

Prisoners of Social Capital

Interrogating Social Capital: The Indian Experience

edited by Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya,
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Bohapatra and Sudha Pai;
Sage Publications, New Delhi,
Thousand Oaks and London, 2004;
pp 335, Rs 680.

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In liberal or Marxist studies of modern development, collective action was primarily analysed in terms of the structural dynamics that made people cluster and fight between groups, classes, and organisations. In addition, one analysed the importance of people's ability to read these realities and to generate common understandings and ideologies that shaped movements, organisations and joint actions. In the 1980s, class, state, politics and ideologies were deemed to be inefficient tools of collective action, and inevitably dangerous in the hands of power-hungry leaders. But this danger would be mitigated by the invisible hand of the market. The market would facilitate less destructive collective action, as long as the economists "get the prices right". Ten years later, one had also to "get the institutions right". The elite as well as the people would adhere to the optimal rules of the game, so long as experts on the rule of law, human rights, democracy and "good governance" engaged to develop them. Post-modernists lashed out of course, saying that nobody could understand reality in the first place. But the more meaningful reaction against class, market and politics was the thesis that "good" collective action tends to originate instead from the independently communicating, associating and self-managing citizens in civil society. In civil society, people would not have to be brought together by the more or less devastating interests of enlightened leaders, markets, institutions, organisations or states. In the process of associating, people themselves would

develop sufficient inter-personal trust or "social capital" to solve the game theory of the "prisoners' dilemma",¹ work together on a reasonably equal basis, and thus improve on everything from economic development to peace and democracy.

This new theory of social capital that would solve the collective action problem on the level of the people themselves was conceptualised by American scholar Robert Putnam in his similarly idealist reading of old Italy as French aristocrat de Tocqueville's was of young America. Pierre Bourdieu's alternative concept of social capital (as a source of power in terms of "good contacts" with influential people) withered away. According to Putnam, people did not have to be brought together by "special interests" and mucky politics or markets. Thus, communitarians as well as libertarians and anarchists could unite against state and politics. Yesterday's Maoists and Leninists could dispose of their old leaders while holding on to "the people". NGO activists with access to Toyota land cruisers could talk to social movement campaigners with access to the poor. And pilgrims to Putnam's historical north Italian heartland of social capital could bask in the glory of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's magnificent medieval frescoes showing "good and bad government" in the town hall of Sienna, without paying much attention to either the chained, non-civic, rebellious peasants in the right hand corner of the most lively illustration of "good government" or the fact that Lorenzetti's masterpiece was commissioned by the then ruling city councillors in the first place.

'Good' Development

The councillors' contemporary counterpart, the World Bank, launched a supportive campaign of Putnam's social capital theory, stating that it is this capital that keeps society together and that fosters a happy marriage between well functioning public administration and markets. However, many began to have second thoughts

and thus the four major points of early critique became more widely considered.² First, the hegemonic tendency of not discussing the explanatory power of inter-personal trust in relation to alternative analyses of collective action, such as those mentioned in the introduction of this article. The social capital paradigm simply did not bother much with the huge reserves of knowledge on conflict and power, but suggested the alternative grand thesis that inter-personal trust through associational activity, such as bird watching, was the ultimate key to fruitful collective action and the best possible form of development. Second, the lack of consideration for the different ways of explaining the rise of various forms of associational life, as well as whether these generated inter-personal trust and "good" development. Scholars of Italian history disputed Putnam's account. Others pointed to the general lack of intermediary variables such as politics and ideology that exist between people getting to know each other and then acting collectively. Yet others argued that politics and institutions were the independent rather than the dependent variables. Third, the crude thesis that inter-personal trust would somehow shape and influence most of the good things in life, such as effective democracy and "good" development. In time, different kinds of social capital such as bonding, bridging and linking capital were defined, but these only served to raise more questions about the development of "good" associations and "good" trust. And it remained notoriously difficult to make sense of dynamics such as the rise of fascism in Putnam's north Italian heartland of social capital, or the different outcomes of efforts at popular development in similar Kerala panchayats.³ Fourth, the question of equating civil associations with the people. On the one hand, by ignoring the difference between rights-bearing citizens such as many progressive NGO activists and "populations"⁴ that lack sufficient capacity to promote and use their rights, and on the other by then assuming that NGOs and "popular organisations" that attempt participatory direct democracy are undistorted offsprings of the people, thus avoiding the problems of political representation.⁵

Analysing Complexities

Over the years, some of the lustre of social capital has thus faded away. Despite the backing of the World Bank and other development agencies, many of the questions arising concerning dynamics of actual collective actions and conflicts remain unanswered. Some innovative students of social capital have therefore used available funds to problematise the original theses. The present anthology, *Interrogating Social Capital* is a good example (and thanks to its empirical focus somewhat more coherent than the more wide-ranging *Investigating Social Capital* from the same publishers, edited by Sanjev Prakash and Per Selle). In the introduction to the present volume, editors Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, Niraja Gopal Jayal, Bishnu N Mohapatra and Sudha Pai distance themselves from certain aspects of the dominant research on social capital. Their approach may be summarised thus: yes, we work with Putnam's concept – but we are aware of many of the pitfalls. Thus, we look at various explanations for inter-personal trust and its outcomes. While we appreciate the works of Ashutosh Varshney and Anirudh Krishna,⁶ we do not confine ourselves to what are supposed to be the civic elements of social capital in the west, but we also include the democratic potential beyond civic communities, along similar lines as Partha Chatterjee in his "The Politics of the Governed".⁷

A number of the contributions live up to this vital programme. Sudha Pai analyses the complicated ways in which dalits in Uttar Pradesh may benefit from social capital by uniting against upper and middle castes while also suffering from problems of linking up with other sections of the poor. Niraja Gopal Jayal discusses self organisation for forest conservation in the central Himalayas and shows how new panchayat schemes undermine rather than draw on and integrate the trust and cooperation that already existed. Bishnu N Mohapatra demonstrates how substantial stocks of social capital in an Orissa village are quickly undermined by the segmentation, hierarchies and outright power relations that occupy public spaces. Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (whose essay also appears in the other Sage volume on social capital) comments on these papers, demonstrating effectively how they refute three major theses of Tocqueville and Putnam: associational life may unite the participants but not necessarily promote

collective action with those outside, associationalism and social capital are not always positively related to democracy, and accumulated social capital may not automatically be useful. As was the case decades ago in the discourse on what was modern and traditional, Rudolph now warns against attempts to identify ideal forms of civil society and social capital. Indian reality in particular, she says, is always a hybrid. A similar critique, one might add, may also be applied to the sometimes idealised European settings. But Rudolph's major theses should be underlined. First, that whether or not different associations generate social capital and "good" results is an empirical question. Second, that the crucial conditions may not be limited to civil society. Third, that this calls for more knowledge about various associations. In contrast to Tocqueville and Putnam, one must be able to distinguish, with the aid of scholars such as Habermas, between non-political associations that tend to reflect private life, special interests and specific issues on the one hand and political associations that relate such issues to matters and perspectives of common concern on the other. Rudolph, however, does not discuss whether this also calls for breaking out of the social capital paradigm as such and relating more openly to the broader discourse on political associationalism.

Rudolph's programme is only partially followed up in the remaining sections of the book. Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya's study of the political mobilisation of social capital in West Bengal by the dominant Communist Party of India-Marxist is both imaginative and compelling. While initially the Left drew extensively on local schoolteachers' contacts, prestige, authority and integrity in mediating the relations between state and society, their capacity to generate trust was later reduced by actual or perceived partisanship as they became politically more involved. This is convincing, but there is no close analysis of whether the erosion was inevitable and how the political engagement relates to other forms of politicisation and representation. Manabi Majumdar contributes a fine study on how existing and potential social capital in schools are destroyed by widespread social apartheid. And Nandini Sundar demonstrates effectively that the problem of forest conservation in Bastar, Madhya Pradesh, is not the lack of social capital but the non-inclusive forms of devolution and participation imposed by the World Bank. Yet the focus on social capital does

not help us address the obvious question as to whether these contradictions might then spark efficient and public collective action. It is true that Peter Mayer's study of how the institutional relates to civic engagement points to the fundamental importance of human rather than social capital. And Renata Serra's investigation into the general developmental effects of social capital concludes similarly that while Putnam's civic community index variables do not make sense in India, education seems to be the key intervening variable that may generate positive civil engagement and development. But if public policy in favour of widespread and equal education may shape social capital, the question remains, what is it that generates collective action in favour of such priorities in the first place? It is this question that remains unanswered within the present discourse.

Ashok Swain's concluding chapter on protest movements in Kerala does not offer a convincing answer. He argues that strong social networks have facilitated bonding as well as bridging social capital among progressive movements, which in turn have generated impressive social policies in spite of poor economic growth. But all this does is recount a fine tale of success without helping us to understand more about the critical stumbling blocks that existed in spite of positive efforts and tendencies and the impressive "People's Campaign" (which banked on the assumption that such potentials in civil society simply had to be encouraged). How do we explain the many special demands from various groups, the political clientelism, the shrinking public resources and the weak political capacity of the innovative activists to counter the problems that prevented the renewal of the world-renowned but now unviable "Kerala model".⁸

Alternative Views?

One must return to the introductory chapter for a final verdict on the interrogation of social capital. Several of the authors have distanced themselves from mainstream theories of social capital by being open to alternative ways of explaining the rise and impact of inter-personal trust as well as by denouncing assumptions that associational life in countries such as India is dominated by rights-bearing citizens. According to the editors, the main conclusion is that "civil society in India is not a space occupied by free and equal

citizens, it has within it unequal relations based on hierarchy, power and domination. (...) Consequently, the relationship between social capital and democracy can be negative as well as positive.” Thus, these wider dynamics “need to be investigated with care” (p 33).

Yet there is little in the way of such broader investigations of collective action. While most of the book is laudable and essential reading for everyone with a serious interest in Indian politics and society in particular, the importance of inter-personal trust is neither discussed within the framework of the larger stock of theories of collective action (such as structural dynamics and people’s ability to understand them) nor the discourse on political mediation and representation. Even the successfully pragmatic authors of the volume under review thus remain prisoners of the social capital approach.⁹ It is not only the fact that analysis has not been carried out within the broader perspective of theoretical and empirical insights from south-east Asia, southern Africa, Latin America and northern

Europe. It is also ironic that a book aimed at “interrogating social capital in India” neither addresses the most devastating problem of social capital in the country – the politics of Hindu communalism – nor contributes much to the discourse of the increasingly obvious political problems of progressive popular action in cases such as Kerala. [EW](#)

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Notes

- 1 The idea of this game theory is that each isolated prisoner gains when both cooperate, but if only one of them cooperates, the other one, who defects, will gain more. If both defect, both lose (or gain very little) but not as much as the “cheated” cooperator whose cooperation is not returned. The dilemma resides in the fact that each prisoner has a choice between only two options, but cannot make a good decision without knowing what the other one will do.
- 2 For the original critique in this respect, see John Harriss, *Depoliticising Development: The World Bank and Social Capital*, Left Word Books, New Delhi, 2001.
- 3 For some early examples of critical texts that relate to the three points above, see Sidney

Tarrow, ‘Making Social Science Work across Time and Space: A Critical Reflection of Robert Putnam’s ‘Making Democracy Work’’, *American Political Science Review*, 90:2, 1996; Margaret Levi, ‘Social and Unsocial Capital’: A Review Essay of Robert Putnam’s ‘Making Democracy Work’, *Politics and Society*, Vol 24:1, March 1996; Olle Törnquist, *Making Democratisation Work: From Civil Society and Social Capital to Political Inclusion and Politicisation: Theoretical Reflections on Concrete Cases in Indonesia, Kerala and the Philippines*, Uppsala University, 1996, also in Lars Rudebeck et al, *Democratisation in the Third World*, Macmillan, Houndmills and London, 1998, and Törnquist, ‘Politics and Development, A Critical Introduction’, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, 1999. For vital further developed early critique, see for instance, Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman 2003 and Bo Rothstein, *Social Traps and the Problem of Trust, Theories of Institutional Design*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005.

- 4 To use the term of Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004.
- 5 See, e.g., John Harriss, Kristian Stokke and Olle Törnquist, (eds), *Politicising Democracy: The*

New Local Politics of Democratisation, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills and New York, 2004, Neera Chandhoke, 'Seeing the State in India', and John Harriss, 'Political Participation, Representation and the Urban Poor: Findings from a Research in Delhi', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XL, No 11, March 12, 2005.

6 Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002 and Anirudha Krishna, *Active Social Capital: Tracing the Roots of Development and*

Democracy, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002.

7 See note 4.

8 Cf the preliminary attempts in P K Michael Tharakan's 'Historical Hurdles in the Course of the People's Planning Campaign in Kerala, India' and Olle Törnquist's 'The Political Deficit of Substantial Democratisation' in Harriss et al, op cit.

9 To allude to the frequent statement that social capital solves the classical game theory of the "prisoners dilemma" that was mentioned in note 1.