



Patching development: information politics and social change in India

by Rajesh Veeraraghavan, New York, Oxford University Press, 2022, 256 pp., £80 (hardback), ISBN 9780197567821

Diego Maiorano

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BOOK REVIEW

Patching development: information politics and social change in India, by Rajesh Veeraraghavan, New York, Oxford University Press, 2022, 256 pp., £80 (hardback), ISBN 9780197567821

Much scholarship on development programmes makes for a rather depressing read, with its endless list of failures, corruption, injustice, and inability to deliver much good to the poor. Rajesh Veeraraghavan's brilliant new book departs from this scholarship by focusing on a success story and seeks to understand why India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) – one of the world's largest development programmes – is successfully implemented in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh.

Veeraraghavan departs from a core problem that affects virtually every development programme: elite capture over the last mile. This is the ability of local powerful state and non-state actors to derail policies for their own benefit. How can upper-level state authorities avoid this fate? The book's core argument is that, first, two preconditions are crucial: the programme must be designed carefully; and the political authorities must have the will to make the programme work in the way it is supposed to. Both conditions were present in Andhra Pradesh, where the state's chief minister, Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy, empowered some committed bureaucrats to make the NREGA – a well-designed programme conceived by experienced social activists with decades of on-the-ground experience – his top priority.

Political will and policy design, however, are necessary, but not sufficient conditions to avoid elite capture over the last mile. Veeraraghavan's book then analyses the set of steps taken by this empowered and committed bureaucracy, which he describes with a term borrowed from software development: patching, that is the process of replacing a set of commands with new commands and rules to incrementally solve problems and improve functionality. Veeraraghavan's argument is that the upper-level bureaucracy in Andhra Pradesh embarked on the task of acquiring information from the ground, identifying problems, and issuing new guidelines or tools to solve problems and win support from field staff or locally influential actors.

Patching has three main features. First, it is a top-down exercise; second, it focuses on seemingly small details, which however, make a big difference on the ground and can be used as loopholes by local elites to derail the programme; and third, it is an iterative process, as each fix triggers a reaction from local elites trying to identify and exploit new vulnerabilities, in an endless 'cat-and-mouse game' (p. 169). 'Endless' is a key word here as upper-level bureaucrats must be willing to *constantly* supervise implementation at the local level under the

certainty that local power structures *will* react to their 'patches', thus triggering the need for new ones.

The usage of a word borrowed from software terminology should not indicate that what Veeraraghavan is analysing is the mere quest for technical solutions that will fix problems. On the one hand, the use of technology is indeed a big part of Andhra Pradesh's success story, as the bureaucrats in charge of the NREGA did make widespread use of technology to insulate the programme and increase their control over its implementation (Chapter three). On the other hand, however, Veeraraghavan shows that 'patching' applied to the institutional domain too (Chapter four). The construction of a complex institutional infrastructure to conduct social audits is a case in point (Chapter six), which not only required the state to be willing to open itself up to scrutiny (political will), but also a process of constant adaptation in the rules and practices governing every aspect of the social audits to overcome local resistance and collusion.

Furthermore, the process of patching is far from being a technological fix because it is deeply political. This is an argument stressed repeatedly by Veeraraghavan, and rightly so. By 'intruding' into the local level, state bureaucrats effectively altered power relations on the ground in two interconnected ways. First, they stripped local implementers – who very often are part of local power networks – of any discretion. This also had the benefit of insulating them from pressures by powerful actors; and second, it increased the power of the programme's beneficiaries to the detriment of local elites, particularly upper caste landowners. This is a crucial and underestimated impact of the NREGA, to which Veeraraghavan dedicates Chapter seven, where he analyses changes in caste and class relations at the village level.

The book is based on careful ethnographic work, which provides the reader with many interesting details about the day-to-day actions of the state, the citizens, and the local elites. Veeraraghavan has not only interviewed virtually every actor involved in the NREGA – both state and non-state ones – but he observed at close quarters its implementation and implications for the village's political economy. He also scrutinised police records reconstructing the history of the village where he was based, which allowed him to ground his story into the local context very effectively.


To this reader, there are two minor shortcomings. One is the absence of how the NREGA contributed to change gender relations. I believe this is an important part of the story, which I expected to find somewhere in the book. The second shortcoming is that the fragility of the whole implementation model is not stressed enough. Veeraraghavan hints at this in the conclusions, but the sustainability (and replicability) of the 'patching' model is a big question mark. The amount of time, energy, and focus needed to 'patch' the implementation which Veeraraghavan so meticulously describes in the book, makes Andhra Pradesh's success story inherently fragile: a few bureaucratic transfers or a change in government can really make the whole house crumble (as Veeraraghavan acknowledges in the concluding part).

I should add that I was in a unique position to review this book. Veeraraghavan's and my research ran parallel for many years, as we interviewed the same

people, in the same state, visited similar villages, interacted with similar actors, observed the same processes, and tried to answer similar questions. It very rarely happens that a reviewer is so well placed to understand the minutiae of the construction of an argument and understand examples and anecdotes simply because they have lived through very similar experiences.

This put me in a position to conclude this review with two final strong points of the book. First, while most readers will appreciate the sophistication of the general argument and the level of details provided to sustain the analysis, I was also struck by how many times, while reading, I kept shouting, 'yes, that is exactly what is going on here!'. The second strong point of the book is that Veeraraghavan in a way resists well-entrenched incentives in the social sciences to bend empirical reality to a theory. The book, on the contrary, is strongly empirical and the theorisation is derived from the messy, nuanced, and, at times, contradictory reality on which it is based. We would all benefit from more analyses like Veeraraghavan's.

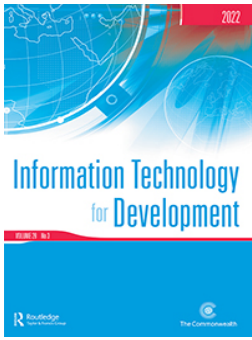
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Book review: Patching development: information politics and social change in India

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Book review: Patching development: information politics and social change in India

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ABSTRACT

Patching Development' is a theory of change, and more specifically a theory of what leads to change in anti-poverty schemes whose enactment conditions the lives of millions of people. A software-inspired terminology, a contribution to literatures that go from public policy to information and communication technology for development (ICT4D), but first of all a concept that constructs a new theory of change: this is Veeraraghavan's book, and these are just some of the many theoretical facets that the reader encounters. With many identities combined in one, laboriously-built ethnographic text, the reader turns the final page having gained a theoretical account positioned to shape the history of social protection in development studies.

1. Introduction

Social protection programmes, which 'provide income or consumption transfers to the poor, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks, and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalised' (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004, p. 1), reveal much about development policies. Articulating the distribution of benefits of different natures, ranging from in-kind to cash to, more recently, employment guarantees, such programmes are the fundamental building blocks of how development is enacted at the local level. And yet, while at the center of development scholarship (Barrientos & Hulme, 2016), social protection schemes are often not known from the voices of their recipients, from the experiences of those whose lives and livelihoods are informed by the local administration of such programmes. Paradoxically given their centrality in the lived realities of development policy, the voices of beneficiaries, their encounters with the 'everyday state' (Fuller & Benei, 2009) that administers the programmes, risk being lost in the statistics-based narrations of the impact of a given programme.

'Patching Development: Information Politics and Social Change in India' is first of all a breach with such a tradition (Veeraraghavan, 2021). In the eight chapters of Rajesh Veeraraghavan's ethnography of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), one of the world's largest social protection schemes, narration does not pass through the numeric reduction that is all too often made of anti-poverty programme realities. With a relentless, two-year-long ethnographic examination of the lived reality of the NREGA in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, the author leaves their own voice for the building of an important theoretical project: the book's flesh is made of the stories of recipients, their hurdles in collecting payments, the details in the work of the programme administrators and the social auditors assessing it. Lived through the eyes of a researcher, who entered himself the roles of worker and social auditor during the fieldwork, the NREGA emerges in this book through

workers' voices that, while thoroughly supplemented with numbers and statistics, offer a heartfelt, directly-lived narration beyond them.

The book's multiple identities – an ethnography, a study of social protection, a theory of development – are fused in one of the most powerful instantiations of development research of the last decade. This review seeks to accomplish the difficult task of eliciting these diverse identities, not in the intent to separate them from each other, but in that of making each of them shine in the unique contribution that the book makes to development studies.

2. Ethnography: living the NREGA

Demonstrating impact of a social protection programme on its recipients is essential, first and foremost, for the continuation of the programme itself. Indeed, usually associated with high fiscal costs, such programmes risk substantial downsizing or cancelation in the absence of results. The NREGA makes no exception: launched in 2005, it guarantees 100 paid workdays per year to every rural household who demands it, pursuing (as this book notes) the simultaneous goals of providing work on demand and building useful infrastructure. Demonstrating impact of such a programme has been essential over time: to cite one leading work, Ravi and Engler (2015) find NREGA in Andhra Pradesh to be associated with greater household expenditure on food and non-food consumables, reduced meals forgone per week, and increased probability of holding savings.

With its lived ethnographic perspective, Veeraraghavan's book tells the stories behind the numbers. Starting from a tracing of the NREGA's history, the book's chapters are a relentless sequence of field vignettes, stories and experiences of the NREGA's actors. Beginning with the author's early fieldwork in Bihar, with a poignant narration of the frustrated voices of underpaid workers, the book goes story after story, taking the reader from village conversations to vivid experiences of situations occurred during social audits across the state. Following the author in his field trips on foot, buses and motorbikes, page by page the reader lives an everyday-state reality that narrations of development too often forget, going from a fair share of tense fieldwork situations to touching, almost with a real-life feeling, the materiality of the livelihoods that the NREGA creates.

3. Innovating in social protection studies

All too often, as argued in the related literature (Barrientos & Hulme, 2016; Masiero, 2015), social protection research risks homogenizing the realities it confronts. The importance of lived realities – of recipients, but also of the workers operating at the many layers of the programme – adds to that of accounting for the multiplicity of identities in a scheme, a multiplicity that for the NREGA has been studied, for example, from the point of view of tribal workers (Maiorano & Buddha, 2014). A substantial hurdle lived by much social protection literature is the erasing of differences: homogenizing villages, recipients or schemes (let's not forget the multiplicity of anti-poverty programmes operating in contemporary India) risks blurring scholars' capability, to put it with Corbridge et al. (2005), to 'see the state' from the eyes of anti-poverty programme recipients. In my earlier work on India's Public Distribution System (PDS) I have highlighted this point, highlighting the importance of anti-poverty programmes as a space of encounter between the state and citizens. Programmes like the NREGA, with studies uncovering the importance of personal and even clientelistic relations in work allocations (Das, 2015; Das & Maiorano, 2019), do not make an exception.

Against this backdrop, Veeraraghavan's book offers a proper antidote to homogenizing accounts of social protection. Framing NREGA as a programme whose history, extremely well-documented, is deeply intertwined with state politics (Maiorano, 2014), the book tells stories of NREGA in Andhra Pradesh that reveal on every page the specificity of the programme. The relevance of social audits, which Andhra Pradesh and Telangana shine for in the whole country, is documented through the author's participation in the social audit experience: and even here it is the stories of the auditors, their backgrounds and their voices as the audits are performed, that the reader

hears through the book. Caste relations, with their relevance in influencing work allocations and the very organization of the villages we encounter, are portrayed in ways that dissect participants' realities, further countering the homogenization that substantial sections of social protection literature risk incurring in.

4. Enriching development theory

With its identities as a rich ethnography and as a substantial innovation in social protection studies, this book is, in its own title, a theory of development. It is from software, where a *patch* replaces a set of problematic instructions, that the core concept originates. The process of *patching development* is one in which rules are 'patched' at the last mile (the stage where recipients encounter social protection programmes), through a process that involves, in the author's own words, 'changes in institutions, changes in technology, and changes in documents and processes that control implementation in a public program' (p. 4). In a development theory landscape that studies policy through macro-level changes, reforms and calculations of the impact of large moves, Veeraraghavan's theory of the last-mile 'patches' shaping the course of anti-poverty schemes speaks directly to the 'political society' that Chatterjee (2004) theorized at the beginning of the century.

Two further contribution to development theory pertain, respectively, to Veeraraghavan's proposed route of solution to last-mile problems, and his illumination of the effects of transparency processes like social audits. In terms of last-mile problems, what the book proposes is a position that while not throwing out technology, does not have deterministic faith in it, proposing that the use of technology in social protection programmes requires continuous adjustment and reappraisal. Technology use, in other words, does not need to come from a technocratic vision: as 'Patching Development' illustrates, it instead allows for political imaginations that are subject to democratic control.

In terms of the effects of transparency processes, of which social audits are an illuminating example, the author compellingly proposes that what happens in public meetings is just one facet, and not the most important one, of such processes. Detailing his lived experience of social audits, the author notes how a naive understanding of transparency often uses the metaphor of *sunlight*, an uncomplicated and universally illuminating force. A better metaphor through which to consider transparency, Veeraraghavan suggests in this book, is a *flashlight*, which illuminates particular aspects of the process at particular times. Powerfully articulated through the book, the flashlight metaphor makes it possible to recognize and ask relational questions on social protection.

5. Conclusion

'Patching Development' is a theory of change, and more specifically a theory of what leads to change in anti-poverty schemes which condition the lives of millions of people. Powerfully represented through Veeraraghavan's ethnographic work, the theory tells a story of anti-poverty programme enactment which dictates the making of development policy in, and beyond, one of the world's largest social protection schemes.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Radical Transparency: (Re)Writing the Infrastructure of Power

Book Title: [*Patching Development: Informational Politics and Social Change in India*](#)

Author: [Rajesh Veeraraghavan](#), Assistant Professor of Science, Technology, and International Affairs, Georgetown University

Reviewer: [Rachel Brulé](#), Assistant Professor of Global Development Policy, Boston University

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. Veeraraghavan 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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Patching Development and Strengthening Ecosystems

Brendan Halloran / September 20, 2022

In [“Patching Development”](#), author Rajesh Veeraraghavan, explores the the “last mile” of implementing social and development programs, noting that implementation generally receives less attention than the “first mile” of political will and program design. By choosing a case in which the “first mile” issues were not the main constraint, “Patching Development” focuses on what it takes to implement a development program in the context challenging of local political realities.

Veeraraghavan explores the implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh (AP) ([I shared a few thoughts on this case when it was still a PhD dissertation](#)). In many ways, this was a best-case scenario. The newly elected leader of AP was strongly motivated to successfully carry out NREGA, and thus political will for implementation was strong. This led to the appointment of capable and committed top bureaucrats in the NREGA program, with significant autonomy and room to experiment to ensure success. Crucially, these bureaucrats understood the kinds of “last mile” implementation challenges that plagued development programs in India, and knew they had to address these if NREGA was to deliver results. Nevertheless, Veeraraghavan’s main point is that this strong enabling environment was necessary but not sufficient to ensure successful implementation. Adaptively navigating the politics of “last mile” challenges was far from certain. Yet adaptation is precisely what the bureaucratic leaders of NREGA did, through a process Veeraraghavan calls “patching”, drawing on a metaphor related to software that entails top down, iterative fixes to address very specific problems that have arisen and/or been identified over time (including those caused by an earlier patch, or that an earlier patch failed to fully address).

The NREGA patches came in two general domains: the direct implementation of the NREGA program itself and an embedded state-led social audit process carried out on an ongoing basis. With regards to the former, the NREGA leadership leveraged digitization and ITC to

generate significant data about the implementation of NREGA across the state and to “patch” various elements of implementation, from what kinds of projects were allowed in which localities at certain times of year (to disallow the most corruption prone projects – like ditch digging before the rainy season) to how often NREGA workers could change work groups. Many of these “patches” leveraged the use of technology, both the digitization of information in NREGA and the use of mobile phones by front line bureaucrats to input information. Patches could be sent out across the state with the press of a button, rather than the cumbersome process of ‘circulars’ which are the standard way of communicating changes to lower levels of the bureaucracy in India.

Equally important was the implementation of the NREGA social audit. This is a massive process undertaken by a quasi-state agency (SSAAT) that is granted significant autonomy to carry out social audits of NREGA to ensure that funds are reaching workers. Social auditors periodically fan out across the state, reviewing records and speaking to NREGA workers directly to surface discrepancies between the formal program records and what is happening on the ground to ensure that rural workers are receiving their wages.

Veeraraghavan’s account of the “patching” of NREGA in AP is deeply contextual and nuanced. He has spent significant time with both the bureaucratic leadership and in the villages where NREGA is being undertaken, including being embedded in social audit processes. He is thus able to speak about the nature of the implementation problems, the thinking and approach of the NREGA bureaucrats to these, and how this plays out on the ground. The back-and-forth dance between high-level and frontline bureaucrats throughout the “patching” process is fascinating, and powerfully demonstrates why attention to implementation is so critical.

The “patching” of NREGA in AP is an important case. However, as Veeraraghavan notes, AP is somewhat of an outlier. It’s essentially the only Indian state to meaningfully implement the social audit component required by NREGA law, and the level of commitment and expertise of the political and bureaucratic leadership seems exceptional. What can we take from this case, given the extraordinary enabling environment in which the patching of NREGA took place? How does this compare to a case in which this enabling environment was not present?

“Patching” vs “Weaving”

For the remainder of this review, I’ll make a comparison to the implementation of NREGA in the state of Madhya Pradesh (MP). I’ve had the opportunity to [explore this case](#) through engagement with a civic organization called Samarthan that has worked for many years to ensure the responsive and accountable implementation of NREGA in MP.

The MP government also set up a semi-autonomous Social Audit Society (SAS) as part of NREGA, perhaps based on the AP model. However, MP’s SAS enjoys much less political support than its counterpart in AP, limiting its ability to meaningfully promote accountability in NREGA. For example, the SAS leadership role has been left vacant for extended periods. Much of Samarthan’s work has been to complement the weaknesses of the SAS and the social audits it undertakes of the NREGA program.

Samarthan has worked to build the capacity and autonomy of the SAS to bring it closer to the level of the SSAAT in AP, and thus strengthen the rigor of the SAS-run social audits.

Samarthan has played a role in developing the social audit methodology, ensuring that local

social auditors are trained and sufficiently independent, etc. However, Samarthan was aware of the limited political support for the SAS and understood the limitations of periodic social audits to ensure meaningful accountability in NREGA (the same limitations Veeraraghavan notes in the AP context); both constraints suggested a need to go beyond strengthening the SAS.

Thus, Samarthan sought to strengthen the social audits on the ground and complement them through other approaches to strengthening accountability. For example, Samarthan brokered a relationship with the state Comptroller and Auditor General's (CAG) office, which led to social audit data being considered in state financial audits as well as CAG auditors following on 50 random social audits to verify the findings and press for remedial action. Samarthan also engaged with local media across the state to share social audit findings, thus putting pressure on local government officials to act on these. Furthermore, Samarthan played a key convening role for many small CSOs across the state, connecting them to the social audit process to bolster the SAS role.

Finally, Samarthan [took on direct roles](#) of facilitating social audits to ensure these were carried out effectively:

“Samarthan generally took on the most difficult aspects of the social audit process. Samarthan ensured the quality of the audit and verification process, often leading those processes directly. The organization also often facilitated the *gram sabha* meetings in which NREGA anomalies were discussed and decisions made with regard to corrective action. Most important, but least visible, Samarthan leveraged its contacts and credibility with a wide cross-section of actors to ensure the social audit process could take place and result in meaningful accountability. In particular, Samarthan worked closely to ensure the cooperation (or at least minimize the obstruction) of village and local elected officials and bureaucrats, many of whom may have felt threatened by the audit process.”

Thus, Samarthan sought to ensure that social audits were undertaken in a similar manner to those of the SSAAT, but was able to go beyond some of the limitations of the AP social audits. With a similarly deep understanding of the local power dynamics that Veeraraghavan observes in his book, Samarthan clearly grasped the limitation of periodic social audits in the context of deep power disparities. Samarthan sought to strengthen an ecosystem of accountability actors and efforts around the social audits to ensure their effectiveness and complement their limitations. Local CSOs, media and Social Watch Groups made up of retired government workers and other local notables helped balance power relationships at the local level. Perhaps most importantly, Samarthan organized unions of NREGA workers in 50 village clusters to enable collective representation and action by NREGA workers.

In other words, it seems to me that Samarthan generally ensured that the social audits were of a similar quality as those undertaken in AP, and made an effort to address the limitations of the social audits Veeraraghavan observes. However, significant challenges remained. Although many instances of corruption in NREGA were identified and corrected through the social audits and Samarthan's efforts to complement these, the underlying accountability weaknesses were not being fully addressed, meaning that corruption and manipulation in NREGA continued. This is especially true because Samarthan had to rely on actors at state and local level who are benefitting from the status quo, thus the CSO had to walk a delicate tightrope of pushing for

meaningful oversight of NREGA while not pushing so hard that those benefitting from corruption pushed back.

Samarthan has not “patched” accountability for NREGA in MP in the same way as the key stakeholders have done in AP, principally since it couldn’t impose top down “fixes”. Nor has it been a disruptive hacker, seeking to input code as a rogue agent. Rather, it has tried to create the context for an “open source” accountability for NREGA in MP, in which it could complement the existing code and catalyze a broader set of actors to “crowdsource” accountability, weaving these together into some kind of accountability ecosystem around NREGA.

Strengths and Limitations

Even with Samarthan’s delicate balancing act, the political will for even a minimum of NREGA oversight is not guaranteed, and political leadership in the state has at times acted to further limit social audits and other measures. These challenges have forced Samarthan to knit together several accountability strands, with social audits as a central pillar but complemented by other pro-accountability actors from local to state levels. Samarthan has sought to keep the pieces aligned, a challenge given the diverse incentives of the actors involved.

Over time, and with an important caveat, this approach seems to have similar potential for oversight of NREGA as the AP model, and may even plant the seeds of a wider coalition to realize the transformative potential of the program. NREGA unions could enable more collective action by workers, both to ensure effective social audits but potentially go beyond that to shift local power dynamics more broadly. The caveat, however, is that shrinking civic space in India constrains the work of organizations like Samarthan.

The bottom line is not surprising, the accountability “patching” in AP and Samarthan’s ecosystem efforts in MP have both led to improved implementation of NREGA, particularly in funds reaching workers rather than being siphoned off. But both have faced limitations. Veeraraghavan’s account of AP raises questions about the government’s approach of “going it alone” as it seeks to “patch” NREGA. Lack of political will for accountability in MP forced Samarthan into an “ecosystem” approach in which it brought together a diversity of actors. The latter approach is more complex and fragile, but is the only option in contexts in which the enabling environment is not as strong as in AP. And in the long run, if the ecosystem can be iteratively strengthened (or at least maintained), it may hold greater promise of more meaningful shifts in power and accountability within and beyond NREGA.

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May 24, 2022 By Duncan Green



Patching Development: Information Politics and Social Change in India by Rajesh Veeraraghavan is a wonderful and important book, a deep dive into the world's largest social protection programme – India's NREGA scheme – to explore the interaction between state reformers and citizen activists, as they work together, or sometimes against each other, to overcome the local politics of caste, capture, inertia and exclusion that attempt to block or corrupt a scheme that should (and sometimes does) benefit hundreds of millions of India's poorest citizens.

Veeraraghavan does this through what he calls 'an ethnography of the everyday practices of bureaucrats in Andhra Pradesh and the technologies they use to oversee NREGA'. What he found was an endless process of cat-and-mouse manoeuvring between bureaucrats at upper and lower levels, and citizen activists empowered by NREGA's social audit process:

'Upper-level bureaucrats used state action to neutralize the local power nexus in the villages with the support of civil society activists and NREGA workers..... The bureaucrats in charge of implementing NREGA in Andhra Pradesh realized that the actors in the local power system were actively involved in blocking initiatives and working around systems of governance. They needed to create a dynamic strategy that constantly countered such interference. If NREGA were to succeed, each aggression had to be met with an opposing action.'

The upper level do not have sufficient power to achieve this by edict – instead they must box clever, in a process Veeraraghavan christens as ‘patching’ – tweaks in technology, processes and documentation to wrongfoot the bad guys and get the money to the people who need it.

‘Patching in Andhra Pradesh is mostly focused on making small changes. The local system of power is hard to transform, not because of inertia but because of counter-strategies from powerful actors at the local last mile. Patching is about the fight over power at the last mile, the untidy realities and the back-and-forth struggles over how work relations are managed within the NREGA bureaucracy.’

If this all sounds a bit too abstract, here’s his account of a public social audit hearing organized by a local agricultural labourers’ union. Prior to the hearing, the author and a group of other activists had worked with the union and villagers to uncover a range of corrupt practices (eg claiming multiple days’ wages for dead workers):

‘The mukhiya, the president of the panchayat (village council), was the first to speak. “Everything is going well in this village,” he assured Kamesh (one of the event organizers). “All the work has been done, and everybody was paid.” At that point, JJSS activists read out the results from the most recent social audit, making clear the gross disparities between the NREGA’s records and the social audit results.

Kanchi raised his hand to speak: “My name is Kanchi, and I am from Boratola.”

Kamesh said to him, “The government records say that you worked on a project to move sand from Ram’s house to Krishna’s. Did you do so?”

“Yes, sir, I did work on that project.”

“The government records show that you worked for forty days and were paid Rs. 4,000. Is that correct?”

“No, sir, I have not been paid that much money. I only got Rs. 1,000.”

Someone immediately shouted, “He is lying!”

Kanchi was livid. He pointed toward the mukhiya and said, “He is a crook. He and his cronies must have taken the rest of my money, all 3,000 rupees!”

The mukhiya rushed over, grabbed the microphone, and hit Kamesh on the head with the stand. An immediate uproar ensued, with workers running toward the mukhiya, shouting, “Hit him, hit him!” Suddenly sticks appeared and people were charging up to the mukhiya, who was whisked away to safety. Everybody was running and shouting and there was a minor scuffle between the mukhiya’s men and some of the workers. The activists clutched their documents defensively to keep them from being snatched away in the commotion.’

Back to patching:

‘The process of patching development has three features. First, patching is top down; the patch sender is at a higher level than (i.e., has jurisdiction over) the patch receiver. Second, patching is about fine-grained changes; patches are extremely specific and make focused alterations to policy. Third, patching is iterative; bureaucrats send many patches as new information about problems in the field reaches them. Patches are part of a continuous cycle of fine-grained changes to the implementation.’

This involves ‘a constant struggle at the last mile between social auditors, bureaucrats, and workers. Upper-level counterparts built new monitoring technologies and processes to address flaws discovered in the system, particularly seeking to hold lower-level bureaucrats accountable. Lower-level bureaucrats then resisted such increased monitoring, sabotaging or bypassing technologies. In turn, their upper-level counterparts built yet newer technologies and processes to deal with this resistance.’

If I have any criticism of the book, it is that the brilliant ‘thick description’ is followed by a rather thin set of ‘so whats’, but a couple stand out:

‘Upper-level bureaucrats must create mechanisms to ensure [against] sabotage at the local level. To do so, upper-level bureaucrats need to constantly innovate by embracing and adapting new technologies and evolving new processes to ensure that members of local political parties, local elites, and lower-level bureaucrats do not sabotage the delivery of programs at the last mile.

Civil society organizations [need] to develop a new form of politics that pays attention to the mundane minutiae of technology—drop-down boxes, links, reports, and other details in governmental platforms.’

I haven’t got space to do justice to the book – please do read it – but I hope this gives you a flavour. It seems to me that its big contributions include:

- Distinguishing between different layers of the state, and how they work against each other
- Placing the use of technology (audits, transparency etc) squarely in the realm of cat-and-mouse skirmishes between these branches of the state and other activists
- Revealing the political dynamics and uncertain outcome of (cf guerrilla war) of such exchanges.
- Showing that It is possible for a state government to learn and create participatory bureaucratic governance with civil society participation, but that it isn’t easy, or a one-time fix
- Transparency and technology are better seen as a ‘flashlight’ than ‘sunlight’ (the usual cliché). A flashlight is only useful if the holder knows where to point it.

Excellent.

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