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Dialectics of Opportunities and Challenges in Disciplinary Shifting of ‘Rural Development’ into ‘Development Studies’

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the emerging trend and scope of Development Studies as an academic discipline. Methodologically, the paper is based on secondary sources of data. A comparative and argumentative method has been followed in a continuum approach to Rural Development and Development Studies. It argues that conventional particularistic approaches to development are being upgraded in the more general domain of Development Studies. Therefore, going with some national and international trends of studies in both disciplines, this paper offers a strong recommendation for the adoption of Development Studies with exploration and extended continuity of Rural Development. The paper does not, however, conclude with the immortality of the discipline of Development Studies but stands with its continuous evolution and contestation. Taking the reference of Nepal, the paper has highlighted different issues, opportunities, and challenges of such shifting in terms of quality of the program, courses and faculties, career and exposure, and research potential and policy dilemma. The paper is expected to contribute to the studies of different paradigms and discourses of development in their given contexts and conditions of socio-political realities.

Keywords: Discipline, development studies, paradigm, rural development

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Introduction

This paper begins with the analytical question of whether and how the notion of Rural Development (hereby RD) still works as a dominant paradigm, or whether it needs accommodation with the discipline of Development Studies in a continuum approach. The author, however, would not stand with a dichotomous answer of this in 'yes' or 'no'. The social science perspective of development is metaphysically contested and empirically debated. It is a kind of dilemma to define and universalize the volatility of development. Power maintains different kinds of disciplinary regimes. This is how Popper (1996) defines the science of philosophy where nothing in the world goes beyond the possibility of falsification.

As a discipline, the paradigm of RD was initiated in the 1960s when the world was moving towards the triumph of modernization. It emerged as a policy approach that was implemented as synonymous with agriculture development at first and regional development in the later decades. Many Latin American universities and South Asian universities had focused on the program, while different NGOs and INGOs working in these countries also made thematic focus on RD. However, there were complexities in the conceptualization and theorization of Rural Development Studies, as most of the concepts, theories, and practices of teaching/ learning and methodological traditions were borrowed from other social science disciplines, in particular, development economics. Therefore, the diversification of discipline of RD and the crossing of its boundaries have become crucially important to grab the multiple realities, narratives, and perceptions on development (Eversole, 2022).

As society could not remain in isolation, so is the case of any social attributes and sciences as likely in the volatility of conceptualization development. Can development remain in isolation? Or is it static ontologically? The answer comes with a simple connotation- No, not! Philosophy of science itself claims for the principle of falsification, which is critically rational, and argues that 'demarcations' that we have made are just provisional, not permanent. Within this axiological backdrop, the notion of RD can be critiqued as the redefinition of identities, development strategies, empirically rooted structures, and networks. Of late, RD discipline can be further evolved as a multi-level process rooted in the historical paradox of political economy. The paradox comes with a Pandora of practice, policy, and theory, which is increasingly accommodated with the discipline of Development Studies since the late 1990s (Sapkota, 2018).

Methodology

The paper is based on a synthesis method by allowing different arguments and counterarguments whether the Development Studies is a perfect science or not. Comparative and argumentative deductions are made. In doing so, discursive elements are viewed from the specific disciplinary perspective of RD. As a delimitation, secondary sources of data from different scientific and scholarly publications have been used with purposive selection.

Results and Discussion

Reconfiguration of RD as an Academic Discipline

Indeed, the present state of RD is not primarily farm-focused or based on agrarian practices alone. Nor it is antagonistic to urban development, but rather an interdependent continuum of rural and urban (life and region). The modern-day world has witnessed urbanization as a new boom, phenomenal, and unavoidable too. Different themes are evolving and paradigmatic wars on rural studies have been going on over the different decades (Capello, & Nijkamp, 2019; Ellis, & Biggs, 2001). Injecting this dilemma in the early dawn of 21 century, Van der Ploeg et al. (2001) very critically examine the conceptualization of RD as a complex one, because the “notion of rural development (emerges) through socio-political struggle and debate” (p. 1). To reemphasize a popular citation many scientific publications often offer, Singh and Shishodia (2016) conceptualize RD as an integrated process of a phenomenon, a strategy and a discipline that includes different institutions, and networks. Manandhar (2011) argues that RD is a contested notion, where the contestation lies in terms of different realities, perceptions and worldviews of development. The paradigms and discourse of development are diverse and plural, often contextually rooted with contrasting claims and discourses (Geiser, 2014).

Traditional wisdom about RD, rural society, and rural economy has thus undergone a crisis. Many complexities and dilemmas have occurred in terms of defining rurality, rural characteristics, and quality of life in rural areas, thereby setting the priorities of agendas of RD. Empirically, the world is in a rush to stay in the cities and urban areas, and less priority has been paid to the rural areas. This rush is becoming phenomenal as a consequence of modernization in the global world system. Following this, critiques of conventional theories have also sparked the idea and practice of development. Ontologically, ideologies rule the world, which truly rings in development, too. The theories of RD are largely borrowed from macro perspectives and grand perspectives in the name of ‘alternative paradigms’. But they

could not become functional and operational in the growing wave of globalization, modernization, and neo-liberalization (including state theories and market approaches). The world is tired of grand problems and the myriad of grand solutions.

This kind of theoretical crisis and empirical dilemma eventually lead to the question of how to maintain the RD as a 'multidisciplinary notion/ practice' making it a mixed-method approach. Does this create an inferiority complex for RD discipline as compared to other social sciences that are aimed at Development Studies? This question essentially goes to different universities, academia, departments, research institutions, and so on. Unfortunately, even we, development scholars, could not defend the logic that there is nothing superior and inferior, and no discipline is ever immortal and dominant in the broader spectrum of knowledge and discussion or Gyān and Mīmāṃsā.

Emerging Trend of Development Approaches

The trend of development debates has been changed in the last 30 years (McDonnell et al., 2020; Pieterse, 2010; Sachs, 2015). The trend has theoretically shifted from determinism to the theory of probability/ diversification. Initially, theoretical construction of development took post-war hegemonic artifacts (in early 1950s) and later on it moved with the rise of sustainable development, human development (in late 1980s) and then with the end of cold war and the rise of neoliberal triumph in the 1990s. As Table 1 reflects, the synthesis is going on. The first is about the 'Theory vs Practice' dilemma. It can be analyzed along with the crisis in discourse and contestation. The colonial economics is still in the wave of neoliberalism. There is another debate about mainstream vs alternative development. Is there something hyperreal or super natural in the development worldview, and therefore, who is the supreme authority in defining the mainstream of development? The conventional centers are being deconstructed in the wake of postmodern revitalization in contemporary societies. At large, the notion of RD belongs to the alternative approach. The tragedy, however, is that the alternative voice of development could not replace the mainstream approach either theoretically or empirically.

Henceforth, we are turning to the point of evaluation of the comparative scope of particularistic social sciences and the general social sciences that would create more scientific representation in contemporary issues of development. Should we teach/ learn either a general discipline or a particular discipline of development, or both of them? Indeed, entwined in both perspectives of development is a reconsideration of the multiple and heterogeneous realities of the changing world in terms of power, politics, society, and economics. The particularistic approach includes various specific disciplines and programs tending towards community development, agriculture

development, rural development and urban development. These disciplines are more applied in nature and are increasingly used for strategic purposes in different development programs and projects.

Table 1

Transition of development theories/ approaches and their synthesis in modern world

Transition from	Transition to	Synthesis at
Grand or macro	Micro	Mixed structures, interaction of structure and agency
Outsider	Insider	Insider-led outsider; multispectral narratives against the elitism of outsider and insider
Universal	Particular	Collective well-being with a range of multiple concerns and choices
Singular	Plural	Multi-perspectives, multi-realism
Eurocentric	Post-colonial	Global and critical

Source: The author (2023)

The second is the general approach of social science that aims at meaningful engagement both of macro and micro perspectives of development. The discipline of Development Studies belongs to this category. The general approach can be described primarily as normal social science. It is more theoretical and philosophical. However, it can be also used as an applied social science whereby many research agendas are empirically addressed and prioritized accordingly. The origin of development studies seems to be rooted in the origin of postcolonial development thinking, thereby the economic prospects of third-world countries during the decolonization and cold war era. After 1990, it is taking momentum by a multiplicity of economics and politics (Kothari, 2019); Willis, 2011). Therefore, we can focus on Development Studies, but in research works, there can be specific research problems of a particular discipline of RD, community development, regional development, and urban studies.

Comparative Advantages of Development Disciplines

The disciplines of Rural Development and Development Studies are not contradictory, i.e. neither they are opposite nor are antagonistic. They need to be developed in a continuum approach. The origin of RD has a specific context, but it was more theorized in terms of agricultural development and regional development. It was further conceived as a multidisciplinary notion involving social, political, geographical, economic, cultural, and ecological issues. The division of inter-disciplines within RD is complex. It further lays a rigidity in the research agendas that often make a tagging

or subtitling of 'rural' in each of the research projects, terms papers, and thesis. Besides this, RD has limited job opportunities and academic careers (jobs in private sectors, including I/NGOs). It has less academic scope in the global credit transfer and honor degrees as many universities do not offer the course of RD and this type of discipline.

On the other hand, Development Studies has characteristic features of having rich in the theoretical sphere as well as engaging with many specific agendas of research, innovations and knowledge sharing. It has a more critical tone about modernization and dependency theory. However, it also took the study spheres of other theories including functionalism, structuralism, Marxism, and feminism in the worldview of development. Development Studies has further covered the voices of post-colonial and post-modern ideas of development. It is a widely evolving discipline in various universities of the world. It has covered both macro and micro perspectives and narratives of development.

Moreover, the flexibility of research agendas can be maintained in Development Studies, where, for example, the relationship between the trend of rural poverty and urban poverty can be taken as a topic of the dissertation. It can be further developed with the continuum of research issues that are conventionally dominant in RD, for example, rural tourism and urban tourism, slum area studies, landscape studies, urban studies, rural sociology and urban sociology, and community development. This is why the syllabus and course of study of Development Studies is globally recognized by various universities. In terms of career, a graduate of Development Studies can have a widening scope of jobs and careers, extensively in public/ academic institutions including universities and research organizations. So, the scope of Development Studies is broader and wider than that of the RD, including national and international development, political economy, globalization, ecology, and cross-cutting issues.

Emerging Scope and Teaching Domains

Global Trend

Along with the growing scope of Development Studies, its program has been kept at various schools, faculties, and departments of many Universities around the world. Nevertheless, there is disciplinary variation in locating and scoping out the 'Development Studies. They include sociology of development, economics of development, development economics, geographies of development, anthropology of development, governance of development, and politics of development. Scientific publications on Development Studies have increased in academia, and many scholars have increasingly published their papers in the most refereed journals.

RD is taught as a separate discipline in rare cases of Ranked Universities; though some are found in Universities of post-colonial third-world countries. However, Development Studies is being included as a separate discipline in many universities in the world, including the Centre for Development Studies, University of Cambridge; Department of International Development, University of Oxford; MSc in Development Studies, London School of Economics and Pol Science; Department of Development Studies, SOAS University of London; University of Vienna, Department of Development Studies; Department of Development Studies, University of Fort Hare; Department of Development Studies, University of Zambia; Developmental Studies Department, Indiana, University of Pennsylvania; Department of Development Studies, Kyambogo University; Department of Development Studies, Institut Teknologi Sepuluh Nopember (ITS), Indonesia; Department of development studies, University of Dhaka; Graduate Program in Development Studies, York University; Development Studies, Department of Government, Uppsala University; and Development Studies, University of Johannesburg. Interestingly enough, many of these programs are kept under the social science domain, while a few are running under the faculty of applied sciences.

Different Universities in India are also offering the course of Development Studies in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. They include JNU, New Delhi; Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati; Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi; Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai; Ambedkar University, Delhi; Central University of South Bihar, Patna; Azim Premji University, Bangalore; National Institute of Technology, Rourkela, Orissa; Annamalai University, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu; Amity University, Noida, UP; Ambedkar University, Delhi; University of Mysore, Kanataka; Gujarat Universit, Ahmedabad, Gujarat; University of Allahabad, UP; and Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala.

National Trend

As a pure discipline, there were many popular programs of RD in many universities in Nepal. However, they are gradually accommodating the program into the discipline of development studies. Out of 11 universities in Nepal, only two universities (i.e., Tribhuvan University and Midwestern University) are offering RD in its pure and full-time format for different undergraduate and graduate programs. In a mixed program approach, however, two Universities of Nepal currently offer the course on RD. For instance, such programs are running at School of Agriculture in Agriculture and Forestry University and at the Faculty of Agriculture Science in Far Western University.

While talking about the pure disciplines of Development Studies in Nepal, it has been taught in many Universities and the trend is being increased rapidly. They include Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD programs in Development Studies, School of Arts, Kathmandu University (KU); MPhil and PhD in Development Studies, School of Education, KU; Master's in Development Studies, Purbanchal University (PU); Master's and PhD in Development Studies, Pokhara University; School of Development Studies and Applied Sciences, Lumbini Buddhist University (LBU); and Master's in Development Studies (MDS) in Far Western University (FWU). It is further interesting to note that there are also some courses which do not belong to a pure discipline of Development Studies but are being conducted the program in complementary approach along with other subjective disciplines. Such blended programs include Department of Conflict, Peace and Development Studies (CDCPDS), Tribhuvan University; Masters in Buddhism and Sustainable Development (MBSD), Lumbini Buddhist University; Development Management and Governance (MSDMG), Faculty of Law and Management, Nepal Open University, and Masters in International Cooperation and Development (MCID), Mid-Western University.

Continuum Logic and Way Forward

Implication of Rural Studies

Indeed, the relevancy and scope of Rural Studies or the discipline of RD should not be undermined or dismissed in the wake of Development Studies. It would be better to reemphasize again the conventional arguments that primarily argue for the 'essentialism' of RD. To some extent, they are still valid. For example, dependent cause-effect logic is still valid. We cannot neglect the ground realities of rural areas where various problems still exist as a challenge of sustainable future. The problems interplay in a three dimensional fashion: economic (poverty); socio-cultural (inequality) and political (dependency). Eventually, it informs that interventions are particularly needed in those areas. Different donor agencies and development institutions, including UNDP, IMF and World Bank have set various types of interventions in the name of project, programs, aid, FDI, and structural adjustments. Development actors and agencies (including State actors and non-State actors) often used and stand with the slogans of 'target area approach' and 'target population/group'. Yet, the critical evaluation of these interventions (for instance, even of the SDGs and its localization) require a strong disciplinary notion and academic sphere.

Another argument for the importance of rural studies is about the nature and prospects of urbanization. Urbanization has been an unavoidable phenomenon in the

world, which is not also exceptional in Nepal. It is also associated with demographic logic. As per the Population and Housing Census 2021, the population in urban municipalities has reached 66.17 percent, while the population in rural municipalities remained 33.83 percent. However, it is found in a decreasing trend with a slow pace, as the Census of 2011 reveals 63.19 percent of urban population and 36.81 percent rural population (NSO, 2023). It is an argument based on the economic school that poverty is still a rural phenomenon, and its reduction must be the prime strategy of development. The predominance of poverty and unemployment in rural areas cannot be avoided in Nepal. For example, 28 percent of rural dwellers are MPI-poor as compared with 12.3 percent in urban areas (MPI, 2021). Still, the thesis of urban-biased development seems critically valid, where a considerable attainment of the state and market goes towards the urban area to ensure the benefits of urban people and the hegemony of the urban elites.

Rational of Development Studies

The theories that have been taught in the discipline of RD are not purely 'rural', rather they are interdependent to the cause and effect of urban issues. The imperatives of underdevelopment (including poverty, inequality, unemployment, and dependency) and development (including prosperity, quality of life, and well-being of people) in rural areas cannot be confined within the geographies of rural. Instead, they might have extended manifestations and multiplier effects/ causalities to the other regions and livelihood systems. Rostow's five stages model, Lewis's two-sector model, core-periphery model, growth pole model, diffusion model, Solow-Swan model, liberalism, and neoliberalism could not be justified in the rural context, nor in the urban context alone. Development is a narrative complex that includes both micro-narratives and grand narratives. Excluding one from another could deviate from the epistemology of development. While local people's perceptions, insider worldviews, and experiences at the grassroots are important, objective visualization from metanarratives and grand theories is equally pertinent to define and characterize the metaphysics of development. The grand narratives of social theories should also be taught in Development Studies, which look at development in the broader context of Modernization, functionalism, Marxism, dependency school, globalization, developmentalism, and post-developmentalism.

The dichotomy of urban and rural is becoming complex, just like the complexities in the dichotomous approach of rural development and Development Studies. The entry point and ending point of a rural region are uncertain, and the characteristics of rural societies are also dynamic. To some extent, rural and urban characteristics

are overlapping with each other. As per the Constitution of Nepal, a three-tier federal system has opened the scope of this debate, as provisioned in federal, provincial and local governments. The dichotomy within the local levels (i.e. Rural Municipalities and Urban Municipalities) has become complex amidst the constitutional adherence in Part 5 and other subsequent Parts and Annexes. The restructuring of local governments with the different rural/urban municipalities is guided by a pseudo political-administrative approach, rather than conceiving a developmental and engineering perspective, including the exploration of status, potentials, leadership and plans in each of the local levels. Moreover, the rights provisioned in the Annexes specifically to the federal government (Annex 5), provincial government (Annex 6), and local governments (Annex 8) and concurrent to them (annex 7 and 9) are neither purely rural nor urban (Constitution of Nepal, 2015).

The issues and characteristics of development existing in different tiers of governments can be appropriately planned and executed with a scientific policy cycle approach. In doing so, it would further need a restructuring of the working modalities of the National Planning Commission at the federal government, Provincial Planning Commissions at the seven different provinces, and the planning sections of all the 753 local level governments. This restructuring will eventually lead to the interwoven nexus of 'governance and development' as a cross-cutting issue. Moreover, as also discussed in the above section, there is an increasing trend of urbanization, which is unavoidable at the apex of the social dynamism of modern societies. Nepal is in the top 10 rapidly urbanizing countries in the world (Rijal et al., 2020). Yet, urbanization is itself not becoming a scientific agenda and planned development in Nepal. Therefore, all these things could not be justified in a narrower perspective of 'RD' alone. They should be critically observed and analyzed in the different subjects of Development Studies.

Theoretically, rural-urban linkage could be the empirical asset of Development Studies. It is growing as a continuum paradigm. Pure isolation and the arbitrary line between these two attributes are rarely possible. Moreover, the plethoric agendas of development that we ever discussed (such as, agrarian reform, rural poverty, unemployment; rural tourism, infrastructure development, community development; rural livelihood, and rural-to-urban migration) are tending not to be pure rural phenomena. The issues and agendas of development have become increasingly plural and polycentric, and are moving beyond the restrictions of a limited livelihood sphere and a distinct administrative territory. Instead, they call for an integrated approach of analysis and planning. The continuum approach seems further rational according to the nature of the RD discipline itself. It would call for a breaking of the boundaries (social,

cultural, political, and economic), increasing social mobility, and diversifying livelihood strategies. Development Studies, therefore, seem to be rational in the preface of the emerging scope of social science research and the volatility of the pure 'RD' notion. The demand for the subject/ discipline of Development Studies is getting wider and worldwide. Competitive career options of different sectors, expanding job market, and the potentiality of knowledge building and scientific innovations are some other added values to this discipline.

Issues and Concerns

The crisis lies in the whole education system of Nepal, including TU and other universities. Critique maintains that academia suffers from a lack of efficient leadership and planning for the competitive knowledge creation. Continuous reluctance towards the reform of structural issues, the intervention of political parties and government to the autonomy of the education system, and the perpetuation of the hegemony of power elites in the Universities are some of the unsettled issues to be answered soon. Amidst this, conduction of any academic discipline in universities is not an easy task. It might be even more challenging for non-ranked or low-ranked universities in developing countries like Nepal, where international students rarely enroll. For instance, the RD program was launched in 2001 at Tribhuvan University within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. The program was quite popular in its first decade where many students who applied for admission could not get admission due to competitive selection and a defined quota of enrollment.

The popularity of the RD program has slowed down since 2015 despite significant improvements in the quality of faculties and the course of the study. It might have different causes, such as the growing trend of abroad education among the youth and increasing pessimism in the country due to the narrow job market, low-income opportunities, and student unfriendly administrative system. Currently, the department is offering undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate MPhil and PhD studies. Indeed, it is a sub-field of Development Studies and one of the multidisciplinary subjects developed in a rural context. The objective of the RD program is to navigate the students with a thorough multidisciplinary theoretical knowledge and empirical contexts in different aspects of development. The course contents and subjects included in the program are significantly inclined to the discipline of Development Studies with some specifications on RD. In this way, shifting the RD program into Development Studies is not a challenging issue in terms of course and content.

Nevertheless, the shifting and upgrading of RD discipline into Development

Studies has not been concluded in TU irrespective of series of internal discussion and preparations. Even Mid-West University (MWU) has not become ready to launch the program of Development Studies despite having many curricular content within its RD program. Amidst this, Far-Western University (FWU) has successfully accommodated its 'RD program' into a new discipline and program of Development Studies in 2021. However, an updated syllabus, sufficient reading materials, and scientific teaching-learning pedagogies will be essential to be accommodated in the global paradigm of Development Studies.

As discussed earlier, many universities in Nepal have offered Development Studies at different levels. The disciplinary orientation and major subjects are mostly the same. If this is the case, why do other universities (including TU and MWU) not succeed in approaching the shifting of this program into Development Studies? The global scope of the program gives its rational implication. We need to reemphasize the research and publication. The course of Development Studies is recognized worldwide and its certification carries a high value in the job market while developing a professional/academic career. It would then ensure the production of competent graduates from the program that could be exposed to any edges of the world in their own identity of professional skill and academic performance. In this regard, however, we cannot deny the effects of the emerging context of the competitive market and globalization of the education system in Nepal. Equally important is the quality and structure of teaching-learning pedagogies/ motivations we employ at our schools and Universities.

As a synthesis of this paper, the author would like to summarize three issues. The issues are critical in the sustainability of the discipline of Development Studies and its better exposure to the national and international diaspora. The first issue lies at the development/ promotion of faculties in terms of number and quality. A group of competent faculties, including professors, researchers, and working staff is essential. Institutional strengthening and departmental leadership need to be ensured along with the goodwill relationship of the administration of the university. Third, the quality of the course and its timely revision from the perspective of Development Studies is another issue to be considered while strengthening the discipline of Development Studies. Research collaboration, partnership projects (both at governmental and non-governmental agencies), faculty/ student exchange and exposure programs, quality enhancement of departmental journal of Development Studies, access to scientific publications, research fellowships, and other promotional activities could also be milestones for strengthening the program.

Conclusion

While going both theoretically and empirically, Development Studies can cover all the issues of different particular disciplines, including rural development and community development. This is the way how social science paradigms often engage with different shifts and a continuum of the knowledge in one discipline/ context to the discipline/ context. The discipline of Development Studies is general and comprehensive in its approach and scope, though it can particularize different specific research agendas from the social world. This general-specific engagement is indeed a dialectics of knowledge in different contexts. It is also evident that there are high chances of international exposure, collaboration, and credit transfer to the different universities and their departments. In this context, we can set some examples from Nepal by incorporating RD programs into the department of Development Studies in different universities. This shifting can explore challenges and opportunities of development in Nepal intensively than that the RD has used to do. It would create the exposure of discipline in the scientific world of research, publication and knowledge building. Nevertheless, we **cannot and should not** conclude that particular disciplines of development are irrelevant and outdated. Instead, they need to be more theorized and contextualized in the continuum approach. Therefore, the discipline of Development Studies needs to be evolving and contesting with the triad of dialectics- thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis.

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