The Curse of Social Capital and Indian Academia: A Commentary

‘It’s not what you know, it’s who you know’ (Bourdieu 1992).

Prelude

Social capital in academia is not alleviating the Indian academic standards today but has become an academic liability especially in social sciences. The mutual bonds, bridges and linkages among academics are proving more detrimental to the quality of research and teaching while benefitting the academics individually who create a coterie of their own ilk based on reciprocal benefits. This wrong side of social capital is virtually degrading and impoverishing our public universities. There is an increasing need to look at the dark side of the social capital in academia as it directly affects quality. A shift therefore is needed to look beyond the good and positive aspects of social capital and dig out and debate its dark side along with its repercussions and the measures that need to be taken to address its negative impact. Besides this, the myth that social capital promotes only wellbeing or only promotes nepotism cannot be generalised as well.

Method

This conceptual analysis is based on an exploratory study for the purpose of understanding the ill effects of social capital in Indian academia. The value of this analysis mainly based on observation and experiences lies in its ability to conceptualise how actually social capital is not benefitting or adding quality but harming research and teaching-learning process by creating an academic iron grip.

The Murky Side of the Social Capital

While all relationships necessarily don’t add to our quality of life however an unusual interpretation that can be conceived of sociological concept of social capital while seeing almost all sectors today is that the social capital is an undue empowerment of the inefficient, free reward for the unworthy and lofty upward kick to the duffers to achieve what they are not capable to acquire on their own. The dark side of social capital is therefore obvious and has been theorised in a few sectors like management and industry however has not been so far conceptualised in academia where it causes the major dent to quality. The undue flight of academics while exploiting social capital and the repercussions like mediocrity culture, routinised sufarishi (reference) culture, Jugaad and jaan-pehchan culture (management appointment or promoting of favourites), academic contractorship and academic tourism (conferences, workshops collaborations with their ilk to enjoy and usurp funds),etc..

The aim is not to refute the significance of the structure of networks, sharing knowledge platforms and exercises, strengthening of mutual ties for
joint ventures, fruitful collaborations, teaching and research faculty exchange
programmes that certainly add to quality but to the culture of partiality and
favouritism and mere collaborations for vested interests that hardly aim at
institutional building but purely for work for self goals. Also the argument is
not against the very ideas of trust building, social cohesion or acknowledging
the family social capital, social networks and support, involvement in
associations, security and working towards educational competencies but a dire
need to prevent the corrupt linkages among academics and sometimes between
institutions and NGO’s, other bodies whose sole aim is to mint money out of
futile and useless programmes, workshops, campaigns, cash massive fake bills,
etc., Here the dark side of social capital manifests as peoples’ individual gains
and is purely an academic corruption that is growing multifold.

In academia, the sociological concept of social capital today is therefore
somewhat coupled with the rising intellectual bankruptcy, a hollow and
intellectual grin and a mere knowledge show off that has virtually shaped a
new academic economy and academic tourism in terms of conferences. While
they say social capital is the new currency, certainly People in academia mostly
rely on it for almost all their academic pursuits or their social mobility today
especially in the Indian context when we talk of social sciences be that
teaching and research.

Situation at hand is not what is projected, it is all social capital now that is
perhaps the main dynamic force which is designing the new course of
academics and this very capital is used as a resource to gain entry, then used
for more space, then for social mobility, to qualify job or promotion interviews,
then to get preferred assignments, awards and rewards in the academic circles,
etc.. People get projects, gain new and prestigious positions even honorary
directorships, professorships, intellectual memberships, special protocols and
facilities through good contacts within the campuses and influence in the
higher corridors of power. Here the quality and merit receives the back seat and
the social capital becomes the game changer. A game changer that works
positively for the individual but negatively for the academia as a system by
deteriorating and impoverishing its very bases by shaping a corrupt culture.

Even many such fake and pseudo-academics grab big fellowships, get
nominated to various prestigious and high level committees as experts, as
speakers in national and international conferences, overnight turn authorities of
the subjects which they hardly know about or care or research on but rush to
speak purely for free travel and free boarding-lodging-the ever rising academic
tourism. Even there are academics who keep reading a single paper in around
five or six countries and continues to read the same paper provided they get
free travel and boarding facilities from organizers. They can do so as there is
no such regulation and control to check quality and research standards are yet
to be elevated keeping in view such a massive indiscipline and ethical issues.
Mostly in social sciences academics go and even manage their speeches in
conferences often seeking forcible and involuntarily help from their students
(research scholars) and the rest is often borrowed from the Google itself,
sometimes as it is while sometimes with a change of language-depends upon
the command over English language. No one asks them (academics) tough
questions for their positions are big, their designations by default define them
as intellectuals and authorities of the subject they speak on. Students keep working for them for their degrees and signatures on fellowship applications, etc.,

Social Capital and the Academic Power Play

Academia today is full of power games and politics is deep down in every aspect of it. The demeanour of such academics is full of grin and arrogance and they can go to any extent to maintain this arrogance and keep enjoying their positions. They often boast about their publications and (useless) concepts which they claim they have developed. People around them nod in yes despite knowing it all simply out of their own apprehensions and feel intimidated by their power positions. Thus gets shaped a full-fledged and unquestionable atmosphere of mediocrity and averageness which sustains itself on the very social capital rather than work and quality research. It gets routinised and is sustained by the unspoken and unwritten mutual agreements between such academics who keep on favouring each other like somebody is running a journal and he favours his fellow friends who in return keeps inviting him to their guest lectures, conferences and viva-voce of students or send him/her a thesis simply to benefit him/her. They know who can favour them and how and therefore keep investing in such capital and accomplish it through other contacts and thus it becomes a chain reaction and like a web—a morally corrupt web but the most powerful. If social capital has such a side effect, we need to abolish the very capital in academia and need a serious check on such a perilous networking.

Also the pseudo-academics invest and re-invest such resources to acquire the academic space and possession over the more valuable resources and go after their broader or narrower social connections, widen their base, manufacture a social prestige and social honour for themselves. Here the capital merges in a strange way and now becomes the sum total of their hollow and little understanding of the subject they belong to, their educational qualifications, and the wealth and positions they gain through it. Thus social capital further facilitates economic capital, information capital and digital capital and lot many other emerging capitals which can largely influence one’s opportunity for progress and affluence along with multiple identities and politics. Pierre Bourdieu was right in his conceptualisation of the social capital but could perhaps never have imagined the corrupt side of it and how it actually degrades the collective life quality rather than adding to it. Today it is the social capital in academia that is actually degrading the academic quality and research quality and is responsible for so much of mediocrity, mushrooming and mess in the academic campuses.

The design of networks in social science academia out of the social capital today is such that it hardly promotes research productivity or for that matter improves curriculum or pedagogy but only becomes a mutual benefitting project. It has become an intellectual barter where people exchange favours. One favours the other and the other compensates by a different favour. The who academic tourism has taken off in terms of conference invitations, key
note addresses, free travel, free food, free tour, etc, today is actually a favour or a return favour where people are not invited on the basis of their knowledge, performance, expertise or body of work but mostly on network basis, who they know or who they have favoured in the past or who can be of one’s advantage in future. Not just conferences but so many processes like nominations, guest lectures, board members, editorial boards, committee members, other academic body memberships, etc, go the same way. If we objectively see the conferences which are being conducted now, hardly any new concepts, models or theories come to fore or are being discussed but people simply bore other people by reading page after page which they copy from books already written. On an average one or two paper per conference are worth listening or convey some novelty. Such conferences are only an economic burden and bear no fruit as far as the quality research is concerned.

While it was earlier believed that the number of ties have a positive impact on future productivity and researchers who tend to be more in networks know more ultimately and knowledge creation becomes easy however this aspect of the academia mars all productivity. If there is serious academic audit and quality research output in social sciences, 95 percent of the academics have nothing to show except their plagiarised books and low quality articles and papers that convey nothing. There has to be some check and research regulating body in the country that aims at serious research and teaching.

Social Capital-Some Theoretical Injections

The crux of social capital as per Burt (2001) is that people who do better are better connected. Putnam (2000) sees social capital as the fabric of our social connections and an integrating force and feels concerned for the American collapse and looks for its revival. Whereas Coleman (1998) argues that social capital is simply a social cohesion within the communities or it is a resource for action. He sees it as actors in embedded networks having superior achievements because they have more coordination and trust on one another and it is developed between communication skills. Mostly studies by Coleman (1988,1990), Bourdieu (1992), Putnam (2000), Wacquant (1992) are positive about the effects of social capital and believe that it contributes to society and even studies by Coleman and others suggest that social capital promotes academic achievement, which can be challenged in the face of negative repercussions of the social capital today.

Social capital is a sociological concept that means norms, relationships and understandings that allow individuals to form cooperative relations for mutual benefit. It also refers to the intangible and invisible resources and assets that emerge from our social interactions and relationships. Social capital as a concept and theory is a work of many like Jane Jacobs (1961), Pierre Bourdieu (1983), James Coleman (1988) and obviously Robert D. Putnam (2000) who believes that social networks have value. He discusses concepts like information, reciprocity, collective action and identity and solidarity. While Putnam seems concerned about disintegration of human relationships however his approach too needs to be reversed for professional research disintegration
in terms of individual research ability and merit that should necessarily be the
c-condition. In his work Bowling Alone (2000), Putnam talks of civic
engagement and social connectedness and argues that it is this civic
engagement that influences the quality of public life and the performance of
social institutions.

The second one was the French theorist and well known sociologist Pierre
Bourrdieu who talked about the social capital in 1980’s. To him the social
capital is the collection of resources that our durable network of relationships
connects us to. He talked about the power, exclusivity and access as well.
Bourdieus was somewhat more interested in social reproduction seeing how the
dominant class maintains their dominant position simply to give his conception
d-of the reality of social inequality. Symbolising social inequalities, Bourdieu
(1992) rightly defines, “Social capital as the sum of the resources, actual or
to-virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable
network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance
and recognition” (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 119).

As for the three aspects of the social capital i.e. bonds bridges and
linkages, it is the bridges and linkages that are developed by academics which
further become mutually benefitting relationships in which they secure
individual welfare and such bonds and networks are no longer contributing to
academic welfare and quality.

Social Capital and Flaws in Research Today

Social capital means trusting relationships that allow us to help each other
and seek support from one another. However in reality the social capital is
proving detrimental in academia today though there are so many other road
blocks which need to be cleared so that the research especially social science
research flourishes in true sense in India. I think today the biggest setback to
honest research is the element of hierarchy of research itself where the
regressive rules have been laid out like a research assistant in any research
centre even if qualified enough can’t pursue or do a research project
independently on his/her own and it (research) has to be done under a faculty
necessarily even when they have no research contribution or knowledge.
Research associates can teach but a research assistant cannot even if equally or
more qualified. Research assistants continue to be defined as a grey area in the
universities and there are confusions if they fall in academic staff or office staff
(nonteaching). These are also no career prospects, the designation itself is a
stereotype as the name should at least bring dignity. It should be replaced with
research officer and given time bound and other promotion benefits. It is not
fair one enters a job as research assistant and retires as a research assistant.
Bring quality to research in India means bringing dignity and empowerment to
the people of the research.

Such flaws and lacunas only strengthen hierarchy and even bureaucratise
research and academic campuses unnecessarily. The power relationship in
research or class room teaching has virtually turned academia into a military
academy which needs to be done away with. If at all research has to improve in
India it is not more funding only but bringing democracy and accountability to the very conduct and atmosphere of research in India. At times the powerful academics exploit the labour of the powerless and get their research work published using their own name and influence. They become authors when they are not. The very idea of research needs a paradigm shift in country’s research centres where quality research should be a focus and a congenial research atmosphere of research is provided so that worthy researches come out and sincere researchers can work without intimidations and power crisis of the academic bourgeoisie. The annual reports of such institutions or research centres should be taken seriously, good centres must be rewarded and bad centres punished. At least research in the country must not be merely reduced to an employment (Gamm-e-rozgar) and people or blue eyed candidates simply pushed in for livelihood through nepotism and favouritism. The government or HRD ministry should give equal treatment to social science research and the country should aim at building some advanced research institutes that are capable to conduct a world class and quality research. Since research seems a lost tradition now, it is the high time to think on the core issues surrounding it and pests to be removed who have been eating institutions. At present it seems there are more power drills happening in research centres than the actual research. The politics and frivolous gossip has reduced it all to nothing.

What Needs To Be Done On War Footing?

The need of the hour is not merely to bring truth to the research or just a qualified teacher for the classroom but real researchers and passionate teachers in the first place who are researchers by heart and teachers by soul. Academics or research therefore should not be open to every Tom, Dick and Harry. It is the viva-voce of Ph.D admissions where I think irrelevant people get in and there are two reasons for that ,either they are NET or JRF qualified which is merely an objective game and needs to be a serious subjective type test which is tough enough so that the genuine candidates who have some research inclination get in. Also the favouritism and dark side of such Viva-Voce’s is that academics choose people not on the basis of good research proposals but what suits them,. it is most of the times not related to their area of specialisation but they take students either to add the student count to their tally or are looking for more people who can help them later. Research entry today needs some objective and practical gate keeping mechanism to keep amateurs at bay who rise to all new heights exploiting the influential resources, topology and nature of the relationship and mess with it bring in mediocrity to institutions and producing a good number of mediocre students who spread the same through all possible mans employing their social capital. There are thousands of such academics today who have no contribution to their respective subjects at all but are like parasites on the whole system, eating and impoverishing it every day, spreading everything but professionalism and sincerity and keep demanding pay hikes and other perks. There are thousands of those who don’t alleviate the Indian research standard anyway but do the reverse instead, keep repeating the already done and worked areas, do research
for funding only, grab big projects through influential contacts, execute all
unprofessional means to compete those research projects not for any novelty or
any new findings and new theories to come out but purely for money. The
research bodies and agencies of the country need to look into it seriously while
granting or gifting the research projects with big money to such people. There
has to be a strong criteria to distribute such informal awards and there has to be
some accountability and verification before they grant such covert rewards, at
least the research contribution of the person to be granted has to be checked
sincerely and a professional interview keeping aside all the social capital
means and favouritism has to be checked so that Indian research touches its
glory and projects go to the right people and true research comes out. After all
as a country we have to see and compete with western research and bring
quality to our research and especially bring relevant social science research as a
priority ,a research that pertains to Projects are a new side job, a new part time,
a new office of profit while being in the same office. It is all a luxury when the
accountability is not there and people do whatever they like to do, submit
whatever they like to submit and such reports later gather dust. Even when they
submit, the need is to see if these project reports are really worth, we need to
enhance that quality assurance mechanism. On the research front we may get
serious in natural sciences but not at all in social sciences, the shift has to be
serious and things have to change. Even natural sciences research has its set of
problems a lot of fake researchers are in labs also who also know how to get
more money however there are so many sincere researchers who want to do it
in its best way but lack support and infrastructure.

The criminal nexus of editors, authors, co-authors and finally publishers
plus money factor is publishing business has prepared an atmosphere where
everybody can publish and be an author. Most of the journals and all paid
journals publish big names with big designations without even editing their
content resulting in low quality research. The premier research agencies of the
country need to check the paid journal trend and UGC’s removal of many such
low quality journals is a welcome step in this regard. I think there should be
more scrutiny and fool proof mechanism for quality maintenance by
publication houses as well. The academic mafia has taken it all for granted and
they know whatever they do and have the power to justify and come clean out
of any childish inquires against them or any mess they create.

Today we don’t have mostly successful academics but successful mediocre
academics who are ruling the roost. The relationship between social capital and
knowledge creation be that quality research or teaching in social sciences has
been brutally marred by the dark side of the social capital itself which has led
to the entry of amateurs rather than able and efficient social scientists. There
has to be serious rethink on how things work in academia now and how things
should work to compete with the global research and teaching quality. As such
at the moment the social capital in the campuses is not fit for a relevant and
practical social policy. Academia has to mark a stark difference in actual
capability of the academics with that of the things that get done through social
capital. This has to stop and the think tanks plus government has to put an end
to such a filthy culture. Research labs and social science research need more
democratic atmosphere and freedom today. The unfreedom in research is killing the research so no quality is coming out.

Power and unneeded hierarchy needs to go and be replaced with dignified responsibilities, time bound and useful research projects, a good investment in research for desired and mass friendly outputs. At least Research domain must be spared from filling in people who are not made for research. It is not and must not be merely an employment sector if we are serious to achieve quality.

Epilogue

The dangerous and nepotic side of Social capital has to be arrested and not let to do alarming and useless mushrooming in institutions if quality research and quality education has to grow in India. Though it is very difficult to chart out how it can be done but seeing the damage it is perpetually doing, there has to be some serious pondering over it. Perhaps academia today needs a revolution from within, it is rusting and degrading and blue eyed selections are eating every bit of it. World class social research needs selected research institutions in the country that can be well funded and renowned researchers be nominated as heads so that they become inspiration for others at the workplace. Only then we can someday get rid of Eurocentric models and theories of research and come up with our own set of indigenous models, concepts and theories. The process of neo-colonialism in research (western theoretical dominance) has to go along with shunning the huge luggage of social capital in research and teaching where it contributes negatively. Also there is a need to move towards a new perspective on social capital where we believe that social capital is not a positive capital always and it does not contribute necessarily but lowers the quality and sinks the research quality.

There are other factors also which hamper the quality like plagiarism and lack of novelty in research. As far plagiarism and plagiarism check, we still don’t have proper technology to track the plagiarism per se as the current technology with us only checks similarity and that can be done away with language change and language game. It has all became a language craftsmanship rather than a true original, fact based and novel research. We need to move away from mere numbers, percentages, curves and graphs and focus on the content and practicality of social science research. In India given the range of social issues, the applied part and policy formulation part has to be given more attention. Resultantly in world ranking we always make it dismal and this dismal performance is not without reasons. At our first priority the research training has to be made mandatory, not just workshops which people join to fetch points for promotion but the real training of research methods and lectures on new insights need to be introduced. A plethora of so called researchers and academics today are still not well versed with research methodology. Therefore priority should be to develop the skilful human capital in academia who are trained and later qualify such research methodology tests.

Excessive social capital in academia via bonding and bridging along with the strong networks have lead to a sense of social exclusion of the deserving as such bonds have created a robust glass ceiling for those who don’t come from
their groups. Such people hardly get in despite rich research profile or teaching background as the candidates with social capital sweep it all without even any merit. Sometimes a phone call can be more powerful than the high impact factor journal publications, books, etc. The flipside of the coin or the central argument is that let social capital prevail everywhere but it has to be uprooted from academics and research as it is shaping averageness and facilitating mediocrity in younger generations as well.

References


