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WHY do some states see progress while others remain poor? Right-wing analysts link progress to the presence of the ‘right’ institutions, policies, and societal traits in rich states. But left-wing ones blame Western colonialism and later imperialism as the reason for progress there but poverty elsewhere.

I aim to unravel this puzzle by comparing rich and poor states using the Human Development Index. The index, developed by Mahbub-ul Haq, uses per capita income, life expectancy and literacy data to classify around 190 states. I compare the top and bottom 25 to distill the differentiating factors. There is striking monotony among both sets of states. Among the top states, 21 are from Europe or settler states like the US, 20 being from Western Europe. The other four are all from East Asia. Among the bottom 25 states, 23 are from Africa plus Afghanistan and Yemen. But this high monotony still leaves room for a wide range of explanatory factors.

Almost all rich ones are white-majority ones while the poor ones are almost all black. Racist analysts once claimed that the white race is superior to others on the basis of the ‘white man’s burden’ thesis. But science has proved that once contextual factors are held constant, all races are equally endowed. Most rich ones are also Christian. White supremacists claim that Christianity better supports progress. But about half of the poor states are Christian too. Even the rich states progressed once they became secular and relegated religion’s dominant status. The Church initially opposed science and persecuted many early scientists. Nor do arguments about Protestant virtues withstand scrutiny. Catholic Italy was the cradle of the Renaissance. France, Italy and Germany are richer than most Protestant states. Copernicus, Galileo and others were cosmopolitan cultural and religious deviants who catalysed change not by immersing themselves deeply into ‘superior’ European religions and cultures, but by often bucking them and ‘virtually’ connecting themselves with the best thought globally.

Modernisation theory argued that poor states lack traits key to the success of the West, eg, hard work, enterprise, etc. But these traits are either present in most nations or can be easily grafted when the tides of global capitalism favour a nation due to other factors. China and India stagnated earlier but have developed fast in recent decades. If the culture theory is correct, their progress should have been preceded by major changes in their cultural traits. But there is no evidence they underwent such changes.

Why did Asia stagnate, despite being ahead of Europe earlier?

One can now turn to more robust facts. Almost all developed states, both European and East Asian ones, are homogenous racially and ethnically. But most poor ones, in Africa or Asia, are socially divided and many have also seen ethnic strife. Also important is how states have handled diversity. Those that have given ample space to all ethnicities democratically have still flourished, eg, Switzerland. So, almost every developed state is democratic while most poor ones are autocratic.

Most poor states were colonised, and none were colonisers while many of the rich ones were colonisers and almost none were colonised. Colonisation caused huge material losses and damaged social and political fabrics in the long run. But why were European states able to colonise the rest and not vice versa? Jared Diamond, a geographer, says this was due to key features of the temperate zone Eurasia, ie, its high diversity of wild plant and animal species suitable for domestication. Its east/west major axis that favoured the spread of those domesticates, people, and technologies for long distances with little change in latitude, unlike tro­pical areas like Africa and South America. These edges gave dense populations, centralised poli­­tical organisation, and stratified economies that yielded large surpluses which were invested in armies, scientific inquiry, and foreign conquests. Some criticise his focus on geography and say that the presence of productive institutions trumps geography. This is true, yet the role of geography in initially allowing the emergence of such institutions in some areas seems salient.

Why did temperate Asia stagnate, despite being ahead of Europe earlier? Just before Europe’s take-off, Baghdad, India and China were attacked by Central Asian nomads, who revelled in destroying formal hubs of knowledge. Without such attacks, some Asian intellectual centres too may have sparked Europe-like societal changes. While Europe suffered warfare too, its intellectual repositories survived them.

Thus, politics, conquests and even luck are far more salient drivers of progress than static factors like race, religion and culture.

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