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RESEARCH ARTICLE

HOW CORRECT ARE THE CLAIMS OF GOODNESS OF ASSOCIATIONALISM?

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Abstract

Discussions about how associational life is understood in western societies typically center on the relationship between its robustness and strong democratic institutions. Associations provide the dispersed persons a sense of rootedness. The backdrop of democratization and the introduction of other concepts and categories to understand the significance of associativeness and its connections to democracy are the problems, though. Furthermore, using associations to achieve one's own or communal interests is more essential than whether a person is a "associated self" since it shows initiative and leadership on the part of the individual. Overall, the relationship could be viewed as a dynamic process where associational actions are considered as an essential component of the state rather than as something separate from or outside of it.

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Introduction:-

Debates on the understanding of associational life in western societies primarily concern the connection between its robustness and healthy democratic institutions. Associations provide a sense of rootedness to the atomised individuals. The issue, however, is the context of democratisation and inclusion of additional concepts and categories to appreciate the meaning of associativeness and its linkages with democracy. In addition, the important thing is not that whether the individuals are 'associated selves', but the initiative and leadership capabilities of persons to use the means of associations to further their personal or community goals. Overall, the inter-relationship could be understood as an evolving process where associational activities are seen not as something independent of or beyond the state, but as an integral part of the state in its perpetual endeavour to become more democratic and meaningful for the individuals and groups on its territory.

In democratic theory, the link between associations and democracy has, by and large, been looked at positively. The importance of associations is highlighted in order to see how various forms of associations advance ideals of democratic governance. While there are arguments that highlight the limitations of the theory, and which can be discussed separately, there are various ways in which associations contribute positively to democratic living. Associations foster civic virtues like attention to the public good, habits of cooperation, toleration, respect for others, respect for the rule of law and willingness to participate in public life.¹ Associations also teach political skills (participation in debates, public meetings, polls and making decisions) to their members. Associations, as organised bodies and due to their collective strength, are especially helpful in resisting domination and antidemocratic power. Associations also teach citizens to freely participate in the debates on public issues and as fellow association

¹ See Mark E. Warren, *Democracy and Association* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 73.

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members citizens learn to appreciate diverse views. This way, associations improve public participation in decision making process as public decisions are based on open deliberations.²

As intermediary bodies

Associations are considered to be intermediary bodies that can play a facilitator's role in their collective capacities to mediate between the state institutions and citizens, and, thus, by articulating and aggregating citizens demands effectively, associations make the state responsive to the citizens demands. The idea has been described by Amy Gutman, who says, "Without access to an association that is willing and able to speak up for our views and values, we have a very limited ability to be heard by many other people or to influence the political process, unless we happen to be rich or famous."³ Associations are valued for the 'good' of democracy and their role in democratic living has greatly been appreciated.⁴ Associations are thought to be playing an important role as mediating institutions. Associations are the binding force behind collating the scattered interests. A vibrant associational life is helpful in furthering the claims of citizens in an organised and sensible manner. This, as a collective effort can achieve objectives in a better manner when it comes to receive the state response on the citizens demands. Associations with cross-community membership could be in the form of associational engagement and informal or routine engagement. Business associations; professional organizations of doctors, lawyers, teachers, students; film clubs, sports clubs; NGOs; trade unions; and even political parties could be associational engagement. In the discourse of association-democracy connectedness the associational form is considered stronger. In this framework, the inter-ethnic associational life acts as a constraint over the polarizing strategies of vested interests. Associational politics, thus, introduces into a democratic system a kind of plurality of ideas, functionality and actions that can be seen as separate from the activities of public institutions. This is considered a sign of strong democracy.⁵ Associations provide collective strength, which individuals would otherwise lack if they work in isolation. On associational platforms, individuals are engaged in meaningful activities together beyond their primary and ascriptive group affiliations.⁶

Have intrinsic value

Associations have intrinsic value in the sense that they symbolise freedoms and rights that are available for individual citizens in a democratic environment. Democracies offer space for a plurality of civic and political associations. By choosing to become part of or form an association, individuals exercise this right and enjoy the freedom to choose one's associates. This way, forming associations to advance individuals purposes is a central component of individual freedom. This view would support a minimal government and associational activities would mainly aim to limit the role and reach of the state.

Are means of political education

Associations are platforms where individual citizens learn civic socialisation and get political education. Associations shape the attitudes, skills, and behaviours of individuals in ways that benefit democracy. Participation promotes democracy because it teaches people the social skills and attitudes that are necessary for democracy to take root.⁷ By participation in associational activities and through interactions with fellow members, individuals come to

2 On these accounts, totalitarian regimes are critically looked at. Collapse of former communist systems is taken to mean that "attempts to abandon the liberal separation between state and civil society are dangerous." See April Carter and Jeoffery Stokes, "Civil Society and Democracy," in *Democratic Theory Today*, eds. April Carter and Jeoffery Stokes (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 205.

3 Amy Gutman, "Freedom of Association: An introductory essay," in Amy Gutman, ed., *Freedom of Association* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 3.

4 In addition to Mike E. Warren (*Democracy and Association*, 2001), Cohen and Rogers have also listed the contributions that associations make in democratic living. See Joshua Cohen and J. Rogers, *Associations and Democracy* (London: Verso, 1995), 42-44.

5 Democracies seen in terms of "the politics of conflict, the sociology of pluralism, and the separation of private and public realms of action" are considered strong democracies. See, Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (California: University of California Press, 2003), 117.

6 "Primary groups" are small, most likely primordial and whose members share personal and enduring relationship. In such groups expression of interests occurs mainly through caste groups, age groups, kin groups, neighbourhood groups, and other unorganised or loosely organised solidarities under simple conditions of society. See, R. M. MacIver, *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), 147.

7 Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 45-47.

identify their interests with similar interests of the co-members and learn to appreciate collective interest of the community, as distinct from his or her personal interest. Association are valued in their capacity to negotiate differences among the groups and furthering the idea of democracy.⁸ This way, citizens learn to respect diverse views that may not be similar to their own. As associations offer best opportunities for civic skill building, participation in such organisations has been hailed as the heart of democracy.⁹ Associations matter because “people who are members of community organisations are more likely to participate in politics”¹⁰ and hence can work towards making the state responsive through, what is understood as ‘collective action’, which in one form or another has always been considered critical vis-a-vis political living.¹¹ The meaning and value of associations “is as extensive as human flourishing, self-development and self-affirmation.”¹²

In terms of making individual’s life better, associations provide the spaces, venues and opportunities for social collaboration and “collective action”. This way, associations “instill in their members habits of cooperation, solidarity, and public spiritedness.”¹³ Further, associations foster adherence to ‘generalized reciprocity’ in their members, which Putnam has explained as, “I’ll do for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return and perhaps even without even knowing you, confident that down the road you or someone else will return the favour.”¹⁴ According to Putnam, ‘generalised reciprocity’ has an important role in furthering the cause of democracy because citizens abide by rules, expecting that others would also do so. Since, individual citizens are abiding by rules, regulations and other requirements of democratic government they would also make sure that others would comply. On this account, associations help solve free-rider problems. As a consequence, the citizens, considering that they are not doing any wrong, demand accountability from governments. Also, on associational platforms, individuals acquire skills for political actions like organisation into groups, mobilisation of fellow members on issues of common interest, running meetings, writing petitions, arguing issues, and make speeches. Since these features are an integral part of democracy, individuals possession of these values is considered good for the robustness of democracy.

As countervailing force

Third, associations are means to countervail domination and antidemocratic power. Associations, as organisation of people on a common platform for the promotion of or protection of particular interests, also mean collective strength. In this role, associations offer resistance against unconstitutional actions of state authorities and are also bulwark against any other concentrated interests, which may infringe upon life, liberty and property of individual citizens. Rosenblum notes that associations are in such roles as “means of checking the government, as elements of interest group pluralism, as inhibitors of unrestrained majoritarianism, and as training ground for participation and

8 Iris Marion Young, “Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship,” in *Ethics*, Vol 99 (1999), 250-274.

9 Sidney Verba, K Lehman Schulman and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 378.

10 Huntington and Nelson hold that higher socioeconomic level would encourage higher levels of political participation. See Samuel P. Huntington and Joan M. Nelson, *No Easy Choice: Political Participation in Developing Countries* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 167.

11 Discourse on collective action for common goals is not new in the social sciences’ literature, though explanations have been offered under different contexts. Aristotle by ‘political animal’ possibly meant individuals’ inherent trait to work collectively for mutual goals. See Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans., T. A. Sinclair and revised by Trevor J Saunders (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 59. Mosca explained presence of this attribute in individuals as instinctive nature that makes them to “herd together and fight together with other herds”. See Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class* (New York: McGraw Hills, 1939), 163. These views consider associations ubiquitous, based on human propensity. See Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Goods* (Harvard: University of Harvard Press, 1971), 17.

12 Nancy L. Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals: The personal uses of pluralism in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 3-4.

13 Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 89-90.

14 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 134.

leadership.”¹⁵ As associational platforms are meant to cater for the interests of the members, people would be treated as equal and the ‘principle of equality’ would help overcome the influence of social and material inequalities.

Means of inputs in policy-making

Associations help improve ways in which interests are represented to lawmakers and translated into law and policy. Associations encourage constructive interactions with the democratic polity.¹⁶ Associations play the role of additional channels for citizens to air their public concerns. Associations, in this role transmit the needs and preferences of their members to government, which in democratic set up is bound to pay heed to the concerns of the public. Since associations choose to work in a specific area, they help members understand issues concerning them better. Given this nature, associations become specialised in certain area(s) and are in a position to offer detailed information and rich views on issues like health care and education, among others. This helps making policies better and also amounts to citizens participation in policy making through the means of associational platforms. In a similar way, associations also help improve equality of political representation through its collective strength.

Facilitate public deliberation

Associations also facilitate public deliberation. On the associational platform, people get an opportunity to discuss and debate issues of their concern. This way, on associational platforms, people are engaged in a communication process that helps reach decisions or decide a matter through talks and debates and, thus, participants decisions on issues are reached following acceptance of one of the views from among the diverse views that has been debated on the forum. Associations, thus, help constitute a space, in which social problems and priorities are initially articulated and later transmitted to political and economic spheres.

In radical role

Finally, associations are also seen in their radical role as alternative means of governance by contributing in the state functions of regulation, service provision, and policy formulation. In addition to choice to the members, associations also offer administrators and service providers a creative role. Associations also empower those for whom services are provided in diverse ways. They are seen as “an alternative to top down bureaucracy in the competent provision of services”.¹⁷ Associations, in this role, would unburden the state of various functions in the field of welfare and economic development. As associations are specialised in their functions, they would introduce higher-quality information into policy formulation and enhance the level of cooperation between citizens and public authorities. Associations can also help improve policy implementation by leveraging local knowledge, encouraging compliance, and monitoring outcomes. Associational activities are valued as they would articulate, address and safeguard collective interests within the larger democratic environment and would also facilitate participation in some form of institutional arrangement with the state, for instance, participation of association in state run or sponsored schemes to steer the developmental process locally. Collective bodies under various names in various countries that bring together members of police forces with some kind of citizens forum to better the local security environment are other instances. This way, associations are important for their role in giving boost to participatory democracy. Importance of role of associations in participatory democracy has also been captured under the rubric of ‘associative democracy’. Associative democracy “seeks to promote individual freedom, social justice and political participation.”¹⁸ The objectives can be achieved through associations that function to cater for distinct interests and achieve various purposes of the individuals who have organised themselves for this objective. This way ‘associations’ could be a means of revitalising smaller scale functionality delineated arenas of democratic decision making. The participatory kind of the system would create space for bigger role for associations in the form that the democracy itself would be associative in form.

Significance of horizontal network of associations

While these attributes are attached to the positive contributions that associations may bring to further the cause of democracy, importance of horizontal network of associations has especially been highlighted in the debate. Horizontal associations that include professional groups, cultural groups, literary guilds, choral societies and service

¹⁵ Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals*, 4.

¹⁶ Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, “Associations and Democracy,” in Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D Miller and Jeffery Paul, eds., *Liberalism and the Economic Order* (New York: University of Cambridge Press, 1993), 282-283.

¹⁷ Paul Hirst, *Associative Democracy: New Forms of Economic and Social Governance* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 6.

¹⁸ Carter and Stokes, “Civil Society and Democracy,” 228.

groups play an important role in better functioning of democratic institutions because citizens participation in such associations generates networks, norms of reciprocity and trust, which help social cooperation to take place in a better way. In this regard, Putnam suggests that social cooperation is an important component in good government and participation in such groups enhances the capacity of community members to overcome opportunism and to collaborate for mutual benefits. Higher density of such associations in a region is an indication of better institutional functioning, and hence democracy, in that area. In contrast, vertical associations are marked by vertical relationships, such as patron and client ties and are characterised by dependence, which fail to generate norms of reciprocity, social trust or a shared sense of responsibility for collective endeavours. Putnam underlined that the hierarchical nature of vertical associations prevents higher level of participation from the members and mutual cooperation among them and hence vertical associations are not suitable to enhance social cooperation. On Putnam's accounts, thus, vertical associations have limitations in contributing to the democratic governance.¹⁹

Putnam thought that horizontal associations are important in democracy because individuals interacting with one another on associational platforms create social capital. Social capital, according to him, is created out of "social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity," and "like physical and human capital, social capital creates value, both in individual and collective", and this is also a form of 'capital', "because we can 'invest' in networking." Putnam, however, has distinguished between various forms of social capital that would be linked with various kinds of associations, like 'formal versus informal social capital,' 'thick versus thin social capital,' 'inward looking versus outward looking social capital' and 'bridging versus bonding social capital'. He considers that "some forms of social capital are good for democracy and social health, others are (or threaten to be) destructive."²⁰ Among these, the distinction that Putnam makes between the "bridging" versus "bonding" social capital is significant.²¹ He identified bonding social capital as those which bring together people who are like one another in important aspects (ethnicity, race, gender, social class), while the bridging social capital refers to social networks that bring together people who are unlike one-another (people with diverse backgrounds). He added that the external effects of the bridging social capital are likely to be positive.

Putnam's distinction between vertical and horizontal associations and various forms of social capital notwithstanding, there are issues, which have been discussed in the pages below that add complexity to and also underline limitations, as regards the association-democracy linkages. For one, issues have been raised that various kinds of associations may make some of the contributions that I have discussed above, but not all associations are equally capable of contributing all of them. Membership of a cultural association, for instance, would comprise of individuals who are interested to serve the cause of art or culture and would pursue goals that primarily are cultural. In comparison, a welfare association would expect its members to be versed with social welfare aspects of the society (like child and women welfare) and would conduct its activities accordingly. This way, nature of association, its objectives and the kind of memberships of associations determine the contributions that the association would make and the extent to which they would be able to make these contributions. Also, people's participation in democratic exercises, politics, for instance, would also depend on "the role that many organisations play in mobilising their members for political action." If an organisation promotes and encourages participation among the members in associational affairs, this would result in enhanced participation in politics. However, decreased participation may occur if "the individual belongs to an organisation that discourages political activity."²²

In opposition to the systems of socialist world

The discourse emphasises the value of association as a means to address aspirations of the citizens through collective action/decision making. This is expected that associations would take care of the changes linked to diversity and would also be able to respond to the changes taking place under the influence of the market forces. The discourse stood for the extant forms of democracy with constitutional state and representative form of government in

¹⁹ Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, 173.

²⁰ Robert D. Putnam and Kristin A. Goss, "Introduction," in Robert D. Putnam, ed., *Democracies in Flux* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 8-11.

²¹ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 22.

²² Constance Smith and Anne Freedman, *Voluntary Associations: Perspectives on literature* (Harvard: Harvard College Press, 1978), 86. Smith and Freedman have made this statement while referring to the studies done by Robert Lane (*Political Life: Why People Get Involved in Politics*. Illinois: Free Press, 1959.) and Lester Milbrath (*Political participation; how and why do people get involved in politics?* Illinois: Rand McNally, 1965).

opposition to what Khilnani and Hirst have called “less attractive systems of socialist world.”²³ The associations viewed in this context are meant to help develop civic capacities that underwrite democracy. This would also address some of the core values of democracy that includes individual freedom and is in line with the ‘liberal commitment to the moral dignity and priority of the individual’. Further, there are internal and external effects of associations. Internally, associations socialise individual members into a democratic culture and teach them subtleties of trust and cooperation. The external effects “link the citizens with the political system and its institutions, aggregate and articulate their interest, and provide the range and variety of competing and cooperating groups which constitute a pluralist society.”²⁴

Conclusion:-

The democratic effects that various forms of associations are intended to contribute to the society can be categorized into four. One, associations are important because they are the realm of individual freedom and individuals have a right to associate and choose companions. By joining together on associational platforms, individuals exercise this right and enjoy this freedom. Associations are, thus, means to individual empowerment through the means of collective action. Second, associations are means of interest articulation, representation and realisation of those interests. Individuals are free to identify their interests and see what he or she has got in common with others. They can organise themselves on various issues that concerns them in order to protect and promote their interests. Third, associations have a role as countervailing power to undemocratic actions from concentrated interests. In this role, associations also act as bulwark against infringement to individual rights, liberty and property through any unconstitutional or illegal means. Associations also protect individuals from any threat from the state itself. Finally, associations are valuable in their role as teaching civic and political values in members. Individual citizens are expected to learn participation in political events like polling, meetings, debates and protests against undemocratic acts from other concentrated interest and civic virtues like social cooperation, tolerance and respect for laws on associational platforms.

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The paper is an edited version from my Ph.D thesis and my book entitled “Associationalism and Democracy in India: An Exploration of Community Identity and Individual Interests in the Bhagalpur City of Bihar”.

23 Khilnani and Hirst have qualified it as ‘the western system of democracy’. See Paul Hirst and Sunil Khilnani, eds., *Reinventing Democracy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 1.

24 Kenneth Newton, “Social Capital and Democracy in Modern Europe,” in Kenneth Newton et al., *Social Capital and European Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1999), 10-11.