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Governance without Democracy? ‘Techno-populism’ and Modi’s India

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Policy consultants have become a critical component of a strategy of governance in India, which is democratic in form but not in content.

"Should societies be governed by the people, or by experts?" This simple and yet deeply searching question is the leitmotif of this slim, thought-provoking, and accessible volume. The question which appears early in the book takes Anuradha Sajjanhar on a wide-ranging journey across Prime Minister Narendra Modi's India and to scrutinise the role that 'new experts' – policy consultants, working alone or out of think tanks – play in the making of public policy.

These professionals, often employed by foreign consultancies, and usually trained abroad – the author calls them "deracinated" experts – are more than a fashion accessory for the Modi regime. They are, in fact, a critical component of a strategy of governance, which, as Sajjanhar assesses it – is democratic in form but not in content. This form of policymaking is "techno-populism" par excellence, dominated by professional consultants and think tanks and global management consulting firms. It conflates two apparently contradictory poles – policy formulation by folks who are not politically accountable, and implementation of these policies by a popularly elected government.

In order to document this claim and dissect the nexus between the Modi regime and think tanks, Sajjanhar undertakes a journey through the Modi-space, interrogating politicians, bureaucrats, consultants, and journalists. In five closely argued chapters she analyses the political discourse that gives body and legitimacy to the techno-populism of Narendra Modi. The introductory chapter presents the main argument of how 'technocracy' and populism can work together. This, the author argues, is not a simple conflation of binary differences into one common and coherent narrative. As the next chapter 'The BJP's ideological heterodoxy' argues, the Hindutva ideology of the Modi regime which techno-populism sustains, operates through multiple narratives which have a common goal – "persuasion, personalisation and propagation." Chapter three narrates the process through which the Modi regime has steadily and stealthily replaced institutions like the Planning Commission with think tanks that function as "custodians of new discourse." Chapter four follows up on this argument by explaining the process of "outsourcing democracy" through the recourse to professional consulting. Chapter five illustrates these arguments with the analysis of two major think tanks she refers to as the Chanakya Institute and the India Foundation that bolster the Modi regime. The concluding chapter pulls these arguments together, and explains how and why Modi can claim to be both within the political fray and at the same time, above it. In sum, the author concludes that her investigations have generated a "fascinating display of how political leaders in India strategically use modes of populist spectacle and established technocratic institutions to produce shared visions of glorified technological and hyper-nationalist futures."

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Political accountability of the government and its representative character are essential features of democratic governance. Articulation and aggregation of the popular will by competing political parties and implementation of the electoral mandate by a professionally neutral bureaucracy are critical components of the hallowed myth of liberal democracy. As such, the by-passing of this process by diverting policy-making to hired consultants is a serious charge and, if sustained, would feed into what many hold to be part of democratic backsliding in India. For evidence on the basis of which to justify this claim, Sajjanhar has conducted interviews with stakeholders, prominently including consultants in think tanks and political leaders close to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Long transcripts of these interviews are one of the most valuable features of this book.

By the standards of conventional policy analysis, the methodology Sajjanhar uses is innovative. Her ethnographic and interview data suggest that Prime Minister Modi's government "oscillates between populist anti-elitism and forms of technocratic expertise to produce a distinct form of nationalism that is both seemingly pragmatic yet ethnocentric." She shows how technocracy and populism, rather than being contradictory forces, can actually become 'complementary arms of governance in contemporary India'. These two strands of the Modi regime "function through different, often contradictory, logics and content, yet are able to work towards the same goals in key moments of mutual reinforcement." However, while these insights are interesting in their own right, at times one gets the impression

that the author is over-reliant on opinions of her interviewees and does not provide any primary data which would help readers see techno-populism in action. The author could have illustrated her core arguments by picking up one or two examples from the whole range of new policy innovations that marked the Modi regime, and follow them up from drawing board to the field and through this, she could have shown the life-cycle of policies of the Modi regime, from conception to implementation.

This raises further questions. First, who actually implements policies and walks the last mile on the delivery chain? Is it the karyakartas – party agents at the local level – of the BJP who deliver cooking gas, toilets and subsidised food to people below poverty level? Secondly, it is unclear where new ideas are born. (The controversial idea of demonetisation comes readily to mind.) Who conceives new, saleable ideas? Is it Modi himself, his close entourage, or hired consultants who coin the catchy slogans that have marked the ten years of BJP rule? Third, what role does the civil service play in the policy process? Is it still the old, bureaucratic machinery that incubates the new ideas, studies their feasibility, formulates the draft bills that the Minister pilots through the legislative process?

For all we know, the Modi regime might simply have added some new wine to the old bottles and trusted the professional and politically neutral bureaucracy with the responsibility to do the rest. If that is the case, then one can safely surmise that the old order lives on within the interstices of the new.

To the best of my knowledge, the BJP has not built up a separate chain of implementers, nor did it undertake a wholesale replacement of civil servants with committed bureaucrats. For all we know, the Modi regime might simply have added some new wine to the old bottles and trusted the professional and politically neutral bureaucracy with the responsibility to do the rest. If that is the case, then one can safely surmise that the old order lives on within the interstices of the new, and that India's professional civil service which has sustained the post-colonial state in the aftermath of the Transfer of Power and bloodbath of the Partition has adapted itself to the new order and has remained intact, ready for further political transition if and when regimes change.

What might be the motivation of the Modi regime to induct think tanks into the policy process? Is it a quest for efficiency in policy making on issues far too complex for generalists, or is this an attempt at policy-making by stealth, an alternative path that avoids politically contentious policy process, meandering through public hearings and fractious scrutiny by parliamentary committees? And why has this particular method not evoked the kind of resistance it could have? What made Modi's 'techno populism' acceptable to the electorate which voted it to power over successive elections? In insights that the book offers about the state of Indian politics, Sajjanhar outlines a response to some of these complex questions.

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In the introductory chapter, she presents a thumbnail sketch of Modi's vision of India, melding together "cultural nationhood and technological modernity." Within this space she situates the dramatis personae of her narrative. She projects the Ram Mandir – "promised to include high-tech security systems and the technological advances showcasing the global reach of the Ramayana, constituting both a marvel of modern technology and ancient heritage" as the iconic vehicle of much of what Modi stands for. Is there a national consensus on this? Sajjanhar comes tantalisingly close to saying as much. She quotes Congress party's general secretary Priyanka Vadra who has called "the event" [the inauguration of the Ram temple] "a hopeful marker of national unity, brotherhood and cultural harmony in accordance with the message of Lord Ram and with his blessings." She adds: "Hindu nationalism has become a mediating discourse across political party elites (sic.) lines," adding, further, "In many ways, Hindu nationalism has been a core undercurrent of Indian nationalism for the last eight decades, constituting key slogans and normative ideals of the Independence movement and beyond." So, if induction of the 'new experts' appears to break the mould, their unobtrusive entry can perhaps be explained by the fact that the field was ready to welcome them.

Populism, judging by political trends in the West, as well as the Global South, is currently in high season. Spurred on by institutional crises – real or imaginary – populist leaders across the world have risen to power and popularity. Coming from outside the 'system', they bypass conventional political parties, set themselves up as the sole representative of the 'people', and on their behalf, take on the establishment, holding out visions of a brave new world. Through copious references to the political rhetoric of the Modi regime such as the refrains of 'Modi ki guarantee', 'Sankalp Patra', and 'Phir ek baar Modi sarkar', Sajjanhar demonstrates how and to what extent politics in India has moved away from conventional party competition into the new mode of 'techno-populism'. However, India is not alone. Though aimed specifically at 'Modi's India', the scope of the book is general, because the issue of experts vs. generalists when it comes to policy-making, underpins all complex, modern societies.

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A comparative perspective, dissecting the generality of the Modi-method and singularity of the Indian context in which it operates, could have bolstered the novelty and originality of the insights Sajjanhar provides. Many of these criteria of the essential populist apply to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, seen, particularly in his recent avatar, his face beaming from billboards, adorning packages containing bounties doled out to the vulnerable and the slogan ‘Modi ki guarantee’ reverberating from the noisy and divisive electoral campaign that projected him as the sole electoral asset of the BJP. However, what distinguishes Modi from others of the ilk, according to this important and timely analysis of the performance of his regime, is the dexterity with which he has been able to juxtapose an anti-modernist ideological stance with the usage of ultra-modern technologies of communication, data management and projection.

On the whole, the book delivers an unanticipated bounty by the way of dissecting the political-supra-political mix of the Modi discourse. Sajjanhar poses a fundamental question about charisma, its social relevance and its limited shelf-life. She is not explicit about the default option she compares it to. Is Modi’s techno-populism, tied to him as a populist leader, an ephemeral aberration or is this likely to become a permanent feature of the Indian system? The alacrity with which India’s competing political formations pick up tools and ideas from one another (take for example the effortless ease with which political consultant Prashant Kishore has worked for all the major political parties of India) indicates the general acceptance of think tank and consultancy led politics and policy-making.

That said, one should still ask - how stable is techno-populism as a method of governance? Our brave predictions get quickly buried under the shifting quick sands of politics. The drubbing that Modi got in the parliamentary elections of 2024 raises further questions. What future then for techno-populism? Finally, why did techno-populism in its heyday get popular support? Is Modi’s style of governance a consequence of deeper forces that underpin Indian politics?

One of the most important contributions of this book is to lift the quality of public debate about policy-making – both in the parliament as well as in the media, universities and in civil society – from the abyss that it reached with specious allegations against the ‘Khan Market Gang’, ‘Tukde Tukde Gang’, and summary dismissal of disagreements as ‘anti-national’. Sajjanhar helps us look beyond this vehement polemic by exposing the role of new experts who have been brought in to replace the old establishment experts. A little historical perspective might have helped. The induction of experts into the policy process is not entirely new. Nehru had his social democratic experts; Indira Gandhi favoured experts who were clearly left-leaning. For democratic, accountable and transparent governance, dissecting the provenance of public policy and exposing the role of unelected experts is a step in the right direction. The next steps would entail focused analysis of specific policies as they emerge from the entrails of political initiative, their incubation within ministries, the passage through legislative debates and scrutiny by parliamentary committees and the pace and scale of their implementation.

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