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A Critical Evaluation of the Concept of 'Social Capital' and it's Role in Public Policy

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ABSTRACT

Social Capital theory offers public policy a new paradigmatic approach to solving social problems. Despite being ill defined and difficult to measure, numerous claims have been made about its benefits. As it facilitates collective action among the actors, it leads to increased level of performance in several public policy areas. briefly describing about the social capital and it's theories, hear this research try to understand relationship between social capital and public policy. it further demonstrates how social capital framework is applied and works in Indian context. Then it offers empirical case studies of social capital in covid-19 pandemic and the Nepal's Chhaupadi tradition to represent how social capital needs to compliance in non-compliance of policy respectively.

Keywords: Social Capital, Public Policy, Community, Chhaupadi, COVID-19

I. INTRODUCTION

Many scholars have tried to define social capital in their way, however in simple terms social capital can be defined as stocks of social trust, norms, and networks that people can draw upon in order to solve common problems.³

Robert Putnam, the author of *Bowling Alone*, and a political scientist based in America, describes how America has undergone drastic changes in the form of reduced social capital.

According to Robert Putnam, social capital can be defined as – ‘those features of social organization, such as trust, norms and network, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions’.⁴ Putnam treated social capital as a public good. He describes social capital as a collective trait functioning at an aggregate level. For him, it was the main stock of political culture of modern society. Putnam has been criticized due to his oversimplification of complex processes to a single factor called trust. For him trust was the aggregate indicator of social capital.

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³ SWAIN, "Social Capital and Its Uses." *European Journal of Sociology*.

⁴ Lewis, 2010, 10.

Most of the social scientist agree on the fact that it was Pierre Bourdieu who first used ‘social capital’ term in his work. For him, social capital is the sum total of all those resources which help in maintaining the durable network of institutionalized relationships, mutual trust and norms. Although Bourdieu view of social capital was limited to bourgeoisie class.⁵ As described earlier, Bourdieu views social capital as only possessed by bourgeoisie. For him, social capital is about individual position within a class-based social structure. Although this can be perceived as a Marxist vision, however it is more of a lack of theorizing of the term ‘class’ on the part of Bourdieu. He claims that the amount of social capital one has depends upon the size of the network one can mobilize.⁶

James Coleman’s interpretation of social capital depends on his interest in both economics and sociology. According to him social capital is important as human capital. He defined social capital as ‘the set of resources that inhere in family relations and in community social organizations and that are useful for the cognitive and social development of a child or a young person’.⁷ For him, social capital is a functional means through which ends are achieved.

Nan Lin’s book titled *Social Capital: A theory of social structure and action*, describes social capital in action. For him, social capital is not merely a resource but something that can be used purposively to achieve the desired goal. If people just accumulate these networks without their use, is equal to unrealized potential. His theory of social capital is thus more concerned about the proper utilization of the resource rather than as just a potential resource.⁸ He also refers to Marx’s theory of Capital and describes two versions of neo-capital theories- Human Capital and Cultural Capital.⁹ Lin discusses in his book how social networks enhance the outcomes of a particular action. If someone do better, it is because they are better connected.

There are three types of social capital- bonding, bridging and linking.

1. Bonding describes connections between similar group of people sharing similar characteristics. These characteristics help in creating a bond between two persons. It is the strongest kind of social capital and are formed through development of social ties¹⁰.
2. Bridging differs from bonding because the ties in this type of social capital are not strong. Bridged refers to an intermediary connection which is formed when one person

⁵ Ians, 2020

⁶ Lewis, 28

⁷ Ibid., 30

⁸ Ibid., 35

⁹ Human Capital is the value added to the workers after they acquire knowledge while Cultural Capital focus on social practice and social reproduction.

¹⁰ Boyce, Social capital definition (3 types and 5 examples) 2020.

gets connected with another through an intermediary. It is horizontal that means that it is developed among people who are from the same socio-economic group.¹¹

3. Linking is an extension of bridging. It occurs vertically that means among different socio-economic groups. People belonging to a similar socio-economic group is referred as a 'community' while linking takes place outside of these communities.¹²

Social capital varies from places to places. Some places have plenty of financial capital and very little of social capital, while others can be very different in their composition of financial and social capital¹³. Although measuring social capital is not as easy as it looks like. It depends on the size of one's network of connections and the volume of economic and cultural capital that the members of network have. It is also determined by the rate of civic participation.¹⁴

As already mentioned, trust varies from societies to societies. Both Japan and America have been historically high-trust societies. American society has been characterized of network of private associations. According to Alexis De Tocqueville, this association have been a key to American democracy.¹⁵

Social capital has an economic dimension to it as well. This can be seen in a comparison between Japan and China.¹⁶ The industrial structure of Chinese capitalist society is small scale while Japan has the complete opposite. This is because of centrality of family in Chinese culture due to which most of the Chinese don't involve unrelated professional managers. On the other hand, Japanese families have a lesser social pull.

Some societies may be deficient in social capital. This can be seen in African-American societies where most of the poor live single parents and larger social groups are weak. The deficiency of social capital also results an increase in criminal organizations.

Social capital and development thus are interrelated. There have been studies indicating that social capital plays a pivotal role in economic and sustainable development. Empirical studies have established that social capital plays a positive role in health, tax evasion and social welfare.

Social Capital and Public Policy

Social capital and public policy have a strong link between them which can help in policy

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ians, 2020.

¹⁴ SWAIN, 2003

¹⁵ Fukuyama, Social Capital and the Global Economy 2012, 91.

¹⁶ Ibid., 92.

implementation. However, it should not be regarded as a magic bullet for implementing public policy. There are many concerns that should be kept in mind while applying social capital to public policy.¹⁷ Social capital is that tool which can be used to achieve desired results of policies. However, this happens in a complementary way. There are some public policies that lack mechanisms to determine group dynamics and are based on theories of personal motivation. The social capital lens thus, helps the policy researchers and analyst to address this deficit. Much of the challenge for the policy makers is to find ways of plugging strong local networks found in many low-income areas into the larger networks found in many low-income areas into the larger network opportunity that exists beyond their world.¹⁸

In order to know the relationship between social capital and public policy, it is important to understand all the positive effects that social capital have for the society and the state.

The first and the foremost effect is that there is reduction of transaction cost. Social capital leads to collective norms and common understanding. This facilitates access to information and connections. And through that search costs are lowering and trust between institutions of society eases the transaction.¹⁹

Bonding, Bridging and Linking up across the society facilitates the dissemination of knowledge and innovation. This makes the spread of knowledge easy not only within a section of society, but also all over the society.²⁰

Social capital promotes the cooperative and socially minded behavior and could help in trying to avoid self-interest of individuals. The main reason behind this is that social capital tends to create mutual trust, norms and networks in society.²¹

Another effect of social capital is that there is more precise and effective use of existing resources. State budget is always too small to cover all the needs and costs of the people. Hence, government has to resolve this by deciding where and how they can allocate resources and prioritize their policies.²⁰ Thus, social capital helps in long term and sustainable application of policies.

Social capital promotes the people centric perspective which puts people at the center. Social capital transforms the people into active citizens as it is all about relationships, cooperation,

¹⁷ Lang & Hornburg, 1998, Pg. - 8

¹⁸ Ians, 2020,

¹⁹ Western Cape Government, Social capital and public policy. Pg. - 1

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., pg. - 2

²⁰ Ibid.

links and networks. It is necessary to implement social capital to every part of the society. It will not work if it is implemented from the top only.

The negative effect of social capital are also brought in light by scholars. It has been seen that social capital when applied with policies result in costs and negative effects for insiders as well as for outsiders and further lead to social exclusion. And where there is a community with strong bonding but not bridging or linking up new information or innovation could be kept outside.²²

II. INDIA AND ITS SOCIAL CAPITAL ADVENTURES

In India, social capital facilitates the development process at local levels. Putnam identified social capital as “those features of social organization such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” .²³ So, it can be said that the nature of creation of social capital and the role it plays in interaction between new institutions and older formalized networks which bring enduring development. these rules, norms and values set the index of the density interactivity amongst the agents of development located in different sectors and this determines the sustainable process aimed at achieving ‘development’ at local decentralized levels. Social capital could be the means for achieving well-being which constitutes the end in the Indian society, as it helps in forming networking which creates linkages and which in turn forge rules and norms that governs the developmental process.²³ Such types of network exists at different levels of Indian societies. So it is recommended that the concept of social capital should be included at both macro-level and micro-level institutions. And this initiative may be found in cultural values, social entities or economic interests.²⁴

In the developing countries, especially in India, development is the policy objective. Achieving it through sustainability of resources shall require crafting a set of policy interventions which use formal institutions in combination with non-market institutions. So mere establishment of institutions don’t guarantee that localized natural resources will be managed in a sustainable way. So, the application of social capital is crucial for the achievement of objectives in a sustainable manner as it holds the key to collective achievement of common goals and objective by a community group. ²⁵

²² Ibid. Pg. - 5

²³ Chopra, 2002, Pg. - 2911

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Mukherjee, 2002, Pg. - 2996

Social capital also plays important role in functioning of democratic institutions in segmented societies and most of the local bodies of India work in such environment. In India, segmentation arising out of caste, class or religion divisions emerges as a significant contextual variable determining the development of trust, social capital between different segments and democratic functioning of institutions and the nature of bifurcations.²⁶ Such societies are not fixed but free flowing with consequences for the nature of social capital.

III. SOCIAL CAPITAL AND POLICY COMPLIANCE

CASE OF COVID-19

Margret Thatcher once said “ there is no such thing as society”, which the pandemic proved wrong.

A social capital-based policy rather than a top-down approach of policy making can help in improving healthcare system and achieving the desired objectives. Many scholars in the public health domain have examined social capital and considered it as a framework for understanding and implementing health interventions. Many public health studies point out that an enhanced social capital can lead to improved mental health outcomes.²⁷ Studies conducted in U.S shows that social capital is an important factor in COVID-19 response. Not only this, some studies have confirmed that some states with higher social capital were marked by higher testing rates and slower infection growth.²⁸

COVID-19 had major impacts on mental health keeping in mind the social distancing policies. The normal patterns of networking and ties were disrupted due to this. In China, there was an increased rate of anxiety and depression among people practicing social distancing.²⁷ In such situations, strong bonding capital between the distant family members and communities can help in alleviating mental stress due to isolation. More recently, the CEO of Infosys, also emphasized on the importance of building social capital through a hybrid working model during the pandemic.³⁰

Several studies have also shown that different social capitals can have different impact on policy outcomes.³¹ For example, in U.S, states responded differently depending upon the community engagement and individual commitment to social distancing leading to different

²⁶ Pai, 2001, Pg. - 652

²⁷ S. Szreter et al., 1970, ²⁸ Wu, CIHR, 2020.

²⁷ S. Szreter et al., 1970.

³⁰ Money Control, 2020

³¹ Wu, CIHR, 2020.

outcomes. Thus, social capital is one of the important factors that can help in making effective policy interventions during such health crisis.

Three public health experts at Harvard University showed through their study that bonding, bridging and linking are important social tools to build trust and network during an outbreak.²⁸ These can also be build through the promotion of community-based social norms that may be complimentary to public health interventions. That is why when social capital is higher, than enforcing norms become easier. The mask culture of South Korea can be one such norm.

In India, Kerala is the state with the highest social capital.²⁹ This can be proved by the responses of Kerala floods which brought the local support groups, fishermen and technology driven people under one roof and resulted in high collective resilience. Keralites has a high level of trust and networking.

Countries such South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore demonstrated a high rate of linking social capital. Linking social capital in these countries can be demonstrated as the state-society relations. People here, have showed enormous trust in public institutions.

Sweden is also a remarkable example where social capital lead to behavioral compliance with the public health system. Although there was no such strict restriction on the movement of people, the rate of COVID-19 cases remained low. According to a survey, Swedish people tends to trust other people and this trust is among the highest in the world.³⁰

Thus, countries deficit in social capital should learn from the present pandemic. Ignoring social capital, will not do any good in improving the situation. Communities, individuals and government institutions should make efforts to build robust social capital and networks to deal with such crisis in the future.

IV. SOCIAL CAPITAL AND POLICY NON-COMPLIANCE:

CASE OF NEPAL'S CHHAUPADI PRACTICE

Chhaupadi is an ancient tradition which is still practiced in the rural areas of Nepal. Women are forced to live in mud huts or sheds during their menstruation as they are considered to be 'impure'. Even during child birth, they are forced to live in these huts with limited access to water and sanitation facilities. The impact of this practice on women's health is immense. It is not only physical but also psychological. Girls experiencing menstruation for the first time are

²⁸ Samanta, 2020.

²⁹ Babu, 2020.

³⁰ Stuti Rawat, Alfred Muluan Wu, 2020.

made to live in these unhygienic huts for 14 days .³¹ This increases the risk of reproductive tract infections other serious diseases. Apart from this, there is always a fear of animal attacks or sexual harassment at night.³² Most of the rape cases are not even revealed due to shame. The effect on mental health is also serious as women develop a feeling of isolationism and insecurity often leading to depression.

There are several laws that criminalizes the practice of Chhaupadi. Most prominently, Article 12 of the Nepal's interim constitution of 2007 provides its citizens with the Right to equality and Article 20 which provides the right to reproductive health. Article 29(2) is also very important with regard to the Menstrual exile practice in Nepal as it states that "No one shall be exploited in the name of any custom, tradition or usage or in any other manner whatsoever".

A significant piece of legislation was passed in 2005, when the Supreme Court issued the directive to the Nepal Government for the formulation of laws which can help to curb the practice of Chhaupadi. In the year 2008, the ministry of child and women welfare also laid down certain guidelines which would help in the elimination of the practice. In 2017, the Supreme Court of Nepal criminalized the practice of Chhaupadi Any family member who forces a women to practice Chhaupadi can be punished with a jail sentence of 3 months and/or a fine of 3,000 rupees. Not only this in recent years, Nepal government has also proposed the withdrawal of state support services from the families who continue this practice.³⁷ However, no arrests were made and it was only recently that an arrest was made after so many years.³³

The practice of Chhaupadi not only violates the laws of Nepal but also some very important international agreements. Article 25 of the universal declaration of Human Rights states , "Everyone has the right to live standard life with adequate health care, security, food, clothing, housing and necessary social services".³⁴ Another important agreement has been made in the World Conference on Women's Rights, the Beijing declaration has agreed that "Women and girl's rights are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedom".³⁵ The Vienna declaration and the program of action is also another declaration which is violated by the Chhaupadi, particularly paragraph 38 which calls for "the eradication of any conflict which may arise between the rights of women and the harmful effects of certain

³¹ UNHR, 2011

³² Actionaid, 2021. ³⁷

Jun & Jang, 2018

³³ Shreshtha, 2019

³⁴ Kadariya & Aro, 2015

³⁵ Ibid.

traditional or customary practices, cultural prejudices and religious extremism”.³⁶

Despite of various policies and laws in place, practice of Chhaupadi still persists. Social capital is thus an important tool to map this persistence of Chhaupadi. This has happened mainly because the traditions are being followed by generations after generations without questioning the exact rationale behind such an oppressive practice. Such traditions are based in Hindu mythology making people fear of getting punished by their gods if they try to disobey them. At such juncture, it becomes pivotal to examine the role of social capital in sustaining the practice of Chhaupadi.

A group with a high level of bonding social capital, represented by the level of solidarity in the group, build its own belief system and may become an obstacle for the national governance.³⁷The case of Chhaupadi is completely the opposite of what Putnam have conceptualised. This is because the social capital in communities in Nepal have led to policy non-compliance rather than having a positive implication for the society. To prove this, a study was conducted targeting over 400 local residents in a local community of South eastern Nepal.³⁸ The study revealed that higher caste individuals have more positive perception of Chhaupadi practice. Following the traditional practice of Chhaupadi is a matter of pride for upper caste. Not only this, the study showed that women with strong social capital were more likely to adhere to the cultural practices such as Chhaupadi.

According to some disaster studies, if there is more solidarity in a group, they try to build a self-regulatory system.³⁹ In such a system, behaviours which favour the maintenance of traditional values and practices are encouraged. On the other hand, individuals who have a strong perception of policies associated with Chhaupadi have negative perception of this traditional practice. The most shocking revelation of the study was that this practice is actually sustained due to the efforts of high caste. Individuals belonging to higher caste put more restrictions on women than on people of lower caste. This is because high caste men possess resources to put stricter restrictions on women.⁴⁰ For e.g. arranging a hut for the women to reside during menstruation or child birth.

Thus, the case of Chhaupadi practice in Nepal shows that strong social capital can lead to policy

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Jun & Jang, 2018

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Jun & JangHans, ⁴⁶

Dr. V Basil.2014, 63.

⁴⁷ Ibid. ⁴⁸ Ibid

non-compliance. The strong values and norms shared among the community in North-western region of Nepal becomes a barrier in policy implementation and perpetuates the oppression of women through these inhumane exile practices.

V. CONCLUSION

Policies affect directly the life of people in areas such as health, education, employment, housing, living conditions, access to basic services etc. And social capital is that concept which have a lot of potential for development especially for developing countries. If social capital implemented with caution and in appropriate manner, then the assessment of public policies in terms of social capital would support the idea of effective service provision and targeted policy making.

There is both positive and negative side of social capital when it comes to public policy. Here some recommendations can be suggested to fill those gaps.

- Bridging gaps and filling social capital deficit through the confidence building measures and mobilisation activities.⁴⁶
- Endorsing livelihood rights, water rights, forest rights and rights over common property resources to people.⁴⁷
- Ensuring protection of children and women from exploitation.⁴⁸
- Felicitous initiatives, incentives, infrastructure -even if by reforms and redirections – are required to deal with imbalances in socio economic structures and opportunities.⁴¹

The inclusion of social capital into public policy will result into increase in development, inclusion of the poor, and assessment of assets in form of networks, trust and norms. However, first of all it is important to understand what can be the possible positive and negative results for society when social capital will be related with public policy.

⁴¹ Ibid

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