



## Patching development: information politics and social change in India

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

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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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