

REVIEW ESSAY

Power and influence in India: Bosses, Lords and Captains

Price, Pamela G. and Ruud, Arild Engelsen, eds. (2009), *Power and Influence in India – Bosses, Lords and Captains*, New Delhi: Routledge.

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Hearing the words ‘leadership’ and ‘South Asia’, the first thing that probably comes to mind for most people is Mahatma Gandhi’s legendary involvement in the Indian independence movement. He succeeded in weakening British colonial rule (and gaining the sympathy of the world) through non-cooperation and civil disobedience. Those more acquainted with the sub-continent might also think of Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, who till his death retained an image of being a incorruptible and visionary leader. Yet others would think of his daughter Indira Gandhi, who was notorious for her populist rhetoric as well as her ruthless policies during Emergency Rule in India in the 1970s.

But, as becomes apparent in the book under review, leadership in South Asia is much more than a collection of the most prominent national figures and their deeds. In fact, as the volume aptly displays, leaders exist at all levels – from the rurally located local fixer to the national level party strategists. Two broad themes emerge from the book, which signal interesting avenues of future research. First, there is an intricate relationship between non-elected and elected leaders in South Asia. Second, that there is a strong inter-dependence between the different levels of leadership in South Asia. I hope to see more work on these issues.

Hierarchy is omnipresent in South Asia. In society at large there are caste, class and regional divisions. There are religious leaders, ringleaders, beggar pimps and mafia bosses. In villages and communities there are usually local fixers, strongmen and landowners. Within the family, the man is traditionally above the woman, the elder is above the younger. In politics there are leaders in the villages, blocks, districts, members of legislative state assemblies (MLA), members of parliament (MP), ministers of state, cabinet ministers, chief ministers and the prime minister. There are also important non-elected party leaders at all levels. Hierarchies are visible in many forms: Who bows their head, who says *ji* (postposition added to name or title to show respect), which verbal level of respect is chosen in conversation (in Hindi verbs can be conjugated in four different ways showing different levels of respect), or which title you use to address people you interact with (if I call someone my guru or uncle I show them respect by making it clear that I put myself in an inferior position). Hierarchy is also visible in who gets to sit on a chair and who sits on the ground in a meeting, or in who is offered tea and what cup they are offered it in.

In recent years there has been increasing media attention and popular interest in the role of political leaders in South Asia. Much of the attention is negative. Right now

there is an ongoing anti-corruption campaign in India, led by Anna Hazare, black-painting the political establishment and bureaucracy and demanding anti-corruption legislation. But the sentiments expressed through this campaign are not new. The classical *neta* (professional political leader) caricatured in Bollywood movies (e.g. in *Raajneeti*) is stereotyped as self-interested and corrupt. This image has been strengthened by newspapers and magazines exposing leaders involved in large-scale corruption scams or in instigating ethnic violence (e.g. Tehelka's exposure of how Gujarat's Chief Minister Narendra Modi involvement in the Hindu-Muslim violence in Gujarat 2002). Over the last few years, efforts have also been made by volunteers and scholars to get more information about the political leaders in India out to the voters. For example, at the website *myneta.info* you can now find information about political candidates to MLA and MP posts, such as their educational attainment, their assets and liabilities, and what criminal cases they have pending against them. The goal is to get voters more aware of the 'wheelings and dealings' of the individuals they elect as their representatives. After all, the voters are the ones bringing these politicians to power.

Despite the deep interest in leaders and leadership among the public and the media, the topic of leadership in South Asia has received limited academic attention. The focus of scholarship on Indian politics has been on the shift from a Congress-regime to a multi-party system, the importance of caste-identity in politics, political violence, and the rise of the Hindu right. Leadership styles and techniques are an integral part of all of these topics, yet there has been no thorough exploration of types of leadership in the South Asian context.

In *Power and Influence in India – Bosses, Lords and Captains*, the authors try to address this gap in the literature. This edited volume is the fifth book in the Routledge series *Exploring The Political in South Asia* (edited by Mukulika Banerjee). The book comes out of a conference in Norway in 2006, where participants from various disciplines were invited to explore how politically ambitious people in South Asia go about building a support base, what goals they portray to the public, and how they choose to behave in order to achieve these goals.

In the introduction of the book, Pamela Price discusses existing categorizations of types of leadership. She goes back to the ideal types of Weber (1978): the traditional, the charismatic and the bureaucratic. These categories more or less correspond to the traditional, the saintly and the modern described by Morris-Jones (1963). While Weber described the leadership types as linked to specific times and regimes, and saw the move from one to the other as the move from traditional to modern society, he also made it clear that we can see a mixture of these stereotypes.

Price argues that in the case of South Asia, different types of leadership both co-exist and are mixed, and in the case of this book she refers to them as *bosses*, *lords* and *captains*. Bosses, she argues, are the type of local leaders seen in cities in the US in the late 19th and early 20th century. These leaders retain order and distribute resources in small-scale domains. They often do not have an ideological inclination and do not necessarily belong to a political party. Rather, they function as 'fixers' of small problems and as middlemen to higher-up leaders, and they do not shy away from the use of threats and violence in order to keep control of their area. Lords seem to be a much nobler form of leaders: They rely on the perception of being benevolent, moral

or supreme in some way. Violence is not a necessary feature in their leadership (although they might keep some thugs by their side as a back-up). Lords rely on being perceived as benevolent, honest or fair, and might claim direct linkage to a monarchical dynasty or construct a story of divine origin. Finally, a Captain is more of a traditional leader in a Western sense. This is a leader in large-scale politics, someone who needs to have ideological vision and clear strategic plans. A captain also needs to have manipulative skills and know-how of the bureaucratic and political system.

Power and Influence in India – Bosses, Lords and Captains contains 10 empirical chapters by ten authors, each exploring a different aspect of leadership in South Asia. Nine of the chapters are based on fieldwork in India, while one is based on work among students in Dhaka. Among the chapters on India, three chapters are about Tamil Nadu, three chapters are about Uttar Pradesh (UP) and the last three chapters are based on work in West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. This gives quite a bit of regional spread, which is important in the South Asian context where it is possible to make inaccurate generalizations based on one, or just a few, case studies. The chapters are ordered from the micro to the macro level, starting with an informal leader in a village and moving all the way up to the Chief Minister level. In this way the selection of chapters covers the topic of leadership broadly and at different levels. Interestingly, the studies at the micro level are about informal (non-elected) leaders, while the focus on the macro level is on elected leaders. This is perhaps just a coincidence, but it is important for readers to bear in mind that there are lots of elected leaders at the local level and important non-elected leaders at the macro level. Although most of the chapters do not explicitly refer back to the categories *bosses*, *lords* and *captains*, all of the leaders described can be understood as combining these three types of leadership.

In trying to answer the main question of the book, how a politically ambitious person in South Asia goes about creating a support base (or as Arild Engelsen Ruud puts it: How to create a crowd), each of the chapters points to several different techniques employed by political leaders. In the following I will briefly discuss the six main leadership techniques I glean from the chapters, or what Hugo Gorringer (following James Tilly 1986) refers to as the ‘repertoire’ of organizational possibilities for political leaders.

Resources (carrots)

India has often been referred to as a patronage democracy (e.g. Chandra 2004). This finds support in the case studies about leaders in this book. The access to resources and the ability to distribute resources is the most recurring theme in the book and is one of the key elements to successful leadership in South Asia. Yet, resources come in many different forms.

The most crude form of patronage in the Indian context is the distribution of gifts at the time of election, such as food, alcohol, a radio or a grinder. As Andrew Wyatt describes in his chapter about populism in Tamil Nadu, Vijayakanth (an actor turned politician) marked his birthday in 2005 by handing out scholarships, uniforms and books worth Rs. 2.5 million. This was done right before the launch of his own political party. Another common form of patronage is the distribution of access to jobs, schools or permits (this was common under the so-called ‘permit-license-quota raj’ referred to in Paul Brass’ chapter). In Ruud’s piece about student leaders in

Dhaka, 'seats' are the most important resources held by student leaders. A 'seat' refers to the right to live in one of the student dorms on campus. Ruud describes how this allocation was controlled by student organizations. To be accommodated for a seat, students have to participate in the activities of the student organizations. By controlling the access to the dorms, the student leaders thereby control a large group of people that could be quickly mobilized to campaign, protest or fight.

The *perception* of being able to distribute resources is also important. In her chapter about *goonda* (muscle-man, wrestler) politics in North India, Lucia Michelutti describes how *bal* (brute physical strength) is seen as a sign of the potential for wealth accumulation of a politician and their supporters (often their own caste group).

A large network is another vital resource in South Asia, since most things can be achieved through contacts. Contacts can be used to quicken bureaucratic processes, get the police to put forth or withdraw allegations of criminal activity, or to get access to the permits or jobs that other leaders control. In his chapter about the local leader Karuppavan in a village in Tamil Nadu, Björn Alm describes how the connection to a local MLA helped Karuppavan seem important in the village. Similarly, the local leader (Comrade) described by Mukulika Banerjee managed to seem important by disappearing on his motorbike and thereby giving the impression that he had important meetings with important people in the city. Craig Jeffrey describes how the student leaders in UP spent much of their time developing and maintaining networks that would enable them to fix small and large problems for the rest of their network. Networking and using contacts efficiently (giving and taking) is thereby presented as a very important political tool for a leader in South Asia.

Violence (stick)

In conversation with old politicians and bureaucrats in India, it is commonly heard that until the 1980s politicians were honorable, educated, well-meaning and well-spoken. They lament the entry into politics of the lower classes and ruffians. The glorification of the politicians of the past is probably an exaggeration, but there has indeed been a systematic change in the background of people elected to office. The first major change that has taken place is the large-scale entry of lower caste individuals into political positions. This development has been thoroughly documented in Jaffrelot and Kumar (2009), another book in this Routledge series about South Asia. They show how there has been a shift from Brahmin dominated politics to the entry of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

The other major shift in the type of politicians elected to office is the increasing number of criminals in politics. In her chapter about *goonda* (criminal, muscle-man) politics in UP and Bihar, Lucia Michelutti writes that more than 50 % of the winning candidates in the state assembly elections in 2002 had pending criminal charges. The rule of Samajwadi Party (SP) in UP 2002-2007 has therefore commonly been referred to as *goonda raj* (criminal rule). Michelutti outlines how muscle strength and a fighting spirit was glorified and encouraged in the wrestling culture surrounding the Yadav community. So why people support criminal politicians? Michelutti suggests one answer: Showing strength becomes a sign of how much wealth the politicians can acquire for themselves and their followers. The caste focus of the political appeals also makes people believe that the politicians intend to distribute their wealth to their

own group. In addition, many of the *goonda* politicians are seen as Robin Hood type characters who fight for the interests of the poor against the evil state.

Efficiency: Getting things done

Another recurring theme in South Asian politics is about 'getting the work done.' Leaders in India are often portrayed as violent thugs or as charismatic gurus who are simply adored by their followers. But in reality, if they do not deliver, they quickly lose the reputation of being a skilled leader. This was the central element in Digvijay Singh's unusual rise to power, as described in the chapter by James Manor. Convinced that people were fed up with the talk of poverty reduction without any action being taken, he focused on performance rather than rhetoric.

Working efficiently, as well as maintaining an image of working efficiently, is hard work. In his chapter about Dalit leadership, Gorringer describes how the Dalit leader Thirumavalavan spoke in public meetings at least 20 days per month and spent more than half the month travelling. I have seen similar examples in my own fieldwork. One of the most exhausting days I experienced was a day traveling with a Dalit politician in UP. We left at 7am and returned back at 10pm. During this time we had visited 5 or 6 villages, and the politician had addressed several caste groups in each village. We had not eaten anything except the biscuits and nuts offered with the tea in each village, and we had not taken any breaks. From what I gathered, this was a typical day in the life of this politician.

Dynastic/divine legitimacy

Claiming a dynastic or a divine connection is another important political tool in South Asia. Most famously, the dynastic aspect of South Asian politics comes out in the dominance of specific families in national politics, such as the Bhutto family in Pakistan and the Nehru-Gandhi family in India. But, many leaders at lower levels also claim a hereditary right to leadership positions. Among the leaders described in the book, Andrew Wyatt describes how the actor Vijayakhand actively used images of famous actor-politician M.G.Ramachandran (popularly referred to as MGR) in order to frame himself as his natural heir. In the case of the Yadavs in UP (as described by Michelutti), the community mobilized politically by creating an origin story of descent from the Yadu dynasty and Lord Krishna. This allowed them to include other castes in the Yadav category (the author calls this 'Yadavisation') and to legitimize their actions by referring to stories about Lord Krishna. Since Krishna is known as a 'naughty' or 'mischievous' god, leaders like Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav sometimes invoked Krishna's actions to reduce the severity of their own dubious actions.

Honesty: The non-corrupt Lord

The current Congress regime has made the business of being 'clean' (non-corrupt) one of their main political claims to fame. In Brass' chapter about Charan Singh, seeming honest is described as an important political tool. In the midst of chaos and corruption, Charan Singh somehow managed to retain an image of being fair, non-discriminatory and incorruptible. This was one of his main appeals to his supporters. At a lower level, Jeffrey describes how many of the young political leaders he met tried to portray themselves as 'social reformers' rather than politicians. This was meant to help disassociate themselves from the corrupt and dirty game of politics and rather seem like benevolent characters whose aim it was to serve others. By seeming non-corrupt

and honest, a politician can thereby build an image of being benevolent and well meaning: A Lord.

Empathy: Being one of us

As becomes clear from the different leadership accounts referred to above, leaders in South Asia use a mixture of many political tools in order to gain supporters. And yet, as several of the authors in this volume point out, leaders do not succeed if they do not show empathy with their followers and make them feel like they are one of them. Ruud exemplifies this need for empathy in the descriptions of student leaders in Dhaka. He reports several of his respondents stating that it is important for leaders to be around their followers, make them feel listened to and liked, as well as helping them out with small problems. Gorringer describes a similar tendency in the case of Dalit leaders in Tamil Nadu. In order to gain support, it is important for them to engage actively in the lives of their followers and show that they have lived and understood the hardships of untouchability.

Among the more senior leaders in South Asia, many hail from privileged backgrounds. This gives them an advantage in terms of access to resources, contacts and a good education. At the same time, many senior politicians also try to create the perception of being one of the masses. Leaders do this in different ways. Vijayakanth (described by Andrew Wyatt) used to emphasize his rural background and stated publically that all his close friends come from the lower strata of society. One of the greatest qualities of Digvijay Singh (as described by James Manor) was that he spoke to everyone in a courteous manner as if they were his equals. Even Chandrababu Naidu (the promoter of economic liberalization described in the chapter by Pamela Price), chose to campaign with pictures of himself carrying a plough and driving a pair of bullocks through a field.

During my own fieldwork interviewing political leaders in India, I heard several stories about the importance of showing empathy and respect. One such story was from a BJP MLA in UP. I met him in his meeting room in his home where he received all his constituents from 6am. The walls behind him were covered in gaudy images of Hindu deities clearly signaling his non-secular political leaning. He was a chubby man in his sixties, shabbily dressed and looking tired. On his desk there were piles and piles of thick envelopes. Following my gaze he smiled and told me that these were wedding invitations, enough of them for him to attend several weddings every day. He said that even if he worked to improve roads or water, people did not credit him for it. On the other hand, if he came to their wedding or came to show respect when someone in the family had passed away, then he would be guaranteed their vote for a long time to come. In fact, he was convinced that if he attended weddings and did nothing else during his whole period in office that would ensure him re-election.

Conclusion

The edited volume *Power and Influence in India – Bosses, Lords and Captains* tells us that politicians in South Asia use multiple techniques in order to gain political support ('creating a crowd'). These are resource distribution, violence, efficiency, dynastic legitimacy, honesty and empathy. As becomes clear through the accounts in the book, leaders mix and match these different political tools in order to gain political support, and often shift from one strategy to another in response to their competitors and the general political atmosphere.

All together the chapters of the book give a well-rounded description of the various types of political leaders in India, from the petty fixer to the charismatic chief minister. Several of the chapters would be excellent reading material for university level classes in comparative politics or in South Asian politics. The book is very interesting reading that I recommend to all those interested in South Asian politics.

Sources

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