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The Managers of Politics

By: Ishita Tulsyan

When professionals manage the 'industry' of politics, what happens to party politics and democracy? A new study offers food for thought.

A distinct feature of contemporary party politics in India is the entry of educated professionals offering data-driven expertise and managing the 'industry' of politics. This 'professionalisation of politics' is the subject of Amogh Dhar Sharma's *The Backstage of Indian Democracy*. The book details the roles and experiences of such political professionals, the market demand for professionalisation, and its aspirational supply. This demand and supply creates an environment where the nature of politics in its day-to-day functioning changes. Professionalisation emerges as not only a human-experienced job, but also a transformative process.

The professionalisation of politics has been a topic of study in the West, focusing primarily on the [sophistication of actors within the political system](#), on aspects such as [communications](#), or on [the influence of American culture in global practices](#). Sharma's work differs from these models: he uses the term to refer to consultancies, spin doctors, and other agents of political service that do not identify as politicians.

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In line with earlier work in the Indian context that has [analysed the business-like character of the 2014 and 2019 elections](#), Sharma sees 2014 as a turning point. However, his analysis factors in more. He argues that while technology has certainly had an impact in bringing about changes in the way politics operate in the country, the change is more than just that. The book attributes changes in politics to the introduction of a new political culture, including new actors with political expertise, reformed distribution of power, and a different overall outlook. By mapping the two very contrasting journeys of professionalisation as a process in the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Sharma establishes that professionalisation can take multiple paths in different environments. In a twist on the title, he also explores the shift of professionalisation from the closed-off "backstage" to the "frontstage" of democracy, which is the opening up of professionalisation to the public view.

Early on in the book, Sharma mentions that it is the middle class which opts for professionalisation. However, the defining feature of this section of people is controversial in itself. Who is the middle class? Various definitions and methods of calculating a middle class in India have been offered through [previous works](#). In fact, if the 'new middle class' comprises tech-savvy entrepreneurs, it is more likely that the latter come from well-to-do families which could provide for an expensive education and allow risk-taking. But describing this group as the new Indian middle class per se would have been a [deceptive arena](#). In basing the definition of this new middle class on the ["hegemonic aspirations"](#) of the dominant section of the middle class, Sharma defines a key aspect of who (and perhaps why) the professionals in politics are.

While exploring this demographic of the professionals in question, Sharma concludes that these are predominantly (and perhaps unsurprisingly) upper-caste male individuals. They might not come from backgrounds connected to politics, but have wealth and resources. Yet Sharma's engagement with the influence of caste on the profession ends with this observation. He does not investigate questions about the effects of upper-caste limitation in this change of political culture, or ways of making professionalisation inclusive (or if such inclusion is even possible)- all of which could have built on a very important insight, especially in the socio-economic context of India.

Linked to this omission is the larger question of what effect professionalisation has on democracy, which is a question that constantly remains in the reader's mind.

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Sharma addresses it partially. He refers to the case of the BJP and notes how, despite professionalisation contributing to its recent electoral rise, there still remains a strong ideological hold within the party. Accordingly, Sharma argues that professionalisation, even with its technical and data-centric approaches, which is often party-agnostic in its working, does not lead to an erasure of ideology. The argument here is against the allegation that professionalisation leads to corporatising politics. Sharma details instances of how party workers hold together the structure of the party and keep it from being fully transformed by the professionals. Professionals are as much influenced by politics as the other way around, often taking up the morals of the political workers, Sharma points out. (In any case, he also notes, it would be short-sighted to deem the era before professionalisation as being a golden age for democracy.)

Sharma is also aware of the flip side: the heavy financial investment involved in hiring a political consultancy is more likely to be available with an already established party rather than an unknown new entrant. Even if power is transferred into the hands of the professional class, it only serves to reinforce upper caste men who now pose as a technocratic elite corps. Moreover, if professionalisation leads to parties being in a perpetual campaign mode, it indicates the predominance of advertising not just in the election cycle but throughout. This in turn may be an indicator of a shift away from actual day-to-day workings of a party and larger attention to public perception and populist measures.

Considering that the book argues against treating professionalisation as an extension of public relations work, other questions remain. How much of an impact is there from the substantial non-advertising work that professionals do alongside party workers? How much influence do consultants actually have compared with local caste networks? Do voters respond primarily to data-driven targeting or to traditional social ties? Are consultants powerful, or merely expensive service providers hired by already powerful politicians?

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Sharma notes how political consultancies tend to take up the case of one particular leader instead of doing so for an entire party. It does not, however, explore that this risks causing a deteriorating effect on the political party, without necessarily denting the political consultancy. In promoting the culture of individual prominence over party politics, the parties "[risk becoming temporary vehicles for leaders, managed by consultants](#)". In allowing for this to happen, political parties are trading collective decision-making for technocratic efficiency.

Further, the book mentions the heavy cost associated with hiring a consultancy firm by the political parties, but it seems to provide a simplistic picture of a one-on-one exchange between the parties and the firms. [Sharma himself has written elsewhere](#) on how the transaction between a service vendor (who offers professional services to politicians) and a political party is often mediated by a political donor. Payments are made by the donor directly to the service vendor, who in turn provides services to the party covertly. This backhanded financing seems to be one of the key components of how professionalisation remains on the "backstage" of politics. The book misses highlighting this major problem posed in the sphere of electoral financing transparency.

The recent elections of Tamil Nadu and West Bengal are key in assessing the future of professionalisation in India. Prashant Kishore's I-PAC, the pioneer in the 'industry', has seen a major defeat in the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal. Following this result, the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh dropped I-PAC (though the reason for doing so is debated and is officially attributed to lack of funds). The success of a political consultancy firm, and in turn, professionalisation, is dependent on the continued success of its strategies in electoral campaigns.

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Simultaneously, while electoral results put professionals in a position to be answerable, other attacks on governance leave them unscathed. The questions raised by the Cockroach Janata Party are also born out of social media. However, it invites the presence of all, employed or not, in questioning the government. In this, the accountability checks-in being open for access, against the government, and irrespective of profession-seem to be the antithesis of professionalisation, which is selective in access, associated with governments, and composed of only prized professionals. Despite being the polar opposite in theory, it focuses on accountability of the government only, and poses no threat to political professionals working behind the scenes.

Thus, even when operational on a regular basis, the relevance of questioning the political professionals rises only at instances of kingmaking. It is, thus, important to question how much of a 'backstage' and a place in democracy they occupy. In the face of a changing political culture in India, and a major rise in the number of political consultancies, it becomes important to ponder upon what direction this industry of political professionals will take. Sharma's book does not have all the answers, but offers much to the reader who wishes to undertake this analysis.

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