

## **Book Review**

**Ashutosh Kumar, Seminar February 2011**

**POWER AND INFLUENCE IN INDIA: Bosses, Lords and Captains** edited by Pamela Price and Arild Engelsen Ruud. Routledge, New Delhi, 2010.

THE significance of the volume under review is that the theme of political leadership has rarely received critical attention, including from even those engaged in the study of electoral politics in India. The relative degree of neglect may possibly be because the dominant political discourse around the evolving nature of India's democracy has veered around the assertiveness and conflicting claims of identity groups, and of struggles amongst them, often fought out on lines of region, religion, language and caste or party lines. The critical role of the individual leader in the process has remained under a shadow. Even in the scant literature available on political leadership, usually in the form of biography or political narrative, the leader in question is of 'national' stature and presence. It is seldom a 'provincial' leader, irrespective of the defining influence he or she may have had on the history and politics of a particular state, which in terms of territorial space and population size may well be comparable to any country in Europe. And then, 'power and influence' of individual leadership usually get analyzed in terms of being shaped by structural factors rather than being able to shape political processes and outcomes as a relatively autonomous agency.<sup>1</sup>

It is only in the recent period that the role of political leadership, especially the regional/local ones, has started receiving its due importance in the analysis of political change and development.<sup>2</sup> This has much to do with the emergence of local/regions/states as the 'new' political and economic terrains along with territorially contained state/region level parties with a narrow social support base. These parties are often founded and dominated by the 'new' kind of leaders of the 'post-emergency era', often credited with introducing new idioms<sup>3</sup> in the exercise of their leadership. These 'party supremos' play a decisive role in determining the form and content of their party agenda/manifesto, tenor of election campaigns and also decide about important matter of alliance building and modes of distribution of patronage. Given the pervading competitive populism and fragmented nature of state politics, while considering public policy options, the leaders, when in power, have to face the onerous task of ensuring their personal as well as party's political (read electoral) survival.

The essays in the volume present field research based studies of the 'actions, ideas, values, rhetoric, policies, and styles' of political leaders of different hues, who wield power and influence in the 'various types of political spheres' of India's huge and diverse democratic space. These leaders, as the subtitle suggests, can be put into the broader categories of 'bosses/lords/captains/gurus' even as some of these local 'netas' prefer to call themselves humbly as mere 'social workers /reformers'. What is significant about these fieldwork based accounts is that the 'followers/constituents/shishyas' along with the 'patrons' of these politically ambitious actors also receive considerable space in the course of the narratives.

For the purpose of reviewing, let us take up first a set of articles where the protagonists are the regional political leaders of eminence – three of them being former chief ministers, one of whom went on to become a prime minister.

The contrasting leadership style of two former chief ministers, Chandrababu Naidu and Digvijay Singh, even as both leaders focused on the politics of development, comes out clearly while reading the essays by Pamela Rice and James Manor respectively.

Naidu as the chief minister adopted a highly personalized and publicized approach in pursuing a neo-liberal agenda of growth. Projecting himself as the CEO of his state in his effort to realize good governance, Naidu made conscious efforts to bypass the conventions of 'Andhra politics'. Pursuing 'person-centred politics', Naidu projected himself as an ardent votary of neo-liberal reforms that he promised would transform Andhra Pradesh into the most developed state of India. It was only before the 2004 elections that Naidu resorted to 'mass politics' during the campaigns. Instead of decrying populist 'handouts' from the government, Naidu now stood for 'alternative economic policy', aimed at inclusive growth and promotion of welfarism. In an effort to negate the anti-incumbency factor, Naidu even invoked emotive/rhetorical issues like Telugu pride, his 'rebirth' after surviving an assassination attempt, the foreign origin of Sonia Gandhi and so forth – a positioning which hardly suited his carefully cultivated global image of a 'modernizer' comfortable in the company of Bill Gates and Clinton. Even the belated attempt to remodel his pro-market/pro-rich image by taking up the cause of poor farmers suffering under drought and holding out promises, could not rescue Naidu. The late Y.S. Rajasekhra Reddy, leading the Congress campaign, scored over him by undertaking his famous *padyatra* in the scorching heat listening to villagers' complaints. The Naidu saga is instructive in visiting India's electoral politics since the initiation of neo-liberal economic reforms and taking note of a perceptible 'disconnect' between the two.

Unlike Naidu, Digvijay Singh, another two-term chief minister of the neighbouring state of Madhya Pradesh, kept a relatively low profile in true Congress tradition. The deliberate attempt to keep the focus of politics away from his 'person', despite being articulate, persuasive and having a privileged sociological origin, is attributed by Manor to a proclivity to reticence/ self-effacement due to an inherited courtly manner befitting a royal lineage and a pragmatic recognition and acceptance of a Congress 'culture' that mandates an exclusive focus on the 'family'. Compared to Naidu's relentless drive for development (read growth) in a top-down, illiberal model inspired by the ASEAN tigers, Singh focused on alleviating poverty by adhering actively to a 'bottom-up, demand-driven development' liberal approach based on devolution of power through PRIs by generously funding them and enabling them to promote the interests of the dalits. Manor calls Singh an 'unusual leader' within the Congress tradition who refused to depend merely on patronage based distributional politics and rather pursued a home-grown imaginative 'post-clientelist strategy'. In his opinion, Singh's 'brand of post-clientelism is more constructive and more exportable to other Indian states,' which is not the case with the left-ruled states of West Bengal and Kerala for the simple reason that the 'progressive' Communist parties 'cannot gain power in other states.'

Charan Singh comes across as yet another 'unusual leader', though belonging to an altogether different era. The original 'kisan leader', Paul Brass suggests, was able to maintain his popular support and a degree of admiration in the murky world of politics due to his widely praised 'personal honesty, integrity and reputation' and his unquestioned commitment to his core constituency, i.e., the middle peasants and backward classes. As someone who held important positions for a long period, Singh was an unusual leader also in the sense that he refused to indulge in a crass distribution of patronage, rewarding one's own followers, even the undeserving ones, with positions of power and influence and thus allowing them to acquire corrupted income. He was not only conscious of his personal honour but also ensured that his key followers, even those belonging to his own Jat community, behaved honourably. A tough call, one would say, if someone has some idea of the state and the region he belonged to, even if the era was different.

Andrew Wyatt takes up the study of the emergence of actor-politician Vijayakanth, the founder leader of DMDK. Vijayakanth, popularly known as 'Captain' after one of the movie he starred in, symbolizes the return of a politics of populism after nearly two decades marked by the primacy of identity politics. Reminiscent of the late MGR, another actor-politician of iconic status, Vijayakanth has also downplayed his privileged caste and class status and consciously fostered an image of an individual in touch with the aspirations of the ordinary masses by taking recourse to symbolism. His acts of charity are akin to 'saintly idioms' which Morris Jones talked about. The significance of Vijayakanth, despite his modest electoral successes so far, lies in showing that it is possible for a leader to manoeuvre within the politico-cultural constraints and norms of Tamil politics dominated by DMK and AIADMK and even challenge the status quo.

Now let us consider the other articles which focus on the 'less important' leaders/netas hailing from the micro-polities of village/community/student union/a locality in a small township. Reading these accounts along with the earlier ones enables us to underline the distinctive ways of leadership located differently and operating at different scales. Thus in the same state of Tamil Nadu, unlike Vijayakanth, the lesser leaders leading the dalit movement have been unable to challenge the status quo. This is, Hugo Gorringer argues, because they 'merely replicate and reproduce the relations from which they are excluded.'

How in the post-Mandal era are 'new' political leaders doing in a North Indian state/region the late Chaudhary Charan Singh belonged to? Lucia Michelutti spends time in a locality of Mathura town to write a political ethnography of the local leadership belonging to the dominant Yadav community. Here the focus is on how the community supported political leaders who use and legitimize what she calls, 'muscular politics'. Reinterpreting the whole idea of democratic politics of self-respect, dignity and empowerment, the local community leadership is able to seek ground support for criminal politics and 'goonda type of political acts' to earn wealth, power, influence and 'prestige' by allowing unfair distribution of corruption in the form of patronage for the community. Loyalty to one's own community here provides the sole legitimating factor. Historically, being victims of the upper caste led manipulations of law and institutions

provides yet another justification. There is another ethnographical study of yet another North Indian town of Meerut from the same region/state and also in the close proximity of the capital city which has wider implications. In his study of the student politicians in the two higher educational institutions of the city, Craig Jeffrey draws attention to the compromised potential of young student leaders to act as autonomous political agents, as the campuses increasingly become arenas for interplay of party-community political competition. In the process the broader causes get undermined. This ironically happens despite the leaders asserting their disillusionment with and desire to be separated from conventional party-driven political strategies of mobilization.

Moving from urban micro-polities to rural ones brings us to a study of the village level 'new type' of leadership. Mukulika Banerjee, in her study of two villages of Birbhum district of West Bengal, presents a captivating and incisive description of how the local politics has revolved for over a decade around the 'comrade', who has been acting as organic intellectual cum practitioner of mass politics. She argues that the 'party' (read the left parties when in West Bengal), long realizing the fragility of vanguard radical movement (refer, the Naxal-ruling left divide since the second split days), has come to rely on these comrades all over rural Bengal. Acting at the behest of the party, the comrades, in tandem with their followers who are also engaged in 'doing party work', organize political activities and act as the conduits for the disbursement of governmental patronage in the form of funds, loans and other benefits. The left parties have increasingly come to rely on the political work of these comrades to ensure that the party directives are carried for electoral successes. The study, referring to panchayat bodies, shows how all policy decisions were being made by 'the party', and 'other administrative bodies were mere rubber stamps – the executors of these policies.'

Bjorn Alm in his anthropological fieldwork based study of a village in Tamil Nadu, traces the story of a DMK youth who builds his support base with the help of his network of followers and patrons as the past village loyalties crumble and the traditional leadership based on land ownership gets discredited. Here is a youth leader, mirrored at successive levels of Tamil Nadu politics who, in the mould of a 'social worker', harnesses various state distributed resources for patronage. Such aspiring social leaders, often decried as 'fixers', are not necessarily from the upper caste or from a privileged economic background, but have the all-important virtues of accessibility and a reputation for 'delivering the goods'.<sup>4</sup>

With the focus on the regional/state level/grassroots level leaders and their leadership styles, idioms and strategies, these essays not only respond to the growing interest in a key aspect of the concrete reality of democratic politics, but also bridge a gap in the existing scholarly literature on politics in India. It is all the more welcome that the essays on essentially a political theme have been written by sociologists, anthropologists and students of cultural studies and human geography, with only a lone political scientist. Showing the growing global interest in the 'Indian model' of democracy, only one of the contributors to the volume is from India, that too institutionally located abroad. Straddling the disciplinary/national boundaries, the essays show both a sense of freedom from straitjacketing and a freshness of approach – a must read for those engaged in

undertaking analytical studies about the ways different kind of leaders and leadership strategies interact with one another.

**Footnotes:**

1. Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics', *Economic and Political Weekly* XXI(38), 20-27 September 1986.

2. CSDS-NES 2009 survey data clearly revealed that compared to the national leaders it was the state level leaders who played a far more decisive role in determining the electoral outcomes in different states.

3. Morris-Jones referred to three political idioms while analyzing the styles of political leadership in India, namely the modern, the traditional and the saintly. 'India's Political Idioms' in C.H. Phillips (ed.), *Politics and Society in India*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1963.

4. Anirudh Krishna calls these new village leaders as '*naye neta*' who have become the 'crucial mediators' between ordinary rural Indians and the state. *Active Social Capital: Tracing the Roots of Development and Democracy*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002.