FOR BULK ALONE this one-million word study, is a daunting proposition. But its size — whose impact is minimised to some extent by the masterly printing and production — is really the least of the difficulties it poses.

Much greater is the difficulty of the task it sets itself, which is nothing less than an examination in all its connections of the social, political and economic condition of the region which Professor Myrdal calls South Asia. Under this head he studies the vast, complex and ancient society of India, where he worked for a number of years and which is really the pivotal point of the study, and also Pakistan and Ceylon. The South-east Asian countries also receive some attention, but only in a relatively marginal way.

Myrdal consciously approaches the study in the tradition of the classics of political economy — the echo in the title of Adam Smith's An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations is far from accidental. Indeed, he says in his preface: "It is not altogether a pretentious metaphor when I describe my endeavor to apply an institutional approach in this study as an attempt to analyse the development problems of South Asia in the manner that Adam Smith studied England's development problems two hundred years ago. Smith, of course, never dealt with problems as purely "economic", and the same can be said in general of the whole classical school . . ." (p. x).

Myrdal develops his "institutional approach" in a sustained polemic with prevailing "purely economic" approaches to the problem of development in South Asia, especially as practised by Western economists, but also by many specialists in the South Asian countries themselves.

His attack on "Western bias" in the study of South Asia is pressed with relentless vigor. At one level, he attacks the political, diplomatic and strategic influences which bear upon these attitudes — the whole complex of cold war phenomena, as they have influenced economic studies. At another and deeper level, he attacks the tendency to carry over into the study of South Asia social and motivational assumptions arising from a Western environment.
His discussion of the concepts of "unemployment" and "under-employment" as used by Western economists in relation to South Asia is particularly interesting in this connection. He finds these conceptions inappropriate to the historically evolved South Asian reality, preferring instead the concept of "under-utilisation" of labor.

However, Professor Myrdal explicitly disclaims any "pure economic" approach for himself — he is in fact at great pains to point out that all economic judgments are valuational judgments. Perhaps the core statement of his argument is the following:

Conditions in the rich Western countries today are such that, broadly speaking, the social matrix is permissive of economic development or when not, becomes readily adjusted so as not to place much in the way of obstacles in its path. This is why an analysis in 'economic' terms, abstracting from that social matrix, can produce valid and useful results.

But that judgment cannot be accurately applied to South Asian conditions. Not only is the social and institutional structure different from the one that has evolved in Western countries, but, more important, the problem of development in South Asia is one calling for induced changes in that social and institutional structure, as it hinders economic development and as it does not change spontaneously, or, to any very large extent, in response to policies restricted to the 'economic' sphere. (p. 26).

The depth of the differences between the developed Western countries and the world of South Asia is a leitmotif of the work. In an extended comparison of the initial conditions for economic growth as between the present-day rich Western countries and the countries of South Asia today, Myrdal finds on almost every count that the comparison is unfavorable to the South Asian countries. In particular, he emphasises the slowness of the development of the growth potential in the pre-industrial West, and compares it with the imperative need of the contemporary South Asian countries for accelerated rates of development. Myrdal concludes this discussion with these words:

In a sense, the most fundamental difference in initial conditions between the South Asian countries today and the Western countries in any period of their pre-industrial phase is the difference in the pace of history. A telescoping of change has become the only alternative not only to continued stagnation but to regression. In the final analysis, this situation is a result of the high levels of economic development now achieved by the developed countries and the accelerating speed with which they continue to develop . . .

It is as if the "coefficient of changeability," starting at a low point in the Middle Ages, rose and then continued to rise at an ever faster rate. And so the ideas of change, adaptability, and mobility were gradually accepted as a way of life, until Westerners became accustomed to the kind of "permanent industrial revolution" in which they live today. (pp. 700-701).

In the South Asian countries, on the other hand, the long stagnation . . . has solidified institutions and attitudes, and hardened resistance to change in all strata of the population.
Myrdal defines the "institutional approach", as follows:

We conceive of the situation in each South Asian country — as in any other country — as a social system. The system consists of a great number of conditions that are causally interrelated, in that a change in one will cause changes in the others. We classify the conditions in six broad categories 1) output and incomes 2) conditions of production 3) levels of living 4) attitudes towards life and work 5) institutions 6) policies.

This structure of categories represents the conditions in a country viewed from the 'economic' angle, which corresponds to the focus of the present study. The conditions in the first three categories represent broadly what is usually referred to as the "economic factors:" while categories 4 and 5 represent the non-economic ones; category 6 is a mixture and is usually considered to belong to the "economic factors" when policies aim at inducing changes in conditions 1-3, but not otherwise. (pp. 1859-1860).

The main thrust of the "institutional approach" is in fact a plea for a much greater appreciation of conditions 4 and 5, as they exist concretely in each South Asian country, in confronting the problems of underdevelopment, development and planning for development. Each of the "conditions" listed above is the subject of a book-length essay in Asian Drama. Here we can only comment on his summation of conditions 4 and 5. Of condition 4 (attitudes towards life and work) he notes particularly as obstacles low levels of work discipline, punctuality and orderliness; superstitious beliefs and irrational outlook; lack of alertness, adaptability, ambition, and general readiness for change and experiment; contempt for manual work; submissiveness to authority and exploitation; low aptitude for cooperation; low standards of personal hygiene and so on. To these attitudes should be added unreadiness for deliberate and sustained birth control . . .

As to condition 5 (institutions), he notes a land tenure system detrimental to agricultural advance; undeveloped institutions for enterprise, employment, trade and credit; deficiencies of national consolidation; imperfections in the authority of government agencies; instability and low effectiveness in national politics; low standards of efficiency and integrity in public administration; ineffective organs for provincial and local self-government; and a weak infrastructure of voluntary organisations — the institutional conditions which constitute these national communities as "soft States" in our terminology. At the root of all these institutional debilities is a low degree of popular participation and a rigid, inegalitarian social stratification. (pp. 1862-1863).

The core recommendation made by Myrdal for emergence from this social miasma is what he describes as "radical State policies" designed to bring into life the "modernisation criteria", which he takes to underlie all efforts at development in South Asia. These criteria he describes as a rationalist (rather than a sentimental) approach to economic problems, the development of the economy on a planned basis; a rise in labor productivity and the level of living; social and economic equality; an improvement in social institutions and standards; national consolidation and national independence; democracy in political life and in the sphere of public relations; social discipline combined with democratic planning. (p. 57, et seq.)
It is necessary to apologise for the length of the quotations presented above. But they still present nothing but the barest of skeletons of the argument of this massive theoretical enterprise in the methodology of economic studies, upon which Professor Myrdal expended a full 10 years of his life. Myrdal's "institutional approach" takes him, as can be seen, right to the threshold of a marxist, revolutionary socialist approach. But it is a threshold he does not cross.

Not only is the idea of the revolutionary overthrow of all existing structures as a possible denouement to the South Asian drama absent from the work, but the mass of the population are seen throughout as an object of government, which may be either good or bad, rather than as a possible force for social progress in their own right. The perspective of a change of the entire class structure therefore scarcely arises, however keenly aware Professor Myrdal is of the mammoth difficulties posed by this structure for progressive social development.

It is a matter for the greatest regret that a work of such importance barely examines at all the experience of the Asian communist-led regimes of China, North Korea and North Vietnam. True, they are geographically peripheral to the scope of the work. True, there are substantial differences in the historically evolved national communities of East Asia and South Asia, which, in the case of China, North Korea and North Vietnam, undoubtedly favored the growth of revolutionary socialist movements out of the movements for national independence. But even the most superficial study of the pre-revolutionary situations in these three regions points not only to differences, but to similarities, and great similarities.

With all its shortcomings in practice in the different national environments, socialist co-operation in agriculture must surely be said to offer at least as promising a perspective in South Asia as the planned development of capitalism in agriculture recommended by Professor Myrdal. Likewise, the experience of China, North Korea and North Vietnam is rich in experiments in the planned development alongside modern industry, of the traditional craft industries — a course which figures very high on the list of recommendations with which Professor Myrdal concludes his study of the problem of industrialisation. Above all, their success — which remains unique in the history of Asia — stimulating that "popular participation" in the social process, whose lack Professor Myrdal sees as the "root" of the institutional problem in the South Asian region, surely deserved comment.

Professor Myrdal's identification with progressive, non-communist
elements of the South Asian elites is passionate and complete. He says at one point:

Despite the increased interest in South Asian problems in other parts of the world, the leading figures in this drama are the people of South Asia, especially their educated class . . . (p. 34).

This is not to suggest that he does not feel the most genuine sympathy for the suffering of the masses of a country such as India. He does — the entire work is lambent with such sympathy. But the idea of a politically decisive section of the educated class moving over to revolutionary socialist positions and securing massive popular support (as happened in the present-day socialist East Asian countries) he scarcely entertains.

Perhaps the political optic of the work is most surely indicated by the fact that its author index contains at least eight column inches of references to the writings and statements of Jawaharlal Nehru, and no reference at all to Mao Tse-tung. But is there such a "Chinese wall" (if one may be forgiven the expression) between the societies of South and East Asia? Is it really a fact that the development problems of the two regions, due to historically evolved factors, are different in kind? Is it really not possible that what we are witnessing today is merely a lag in time.

The reverses so far suffered in 1969 by the forces of reaction in India — representatives par excellence of those "institutional impediments" to change whose negative influence is so thoroughly exposed by Professor Myrdal — do at least give slender grounds for hope that a "global" socialist change is not forever ruled out for this vast country, whatever the difficulties such a change may face. The very forms of political democracy on which Professor Myrdal pins considerable hope could conceivably help to ensure a less painful socialist transition, in the conditions of India, than has occurred elsewhere in Asia where such forms were less developed, or did not exist at all.

Gunnar Myrdal's Asian Drama towers over previous attempts at its subject. It is a massive contribution to scholarship, and a strong antidote to glib, Western-biased approaches of either the Left or the Right to the problems of social development in the long-stagnant societies of Asia. It is noteworthy that it has been received rather coolly in the West, but with considerable enthusiasm in the region to which it is devoted.

Gunnar Myrdal writes at one point that the outcome of the Asian drama is "not necessarily tragedy". Whether one shares its basic political viewpoint completely or not, there can be no doubt that his work, through the light it throws on the reality of the problems of development in the region, will work powerfully in favor of averting a tragic outcome.