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Review

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### Sarbeswar Sahoo

(2013) *Civil Society and Democratization in India: Institutions, Ideologies and Interests*. Abingdon: Routledge. 196 pages. ISBN: 978-0-415-65929 (hbk).

Is associational public life and greater cooperation through associations a sufficient condition in “making democracy work”? Is a sequential linear view of democratisation to explain the “third wave of democracy” able to capture the “distinctiveness” of Indian democracy? This book problematises Robert Putnam’s postulation of “social Capital” and challenges a transitory linear view of democratisation.<sup>1</sup> Sahoo establishes a pertinent linkage between civil society, democracy and the role of politics and offers a nuanced view of tracing the process of deepening democracy. A searching central question, “Is civil society a democratic force?” (p. 3) guides the arguments in this book. The author explores the politics of civil society in relation to the external political environment by looking at three non-governmental organisations operating in the tribal dominated district of Udaipur in South Rajasthan, namely—Seva Mandir, Astha Sansthan and Rajasthan Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad (RVKP). The book’s seven chapters methodically engage with the literature, making conceptual points before delving in the three case studies and offering a valid and empirically proven conclusion in the last chapter. Sahoo argues for the “primacy of politics” over social capital by postulating that the “politics of civil society” is “multifaceted” resulting in different democratic outcomes (pp. 3–4). Varied democratic outcomes of civil society are directly linked to the dominant interests and ideologies present in both civil society and the state.

The interface between state and civil society is empirically validated by examining the objectives and working of three organisations with varied democratic outcomes. These cases present three variants of civil society–state interface and show different shades of civil society politics. At the outset Sahoo outlines the nature of the liberal pluralist model as constituting a minimalist view of the state, cooperative relationship with the state and technocratic service delivery at the grassroots.

Seva Mandir is liberal pluralist in its orientation focusing on service delivery and maintains a conformist engagement with the state. Empirically, it is shown that Seva Mandir is close to the bureaucracy with a good working relationship with political parties in power. Sahoo concludes that even though Seva Mandir has been able to create a participatory institutional base at the

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1 Robert Putnam, Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nonetti (1993) *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton University Press.

grassroots with the objective of citizens' empowerment, it has also created an "organised dependency" at the grassroots. Thus, instead of creating an empowered and politically active citizenry, this organisation has remained "micro-developmental" rather than "micro-political" (p. 91), implementing the development programmes in a donor-driven project mode.

Astha Sansthan, on the other hand, represents a neo-Marxist organisation that has adopted a confrontational relationship with the state. This organisation engages in framing the demands of the excluded groups, which in this case are the tribal peoples of south Rajasthan and lays claim to the state around such demands. The approach of this organisation is movement oriented, often engaging in issue-based activism and mobilising for the rights and entitlement of the citizens. Mobilisation of tribal people against land acquisition, taking traditional moneylenders to court for malpractices, protecting forest land or an anti-dam movement are many such examples that are cited to show the "claim making" and the movement-oriented approach of Astha Sansthan. This organisation, which is highly politicised and engages in active political mobilisation at the grassroots, presents a variation to the apolitical Seva Mandir. Critical engagement with the state, non-violent mass mobilisation and issue-based activism are some of the notable strategies that form the core of Astha Sansthan. A two-pronged approach is deployed by this organisation, where at one level it carries out mobilisation and grassroots activism through People's organisations and at another level it engages in "training, campaigning, advocacy, networking and lobbying with the government" through a resource centre (p. 101). Interestingly, this organisation was formed by a group that defected from Seva Mandir over differences in ideology, which in turn explains the different directions that these organisations have taken.

RVKP is presented as a third variant, which is influenced by "Hinduvta" ideology, is communitarian in its orientation and has a mixed relationship with the state depending on which party is in power. The logic that guides the communitarian ideology is that modernisation has led to a decline in societal values, which necessitates community-based interventions. Sahoo argues that RVKP, through its development projects, cultural and political mobilisation, has indulged in active ideological socialisation of the local tribal population often leading to distrust and conflict between the tribals and others. These interventions have helped forming an electoral base for the right wing Bharatiya Janata Party. The party in this case also acted as an agency to distribute state patronage (p. 156). This explains the financial and political support of the BJP-led government in the state of Rajasthan. On the contrary, RVKP faced constraints when Congress was in power.

From the empirical evidence provided, Sahoo makes three overarching points that stand out from the narrative. First, that middle-class activism in NGOs, which have come to dominate the civil society sphere, has resulted in the “NGO-ification” of civil society in India. Secondly, the author highlights the need to have a nuanced view of civil society–state engagement, which is marked by both conflict and cooperation depending on the ascendant ideology. Thirdly, he posits that the democratic outcome as a consequence of civil society intervention is contingent on the role of ideas, interests and leadership. To elaborate on the third point, Sahoo traces specific ideational sources, such as the “Gandhian idea of constructive work” in the case of Seva Mandir, the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, Marx, Mao, Friere and Jayprakash Narayan for Astha Sansthan and in the case of RVKP the ideas of Savarkar, Hedegewar and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (p. 157, Table 7.1).

This book provides a revealing socio-political narrative that carries forward the discourse on state–society relations. A nuanced understanding of the civil society–state and democracy relationship is presented, offering not only typologies and variants, but also contributing conceptually to an evolving civil society discourse in India. The book, however, is not free of some nagging gaps. Firstly, the analysis is on three organisations, which at best can be treated as civil society organisations and not as civil society. The justification by the author that there is “NGO-ification” of civil society in India is not entirely convincing. Secondly, perhaps a more detailed exposition of the politics and related socio-political process in south Rajasthan generally and around these three organisations specifically would have added robustness to the arguments and conceptual claims made in this book. For instance, I was keen to see a detailed process tracing how ideas influenced the working of the organisations examined, evidence of which was rather thin in the empirical narrative. Also, clear evidence of how ideas shape interests is parsimoniously argued in the analysis. Lastly, I am somewhat surprised to see that the reference for Putnam’s book is incomplete. Given that the book’s main thrust is challenging Putnam’s postulation of social capital, this omission is glaring. Notwithstanding these gaps and limitations, the book provides a comprehensive and insightful examination of state–society dynamics and its interplay with democratic politics in India.

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