Can Audits Fuel Social Transformation? India's Revolutionary Effort to Employ the Rural Majority

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In the opening pages of *Patching Development: Information Politics and Social Change in India*, Rajesh Veeraraghavan invites us into a radical scene in which he is acting as an auditor and activist. Kanchi, an unlettered laborer, shows his passbook to Veeraraghavan, who reads aloud the entries so that Kanchi may verify them. According to the entries in the bank passbook, Kanchi received 4,000 rupees for 40 days of work and then withdrew the money, leaving a zero balance in the account. Initially confused and later enraged, Kanchi responded that he was never paid for the work. Other villagers then joined in, asking for Veeraraghavan and other volunteer activists to read their passbooks too. They realized that, despite an official record indicating payment, many of them had not been paid. Local officials had taken advantage of the workers' illiteracy and siphoned off government funds directed at the poor for personal profit.

The radical act of holding government programs to account at the micro level and the results that emerge from the discrepancies discovered in the audit process are the subject of this vast, illuminating examination of bureaucracy, welfare, and information technology in rural Andhra Pradesh, India. The concept of a "social audit" will come as a surprise, perhaps even a revolutionary one, to many scholars of policy and development studies. This mechanism for citizen oversight ensures that civil society actors can check, *in situ*, whether funds are reaching their intended beneficiaries. Veeraraghavan's tirelessly meticulous ethnography, careful attention to micro and meso processes, and immense empathy for all those involved in the bureaucracy of one of the world's largest development programs make this a critically important book, with implications far beyond India or even the global South.

Development sociologists have long been concerned with the extent to which state-sponsored social programs can counter entrenched social inequalities by providing access to cash, work, and food. But thoughtfully designed programs are often undermined by the complex social dynamics at the proverbial "last mile": the allotted money or food or resource does not go to its intended beneficiary due to corruption, waste, mismanagement, or elite capture. Veeraraghavan shows us that, at least in Andhra Pradesh, this "last mile" problem has been revolutionized by information technology, upending existing assumptions about who has control over government funds. As we might guess, information is inherently political. In the world of social audits that *Patching Development* introduces to us, the details of documentation procedures, the software code (and who writes it), the options on a pull-down menu, and the entries on a muster roll are all subjects of debate and contest. Veeraraghavan shows us that the existence of the social audit, despite its limitations, has effectively transformed beneficiaries from passive welfare recipients into active citizens whose voices and experiences affect the workings of the state.

Social audits were included in the original conceptualization of the groundbreaking National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), implemented in India in 2006. In an effort to counter the struggles over power and resources that occur at the point of disbursal, NREGA aimed to have workers

themselves involved. The audit mechanism evolved differently in diverse states, involving different actors and bureaucratic processes, but has evolved into its most sophisticated form in the state of Andhra Pradesh. There, a particular state focus on information technology, a dedication on the part of upper-level bureaucrats to iterative responsiveness, and a mobilized civil society converged to provide the necessary infrastructure and historical openings to allow the social audit to grow, change, and correct course when necessary.

Patching Development is distinctive in its exhaustive focus on *process* within the social audit. If we think about the social audit as a flashlight of sorts, one that shines a partial light on relationships, individuals, and interactions that are otherwise ''in the dark,'' ''patching'' is the process through which information technology helps ''build a better flashlight'' to increase the effectiveness of monitoring (p. 177). In particular, it involves upper-level bureaucrats having the ability to constrain the opportunities for misconduct, misallocation, and personal interests in that ''last mile'' through control over software, on one hand, and through social audits that rely on interactions with workers on the other. Constant ''patching''—iterative changes in bureaucratic process and software coding that respond to changes on the ground—can produce a process in which workers are themselves able to ''rewrite'' the state. But this constant process involves various arenas of contestation: interpersonal (between auditors and local officials, for instance), at the mandal/district-level meetings, within and among political parties, and in the context of the local panchayat (the village governing body). All these arenas are situated within long-standing caste divisions and conflicts that have proven highly resistant to change. Despite these obstacles, ''patching'' is today part of the everyday working of the state in rural Andhra Pradesh.

The first several chapters of the book take on the daunting task of describing and historicizing the processes involved in NREGA and laying out the information politics, bureaucracy, and process of ''patching.'' For scholars of policy, development, bureaucracy, and public sector governance, the level of detail in these chapters provides invaluable insight into the multiple scales at which social change takes place in real-world settings. In the historical chapter, we come to understand the convergence between Right to Work legislation and Right to Information legislation, both of which were underpinned by significant bottom-up movements. Because of this convergence in the early 2000s at the national level, when NREGA was created, legislators also created the provision for social auditing.

The empirical chapters then turn specifically to the state of Andhra Pradesh, where these national-level dynamics took on an extraordinary form, giving rise to the unique evolutionary processes that turned social audits into a central element of NREGA's implementation. The government of Andhra Pradesh hired a private IT firm, Tata Consultancy Services, to design the software that would be deployed with beneficiaries and contracted with them to constantly update the software so that it could respond to emergent situations on the ground. These updates would be overseen by upper-level bureaucrats. The basic task of the audit, however, was always clear: to ask laypeople to verify whether the money, food, or work that the government recorded they received was the same as what they actually received. Veeraraghavan's explanation of how that process came to be implemented, the hurdles it faced along the way, and the constant ''patching'' required to make it functional serve, in many ways, as a ''good news'' development story.

In the latter half of the book, we come to understand the impact, as it were, of these ''patching'' processes: those public arenas of contestation where discrepancies in information are confronted, the limitations of turning transparency into accountability, and the very real dangers that auditors face in their work on the ground. We also catch a glimpse of what the author experienced laboring alongside workers in supposedly ''unskilled'' jobs, digging bunds. As the author puts it, one coworker only very ''hesitantly gave me the necessary tool. He was clearly worried that I would break it.'' The worker's fears were well founded as Veeraraghavan soon had to stop burdening the other workers as he tried to lighten their load and gain their trust.

Despite these lessons in humility, shared with sincerity and good humor in the book, we come to understand how the author's presence also often served as a "flashlight" of sorts. Although the workers were accustomed to being unsupervised, they sometimes treated him as a supervisor despite his protests. At other times, however, his persistent presence and care prompted the most marginalized to share their struggles with the hope of some reprieve. One Dalit informant shared a family story of resistance against greedy landowners who had refused to give them the quality of food owed (p. 146). In another instance, a Dalit interlocutor shared how a dominant caste member, upon seeing he was wearing a white-collared shirt, demanded he carry out a useless task of moving cow dung from one place to another in the hope that his shirt would become soiled. This was still something of an improvement from what the norm would have been decades ago, when the young man would have been asked to take the shirt off (p. 148).

These and many other beautifully contextualized anecdotes help the reader understand the fundamental ways that caste inequality undergirds the story of NREGA, monitoring, and the larger goal of social transformation. We come to understand that the social audits process and its (partial) success, at least in the state of Andhra Pradesh, cannot be understood without an appreciation of Dalit movements of organized resistance in recent decades. In the village where Veeraraghavan stayed, Dalits effectively countered demeaning practices they were subjected to, such as carrying their shoes on their heads when walking past upper-caste landowners. To a small extent, Veeraraghavan even experienced the continued surveillance and policing that Dalits face. While staying in a Dalit part of the village, he experienced how the dominant caste was able to view all the comings and goings of those from that area due to the way the road was laid out (p. 141).

By bravely confronting the challenges of naming and discussing caste, Veeraraghavan also explains the anger of local landlords who oppose NREGA. For them, the program has meant higher labor costs and attenuated local power. Many Reddy landlords in fact believe that NREGA work should be on their own private lands, as they view their private lands as aligned with broader state goals. Ironically, the most powerful landowners do not oppose NREGA because they lease their land to tenant farmers and, thus, NREGA does not affect their economic interests. Smaller landowners, however, cannot afford to lease out their land and require local labor to make it profitable. For these landowners, the sense of anger toward auditors is palpable and is connected to the advances achieved by Dalit movements in recent decades. What we see in these narratives is a firsthand account of a perceived loss of status on the part of a previously dominant group, a sense of anger and aggrievement that has become relevant for local and global politics and is not explored enough in sociological accounts of South Asia or of the global South more broadly.

Auditing is a key mechanism through which elites are held accountable within systems that are supposed to fairly distribute resources to the marginalized. Too often, however, auditing and regulation fall outside the scope of sociological analysis. As sociologists, we tend to forget that bureaucratic structures, information, and how those constitute one another have the potential to be responsive to social movements and pressure from below. At least partly, this is because these processes are difficult to study, frustratingly "local" in their manifestations, and extremely difficult to unpack in sociological terms. Yet Veeraraghavan's research shows that we ignore the interactions between bureaucratic processes and everyday citizens at our own peril. It is in the mundane details of bureaucracy, where the actors who defy our taken-for-granted categories of "the state" and "the people," "the workers" and "the elites," that social change (and challenges to it) are really occurring. Veeraraghavan also demonstrates the tremendous potential from micro- and meso-level theorizing at these sites and between them.

This book's lessons and methods are also extremely useful for transnational analyses of governance and social change and should not be viewed strictly as "global South" or "development" interventions. One of the

most useful lessons of the book has to do with the limits of decentralization. Sociologists and laypersons alike tend to think that addressing social structures at the hyper-local level is more effective than interventions from the top down. In the United States, for example, it is more effective to counter structural racism through local zoning policies than through national legislation that prohibits redlining, even though the latter is still important. Yet Veeraraghavan shows us that although the locus of change is local, intervention from the national bureaucracy, here in the form of upper-level bureaucrats, is a necessary check on local elite power. This is a helpful reminder even in the U.S. context, when we are still looking for ways to check ''local'' forms of injustice around issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Enforcement from above, supported by vibrant local social movements, is critical for social transformation. Along the way,

there will be, without doubt, some angry elites who perceive a loss of power; and this anger needs to be considered, understood, and taken into account in our studies and in our policy-making in order to ensure that the most vulnerable are free from harm.

This book is required reading for scholars and students of development sociology, policy studies, and the emergent sociology of South Asia. Scholars of auditing and regulation, political sociology, and social movements also have much to gain from this exhaustive, compassionate, thoughtful book. Chapter Six, which speaks to how the marginalized ''rewrite'' state records, and Chapter Seven, which explores how social audits challenge local caste hierarchies, will have audiences outside sociology, as they provide one of the most thorough recent examinations of how the most marginalized interact with the state.