

Whither Myrdal?

An Inquiry into the Theoretical and Educational
Contributions of the *Asian Drama*

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Abstract

This study revisits many of the theoretical contributions and policy recommendations in Swedish Sociologist Gunnar Myrdal's 1968 three-volume work *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*. The analysis in this dissertation returns in the same geographic territory considered in the original study using two complementary tracks. The first track (Chapters 2-7) compares and contrasts several of Myrdal's theories in *Asian Drama* against his contemporary modernization theorists. The theories tested in this thesis include the need to expand the scope of development economics; the role of values in modernization; circular and cumulative causation; the need to address inequality for development; and the 'soft state'. Each of these theories is addressed separately and the impact of each theory on the succeeding development discourse is discussed. Here, the author argues that many of Myrdal's theories had been prematurely brushed aside by the later rise of neo-liberal and post-modernist movements. Myrdal's arguments appear to be regaining a foothold in the contemporary discourse on developmental economics. In The second track of the research, Chapters 7-12, the author empirically tests the suitability of the theories above using basic education skills outcomes as a proxy for state competence in South and Southeast Asia. In particular, the author examines Myrdal's spatial component of circular causation as well as Myrdal's more specific policy suggestions concerning the educational sector. The data-driven empirical section in Chapters 9 through 11 is concerned with India at the district level. In Chapter 12, the geographic dimension of education issues are examined more concisely in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, The Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand. In each country the Getis- Ord G_i^* Hotspot spatial analysis tool and the "overlay" toolset in the ArcGIS 10.1 Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software suite are used to create spatial models of the geographic distribution of different exogenous and endogenous educational factors and their relationship to student outcomes at the primary school level. From this analysis, the district level clustering of higher and lower student skills outcomes in the educational sector, and Myrdal's specific policy recommendations on how best to expanded universal literacy are tested empirically. In conclusion, Myrdal's theoretical understanding of the 'soft state', and the independent and instrumental importance of addressing inequality are largely supported by the data. However, empirical support for Myrdal's theory of circular causation is less apparent using this methodology.