

## BOOK REVIEW

**Prerna Singh. *How Solidarity Works for Welfare*. New York & Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.**

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Prerna Singh's book comes with some trailing glory: It won the 2016 Woodrow Wilson Foundation Award of the American Political Science Association, and was also a co-winner of the 2016 Barrington Moore Book Award of the American Sociological Association. It deals with some important questions: Why do some Indian states have better social service provision and welfare outcomes than others? What are the conditions that promote social welfare? What best explains the stark variations in educational and health outcomes within India? How might it be possible to improve outcomes in laggard states such as Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar towards those achieved by Tamil Nadu and Kerala?

The comparisons between these three north and two south Indian states are well known to economists, public health specialists and educationalists, but there are few good explanations out there that try to account for these differences. In the field of political economy, one of these—increasingly challenged—is that public goods are less likely to be delivered in settings of social diversity, as indicated by caste, religion or ethnicity. Singh's contribution to the debate is that “subnational solidarity fosters a sense of collective welfare, promotes political awareness and participation, and encourages popular monitoring of public goods” (55). “Subnational solidarity” emerges if challenger elites choose to develop common symbols such as “common history, memories, myths, culture, and language” (30). As a result, dominant (national) elites can be cast as an “out-group” against which collective popular actions can be mobilised. Such a process can reduce the significance of social heterogeneity. Clearly, it is “invented,” in Benedict Anderson's terms, not a result of primordial sentiments. This does, of course, also raise the question of whether those dominant elites (perhaps—as in India—often located unevenly

across the country) can use the same methods by casting foreign outsiders in the same terms, and Singh uses the familiar example of the strengthening of the welfare state in Britain as a result of the collective identities forged during the second World War. But in the Indian context, it also means that challenger elites in Uttar Pradesh (for long regarded as the dominant political state, not just because of its population, but also because it was a key base of the nationalist movement) have found it difficult, if not impossible, to forge this kind of subnational solidarity (discussed by the author in Chapter 5).

Her theory is set out in two versions, one “top-down” and one “bottom-up.” The top-down model is concerned to spell out how local elites may come together and “transcend, but not necessarily abandon, their subgroups” (36). As they feel the psychological effects of this identification with subnational groups, and experience ethical obligations of this wider community membership, they support collective welfare schemes and push for them to be included in the policy agenda, leading to progressive social policies. In the bottom-up mechanism, collective welfare support from the top facilitates emotional arousal, mobilisation by subnational movements, greater political consciousness and then greater involvement in public services (37–41).

Singh shows strong correlations between her indicators of subnational solidarity, social development expenditures and welfare outcomes (literacy, good health indicators, etc.) over time: she accepts that the existence of good social policies can help, in their turn, to generate subnational solidarity, but argues that the creation of subnational solidarity has come first. This claim is supported by a raft of indicators, for example of subnational consciousness through linguistic, political mobilisation, the presence or absence of separatist movements, and aspects of party politics, across all the larger Indian states from 1960–2000. A data appendix to Chapter 6 should satisfy the methodological purists who might wish to be assured that all the correct statistical tests have been carried out.

Not content with her analysis of India, Singh widens her net to look at two other cases of subnational solidarity—Quebec (249–251), and Scotland (251–255). For Quebec, she notes how through the 1960s, politicians began to demand that Quebec’s historical distinctiveness, in terms of language and religious institutions, should be recognised in more autonomy that would also allow its more egalitarian spirit to flourish. Scotland, similarly, has a separate history and retains local social institutions in the church, education, law, and banking that differ from those in England. Scottish politicians have laboured to enhance this sense of separateness, but only really became successful in the 1980s and 1990s, when they won increasing levels of regional autonomy.

Singh makes great play with how the claim of an egalitarian spirit was used to mobilise support, and to the specification of that claim in terms of a stronger commitment to a welfare state. But she does not discuss why or how, in practice, health and educational indicators for Scotland are not noticeably better than those in England, and in some cases, are worse.

There is much to be appreciated in this contribution. Despite—or perhaps, for some readers, because of—considerable repetition of the main arguments, the book is well written and does its best to carry its audience along through some complex arguments using statistical modelling. As an example of a particular kind of political science (and linked versions of political sociology) it is welcome because it attempts to integrate a close historical enquiry with the analysis of quantitative datasets. What is not so well handled, however, are aspects of the everyday politics of these states. There is, for example, no reference to violence on the part of “challenger elites,” as part of the everyday political experience of those not included in the subnational project—Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, Dalits and Adivasis (neither of whom warrant an index entry) in Tamil Nadu or Bihar, for example. Similarly, I am not convinced of the effort to link the state-wide indicators to the everyday processes through which health and education policies are implemented. As Singh notes, “the lack of... systematic data across states over time on citizen levels of socio-political consciousness and activism and involvement with schools or health centres” makes it impossible directly to test—in ways she would like—the “bottom-up” version of her theory. There is evidence, but not of the kind she is happy to use, on these issues, and it occasionally surfaces, as in the use of ethnographic material of her own (relegated to a footnote on 144) on how local people in Kerala engage with public services, and have done so since the 1950s. More use of such material would have provided more intuitive feel for how her arguments play out in the everyday, but, perhaps, would also have required a much larger or very different book.

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