Radical Transparency: (Re)Writing the Infrastructure of Power

Book Title: *Patching Development: Informational Politics and Social Change in India*

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In Patching Development, *Veeraraghavan illuminates the dynamics of power systems that are integral to the success of development projects: the "last mile" of program implementation. Well-grounded in the author's wealth of technical expertise, deeply-rooted civic activism, and multi-year ethnographic field research, this book provides unparalleled access to the local, state, and national-level practices of (re)writing power infrastructures in the service of greater equality, following the world's largest development program: the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in India. Enacted in tandem with a radical form of transparency, the Right to Information Act that guaranteed citizens access to government records, NREGA aimed to leverage new rights to build a pro-worker rural infrastructure of opportunity that tilted state power in favor of the most marginalized citizens. Considering what are often considered great contrasts, the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh and North Indian state of Bihar, Veeraraghavan not only maps the vast terrain of resistance to development programs but also builds and tests and eloquent theory of bureaucratic change. Under the right conditions, upper-level bureaucrats—with high stakes in the anti-worker status quo—may harness digital and political technology to build "participatory bureaucratic" institutions that can transform resistance into effective support for pro-worker development. The book raises crucial questions about the resilience of resistance to development, the complexity of local (public and private) technologies of power, and the need for equally-dynamic, socially astute political technologies that challenge the status quo "power equations" and in so doing build a more democratic, developmental state.*

Why is India, an innovator at the forefront of democratic development with the world's largest poverty-reduction programs, better known as what Pritchett (2009) terms the "flailing state" than the "adaptive state"? The story of "bureaucratic overload," where local bureaucrats attempt to achieve soaring goals with limited stocks of financial and human resources is well-documented, as are equally-bleak concerns of elite capture and the lack of political will (often in the absence of political competition) that disrupts the "chain of sovereignty" (Dasgupta and Kapur 2020; Iyer and Mani 2012; Bardhan and Mookherjee 2000; Heller 2011; Bussell 2012).

Yet, as Kapur (2020: 31) explains, the "most striking fact about the Indian state is how varied its performance has been" with significant success in managing a diverse, well-integrated military, and at many points, local communities, in particular around managing elections with 900 million voters and significantly reducing poverty despite challenges in the provision of many basic public services (Wilkinson 2015; Page and Pande 2018). What explains such variation?

In what is certain to be a landmark study of state-building, information, and power, Rajesh Veeraraghavan's *Patching Development* provides a radical tracing of the intentionally opaque infrastructure of power to identify the conditions under which transformative development thrives.

The book begins at the root: studying local social power in the eyes of workers which a local agricultural laborers' union, the Jan Jagaran Shakti Sanghatan (JJSS), sought to mobilize around a social audit in Bihar, and later follows similar micro-processes in Andhra Pradesh. Veeraraghavan fluently transitions to the broader study of bureaucratic systems that link higher levels of government to lower, local governments (districts, blocks, mandals, and panchayats) and enables us to observe the birth of a new institutional form: participatory bureaucratic institutions.

Patching Development convincingly identifies the main challenge for development programs, exemplified by the world's largest development project within the world's largest democracy: the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act which guarantees all citizens in rural India 100 days of work. At their core, such programs much transform local systems of power to deliver benefits to the most marginalized citizens without capture, either from above or below, by relatively more privileged actors. Veeraraghavan shows that it is neither inertia nor a lack of requisite resources which pose the gravest threat to the success of development programs, but rather counter strategy by last-mile actors whose power is threatened by these final stages of program implementation. The author accomplishes this through a careful ethnography focused on "the everyday practices of bureaucrats in Andhra Pradesh and the technologies they use to oversee NREGA" (2022: 3).

Anything but mundane, *patching development* is actually a radical theory about the nature of local resistance during program implementation which enables us to examine the strategic redistribution of power during the process of policy implementation – which moves beyond prior foci on resistance that emerges around contesting the design of redistributive policy, with its notional costs and benefits, as in Rodrik and Subramanian (2003), or in the backlash to redistributive policy post-implementation, as in Brulé (2020) and Suryanarayan and White (2021). As Veeraraghavan explains, *patching* is a term he borrows from software development to explain "the process of replacing a problematic set of commands and rules with a new set of instructions" (2022: 4). While such processes are often deceptively narrow, focusing on incremental adjustments to a code – for either digital or bureaucratic technology – Veeraraghavan points readers to their grander implications: changing power equations during the battle for power in the last mile of program implementation, when the "participation of marginalized citizens to the patching process [deciding how work relations are managed within the NREGA bureaucracy] … ultimately lead[s] to patching development itself" (Ibid: 4).

Each component of Veeraraghavan's three-part theory of *patching development* invites further research into the ways such processes travel beyond NREGA, to explain the dynamic process of redistributing power and the resistance it engenders across time and space. First, *patching* is top-down, by 'patch senders': higher-level bureaucrats with jurisdiction over the lower bureaucrats who receive patches. Here, it is noteworthy that the book studies these technocratic solutions to development built in partnership with progressive, reformist higher-level bureaucrats. Considering how broadly this study generalizes, pessimists might be inclined to draw the line narrowly, noting that such conducive settings are likely few and far between. Yet optimists might push us in the opposite direction, encouraging readers to take Veeraraghavan's work as a call to recognize the many successes of local bureaucracies, as Mangla (2022) finds in India's public education system. This suggests a fruitful research agenda in methods to scale up or benefit from the critical mass of bureaucratic reforms, as well as to expand comparative research on the reasons for intra- and inter-

state variation in bureaucratic capacity – as Kapur (2020) encourages, with inspiration from prior conceptual frameworks and tests such as Singh (2016) and Heller (2011).

Second, *patching* is responsive to fine-grained challenges, providing specific, focused alterations to policy. Veeraraghavan suggests that these alterations will be successful only to the extent that they move beyond design solutions that rely specifically on expertise by encouraging "democratic engagement" to shape technological platforms that are consequential for human lives (2022: 174). Doing so requires future work that hones theory and tests of the politics of technology, to explain which coalitions succeed at a pace sufficient to remain responsive and relevant for the rapid scaling up of technology-based solutions, which range from the mundane (facilitating basic access) to the deeply concerning (intrusive, broad-based surveillance), with an equally vast set of consequences for citizen empowerment and suppression.

Third and finally, patching development is an iterative process, where patches are sent by users to patch developers (high-level bureaucrats) as raw information regarding problems or resistance to development programs' implementation. While the prior two elements of patching suggest hierarchical, conflict-specific processes are crucial, the notion of iteration contains a subversive element, which enables multiple opportunities for citizens to contest oppression within the "mundane minutiae of processes" (Veeraraghavan 2022: 164). Here, "success comes not from direct confrontation with local elites, but rather due to a continuous series of responses that react to local implementation and information" providing a series of "incremental remedies" (Ibid: 163). Taken altogether, patching provides an almost infinite promise – which from another angle suggests equally opportunities for failure. Indeed, this perspective provides a promising seed of a project that might map the cycles of mobilization by citizen movements, and potentially by local, state, and bureaucratic authorities, resulting in progress as well as regression. This opens up questions about the optimal way to theorize, track, and acknowledge change, with an eye to understanding the conditions under which backlash represents a productive opening to systemic, possibly equity-enhancing, transformation.

On the path of iterative development, each remedy provided by "patching" increases competition within the system. As a result, Veeraraghavan acknowledges several particularly grave dangers: on one hand the conditions for marginalized citizens may worsen if they speak out, as Chapter 5 of *Patching Development* illustrates in striking detail. Citizen tolerance for sanctions by higher level government (bureaucrats) thus likely depends upon the level of their optimism regarding the scope and pace of change possible under state-directed development. In future work, it would be helpful to build a theory or predictions about where to expect such optimism. Might historical legacies of *dalitbahujan* movements be crucial, as in much of South India? Is it possible that contemporary movements by farmers could play a similar role? What else matters?

A complementary set of concerns concern the creation of third party entities that ensure state accountability by conducting social audits. While effective, "openness" to audits is a double-edged sword with the potential for negative consequences. Indeed, pseudo-openness to third party auditors allows monitoring by local level bureaucrats who are frequently allied with anti-worker local elites. Such concerns raise the prospect that centralizing state control over social audits and other attempts to institutionalize new forms of government accountability may have negative consequences for citizens (workers), given the trend at the Centre toward loosening

institutions with the capacity to sanction the state for policy non-compliance. Veraraghavan also notes that the government may coopt participatory audit institutions and content to suggest it has fulfilled its duties to workers regardless of its efforts toward this aim. *Patching Development* accordingly suggests the necessity of guardrails limiting the extent of state actors' interference in participatory bureaucratic institutions. These may require evaluation alongside the guardrails placed on democracy at the Centre (national) and federal state levels. This knotty puzzle of state accountability raises the bigger question about the circumstances under which support for competing centers of autonomy—i.e. channels for contesting action by the local state–versus collaboration, which enables marginalized citizens not just to read and circulate state but also to write documents that question state accounts of development and create possibilities for ensuring that the government is held accountable from the bottom up (Veeraraghavan 2022: 24).

In its broadest application, *Patching Development* can provide a long-term model of institutional change, whereby iteration holds the key to equality. For Veeraraghavan, this requires the "intent and capacity of citizens to monitor" must precede state-led distribution of information to citizens (Ibid: 176). This is clear in the core case of Andhra Pradesh. Might formal institutional change, in the guise of quotas mandating descriptive representation by traditionally-excluded group members also enable marginalized citizens to bring collective interests into democratic deliberation that spurs policy innovation and a subsequently more inclusive state that is capable of recognizing and countering local, elite resistance to equity-enhancing reforms?

In other words, *Patching Development* lays an illuminating groundwork well-grounded in deep ethnographic research that dares readers to consider whether its model of participatory bureaucratic institutions, which utilize patching to advance equity in very difficult terrain: for economically and socially-marginalized workers in rural India, can be scaled-up globally. If so, should policy-makers and social activists seek to prime political will via democratic political leadership, potentially forged amidst broad-based competition, or prime citizen-based mobilization to exert pressure on imperfect political systems? If both sides must be primed, where should policy-makers and activists direct their attention in the short term? Should one focus on priming the institutions most likely to fail or those most likely to succeed? Regardless of the conclusion one reaches, it is clear that the dynamic theory of power relations Veeraraghavan presents provides readers with insightful, optimistic theory and evidence in favor of the promise for equity-promoting change where higher-level bureaucratic elites can, and do, work in synergy with workers to write and re-write the core institutional code for development.

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