka too, politicians and development specialists pay far less attention to poverty, but addressing this issue is urgent.

As in regard to transportation, the housing condition of the low-income populace is a substantive indicator of the level of development of a country, more so than the highways, dams, or the latest development project: Megapolis. In Sri Lanka, more than half the urban population, especially in Colombo, lives in "under-serviced" housing, in unhealthy environments. (Fernando 2015; Niriella 2012) Moreover, today, the income gap between the rich and the poor is at its greatest. (List 2016)

The first political party in Sri Lanka, LSSP, emerged out of the Suriya Mal (lit. Sunflower) Movement that partially attributed the Malaria epidemic of the 1930s to malnutrition. Its members distributed Marmite and *dhall* in Malaria ridden areas. Later, during the 1977 election campaign, medical doctor Carlo Fonseka publicly claimed that he entered politics because medicine alone cannot cure patients; they need nutritious food and health is more a political issue than medical. Yet, Western-scientific analysis cannot establish poverty as a cause of extended illness or death, and therefore the experts cannot see this connection. Ganesh Devy (2006) too highlights the failure of science to account for the cause of premature death of *adivasis* (aborigines) of India due to sickle cell disease. Understanding these connections requires different ways of thinking.

Poverty cannot be eradicated via infrastructure projects; the current development model contributes to poverty. (Dissanayake this issue; Escobar 1995; Frank 1979; Sachs 1992) The gentrification of select area (i.e., the improvement of the built environment and displacing poorer residents), has taken away ordinary people's right to those spaces and the city. (Smith 1979; Smith and Williams 1986; Mitchell 2003) This is largely the type of

development evident in the “Gotabhization of Colombo,” (Dissanayake and Perera 2015)

Moreover, mega development projects have required more projects to rectify their mal effects. Despite huge highways in Hambantota, people located close to these roads had no water supply. It was later provided by the candidate of the opposition political party. (Premadasa, 2015) Before spending huge amounts of money on gentrification and implementing unknown remedies to issues such as climate change, it is urgent to improve, in sustainable ways, the extant living conditions of the current urban population who are deprived of the lowest-acceptable living standards.

Sri Lanka is one of the few countries that was able to nearly eradicate the involuntary relocation of people, especially the poor. (Sirivardana 1986) As part of support-systems based housing policies (1983-1993), the state implicitly undertook not to relocate any inhabitant involuntarily. While the above policy improved the security of the poor, the Rajapaksa period (2000-2015) saw a disregard for the implicit policy of non-eviction; even people with land titles were evicted during this time.

Relocating low-income people in flats or making them aspire to living conditions of the middle-classes are wasteful. It is more effective to help the poor develop environments that the rich would envy. This cannot be accomplished through good designs and building contracts because they impose outside views. The support-systems idea propagates that the state should take on the role of supporter in people’s housing processes. It should remove the roadblocks that come in the form of bureaucracy, rigid laws, corrupt business and political practices, and involuntary displacement.

**3. Discrimination:** Ordinary people should be free to achieve their life-goals without racial, ethnic, religious, gender, and other classification-based discriminations. Sen (1999) takes the example of Saudi Arabia where women can be rich, but are not allowed to drive a car.

Most Sri Lankans do not welcome discrimination whether it is based on race, class, or gender. Yet it is a fact of life in the country. Despite continuous opposition by a more inclusive-minded population, discrimination has increased. Ironically, after the end of the separatist war, the “land of the Tamils” is heavily invaded, socially, economically, culturally, and environmentally. The new roads and infrastructure projects violate the natural environments in Vanni, which used to be the “unknown country” for the Dutch and the British. (Perera 1999) Many coastal places in the north, such as Mannar and Mullaitivu, are earmarked as tourist destinations (figure 1). This would deprive the existing livelihood of their inhabitants, especially the poorer ones who are being subjected to the infusion of capital from Colombo and Jaffna. Overall, there is a large influx of Sinhala tourists to the north and the east.

Recent rewriting of Tamil history is evident in the erasure of particular landscapes including the house of the leader of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Velupillai Prabhakaran, the display of weapon caches confiscated by the military, and the rebuilding of places important for Buddhists, overpowering the extant landscape. Racism intensified after the war, particularly with the past President Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005-2015) whose regime militarily defeated the Liberation Tigers drawing the ‘line in the sand’ blaming the Tamil diaspora for defeating him in the 2015 elections. The expanding local tourism and investments in the north and the east, ironically, submits the region saved from military violence to social, economic, and political violence.

The level of subordination of and discrimination against women is also broad and deep. The mobility of women (especially girls) is highly limited by the fear of rape, harassments, uninvited advances, and physical abuse. With 900 reported rapes in 1997, Sri Lanka is ninth on the list; without the countries where such acts are well reported, it is second only to India. (Top 10 Countries 2005) Rape cases usually place the victim on trial. It is her morality and chastity that must be proven. (de Alwis 2004) Hence, victims

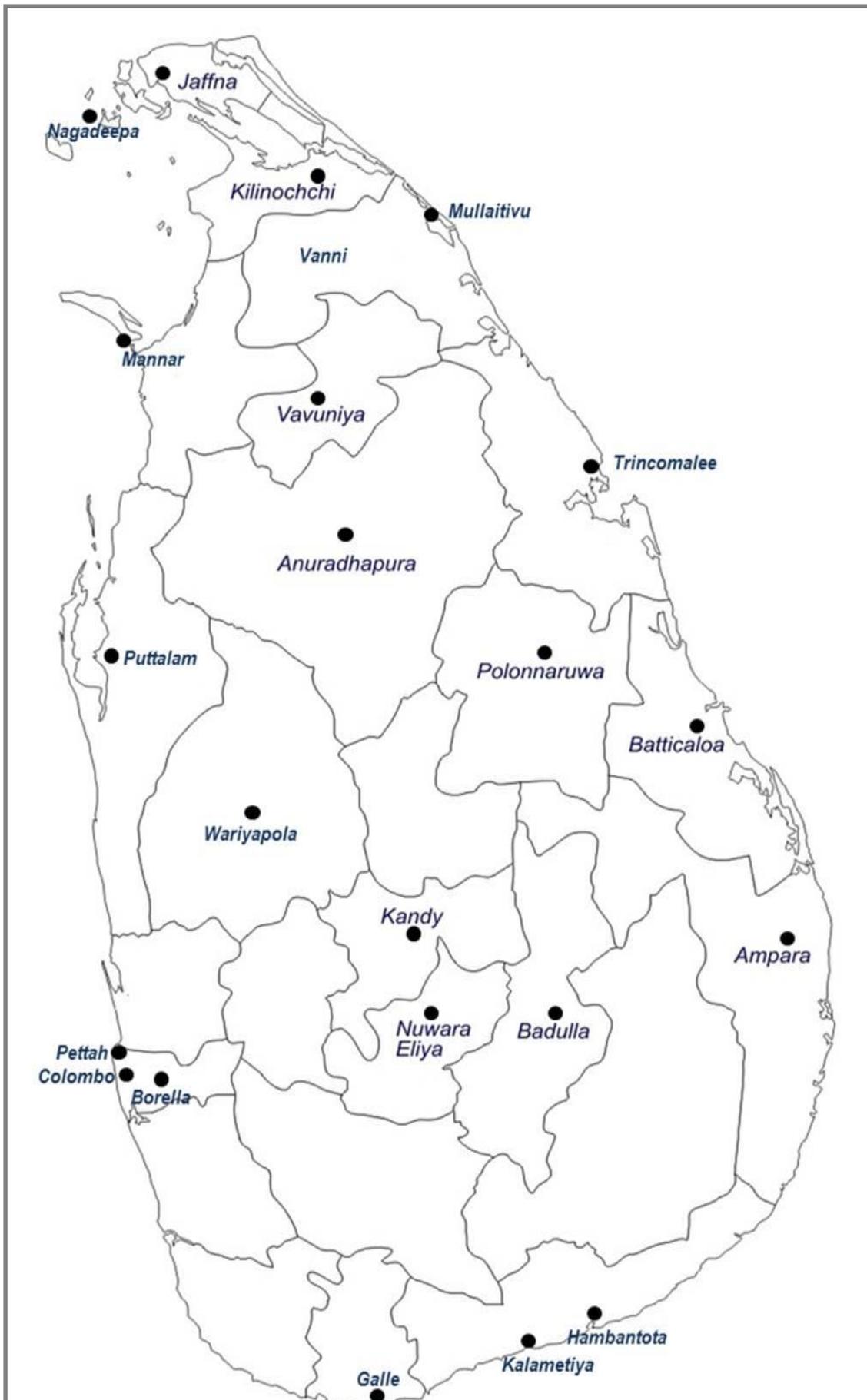


Figure1: Places discussed in the article

and their families try to hide rape, but the family also blames the victim. The audacity of the male culture is evident in the rape of British tourist Rita Jones on the beach and a politician publicly celebrating his 100th rape in Hambantota. (When Rapists 2016)

When women go out, they try to protect themselves from harassment, abuse, and advances by men. It is hard for individuals, especially women, to travel in trains when sets of regular passengers are banded into groups. In busses, it is hard for women to prevent men trying to touch them. Malathi de Alwis (2004; 179) narrates a scene:

It is evening. A half-empty bus trundles past the cinema as hordes of men stream out of the “Adults Only” film...The young woman on the bus holds her breath, hoping that no one of the will board the bus...She relaxes...

At Borella more people get on and the bus becomes a little more crowded. Although there is plenty of room for people to stand without touching, the man in front of her somehow contrives to rub his legs against hers. She shifts, trying to avoid contact with the man. He moves to touch her again, and again she twists into an even more uncomfortable position to escape him. The girl besides her watches her contortions with sympathy and amusement. When the seat besides the young woman is free, the man sits down, stares at the young woman. She endures his presence with tense anxiety...

...She wishes someone else would chastise him for his covert but obvious actions. When she gets off the bus he gives her a hard look. She hurries home and locks the gate and the door, thankful to be safely barricaded in her home.

The situation is much worse. My female informants were subject to touching by men at markets and groping in public spaces. Two interlocutors have received invitations for sex in demeaning ways in broad daylight in the

middle of populated Colombo Pettah. This is very scary for young women. A common misconception is that women do not mind this attention. (de Alwis 2004; 179) This idea extends far beyond simple attention.

Women hardly share these experiences with others because that brings shame to them. Many women feel that sexual harassment is something they simply have to endure privately. (de Alwis 2004, 180) As Shilpa Phadke (2010) highlights in regard to India, when a man exposes his genitals by the road, either to urinate or to purposefully display it to a woman (not that rare in Sri Lanka), the woman crosses the street to the other side. More than shame, this makes the females threatened and insecure.

Lankan women were also subjects of the nationalist struggle. As part of seeking independence, the nationalists sought to civilize Sinhala women, especially to liberate them from Western influence. (Perera 1997) For Sinhala-Buddhists who developed themselves through late-nineteenth century agitations, women were the agents of cultural continuity across generations.<sup>iii</sup> Hence, the nationalization of women was key to building the nation. The leaders were men and most of them were quite Western. According to Sandya Hewamanna (2016, p. 10),

these leaders felt that instilling virtues of Victorian femininity, domesticity, discipline, and restraint was necessary if they were to transform Sinhala Buddhist women, and through them the island, into a symbol of greatness.

Women are conscious of the potential threats they face when they go out. A small amount of skin exposure can be unsafe. For the society at large, it is never the fault of the man. Hence, women need to prepare themselves to meet the outside world when they go out; among other things, she needs plain the clothes to wear including as needed. Usually mothers train the daughters what to wear, how to sit, how to be modest, and how to move around without attracting unwanted attention from men.

Travel is difficult, especially with the lack of public amenities. While men are not reluctant to use the outdoors as toilets, sometimes the roadside; women hardly do. This curtails women (and some men) of their mobility. They also use strategies such as holding urination for a long time and drinking less water. These affect women's health.

In this, mothers (and religious institutions) transform their daughters into subjects of this discriminatory system, making sure that they are safe outside of home. The production of the "modern" national woman normalizes the current social environment and justifies the norms used by the society. As de Alwis (2004) notes, many women feel that sexual harassment is something they simply have to endure. Curfews for women are nationally accepted. A large majority of females travel only to school and work by themselves, even in broad daylight.

A daughter is supposed to be under the protection of her father until she is transferred to another man called the husband. Third options such as living by oneself and not marrying are not available for "good" Sri Lankan girls and women. They should be subjected to an acceptable man and this is parents' responsibility.

Within this structure, women are most watched at home and in the neighborhood (cf. Phadke 2010). Men are curious about who the girls go out with, at what times, and the frequency. When men collect this information they are not considered gossip as the same would be called if women did. The saying: *game puhulang game kaputanta* (the fruits of the neighborhood is for the birds in it) highlights a believed entitlement the local men have over local women.

Sri Lanka is largely a closed society with so many secrets. So are sexual relationships; even husbands and wives do not show affection in public. The last government took this to an extreme; it saw the showing of affection in public and couples holding hands as vice. Through this, they pushed this activity into "love hotels" across the country including small *handiyas* such as Kalametiya in Hambantota District. Women who (are

compelled to) use such hotels become more vulnerable to rape and sexual harassment than those who show affection under an umbrella on a beach or a park.

In sum, the discrimination, objectification, and harassment of women are parts of mainstream society and culture in Sri Lanka. Most men and women are not only blind to their own biases but not hesitant to act on this biased knowledge. After the "Wariyapola incident" in which a girl beat a man who advanced, men have turned it around, using Wariyapola to call out women who might speak out against male privilege. The outrage among men was seen across the social media.

Girls familiarize the social conditions and transmit the perceptions and norms to their children. These perceptions and norms are neither Buddhist nor moral, but characteristics of patriarchy and sexual suppression, justified by connecting to nationalism, culture, and religion.

Talking about gender discrimination and harassment is taboo in Sri Lanka. There is a large proportion of thoughtful men and gender discussions in the country. Yet most of them are either unable or reluctant to voice concerns about discrimination due to the pressure of the larger culture. These issues are never discussed in development and planning discourses.

The feminists do study gender relations, but this is insufficient to expose the gendered power relations. Patriarchal power relations are largely constructed from the masculine side. Hence, feminist critiques need the support of the critical study of masculinity. This is best carried out through the self-examination of the maleness—its construction and privilege from the male perspective. Yet there are hardly any studies. One rare report is found on Facebook (Madusanka 2016).

Development is about creating this social infrastructure, not just physical. Accepting discrimination as normal is more dangerous than discrimination itself. It is highly important to create an open environment in which biases can be openly discussed, challenged, and reduced.

**4. Time Poverty:** In the above contexts, people not only lose money and resources, but also large amounts of time. With time in their hands, people are likely to engage in more acts they value, fine-tuning their life-journeys in more meaningful ways. Hence, saving people's time is central to development.

As discussed above, the biggest waste of time occurs in-between events on the road. Delays on the road are more cultural than technical. While there is no absolute right or wrong way to drive, road congestions are caused by the culture of driving for which there are no technical solutions. Private busses receive the biggest criticism. Most of the time, they block the road, especially when stopping, each bus trying to pick up all possible passengers without leaving any for the next bus.

Private busses and/or three-wheelers are not the only agents of congestion. The way middle-class people drive also contributes to it. The object of the large majority of drivers is to go before the others, especially the one in front. As they use every little space on the road to minimize the drive, they block and delay everyone else, including pedestrians and themselves. Up until the present, the widening and building of roads have not solved the issue of travel time in any substantive sense. It is not the driver who delays her/himself, but the driving culture. The recent (unpopular) police intervention has caused some improvement but it is too early to evaluate.

Time loss is not limited to the road and driving. Almost every meeting in Sri Lanka is late and people come to work late. Recently the government installed finger sensors to clock in and out the employees but some arrive on time, clock, and leave. Moreover, keeping others waiting is part of exercising power that has become naturalized: Especially the powerful enjoy the privilege of arriving after everyone, reinforcing and making use of this culture of keeping others waiting rather than questioning it.

The time loss in Sri Lanka is colossal; it is a national tragedy. If this is not a national concern, it is because of discrimination: not caring for others' time. If time can be rescued, people may also change what they do, using

time for their extant needs, wants, and new creative uses. They will transform themselves and their lives, better addressing the way they want to live, i.e., development.

**5. Fear and Instability:** Sri Lankans feared the civil war (1983-2009) for two and a half decades. The end of the war in the north and the east and the absence of bomb blasts in the rest of the country, especially in Colombo, created a safer environment. People get out more often and travel farther. While places like Galle Road is busy at night, people from the southwest visit places like Nagadeepa and Trincomalee during holidays.

People also feared other types of violence and terror caused by politicians and their supporters, particularly during and after elections, especially since 1977. While this type of violence dramatically reduced towards the end of the century, two relatively peaceful elections and the subsequent transfers of power marked the change. Intimidating campaigning including "cutouts" was not allowed during the last presidential election in 2015. Under the last government, people, including journalists, feared to even make a joke about key figures in the government; there were almost no jokes about Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, Secretary of the Ministry of Defense. Currently, journalists seem free to ask questions and people seem to be free to file court cases against injustice, and judges are free to give verdicts.

As discussed above, women fear harassment and discrimination. This is a constant fear for most women, but considered "low politics" (Bollens 2005) hardly addressed in contemporary political, development, and planning practices.

Most people, especially the middle class, fear possible *katu gehilla* (cut throat) and do not trust others. They are highly inquisitive about what others do, but are highly protective of their own affairs. They spread bad news (rumors) about others, but protect their own secrets, perhaps employing offence as a defensive mechanism. People are quite defensive in the ways they interact with others; they have a response to every question but get offended when corrected. While they

hide the mischiefs of their own sons and daughters, they hardly hesitate to highlight the same of the next-door woman/girl. When one gets a job, or plans to go abroad, s/he tries to hide it until the last moment (i.e., until no one can sabotage the plans). They live in the fear of others who are suspected of disrupting their little projects and “trips” in life.

People’s development activities can exponentially enhance if they can be free of such fear to carry out their daily activities, cultural practices, and are able to get the help of neighbors openly and without fear.

**6. Justice:** Social justice is central to Sri Lankan thinking and politics since the beginning of the Suriya Mal Movement in the mid-1930s. Yet, people have very little regard and/or trust in the institutions that are supposed to interpret law, dispense justice, and maintain law and order. Most Sri Lankans prefer to dispense justice by themselves.

The formal organization that is supposed to maintain a fearless society, the police, is both powerful and weak. The common wisdom is that the police are corrupt. It is supposed to implement the law and maintain order, but politicians and upper-class people believe that they are above the police and they could intimidate a police constable in public.

Ordinary citizens follow these examples. They too try to overpower the police through excuses and bribes. When accidents occur, the physically strong people try to dispense “on-the-spot justice.” Most common is the beating of the driver and setting fire to the vehicle. They neither wait for the police; nor do they acknowledge the accused’s right to defend. When in trouble with the police, people try to resolve that using the help of an influential person. They hardly take responsibility for damage.

People have very little faith in the law; they believe that they have a better sense of justice not represented in the law, and the legal system is slow. People do not randomly break the law for the sake of doing it, but do so from perspectives of justice based on their own notions of entitlements to the same rights and privileges as others. This is more widespread

and at the root is a gap between the formal state and the culture of ordinary people. As demonstrated in regard to Gangtok (India) (Perera 2016), people in cities have building permits and the buildings are legal, but do not comply with the permit drawing. In this, people do not reject laws, but incorporate compatible aspects into their system of justice, knowledge, and culture.

This “non-systemic” behavior is not limited to ordinary people. During the last regime, ministers of the government were also involved in such justice. Examples range from the fight at the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, disappearance of journalists, to the President removing the Chief Justice after her ruling that blocked the Divineguma program using money from the Samurdhi Program.

In short, the formal structures of law and politics and the way these are practiced at the people’s level are very different. Drivers, for example, know how to talk themselves out when caught for traffic violations. As the agents of the formal systems confront the interface between the formal and local systems, policemen and building inspectors, for example, have turned their work into a business. This warrants a deeper investigation into the gap between popular culture and the extant system of governance.

**7. Sense of Duty:** People find it tremendously difficult to get work done at government offices without bribes, favors, and personal connections. In December 2014, at a reputed government hospital, a daughter of a cancer patient asked for a wheel chair. The attendant pushed it very slowly and kept complaining. The father stopped the wheel chair and whispered something to the daughter. She gave Rs. 100 to the attendant and everything went smoothly thereafter.

While this should not be generalized, there is very little sense of duty in Sri Lanka. Even the police do not think fining the violators as a duty. Using duty to make money occurs in most government offices. Most people consider doing the job (i.e., serving another) a personal favor that needs to be reciprocated at personal level. There are excellent workers

including policemen with a high sense of duty in Sri Lanka, but they are the minority.

**8. Sense of Belonging:** People constantly struggle to establish their belonging. Political leaders feed people with nationalism and other group-isms to mobilize them against their opponents, projecting fear and insecurity. They hardly promote a sense of the nation, which includes the opposition and other opinions of fellow nationals. In depriving the rights of others, they also fall short of establishing a sense of ownership with the country.

Although Sri Lankans are highly political and have opinions about the government and the opposition, there is a huge gap between the civil society and the state. People do not show much belonging or ownership of the state or the nation. Their participation in the state's affairs are limited to paying bills and taxes, receiving benefits, getting permits, and the like. The value of politicians is more about individuals they know and what favors they can get. This is partly a response to the privileging of influence and not honoring merit.

Politics too is increasingly about oneself and less about the public, policies, and the nation. Many miss such politics before the late-1970s. Bringing the politicians' earning to a peak, Rajapaksa became one of the richest people in the country during his tenure as president.

The performance at government offices is largely abysmal. Employees take things home when possible and many expect bribes and favors to carry out responsibilities. The public too does not hesitate to use government property and material for private use.

The distrust of the system, including the police, building inspectors, and planners, is fundamental. This has developed a sense of inferiority and "outsider"-ness among people. Hence, they constantly attempt to develop a sense of place and to claim their belonging. Their over-involvement in party and ethno-politics (taking sides and even hurting loved ones) may well be an over compensation for this lack of sense of belonging and stability.

**9. Mentality of Scarcity:** Much of these conditions lead to and emanate from the mentality of scarcity. It is a gaping hole in the rich culture of Sri Lanka and the primary driver of its underdevelopment. The fact that upper classes too have this scarcity is a sign that the middle class is decadent and has very little to offer in terms of models and leadership.

Sri Lanka is considered a culturally rich country and rightly so. Defined by both colonialism and nationalism, much of the mainstream cultural discourses refer to old religio-royal traditions that contemporary citizens do not fully practice any longer. Postcolonialism is a dialog with colonialism, (Nandy 2004; Perera 1999) traditions, and contemporary contexts. In constructing the contemporary culture, Sri Lankans selectively draw from traditional and colonial histories and social systems, and concepts and worldviews from other places such as the West and Asia. These imports are localized in the context of local cultural intermingling between the Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, and other cultural groups. As new cultural aspects and ideas are borrowed, transformed, and absorbed into contemporary practices, local culture keeps transforming and diversifying, but with a strong colonial influence.

Sri Lanka's main deprivation is also cultural: the main one being the mentality of scarcity which has contributed to most of the above gaps and lacks which can be identified as deprivations that block development. Traffic congestions, for example, are largely caused by the mentality of scarcity. Everyone knows that there is no material scarcity to panic, but people constantly "struggle to get 'there' before everyone else." I am unable to determine whether this cultural trait is more recent or much older.

Nonetheless, the practice is everywhere and a daily process, from bed to bed. Even at home, when two people want to wash hands at the same time, one hardly waits for the other. This practice cutting lines is more intense and people are heavily competitive outside of home. Getting in front of others has hardly brought happiness to anyone, yet it is an addiction.

This mentality is evident in the famous phrase: “*Issarahata yanna, issarahata yanna, issarahata yanna, lang wenna, lang wenna, lang wenna*” (go forward/// get closer///). This is how they pack busses to the point of immobility, even to get off the bus. It is somewhat the cultural anthem of Sri Lanka. According to my own experience at an ayurvedic medical facility, the staff repeats the same phrase to manage the line of patients even when there is no room to move.

Conversely, even when all the seats are not full, at the medical facility, people are made to touch each other in the line. The lack of respect for order (i.e., to believe that the next person will get the next chance) by others, is assumed and they keep no gap between her/himself and the next. Other people in the line also appreciate this because there is always the possibility of someone cutting in despite everyone having numbers and the order is already established. Hence, people in the line too yell at others when they leave room between them. In this way, people are packed into space, whether it is a bus, train, or a simple line of any kind. People hardly have any room even to move a limb.

As much as individual, people are also communal. Many help others, especially when they are in trouble. Yet very few people realize that letting the person “in front,” or go, might enable him/herself to get to the “destination” much faster than trying to get before her/him and blocking.

Scarcity is not a function of poverty. Powerful people also live this mentality. They use their power to get ahead of lines, reinforcing this mentality. People see coming late and cutting lines as privileges and try to achieve it on the streets, corridors, and institutions.

This highlights a difference between the imagined community of nations, local communities, and the person next to oneself. Although people are national, racial, political-party affiliated, and community members, they view the next person as a competitor. Competition is round the clock even when ordering hoppers people walks in and put their hands in front whoever are standing and ask for their hoppers.

This mentality has little physical basis, but mostly social and cultural. Yet it drains a lot of social, material, and individual energy and is a significant reason for roadblocks, people cutting in front of others, not respecting others’ rights, and the vulnerability to political manipulations. The mentality of scarcity creates enormous competition where it is unnecessary and unproductive, making life a constant struggle. It is enormously stressful, although the stress is mostly internalized, naturalized, and people have become oblivious to it.

A person on depression medicine told me that she never realized that she was under so much stress prior to medication. The lack of security, due to displacement, the culture of particular gossip, and the fear of cutthroat (*katu gehilla*) feed into this practice. These have made the society highly individualistic, stressful, and vulnerable to manipulation which are well exploited by politicians and businesses.

The most dangerous is that the mentality of scarcity is naturalized and people take these competitions as normal. The person who came to the hopper hut after the others who has already ordered or to the Aurvedic establishment thinks it is okay to ask for her/his order first. If given, it is considered good; perhaps feel smart and accomplished. If another is served first, those who were already there hardly fight back.

Sri Lankans are also very nice people and communal at the same time. For example, some disabled people get some help from such nice people. This aspect prevents the mentality of scarcity from destroying the society. Yet this is only a small remedy and not development.

Mentality of scarcity may well be the greatest deprivation. In their rush to follow the West and not lose out in the development “competition,” even the leaders of the newly independent Ceylon could not see the strengths of the nation. The experts in Sri Lanka have also developed themselves in this mentality. In their rush to establish their credentials within the hegemonic development discourse, at independence, they too

overlooked the nations strengths. Caught in neo-liberalist culture and their own professional and personal gains, contemporary experts have not provided the nation or its people much help. As discussed in the opening article, they have been working to underdevelop the nation in the guise of development and professional advancement.

Removing the mentality of scarcity may be the best possible act of development; it may make the politicians and policy makers more comfortable to look into issues of gender and discrimination and “experts” to be more grounded. Most of all, it will allow people to pay attention to many more significant things in life and get involved in their own development.

### **In Sum**

The article approaches development as people’s ability to live the life they value without fear and obstructions and highlights that the state can be a supporter of people’s efforts to achieve this goal than try provide development. Development, in this sense, has digressed –especially with people not being able to fulfill the educational, health, and transportation requirements through schools, regular hospitals, and the bus service-- and mega-scale infrastructure projects have been unable to bridge this gap. The mentality of scarcity, especially among the politicians and experts, has not helped either.

This article does not present a comprehensive critique or a proposal; nor is meant to be a final statement of some sort. It is meant to be a platform for the initiation of more substantive discussions and critiques on how to approach development from a people’s perspective.

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In a substantive sense, the article highlights that development is, at least, political and cultural, as it is economic. Development is related to political interests, will, and how the state works. It is also related to the habits and frameworks of the “subjects,” the state, and politicians.

Hence, the article suggests that we pay more (or equal) attention to politics and culture than simply focusing on economics.

Development is built upon small acts carried out by ordinary people at smaller scales. The state assuming the role of provider of development is elitist, wasteful, and victimizes people. It should consider people as the most crucial resource, support their life journeys, and help them achieve their aspirations by improving their capabilities to do so, removing obstacles, and bridging small gaps in people’s processes to achieve their life goals.

There is also a time dimension. While they do not have to be isotemporal and isomorphic, the pace at which development projects transform society and space should match the speed of change in people’s lives. People can adapt very fast but, if “environmental” changes are slow, people may lag behind; if “progress” is too fast, people will get displaced.

The key is for the state to acknowledge, appreciate, and support the use of people’s agency within particular proscriptions and respect the pace of people’s lives. It is in this context that I have discussed nine roadblocks, the major one being the mentality of scarcity.

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<sup>i</sup> 95% of my male interlocuters informed me that they never realized that they get off the bus while it is moving until I asked the question several times. They have gotten used to this as boys.

<sup>ii</sup> According to the AAA, road deaths have reached the peak in 2015. (Sathisraja, 2016) As the report focuses on standard, spectacular accidents, there is hardly a mention of any death or injury caused when getting on and off busses.

<sup>iii</sup> This expectation is contradictory as women are expected to move to the husbands locale, and subject to its culture, after marriage.