Governance and Poverty Reduction: Beyond the Cage of Best Practices, Amita Singh, Kapil Kapur and Rabindranath Bhattacharya (eds.) , PHI Learning, New Delhi , 2009 , pp. viii+343

This book initiates a refreshingly new approach to the comparative literature on governance in the region of South Asia. It moves around the contours of best practices implementation research adopted by public administration departments in India in a manner to investigate and reprimand its simplicity and lack of rigor. The writings of NAPSIPAG policy experts drawn from South Asia have attempted to explore all possibilities of sustaining support to the poor who have been encountering similar forms of marginalization and abandonment by their respective governments.

Public administration as a discipline is apparently vacillating between global pressures of liberalization and privatization on the one hand, and search for a theoretical structure on the other. Ironically, in South Asia a paucity of endeavours towards theory building in administrative reforms have consistently starved implementation of poverty reduction programmes. So much so that the innovations or best practices in reforms remain scattered and clearly lie outside any specific framework or hypothesis for investigations on replicable models. Thus, 'Governance' has become the new buzz word or an escape route to stipulate a framework within which all types of research in administrative reforms especially in South Asia could be located. In fact, most of the recent publications in public administration make use of the word 'governance' as a prefix or a suffix to attenuate their research titles. Is 'governance' then the new paradigm, which provides a comprehensive perspective on socio-economic and political issues? If the answer is in the affirmative, then the very essence of governance needs to be juxtaposed with the contemporary administrative reality reflected in these best practices transcending the traditional understanding of public administration boundaries appropriately being referred to as 'a cage'.

In fact, the new terminology hovers more around 'appropriate governance' rather than 'good governance'. It emphasizes the facets of 'how and why is a particular service delivered and accessed by the bureaucracy and the people respectively rather than the features of it being 'good' in a global parlance' . The aim is to understand state capacity in encountering many obstructions of the administrative processes such as corruption, loopholes of public resource management, de-facto decentralization, access to justice for the poor in transition to organizational reform measures in a multi-level governance. The book is a very innovative effort in establishing through an analysis of best practices that poverty reduction in South Asia is a precondition for sustaining any form of reforms in governance hence the poor need to be at the core of any innovation. However, the book has tried to justify this argument of poverty alleviation efforts through data made available from best practices in the poorest regions of South Asia.

The South Asian region thus needs to have its own preferred frame of governance as against what has been implanted through the New Public Management (NPM) reforms research in the West, or what has been handed over by the Breton Wood Institutions. Best Practices provide the fodder required to design a critique for this theoretical outcome of the Washington Consensus in the early nineties. In this context the book 'Governance and Poverty Reduction: Beyond the Cage of Best Practices' is a welcome starting point on a discussion culminating into the liberation of administrative reforms from a cage of NPM to suit people and regions appropriately. It is a potentially relevant study in governance research of South Asia where policies are de-linked from the issues of capacities, concerns and convergence pre-existing in local communities. This is also a gentle attack on governance agenda promoted simply on the basis of vendor driven programmes and degeneration of representative democracy called electoralism. The book assumes significance due to five major reasons:

- It delves into micro-level research upon the multiple facets of poverty in South Asia and suggests a wider space for the policy maker in encountering reforms in poverty reduction.
- It draws on the pertinent interface between governance and poverty reduction in new institutions created to achieve targets of Millennium Development Goals by 2015.
- It goes beyond the best practices viewpoint which has stifled administrative research and entrenched a captive agenda in South Asian reforms.
- It brings together the wisdom of research on poverty reduction efforts in South Asia and asserts a common vision to deal with a common intractable enemy of deepening poverty during global transition.
- The book is also an ambassador of peace as it establishes the gains of cooperation, collaboration and partnership in administrative reforms efforts in the region to replace conflict and war.

The impact of globalization on any heterogeneous populace or a caste and class laden society is bound to be divisive and counterproductive. The World Development Report 2006 has warned that unless rising inequality is contained, societies would fracture catastrophically along pre-existing socio-religious and ethnic lines. The book attempts to underscore this issue. Persistence of abject poverty and inequality is considered to smother economic development from below. Thus, even though the per capita income has grown in South Asian countries, the rising levels of inequality have negated the creation of any positive impact in the region. Despite the efforts in creation of voice and services, we are nowhere near the targeted objectives. The Millennium Development Goals also endorse this apprehension. The lacunae can be found at various levels, central, state and local. There are many reasons for this sorry state of affairs. The book examines some of them such as bureaucratic failures, lack of political commitment, absence of creation of tangible and intangible quality goods, inequality of opportunity, deficiency of will on the part of government to make services work for poor, and lack of institutional capacity to sustain good micro-level initiatives.

Public administration is at the core of governance, and is also the steering wheel of governance studies. However, it is no longer a single discipline constructing the meaning of governance studies. The public managers interact with multiple stakeholders like the legislators, judicial personnel, interest groups, donor agencies, non-governmental groups, and people's forums. The book talks of many local level initiatives in India in its 'Introduction', which bring out the role played by some of the stakeholders. These are the electricity reforms in Jaipur (Rajasthan), service delivery in Poorba Midnapur (West Bengal), Mahiti Shakti in Godhara (Gujarat), transparency in administration in Ajmer (Rajasthan), community mobilization in Kudumbshree (Kerala), Amchi Shala (Maharashtra), and Bhagidari (Delhi). These initiatives, as discussed in the introduction of the book, have incidentally created a new landscape for implementation studies and to set off what John Millet avers as a 'craft perspective'. The book points out the conspicuous disconnect between these micro level reforms based on individual initiatives and mega reforms that fail to generate and sustain conditions in which they could flourish. However studying implementation only through this new found micro-connects has become a fashion and a fad in governance. There are millions of such 'best practices' scattered around the globe which are like tiny disconnected empires conveying similar messages of participation, collaboration, cost-effective sustainable approach which is conveniently replicable elsewhere. The introduction has refreshingly highlighted the policy maker's dilemma and pain while trying to seek bigger plans through these best practices. The introduction suggests that this tendency of studying implementation only through 'best practices' squeezes off the wisdom which many failed practices have tried to convey to the policy maker but this is never approached as the 'best practice' research becomes a horse with blinders. This is why this book is very relevant in the contemporary scenario. It steers clear of this so-called cage and tries to position the empirical studies in the broader governance framework. It investigates areas of active networking, partnerships and collaborations between state and non-state bodies which reveal their inner

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capacities, drive and direction. The governance approach stresses on the benchmarks of transparency, accountability, social justice, human rights and legal framework. The book addresses the concerns of entrepreneurship, knowledge and professionalism within these very parameters. Many failed practices bring forth the exit through the 'cage' by showing that despite transparency and partnership many practices are not able to withstand the need for sustainability and replicability because innumerable new variables from the political, ethnographic and demographic arena play decisive roles but fail to be noticed as the practice in itself is not the 'best'.

The editors of the book Amita Singh, Kapil Kapoor and Rabindranath Bhattacharya make an invincible team for this study. Singh a scholar of administrative reforms and project director of Governance Knowledge Centre , Kapoor a World Bank expert on poverty management and formerly the Head of South Asian Region in Washington and Bhattacharyya a long time researcher on entrepreneurship and self-help group studies in Asia Pacific networks of governance. True to the requirements of interdisciplinary-ness in governance studies, the editors have indeed done a commendable service by going beyond the blinkered approach to empirical analyses in linking practices to the real world politics which accredits them as 'best' and 'failed' practices in the field of poverty reduction. A comprehensive introduction by Amita Singh brings together the epistemology of best practice research and the appropriateness of policy structures for the poor in the region. It provides an intellectual impetus to the debate on best practice research being adopted by governments in the whole of Asia without much debate and deliberation.

The book becomes extremely focused in dealing with poverty reduction in South Asia, which continues to be a region with the highest number of world's poor. Brilliant scholars from policy implementation areas have investigated the backwardness of this region due to the State failure in replicating governance more innovatively in partnership with capacity building programmes which stand disengaged and detached from the masses. The rich multi-disciplinary experience which these scholars have put together from different countries such as the USA, Pakistan, Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Philippines has brought forth an enriched understanding of the historical, ethnographic and policy profiles about the state of poverty reduction in South Asia.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section is titled *Understanding Poverty in South Asia*. It gives an overview of the concept of poverty, its meaning and its spread. This section is divided into six chapters, which deal with conceptualizing poverty, understanding its nature, engendering growth for poverty eradication, reforming public administration to make it pro-poor, and encouraging governance interventions for alleviating poverty. The contributors to this section of the book Alan Mayne, Sarfraz H. Khawaja, Steven E Aufrecht, Rashmi Prasad, Regina Birner, Sarfaraz Khan Qureshi, and Tek Nath Dhakal provide an alternative perspective or framework of viewing the relationship and connects of poverty, governance and administrative reforms, as there is no straight cause and effect between high growth performance and level of human deprivation. They call for busting of the outsider view of looking at South Asia and underscoring the need for our own version of reality, be it slums, poverty, political instability, injustice, inequality, women's empowerment, participation and reforms. They discuss the impact of story-telling on poverty issues which generate different paradigms and perspectives of looking at poverty reduction. They suggest the intrusion of market economics as a predominant impulse in poverty reduction policies and its cross cutting through other stories from shared experience is gaining prominence. The understanding of slums as fundamental to urban social reform is clearly brought out. Other issues that they deal with relate to the connect between trade, development and poverty reduction, erosion of economic balance and increased poverty in the liberalization era. The spotlight of this section is on collaborative governance structures characterized by partnerships between different sectors, inclusive reform strategy, engaging civil society and capacity building. The hope in investigative implementation research arises from these scholars emphasizing the

need for a more wholesome understanding of poverty in South Asia within the handicaps of history, state capacity and democratic decision making.

The second part of the book is an innovative survey of area based small community efforts across South Asia, titled *Poverty Reduction: Good Practices*, *Stray Experiments*. It has five chapters that trace the trajectory of good practices and initiatives. These efforts speak of the courage and innovative zeal of local good Samaritans, but bemoan the fact that these remain splintered and therefore bureaucracy applies a fractured approach in replicating them. The contributors of this section, Debjani Sengupta, Rabindranath Bhattacharya, Sanghmitra Majumdar, Jhumpa Ghosh Roy, Aqila Khawaja, and S.W.S.B Dasanayaka attempt to analyze these micro-experiments in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The focus is on the role of autonomous groups in bringing about the success stories of social safety nets, decentralized decision making, entrepreneurial governance and partnership with the State. This section aims at providing a governance framework through three good practices from West Bengal in India. These are Operation Barga, innovations in local governance in West Bengal Panchayati Raj and Self Help Groups. It also highlights the best practice of Technology Stakeholder Integration from Sri Lanka.

The third section consists of ten chapters under the title *Case Studies: Making Services Reach Ordinary People.* It delves into studies on service delivery systems by examining the capability approach. It discusses the service delivery systems in education, health and sanitation, land, housing and access to metro, children welfare programmes, global technology policies for women and employment guarantee schemes. The contributors are well known change makers from across the world experiments on capacity building as a solution to poverty reduction and need for empowerment of underprivileged communities. Narendra Raj Paudel (Nepal), Ashok Kumar (India), Taiabur Rahman (Bangladesh), Wasana S. Handapangoda and M.H Ajantha Sisira Kumara (Sri Lanka), Claudia Morell (USA), James Warner Bjorkman (Hague), Mahi Pal and S.P Singh (India), Raza Ahmed (Pakistan), E.M Thomas (India), Lalitha Fernando (Sri Lanka) have provided a very open minded approach to their suggested solutions in their action research based case studies. Some prominent areas for the policy maker have been discussed. In the era of catching up for achieving the MDGs through reforms in health services, children in metropolis, pangs of transient urbanization, challenges of female labour migration, spatial dimension of employment programmes, decentralized planning and social accountability have demonstrated the rigor of approach to poverty. These Case Studies share the wisdom of capacity building through Service Delivery in Nepal, Capability Approach in New Delhi, Child Centred Community Development in Dhaka, Samurdhi Programme in Sri Lanka, and Tele-medicine in Karnataka.

The epilogue of the book, which is comprehensively written by Raza Ahmed the former Capacity Building Expert of Asian Development Bank and an Advisor to research in the NAPSIPAG takes a vibrant and a holistic view of governance and social accountability within its implemental dimensions. It is a realistic section which does not boast about what should be done and what not but about what is possible in the present context. The chapter suggests the need for improving accountability and applauds the renewed concern for poverty eradication, institutional infrastructure building and social inclusion in addressing poverty. The micro-level efforts such as social audit arrangements and citizens report cards have, in his view, brought in more transparency, access and participation in the services. There are certain areas of concern though, within the parameters and dimensions of social justice, equity, gender and environment besides defining what accessibility would mean to an ordinary citizen. The fact that the epilogue of this book captures most of these facets expansively is extremely laudable.

The book draws attention to the changing nature of state, which could address the problem with greater clarity. The move towards consensual state, desire to provide minimum needs and service delivery, and accent on increased legitimacy are steps in the right direction and these come across clearly in the book.

The pertinence of capacity building, institutional growth and public interest has also been lucidly brought out. Against the background of state minimalism, donor interference, public-private partnerships, it is necessary to view the role of civil society with a little caution and restraint. Civil society need not be treated as a non-state and non-market realm in the absolute sense. Its vital interface with the state and the market will hold the South Asian region in good stead. The region has gone through low state and high state paradigms, but it needs the regulatory shield of the state to protect its poor and disadvantaged. Thus, development efforts will find more scope to prosper under the umbrella of political society. The central point of the epilogue is sustained social audit and accountability. Its focus on citizens' as responsible consumers and participants is the highlight of this book. All contributors to the book have mainly concentrated on the need for knowledge management that requires partnership with civil society organizations which can be sustained only through effective capacity building. The book has however only marginally dealt with an important issue of a viable political and professional leadership in South Asian poverty reduction efforts.

The book examines the self-validating tendencies of best practices that leave little scope for a cumulative and incremental approach to reforms. Administrative innovations and initiatives even if unsuccessful, leave behind a repository of information, which if relegated to the cage of best practices may be lost forever. The book brings forth this concern and lays accent on the research that must move beyond 'best practices'. Transcending best practices viewpoint advocates that there is a scope for increased policy activism in a practice which is striving to find solutions to the problem. The only other research organization which can competitively address many of the problems undertaken in the book is the Global Innovators Network in the Ash Institute of Democratic Governance in Harvard University . Best practice research has a tremendous scope for improving policy implementation provided such international linkages are strengthened as it is more out of the conventional literature framework of governance and uncompromisingly people oriented.

 This book is of immense value and a commendable effort of NAPSIPAG (Network of Asia Pacific Schools and Institutes of Public Administration and Governance) scholars which has laid at rest the State centric understanding of efficiency, capacity building and implementation. Thus the book provides a lease of refreshing relevance to public administration research efforts for the well being of South Asia. It is a must read for all policy makers and researchers of governance.

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