

Discussion Note

In India, culture is a richly diverse, vibrant and thriving space that is immediately evident to any outsider who visits it.

It is not so evident to the insider, mainly because to her/him many ‘cultural’ markers, processes, phenomena and manifestations are invisible, even banal, aspects of ‘normal’ life—such as the seamless blending of multiple languages in the course of a single sentence. I will call this culture with a small c.

Culture is perceived as being outside her/his scope, typically vested with authoritative super-entities like institutions (religious, academic, cultural and other) and the state. The forms of culture she/he sees valorized by them (and hence valid and legitimate) are mostly classical-traditional—typically, originating in a distant and glorious past—or intellectual, stemming from an international avant-garde. For instance, Bollywood is not commonly regarded as ‘culture’. Culture comes across as pre-determined, pure, serious and important, that needs to be protected against contamination—that cannot be ‘fooled about’ with by ‘uneducated individuals’. I will call this Culture with a big C.

However, the good news is that almost in spite of this, small-c culture thrives—possibly through its very normality and an absence of reflexivity. It is only when a particular form or instance of (small-c) cultural practice or innovation stands to serve a political agenda or opportunity, does its lightness and spontaneity get contained and (big-C) Culture steps in to dominate. An example is the trend of morally-charged rioting against Valentine’s Day celebrations.

In my visit, I want to focus on culture with a small c, and ways of preserving and strengthening its vibrancy and innovation, since I believe that it is critical to social capital. By this term, I refer to Lyda Judson Hanifan (1913):

I do not refer to real estate, or to personal property or to cold cash, but rather to that in life which tends to make these tangible substances count for most in the daily lives of people, namely, goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy and social intercourse among a group of individuals and families who make up a social unit... If he may come into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community. The community as a whole will benefit by the coöperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors.

And also the more recent and very similar articulation by Robert Putnam (2000):

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.” The difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.

I suspect that most state and institutional interventions in culture, even when expressly designed to foster social capital (in the above sense), fail to connect with small-c culture (with a few exceptions), and hence remain partially effective at best. I believe that this need not be the case (even though I intuit that small-c culture thrives best when left unregulated and autonomous). I will digress in order to elaborate:

I am inspired by Michel de Certeau’s investigation into the ‘procedures of everyday creativity’ that I believe is (or can be) a driver of cultural innovation and renovation, with a vast and often suppressed potential. De Certeau’s focus (as mine) is on schemata of action rather than the subjects who are the authors or vehicles. He stresses that these ‘systems of operational combination’ constitute a culture, composed of the ‘everyday practices’ of ‘dominated element(s) in society’ (which does not mean that they are passive or docile). He acknowledges his project as growing out of studies of ‘popular culture’ or marginal groups—and believes that if persisted with, it will be revealed as not ‘merely the obscure

background of social activity', no longer viewed through the lens of consumption, but a process of continuous reinvention and enrichment of culture.

Ordinary people are not the focus, nor the mandate for state or non-state cultural institutions. It is culture with a small c – and what strengthens and weakens it, as well as its interrelationships and gaps with big-C Culture – that I hope to co-explore and evolve a better understanding of during my trip, and map possible approaches of how cultural institutions might address this lively and vibrant space of innovation. Towards this, I can share three stories in this area: my logo design for the 50th anniversary of Indian independence, logo design for the revamped (and renamed) Reproductive & Child Health programme of the Government of India, and my work with grassroots NGOs in the campaign for Total Literacy in one of India's backward districts.

My core question is: “How can cultural institutions facilitate/support popular/everyday cultural innovation that strengthens a given society or community's social capital?” or more lucidly: “How to configure and plug cultural institutions into supporting and catalyzing popular culture—without destroying its vitality and edginess?”

We're all facing challenges in the form of certain cultural forces that are divisive and prejudicial, and hence diminish our social capital. Apparently (and remarkably), all such forces obtain their energy (and social if not judicial legitimacy) from what I've called here small-c culture i.e. culture at the grassroots – and its successful blending with and into big-C Culture. There is a perception that this has been successfully countered and resisted in India. Even if this is only partially true, a better understanding of small-c culture in the generation of social capital (and contributing to such a resistance), as well as vis-à-vis its dynamic with big-C Culture as well as the state and institutions in this process, would be extremely valuable.

This is possibly useful for all of us who are engaged in strengthening culture and encouraging cultural innovation and creativity, with the agenda of raising social cohesion, diversity and constructive interaction and exchange.