Book Reviews


The concept of social capital has been gaining increasing attention since the 1990s and the publication of Robert Putnam’s seminal Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy in 1993. This was the case both in academic research and in the case of international donor agencies that have introduced it into their lending strategies for developing countries. Although other authors formulated the concept earlier, Putnam defines it as “features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions.” Using this definition as the point of departure, Interrogating Social Capital attempts to translate this concept into the Indian context. The book is an edited volume comprising 10 essays that explore the relationship between social capital and democracy in India.

The authors are fully aware of the impossibility of directly applying western theories into a non-western context, in spite of the necessity to often resort to them. As the editors point out in the introductory chapter: “Thanks to colonialism and imperialism, and, eventually, the current phase of capital-driven globalization, social science in the South has always been forced to dialogue with the analytical tools of the North” (p. 23). They apply the concept quite successfully, watchful of the pitfalls, and contextualizing it in a meaningful way. The volume is prefaced by a good introduction, which successfully guides the reader through the maze of the subsequent chapters. The essays, each a microstudy of a certain topic, examine the role of social capital in relation to different economic development issues at the level of village communities, in the Indian schooling system in a rural area and generally in a comparison between the Indian federal states, in the institutional performance across the federal states, as well as in the mobilization of protest movements.

Is Putnam’s social capital useful in the Indian context? As the essays reveal, it is, but it is not. In India’s democracy, social capital is manifested in a
different way from that in Western Europe and North America. First, India is infinitely more diverse than Italy, the object of Putnam’s study, in terms of religion, ethnicity, language, caste, and class. Putnam’s indicators may be irrelevant or immeasurable, necessitating their redefinition. The authors point out that education, for instance, plays an important role in India. In Putnam’s study, on the other hand, it was largely disregarded. Particularized trust is another aspect that can contribute to democracy and is not necessarily negative as in the western perception. Moreover, as some case studies demonstrate, the presence of high social capital alone may not necessarily result in democratic and efficient governance.

The essays thus illustrate social capital in different ways, each taking a differing approach. For instance, Niraja Gopal Jayal presents the effects of decentralization which, in his view, rendered people insecure instead of empowering them, leading to the depletion of the social capital necessary for collective action. Bishnu N. Mohapatra argues that the presence of social capital alone cannot make public institutions work. Rather preconditions such as the existence of responsive institutions, a certain level of economic development, and forms of power relations, among other factors, are needed for its successful mobilization. Manabi Majumdar studies the link between social inequalities, social capital, and educational participation of the underprivileged concluding that “social apartheid” based on land concentration, caste, gender, and poverty has developed within the governmental educational system. Nundini Sundar explores the detrimental effects of the involvement of the World Bank in the implementation of a new forest management and conservation model, which disregarded the existing, indigenous systems leading to the destruction of traditional social capital.

The 10 essays cover a variety of topics and are self-standing, but the thread to connect the studies into a coherent volume is missing to some extent. A degree of repetition, particularly as it relates to the presentation of Putnam’s theory, which starts *ab ovo* in virtually every essay, could have been avoided with tighter editing. At times heavy use of local terminology and unintelligible abbreviations, make the reading cumbersome for a reader unfamiliar with the details of the Indian caste and administrative structure, in spite of the list of abbreviations included at the beginning of the book. The volume is nevertheless an interesting and useful read for those interested in a good criticism of Putnam’s theory and its application to non-western contexts. It offers valuable insight into Indian society and as such it is a recommended reference.

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