

L. N. Venkataraman, *The Social Construction of Capabilities in a Tamil Village*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2021, 212 pp., ISBN: 9788194829591 (Paperback).

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Revisiting the same village studied by the eminent sociologist Andre Beteille after five decades, this ethnographic account illustrates the social construction of capabilities. Employing the concept ‘capability’ developed by Amartya Sen, this book examines the intersection of caste, class and education. This study explores the roots of the social construction of mutually converging traditions of social identities with the effects of modern education. The book broadly outlines the adaptive preferences, construction and implication of capability formation in response to the provisions of poor quality of education and fragile employability. The contents of participant observation and ethnographic details in the book advance our understanding of the social (dis)functioning of education across entrenched social identities including the unemployed/underemployed educated youth in a village setting.

Adapting intersectionality in ethnography, which sociologists hardly appreciate, has empowered Venkataraman to critique the assemblages of Beteille’s framework of caste, class and power. It offers a reflexive account of the intersection of human capital ideals and social capital influences on capabilities formation. But the analysis should not shy away from the deliberate political intervention by both the state and non-state actors in a democratic system. The disposition of power, discursive relations and its complex operations in theory and practice are found silent in the adopted framework, though Beteille utilized extensively to illuminate shifting power relations and their effect on social identities. However, the description of the ‘invisible contestation’ between caste groups due to diminishing economic and social opportunities and ordering of caste determined by employment outcomes as a form of success underlines the discursive power relations. Secondly, Venkataraman claims that ‘reducing education as an instrument of human capital against the scholastic ideals of education as capabilities’ (p. 26) for employment has failed to produce any tangible material base (pp. 44–50). Though it underscores the persistence of social inequalities, the approach slipped into capability determinism. Privileging capabilities and embracing intersectionality method mismatch with Venkataraman’s claim that ‘everything as in the state of interaction, not main effect’ (p. 2). The inferences on the descriptions seem to suggest that intersectionality as a flexible method is singularly tightened by the application of capability. Unwittingly, the field has yet to grasp empirical grounding on the capability or signalling the act of capability because of the poor quality of education, which subsequently cast out the objects of poverty in the study area.

Because of the structural impediments, certain caste groups and their capabilities were overlooked and underestimated. Since the narrative structures of capability are organised around the instruments of education in developmental theories, the cultural devices to navigate the distinction between the *embodied*

and the *acquired* among different caste groups are given scant attention. For the upper caste, the arrival of education and being educated embodied as their natural traits. On the contrary, for the lower caste, it has to be acquired as if they do not hold any capability as innate capacity. But the social history of education exposed these assumptions and began to excavate the cultural exclusion of the distributional aspects of educational opportunities. If such opportunities were seized for the privileged in the first place as a natural right, the underprivileged were not only denied but also had to wage a long struggle to access education as a political right. To cultivate a new cultural habit, capabilities do hold a place in the educational theories to *generate* positive energy—for example, social capital formation—among the diverse social groups for the service of society.


Casting education as meritorious good by the privileged section historically, the under-privileged always had to shoulder the burden of poor quality and thereby legitimate exclusion in accessing education. The field evidence reveals that how the quality of education is compromised with the crowding of the lower sections in the public-funded schools. The intricate question of what kind of public services are being rendered, beyond the chartered provisions and the persistence of social inequality for the cultural reproduction, somehow frisked away from the narrative constructions of social capabilities through education. The ideological bedrock of caste, privilege and merit have tacitly acquired their place in the revealed narratives. Crediting the entitlement in the analytics would have provided new impetuses on how the policy captivates the public on democratising a range of institutional apparatuses especially the educational institutions. Though we have had *public provisions* of educational facilities since independence (as a prime mover of constructing capabilities), do we have *public involvement* in the educational system? This question perhaps complicates the conception of education for inclusion and educational inclusiveness. The colonial and post-colonial archaeology of *public withdrawal* from general education to the lower sections announces the alliance of exclusion. As a result, only the state-funded schools were found to be with the public presence of the students from the lower castes, which entails the strong association and the outcome of entitlements provisions. Woefully, not beyond sheer tokenism!

An uncritical ethnographic approach to frame the 'social' is deeply codified and conceived by the caste substance which never let people conduct their public life. The non-discursive power embedded in this scheme of account is flouted by the very caste itself. Packaging sociology of caste as social at least for the analytical purpose prevented the political cost of it since the colonial and post-colonial cultures of power have designated a sovereign power to justify hierarchy and discrimination. A close observation of caste would reveal its dispositions of power in multiple forms which unleash many sociological manipulations. The deep-seated psychic ordering of the caste never let the privileged as a problem of their own. The analytical separation between the social and political in defining the caste system could only be exposed with the arrival and relationship with modern state and constitutionality. Though the circulation of legal and rational power of the state allows political interventions to eliminate caste-based

discrimination, the power of the caste system and patriarchy brought about stumbling block to the institutions of the state, especially educational institutions. Therefore, no leisure to leave the scope for analysing the intersectionality of caste as it fortifies the gap between the public provision and the public engagements. Such analytical framework exposes how far we collectively weaken a range of institutional apparatuses of the state and withdraw the theories of mediation in social and political life.

One wonders what kind of freedom Venkataraman holds while choosing the ethnographic method. As his predecessors have encountered various theoretical puzzles describing a method in dealing with almost the same set of problems, Venkataraman finds space for analytical reflexivity in the narratives built into the structure of the book. Authentic voices were somehow overshadowed by the metanarratives since the fieldwork oriented towards testing capability is more of theoretical than of social construct following Sen and Beteille. Moreover, the causality designated on the capability approach to poverty question might undermine the wider *relations* in which the people are situated and their capacity to conduct dignified life. The book reminds that defining the poor and the poverty in terms of deficiency and preordained needs underestimates the ongoing production of subjectivities through hegemonic developmental practices at the global scale.

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