

An interesting new conclusion relating to social capital - from recent literature

Sunimal Fernando, 05.01.03

Some of the recent literature from America and Britain relating to social capital suggests a very interesting new conclusion relating to social capital. The available information from scientifically researched sociological studies of the dynamics of social interaction in south Asian grassroots communities tend to support this conclusion. Therefore I think this could be of interest to the forum. It is as follows.

Social capital is high where social and economic resources and socio-economic privilege are also high. Trust and Social Capital are a function of socio-economic privilege. Economic resources are needed to build social capital.

This conclusion based on recent studies conducted in the USA and Britain challenges the conventional view that social capital is a resource that the marginalized and disadvantaged can use even if they don't have economic resources. Recent data from Britain and the USA refute this view and conclude instead that social capital is much stronger among economically secure, well-employed middle-class people as compared with working class and marginalized people. They point out that economic resources are needed to create social capital. Social capital is a function of enjoying adequate incomes, access to convenient transportation to meet with others in civic engagements, an environment of safety to frequently venture out of their homes, having child-care facilities when they venture out of their homes on civic engagements etc. The data refers to social ties and social capital in urban, industrial society.

Sociological studies of grassroots level social interaction in poor rural, localized, south Asian communities indicate that though these localized grassroots communities of the poor are rich in social ties, the content of these social ties is characterized by greater elements of distrust than of trust. At the **normative / ideological level**, the expected behaviour associated with these social ties is based on trust, cooperation, emotional identity, reciprocity, working towards a common goal etc. For example, at a normative / ideological level, this is the expected behaviour among kinsmen, neighbours, those cultivating a common rice field, those living in the same hamlet, those belonging to the same caste, those living in the same village community etc. But at a **practical, interactional, behavioural level**, it is found that persons who are thus linked to each other are in fact very competitive, suspicious of each other, jealous of each other, rivaling each other and wanting to get ahead of the other - often at the expense of the other person because in an environment where they are few resources and opportunities, that is often the only way in which a person can get ahead and improve his/her well-being. So at a practical, behavioural level there is more distrust than trust in the social ties that link the communities of the poor in south Asia. It is also seen that in the south Asian situation - generally speaking - most of the cooperation and joint action there is among the poor is motivated by purely instrumental reasons - but not based on trust. For example, kinsmen or neighbours frequently visit each other and go to each other's assistance when the need arises because they need each other's mutual assistance and support when difficulties arise in a society that lacks institutionalized common welfare services. So the reason for the social

links in these circumstances is instrumental; not based on trust which is something deeper, something emotive, something affectual.

One can argue that in the south Asian situation there is a lot of thick social capital existing in poor, rural communities - but that social capital among the poor lacks the element of trust. It is more instrumentally motivated but at the same time legitimized at a super-structural plane by an 'ideology' of trust, which is very different to an existence of trust at a practical, empirical, day-to-day behavioural level.

Theoretically speaking, the problematique is the relationship between social trust and social capital; not the relationship between social links and social capital.

Comparing the south Asian and the USA / British realities, one may speculate as follows: In the urban, industrial North, where the poor can access institutionalized welfare services to a much greater extent than in poor south Asian villages, the poor do not need to link with one another socially for instrumental reasons to the same extent as in south Asia; they can manage their lives in greater isolation from one another. Hence the observation that social links are weak and social capital is low among the poor in Britain and the USA. In contrast, in poor south Asian villages, social links are strong and so is social capital (without trust).