REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD: CRITICAL PARTNERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION IN INDIA

Sharon M. Ravitch
University of Pennsylvania

Nicole Mittenfelner Carl
University of Pennsylvania

Abstract:
Cross-national research partnerships require careful consideration if they are to be equitable, generative, and sustainable. This field reflection focuses on the collaborative work between the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai, India and the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education (Penn GSE) in the United States by presenting excerpts from an interview with Dr. Venkatesh Kumar (TISS) and Dr. Sharon Ravitch (Penn GSE). Kumar and Ravitch reflect on the participatory approaches to research, practice, and partnership that guide their applied work in India. Furthermore, Kumar and Ravitch consider their own processes of learning and unlearning as well as the ways that their partnership is enhanced through deliberately centralizing multiple perspectives.

Introduction

Building cross-national research partnerships entails a significant amount of logistical work; however, building one that is equitable, generative, and sustainable also requires deeply personal work as well as the work of learning and unlearning how to think about, communicate with, and work alongside others. This process of developing a cross-national research partnership in East-West and North-South collaborations, where the reinscription and imposition of epistemological hegemony and violence are particularly rife, requires that partners carefully consider the ways that these specific hegemonies shape their identities, socialized values, and positionalities as they intersect with the histories and realities of colonialism; social, economic, and political power asymmetries; and culturally embedded value systems. This field-based reflection focuses on the partnership between the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai, India and the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education (Penn GSE) and highlights what critical participation looks like in research, practice, and partnership.

This reflection primarily draws from an interview with Dr. Venkatesh Kumar (TISS) and Dr. Sharon Ravitch (Penn GSE), which was conducted in March 2018 by Dr. Nicole Mittenfelner Carl (Penn GSE). A semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide the interview and discuss themes, complexities, and questions in a free-flowing, dialogical way. In this reflection, excerpts from the interview transcript are used to discuss the details of Kumar and Ravitch's collaboration and partnership, the guiding theories, values, and beliefs of their applied work, and how these principles are enacted in practice.

Context for the Interview

In 2017, Penn GSE signed a memorandum of understanding that formalized a 5-year partnership with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). TISS is a premier institute in India in social sciences, human development, public policy, and economics. Its main campus is in Mumbai, and 3 additional campuses are in Hyderabad, Guwahati, and Tuljapur. Established in 1936, the

institute is part of an elite group of research and higher learning institutes that received early support from the Tata Trusts in India. TISS enrolls approximately 1,700 students (as of 2010) in master's and doctoral programs, representing an 11% admission rate among applicants. The TISS-Penn GSE partnership was initiated in 2015 by Kumar and Ravitch and centers around the goal of using applied development methods including participatory research methods and needs-resource assessments. This goal runs across the partnership's 3 main initiatives: RUSA, a national-level reform of India's state public universities, CALEM, a government-supported school reform focused on intensive principal leadership development, and TISS's National CSR Hub, funded by the Government of India to support the development and implementation of community-based corporate social responsibility programs funded by public sector enterprises. These three initiatives are described in more detail below. The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), which oversees the development of school and higher education in India, provides funding and support for the RUSA and CALEM initiatives. The Federal Government of India funds the TISS's National CSR Hub. Across these 3 engagements is focused capacity building for the TISS research teams. The GSE India Research team regularly engages with the RUSA, CALEM, and CSR teams to build research acumen and applied methods skills as well as provide content support when necessary.

(1) Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA)

RUSA is a federally funded reform initiative that aims to revive India's public university system. To this end, RUSA takes a multi-pronged approach to professional development and the implementation of accountability measures that are linked to the renewal of federal funding. In collaboration with TISS and MHRD, Penn GSE supports the development of curriculum and instruction for RUSA seminars as well as the development of frameworks and indicators for site-based evaluation and professional development seminars. Additionally, Penn GSE supports the emergent curriculum reform phase of RUSA. RUSA was recently renewed as a nationally funded scheme (reform initiative) for an additional 5 years.

(2) Centre for Academic Leadership and Education Management (CALEM)

In response to a call by the Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya National Mission on Teachers and Teaching to develop high-quality leaders in K-12 and higher education institutions throughout India, the Centre for Academic Leadership and Education Management (CALEM) at TISS has designed a series of capacity-building workshops for in-service principals from a variety of school types and regions throughout India (i.e., government, tribal, rural, and private schools). In addition to developing principal capacity and networks of mutual learning, CALEM will monitor and evaluate the implementation of these professional development experiences, with the ultimate goal of informing India's education policies regarding leadership training and school governance. Penn GSE currently collaborates with TISS to develop curriculum, workshop content, leadership case studies, and evaluation measures for CALEM workshops. The ultimate goal is to create a national reform scheme that meets the range and variation of needs within and across India's 29 states and 6 union territories.

(3) TISS's National Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Hub

The National Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Hub, which has been at TISS for over 7 years, provides research and technical support to public sector enterprises engaging in CSR projects across India. Penn GSE supports the development of participatory research design and action plans for community-based sustainable development with marginalized and under-resourced communities throughout India. Penn GSE also works with the Hub research team to further develop their applied research methods skills, with a focus on applied ethnography, participatory methods, and case study development.

Reflections from the Field:

An Interview with Dr. Venkatesh Kumar and Dr. Sharon Ravitch

What is the work that you do together?

Kumar: Essentially, we work around 3 broad areas, all through the prism of participatory methods and applied research. But more particularly, we work around how the use of participatory techniques in understanding key issues around higher education and specifically in the improvement of quality, access, and equity in state public universities (as part of RUSA), intensive leadership and organizational development for school leaders (CALEM), and participatory community and village development through public-private partnerships mobilized by TISS's National CSR Hub.

The approach we take is unprecedented in India. For example, the idea of stakeholder contribution, or involving key stakeholders in decision making – such as students, academia, faculty colleagues, policy leaders at the state level and at the federal level – to come up with a well thought through policy design to reform the state of higher education in India through RUSA. This is something that TISS initiated about 4-5 years back. TISS's CSR Hub works at the national level as well as at the state levels and has been invited, and is supported by, the Indian Federal Government. Given these factors, we have been able to influence the whole country's CSR milieu by introducing participatory processes and, further, making a requirement of the work and the criteria of evaluation be that the projects are participatory to the fullest extent possible. As well, building a content framework for leadership development for school leaders through a participatory process has not been tried before in relation to national schemes in India. It proved absolutely critical to the success of all that we built onto the content framework. More recently, as a part of our collaboration with GSE, we have together worked on developing new and better models and techniques for participatory research and engagement with stakeholders, approaches that create the conditions for the stakeholders to build their own capacities. We have also developed and continue to refine better instruments and tools for monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Sharon's expertise in participatory community building, participatory methods and frameworks, and participatory evaluation and M&E has helped us to rethink our methods and has allowed us to engage in new ways that are more equitable, representational, and emancipatory. The strong foundation we have built, of tools and projects and relationships, has been the bedrock of the collaborative work. In the partnership, we develop it further through multiple angles of work.

Ravitch: It is important to underscore that when we began our partnership, Venkatesh and his team at TISS were already well into the process in their 3rd year of RUSA and that the CSR Hub at TISS, which was requested by the Indian Government, was already in its 5th year. So, we started working within those initiatives to further develop the methodologies and frameworks for holistic, sustainable, critical development practice. And now, we are knee-deep in the project coming out of CALEM for principal education and school improvement, which we've really co-constructed from the beginning together. So, our entry points into these projects are different. Our team at GSE works in the service of the projects that TISS is already doing.

Venkatesh and I have spent considerable energy and time really thinking about how our work can be more participatory. Not just in terms of using more participatory methods, but actually that all of our work is conceptualized in ways that are participatory from start to finish – from entry-point to designing the questions and goals, to thinking about critical representation and engagement at the state, union territory, community, town, city, and village levels. How can the work be more deeply and critically participatory and continually improve as we learn in the field? What is the range and variation of perspectives on this? As we scale things up massively for a country of 1.4 billion people, how do we not lose that quality of authentic participation and co-construction of projects, to have a kind of work that is equity-focused and representational as the norm, rather than as additive? These are central questions we ask across all 3 of our initiatives.

How do you approach your cross-national partnership?

Kumar: We, TISS, of course come with a lot of strength on the context part of it, and I think the Penn team comes to the table with the content part of it. The collective approach by the 2 of us, by our 2 teams, is creating a strong partnership that is able to get the

buy-in of several actors—state governments, state-owned entities, the private sector, and other institutions who would like to get informed inputs from such credible institutions. Being 2 top higher education institutions, in each of our countries, brings to the table a kind of credibility factor, so we are able to get them to take us very seriously and any inputs that we bring to the table are seriously taken and are implemented effectively. I think that's a highlight of this collaboration. There is also a participatory approach to even this very collaboration. There is not a sign of 1 dominating the other, and both are co-equal partners in this collaborative project, which I think augurs very well for any strong cross-country partnership looking at such enormously challenging issues. I think there is sound understanding between our 2 teams, and a fair amount of intellectual bandwidth that both our teams bring to the table, and so I think that the potential to engage in large-scale collaborative work is very promising.

Ravitch: I strongly agree. I think that the piece about the team itself being participatory is an important and interesting one because in my experience, teams most often have power dynamics that are troubling, as in inequitable and hegemonic, and therefore can't possibly be in a position of authentically encouraging external partners to be participatory if we ourselves don't know how to do it ongoingly and with fidelity. Doing this at the team level requires a number of interpersonal and collaboration skills, and those are skills that we then need to apply in our work. Therefore, we need to, and have been able to, cultivate these skills in ourselves and each other, which can be trying, but is ultimately very liberating and generative as a part of our own inquiry stance in/on our practice. And I want to give a shout out to my dear friend, Susan Lytle, for helping me understand how transformational an inquiry stance can be when engaged in with shared curiosity, focus, and passion.

What are the guiding beliefs that shape your collaborative work?

Kumar: That part is also because we come from 2 institutions whose moorings are strongly embedded in social beliefs and practices which are meant to address issues of underdevelopment. That value system actually helps both these institutions to come together, and the teams have a similar thinking along this direction. I think that's the very interesting piece of this collaborative work, and I think there is an enormous amount of transparency in the work that we collectively do. These basic values of being transparent, ethical, accountable, then become the bedrock for any strong partnership, and it is on this premise that we build our work with our teams and translate the same beliefs into any of the work that we do. And we also inform our stakeholders that these are very important value systems that they need to imbibe in their own institutions, to bring about transformation. A lot of values and ethics are embedded in this collaboration, and the joint partnership goes with these value systems in any engagement that we have with institutions, with organizations, with states.

Ravitch: I strongly agree with Venkatesh about the value of our teams' transparency, the participatory nature of our teams' functioning, the ethics and values we bring and share in the work, and the relational engagement and accountability. As we come together to collaborate and construct the work that we do, there are broader value systems that come into play and these are really about repositioning expertise and knowledge as a part of people's lived experience of everyday life, whether they have formal education or not, whether they are literate or not, for example. The kinds of epistemological violence that many Western academics (and some academics more broadly) often commit in development work, the violence of killing, devaluing, or discounting someone else's ideas, concepts, experiences, and feelings, is something that the GSE team spends a significant amount time collectively examining and actively working against.

One of the things that we've talked about in the work is pushing into the expert-learner binary. I've done scholarly work on this over the years, and we've both done applied work that pushes into this dynamically, that rejects the all-too-familiar sound of the dominant group speaking as if we hold all the wisdom. And this is not only across our teams as in East-West issues, it is very much within the applied work in India itself in terms of intersections between caste, social class, gender, and generation, as well as ideological differences of Indian field researchers and those with whom they engage. All of this is central, it's, as GSE doctoral student Oreoluwa Badaki brought to my attention, an axiology that must be more consciously centralized in our work since Western contexts and people tend to place a primacy on knowledge over values, emotions, belief systems, and so on. And, of course, we know that these are the center of human being, that all knowledge filters through that. What do we value and how is

that embedded in our meaning-making systems, which may be different and even in conflict with those with whom we engage? We value people being able to co-create conditions where they can find and create freedom in the ways in the Freirean and hooksian view of freedom, with "education as the practice of freedom" as a central societal tenet. Freedom requires that everyone can work to positively affect their lives and those of others in their countries.

I think that for us, in the context of India, if one could say "the context" of India, but in the contextS of a place as deeply and widely diverse as India (29 states and 6 union territories), when we started, we would talk a lot about post-colonial theory. We're shifting over time I'd say to anti-colonial theory because we must not only acknowledge where colonialism has taken root in systems and people, but even more so, we must stand in opposition to continued colonization through structural conditions and top-down edicts and processes of research that reinscribe it. How do you work with authenticity with people anywhere in the world? Post-structural critical theories like post-colonialism help us to push against damaging social constructions that manifest as government apparatus, shifting the discourse to be resource-oriented, looking at and working to build into all people's "funds of knowledge" to use a term by Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti, whose work has guided me a great deal. I think those are the broad concepts and theories that influence how we build our designs and implement work at the needs and resource assessment stage, in the design of content frameworks for professional development, and in other kinds of service delivery.

Kumar: I completely believe in all the guiding beliefs that Sharon has just put on the table. I think these are extremely important beliefs and ideologies that guide our work. I'll add a few more guiding ideas to what she has just mentioned. I think an interesting process framework that has guided our RUSA work is a cooperative theoretical framework. This is where you bring in collaboration, cooperation, and in some sense, our work has also brought in a spirit of positive competition amongst actors, states, and individuals who then work to compete for formal recognition of their progress through a funding structure that creates transparency in terms of each institution's progress on clearly demarcated goals and benchmarks. These kinds of cooperative approaches help us to gain a deeper understanding of how we actually implement some of these changes.

The other process framework I would like to talk about is networks. We have used an approach through attention to networks in much of our work, building relations, building networks. And this takes me to the other point: we both come from a different ecosystem relationally. One is more transactional (the U.S.), the other is more relational (India), but notwithstanding the ecosystems we come from, in our own work, we've been able to ensure that there is a joint relationship built on trust and care. We bring the best of relational and the best of transactional as a whole team. For instance, when you compete for grants, there is some element of the relational argument which can move us away from objective decision making. How do we ensure that while we are relational in our approach, it's fairly institutionalized so that we do not allow the relational element to come in the way of decision-making? We think a great deal about how to help the people with whom we work to develop an understanding of the importance of networks for building cultural, social, intellectual, and economic capital.

Another idea I would like to talk about is the whole concept of evidence-based decision making, which has an important role in policy theory. Today, decisions are made on the basis of well-informed inputs, well-informed choices, and there's an enormous amount of data, in the form of people's articulated perspectives, that guides our work. We create conditions to explore and document what people think about the processes of these reforms in real-time and this helps us to make useful real-time adjustments and improvements. This has helped us to generate content frameworks for our policies and their implementation that are of the essence of what we need to do. And this kind of systematic stakeholder attentiveness, in a formalized approach, is part of what has come in because of the collaborative nature of our work, and informed much of our work around CSR, school education, and also higher education. This has been our guiding belief in the current work that we have undertaken.

What is your conceptual framework?

Ravitch: Our conceptual framework – or our theory of action for our applied work – focuses on critical, non-impositional applied

research that contextualizes development and links concepts, knowledges, values, and realities through a participatory, action-oriented, emergent design methodology. So, in our work, participatory action research (PAR) is approached as a methodology, conceptual and axiological orientation, and, ultimately, as a tool for communities to envision, build, and enact development for themselves. Building on the work of Paulo Freire, Orlando Fals-Borda, Neela Mukherjee, Michelle Fine, Bagele Chilisa, and others, we view participatory action research as a framework that can be taken up to help groups cultivate counter-hegemonic, organic community development often referred to in India as "bottom-up development." Issues of equitable representation and inclusion are central to participatory methods and in this sense, our PAR methodology operationalizes a stance that rejects marginalization, essentialization, and deficitization of minoritized groups, states, regions, and so on. Building on the work of Said, Valencia, hooks, and others, we take, and remind others to take, a resource, anti-deficit orientation as an unwavering stance.

Kumar: These theories are central, not additive. We also look at theories that pertain to welfarism and neo-liberalism in contemporary India and its relationship to CSR and education. Works such as Keyne's welfarism-modernisation perspective in a Friedman free-market framework and Mancur Oslom's theory of collective action are quite helpful in our work. Also, works on neo-institutionalism such as those of Douglas North and others as well as work building social capital through bonding and bridging, such as the works of Bourdieu and Putnam, are quite productive to thinking about new ways to structure civil society. Our work helps us to build the national discourse and to argue cogently for a new pattern of development that is people-centered, non-impositional, shared through strategic collaboration, sustainability-focused, equity oriented, building on good, critical development frameworks that challenge neo-colonialism in all its forms.

Importantly, we are applying Sharon's "customized replication" model for ongoing, participatory contextualization through new program development and even more so, as programs are scaled up and rolled out in ways that become increasingly decentralized over time. This has been very important because her model centralizes the need for customization as a participatory process in the scale-up of locally developed initiatives and processes that are brought to scale. We are working to build, and then replicate, core aspects of our initiatives across sites such as PAR-based M&E, co-constructed leader professional development, the development of communities of practice with an emphasis on peer-to-peer mentoring, participatory curricular and pedagogical realignment, and significant outreach to and building of local community and village engagement. We work toward this kind of fidelity to customization within each community project.

Ravitch: Yes, we're working to further develop my customized replication model (CRM). Balancing the necessary consistency across programs, which is replication, and flexibility in design given contextual resources, needs, and differences, which is customization, has proven challenging given the vital importance of local contextualization, adaptation, and critical engagement in order to customize within each particular locality and group. In India, this has been an amazing learning experience since the customized replication concept and framework were largely built in Nicaragua. We designed, tested, and implemented the model in Nicaragua as part of my work with the Seeds for Progress Foundation which entailed building a pilot participatory school, teacher, and community development program on 1 coffee-farm school and then creating a customized replication model 1-2 schools at a time over a number of years while also creating bespoke professional development materials for teachers and teacher supervisors first in the 16 participating coffee-farm schools and over time perhaps looking to scale it up nationally.

Kumar: We're working in India to further build a customized replication model that will help others understand how to develop, document, and implement their own programs from soft launch to completion in ways that are participatory and contextualized in order to help develop a solid working understanding of how important it is to: (1) ensure a decentralized participatory process that helps to create distributed engagement and leadership; (2) create efficient and effective frameworks for these replication processes that have a robust data-driven contextualization process at the outset and throughout the cycle of projects and programs; and (3) build institutional mechanisms that can allow for a "bottom-up," data-based approach to local development efforts including how they are evaluated over time.

Ravitch: In terms of the formal theories we engage, our theoretical framework is interdisciplinary. In no priority order, there's post-colonial development theory and critical development studies as they relate to development and neo-liberalism, post-

industrialism, like the work of Arturo Escobar, Majid Rahnema, Wolfgang Sachs, and others. Specifically, post-colonial theory and anti-colonial critiques of development like the works of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Amartya Sen, Chakravorty Spivak, and others. We learn much from Homi Bhabha's work on post-colonial "third spaces," which is most useful in positioning CSR as a "third space" in promoting welfarism, supplanting state-centered development. Across my work, and in this work, is the framework of critical hermeneutics and the sub-theories of reciprocal transformation and dialectics of mutual influence that Michael Nakkula and I have cultivated over decades, as well as intersectional feminist theory such as the works of Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill-Collins, Prem Chowdhry, Vrushali Patil and as taught to me methodologically by Carol Gilligan, who taught me her listening framework for feminist clinical interviewing. As well, the ideas of counter-narrative and story-telling to disrupt and replace discriminatory, hegemonic grand narratives, beliefs, and structures (like powerful thinker-activists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Audra Lorde, Henry Giroux, and Ta-Nehisi Coates) have deeply influenced our approach. These values and their attendant methods have stayed with me throughout my career and they are made more vibrant as they are hybridized with other frameworks within our shared work.

How do you enact these values, concepts, and theories?

Ravitch: I'll start with one thing, which is shifting language and process away from grand deficit narratives as they circulate at the policy level and as they are instantiated in local and national contexts. For example, in international development, and in most fields, "needs assessment" has been the normative language and mode of data collection, and I get that often needs are being assessed to provide interventions. Nonetheless, to provide an intervention, one needs to know the resources, not just the needs. It seems like it's a small change, but changing the concept from a needs assessment to a needs and resource assessment changes the understanding from the beginning, changes the goals, the questions that are asked, the engagement with people in different communities and organizations. It shifts focus from what there may not be to what there is. We need to understand what people know and must build into that, not just supplant what they don't have. We use this shift of language in our professional development, across all 3 of these endeavors, in the population of vice chancellors, village-based entrepreneurs, and school principals. That's one example and importantly, it's not just the language, it then happens in the design, in the guiding philosophy, it occurs in the engagement with participants, and in the design of the instruments that we're using, so it means that we're getting different data, it's absolutely changing things… the notion of the "inseparability of methods and findings," that how you go about doing everything leads to the data that you get, leads to whatever happens next. There's an unlearning on our teams, including ourselves, that has to happen because we're all socialized in a world that's quite deficit-oriented. Even the terminology that is used, "third world," we would never engage in that language. That's an offensive Western, Eurocentric way of compartmentalizing humanity. We take a much more cosmopolitan approach in our work in the Kwame Anthony Appiah sense of cosmopolitanism, which includes what he refers to as a universality of concern for all people coupled with the belief that people are entitled to live into their own priorities and ideals without the imposition of what others would choose for them. This is central to non-impositional development work.

Kumar: Yes, this change in language and mindsets is quite important indeed and it is challenging when views and beliefs are sedimented. As another example, in India, we—policy makers, people in general, and official government documents and communications—still name our most unserved and underserved districts as "backwards districts" "backwards areas" and the people in them are "backwards groups." That's so much in our mindset, so ingrained in our minds, but we're now making change to calling them either "underserved" or "unserved" districts, areas, and communities. Or, even by taking a more positive orientation, and saying that these are "aspirational districts" which focuses on possibility and does not limit by giving a pejorative label. This marks an important shift in public discourse which is vital to changing minds. I think there is a shift in thinking which is coming greatly out of this partnership. Having outside, constructively critical eyes has given birth to new possibilities. We are interrupting language and thought norms that are harmful and that is important in all of our work.

Ravitch: Agreed, these language norms reflect and reproduce power asymmetries and deficit orientations. When we talk about bilateral or multilateral partnerships, the assumption is that it's a West-to-anywhere-else flow of knowledge. And of course, that's preposterous. Our partnership is a testament to really understanding that in the U.S. we've gotten far away from understanding the kind of trust and fidelity, loyalty, and sense of shared energy and fate that this kind of work requires because the transactional approach is that everything can be done by email, commenting on a document is the same as talking, and Venkatesh has a very

particular way of working, he believes in the power of relationships to move whole systems. And his immense national-level policy change success confirms this view. And so, our team in the U.S. has had to learn more of that, to consider how our approach to things is often more transactional, less personal, less hearty, in the literal sense. We've shifted and grown a lot as a result. I think in the beginning, when groups come together, there's a lot of excitement, but once the shine wears off, you get to really see the dynamics, and where the learning needs to be. The learning is in every interaction, and that's really important. There's not any goal more important than having an honest process, a relational process, and that's definitely been a key learning because transactionalism is so engrained in the U.S. psyche. That's another kind of unlearning, and Venkatesh has really helped me with that. And I'm not saying that's everyone in India, and I'm not saying everyone in the US is not relational. But we've distilled it crudely into this way of thinking about that contrast, and working in to disrupt, on the US end more so, this transactional way in which we approach our work, because it absolutely does not need to be that way. Partnerships like this require a relational approach; they can't be successful without it.

Kumar: I think this whole relational versus transactional approach is a very interesting behavioral pattern. Either you are too involved, or you need to be completely impersonal, those are the two poles. I think we need to kind of get a middle path to it. It can't be entirely relational, it has to be some element of so-called objectivity and therefore institutionalized patterns. Otherwise there is not merit-based decision making. At the same time, if it is purely transactional it can be a problem. There are times you do require to have that human touch, to have the trust needed to push or work difficult things through. I think what has happened is both of our teams have understood each other and come to a middle path, and our work is also moving towards defining a more relational-transactional mix in whatever we do, on the ground. I think there's a very nice balance that we've been able to create in our joint work and the impact that our work is doing in communities.

Can you speak to lessons learned in your community development work specifically?

Kumar: Over the past 5 years, CSR has been positioned as a major policy intervention in India. India is the only country in the world where the government requires state-owned enterprises to contribute a substantial portion of the resources that they generate through their commercial activity back into the communities in which they operate.

In the wake of India's independence, the newly instated federal government deployed significant amounts of capital, land, and other resources to support state-owned enterprises and jumpstart the national economy. The vast majority of these enterprises, which were established in areas of India that were economically underdeveloped but rich in natural resources such as oil, mineral resources, energy, ports, iron, mining, and petroleum, quickly began to generate revenue and turn a profit. Then, in the 1990s, India moved from being a socialist democracy to a more liberal democracy; consequently, its focus shifted to globalism, privatization, and implementation of neo-liberal policies. As the federal government loosened its grip over the economy, an imbalance of income distribution and development within and across communities and states began to emerge. Some areas of the country grew rapidly, while others grappled with unmanageable unemployment and poverty rates. Social disorder, violence, and a challenging civic moment ensued.

In 2010, India's Federal Government, in an unprecedented and radical paradigm shift, issued a set of guidelines aimed at providing a fillip to interventions through CSR resources. These state-owned enterprises have been, as a result, forced to understand how their resources can be used to meet the needs of people and communities where they operate. That paradigm shift heralded a new beginning for CSR, which came to be viewed as playing a central and effective role in mainstreaming India's development agenda. In the last 5 years, state-owned enterprises have been intensely involved in trying to meet the Government's mandate to effectively contribute to large-scale changes in the areas where they operate. There are over 200 state-owned enterprises in India and 190 of them are profit-making entities, so these are extremely valuable resources that, if put to the right use, can significantly add value to development efforts, thereby helping to bring about effective community and national transformation in India. The CSR mandate means that these companies must come to view and approach CSR as something that is close to their business interests. CSR in India, in stark contrast to the Western model of CSR, is being positioned as a tool to address development deficits. The goal has become leveraging resources from state-owned enterprises that have benefitted

from state largess and generated significant resources, to plough them back to help these communities since the lived contradiction of the State having rich mineral resources but not addressing social needs requires rectification and address.

Ravitch: In the CSR work, we contextualize and operationalize these projects and their respective methodological approaches in terms of geographical location, community and village locatedness, and existing human knowledge, values, and resources. We view the projects in terms of how they elicit participatory stakeholder engagement, collaboratively analyze needs and resources that exist in communities and groups, and understand resource requirements to develop strategic plans for sustainable intervention. A participatory action research approach guides these interventions and how they are implemented and assessed, which democratizes the process including review mechanisms, data-based course corrections, ongoing impact assessment, ways to ascertain if and how interventions are effective, helpful, transformational, and so on. This includes stakeholder discussions of network analyses and social audits to help understand if and how participants benefit and how issues of representation and marginalization fit into and shape these processes.

Kumar: One great learning from our work in general and from the village-based work though CSR initiatives is about reframing "failure" by learning from, with, and across community-based interventions in India. This includes defining what we mean by "failure" since some mean the need for mid-course corrections and others mean that an intervention has failed. We argue for a more critical, innovation-focused perspective on failure that reframes the concept in and beyond CSR as the result of a collective growth mindset (building on the work of Carol Dweck). The central questions guiding our work include: What can we learn from the challenges faced and how they have been addressed? What can these projects help us to understand, theorize, and learn about designing effective community development methods, techniques, and approaches? We have also learned from the ways that certain CSR interventions have been stand-alone and therefore not sustainable at the completion of their funding cycle. This has resulted in CSR interventions that have failed. We now spend more time planning for sustainability, ecosystem realities, and contextual effectiveness in using a PAR process.

We have figured out, after much trial and some error, that the failures of past CSR interventions, when collectively reflected upon, become the basis of an argument for going forward differently to set the conditions for future effectiveness of interventions by critiquing past mistakes such as a lack of bottom-up planning, implementing ad hoc interventions with no strategic timeline, interventions that were impositional and therefore inorganic and unsuccessful, giving in to intense political and administrative pressures that changed the core of initiatives in ways that doomed them from the start, and succumbing to pressures from political, social, and special interest groups. Reviewing these interventions carefully as a group generates great insights and we plough those back into our current and new participatory community development projects.

We strongly believe that India can provide the world with a new model of CSR, that we are breaking new grounds on how a country can engage CSR through participatory methods to evoke and support collective action and then to strengthen collective action in the sustainable development of social capital at individual, group, community, state, and national levels. We have learned how to be more strategic with CSR as critical national and local development rather than just gap filling. We have also learned much about the generative value of resource sharing and the building of networks and communities of practice within and across groups and communities.

Ravitch: We are learning how CSR can be positioned and leveraged as a social movement. The projects are developed and operate in different parts of the country in terms of region, locality, sector, and overall context. The Hub's team work allows for careful examination of a set of state-owned enterprises operating in different parts of the country, sharing how they have been able to intervene effectively precisely because they are built upon data obtained with (rather than on) communities through participatory methods. We see solid working examples of how – through well-informed, bottom-up planning that is informed by locally collected data and broader local input – these people and organizations have been able to engage with and mobilize communities, work with policy leaders, comprehensively address issues in localities and neighborhoods and through this, use participatory research to build concrete ways to assess needs, resources, and how the CSR function of companies can be put to best use from the perspectives of those who live and work there.

Any final learnings from this work and the partnership that you'd like to share?

Kumar: I think a couple of important takeaways would be that all wisdom does not reside in you. No matter how well or how deeply you're engaged, I think you need to have an open mind, you need to allow for other thought processes, other ideas to come in. You also need to look at multiple perspectives, you also need to have an element of criticality in the work that you do, and for it to be objectively looked at it, critically objective, objectively critical. And critical is not misconstrued as criticism. You need to see that there's always course correction, newer learning. There are always insights that you can draw from others. Even though I have been working pan-India, at all levels, engaging with a partner such as Sharon and her team, and from a great Ivy League university such as Penn, brings to the table newer thought processes, new insights, new understandings, which helps us to be informed about what are the newer engagements, newer forms of intervention, new thinking that can be implemented? I think this is a process of learning and unlearning. And this is a lifelong process. We've become far more enlightened and far richer with these kinds of insights and inputs. Overall this has been an extraordinary partnership, and a partnership which has mutual respect and trust, and belief in each other's ability to collectively work together and not look at India or the US, but look at the world as a whole, and bring about a real and lasting change.real and lasting change.

Ravitch: All of that strongly resonates with me. I think the cross-disciplinary, cross-field nature of our work is really powerful. Dr. Kumar is an applied political scientist, I'm an educational anthropologist. His political science expertise is absolutely necessary for these national level policy reforms. I've learned so much from the way that he analyzes macro-sociopolitical trends in the world and in India. Another thing I would say is the importance of being together, you know, Skype is great, the phone is fine, email's fine, but there's nothing like being together in person. And we're together often. That's an enormously important component. You can't build relationships, from my perspective and from Venkatesh's perspective, without actually being together. It's a very different way of relating, and thought partnership, from where we sit, really depends on it. True thought partnership is the only way that everyone's perspectives and experiences and expertise(s) can be integrated in ways that are sustainable.

I want to return for a moment to the idea of cosmopolitanism. I'm often asked, "The Philadelphia schools are a mess, why are you going over to India?" I used to feel defensive but I've shifted my understanding of this and now respond with, "I don't chop up humanity across national lines. Those are political structures, but I don't socially construct humanity that way." And I think that Dr. Kumar and I are similar in that way, not in a Pollyanna sense, but in a true sense of really looking at the horizontals of humanity and figuring out how context mediates human ability to do aspirational things in people's personal, communal, and professional lives. Figuring that out together has been a really amazing process. What we've figured out in part is that we bring our hearts into this work. Freire talks about love, as does hooks, but it sometimes feels that we've all gotten so far away from that sense of things, and I think our work brings back this sense of love—in the work, of the work, with people, of each other, and of shared feelings of responsibility and care.

What do you ultimately hope to do together?

Kumar: Obviously you heard the work that we're doing, and that's prime, I think… Essentially you need to be passionate and enjoy the work you do because change can happen now, change can happen over a period of time, change can happen after a decade or so. What is important is you need to be convinced that what you're doing is for a good purpose. Both of us are excited in what we are doing, and the ultimate aim of this: Can we bring about changes in the lives of people, can they bring about changes in their own lives, through access to good education, access to good living conditions, good health, good facilities, just processes which will bring about both progress and prosperity and an overall change in the developmental pattern? The applied research that we do actually helps in designing changes, implementing reform strategies and change strategies, and also building capacities of those who are involved in these change processes. So clearly change is something that we want to undertake. But it also gives an enormous understanding of what are the pathways for these changes? What are the frameworks

we can create to monitor these changes and improvements? And how can we use a diffusion effect to bring about a change in other parts of the country, in other parts of the world?

What we want is for our work to inform key decision makers, that is something that we want to do. And for us, since we belong to top institutions, we are also able to use this in talking to our students, our faculty colleagues, and so on. We are able to work to build the conditions for so many people to be empowered in many different ways through these different pathways for national and local change and improvement. You don't need to be a political elite, or you don't need to be a policy leader or bureaucrat, but as responsible citizens who have an important role to play, by being in academia, we are able to contribute. It's not just a question of going and doing your teaching for so many hours, it is a very deep commitment to the overall improvement of the lives of people and the world. This is a fundamental value system of each of our higher education institutions. That's what we care about, think about, dream about; that's what we enjoy doing. That's what we hope our work can realize.

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