



When crime pays: Money and muscle in Indian politics

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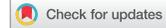


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When crime pays: Money and muscle in Indian politics, by Milan Vaishnav, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2017, xxiii + 410 pp., £25 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0300216202

There is no doubt that money power is hugely significant in India today. *When crime pays* amply confirms this. Milan Vaishnav tells us that one can walk almost the whole way from Mumbai to Kolkata without stepping outside a constituency whose MP faces a criminal charge (see Figure 1.2). More than one-fifth of MPs in the 2014 Lok Sabha have charges standing against them for serious crimes, including murder, up from 'only' 12 per cent in the 2004 parliament and 15 per cent in 2009. Not so incidentally, it was reported after the state elections in Uttar Pradesh in 2017, soon after the publication of the book, that about one-fifth of the BJP legislators who had been elected also had serious criminal charges standing against them – prime minister Narendra Modi's promises, in the general election campaign of 2014, about ridding politics of such criminals being rendered hollow, as Vaishnav also shows in his account of the ascent of eight criminal politicians into Modi's first cabinet. The costs of financing elections bring the fields of crime and politics together. As Vaishnav says 'parties value "muscle" ... because of the money that comes along with it' (p. 20). But then office, once won, turns out to be highly lucrative. One study showed that the average wealth of legislators increased by 222 per cent over just one term. As Vaishnav argues in the second chapter of the book, on 'The Rise of the Rents Raj', explaining the intersections of extractive, regulatory and political rents, and making the critical point that the origins of grand corruption in India today lie in the yawning gap between the transformations of the economy and the capacity of government: 'money serves to bankroll politics; politicians and political parties are beholden to vested interests that can organise and deploy sizeable amounts of largely undocumented cash' (p. 62). And a good many of the criminal-legislators are also out-and-out thugs. Money and fear are closely aligned.

Milan Vaishnav begins the book by recounting the histories of three of the six prominent lawbreakers, together facing more than 100 charges of crimes such as kidnapping, murder, extortion and arson, who were given furlough from jail in July 2008. This was so that they could fulfil their duties, ironically, as lawmakers, and vote on the controversial bill then before parliament on strengthening civilian nuclear cooperation with the United States. They duly voted and were promptly returned to jail. What piqued Vaishnav's curiosity was that the incident apparently

attracted such little attention in the Indian media. The presence in politics of criminals with very serious charges standing against them was evidently accepted as being more or less normal. Vaishnav went on to complete the thesis at Columbia University on which the book is based in order to explore how and why this has come about and the implications of the presence of so many criminals in politics. It is a remarkable book, combining vivid narrative – some based on the author's own fieldwork – about election campaigns, and the lives and actions of criminal politicians, with painstaking analysis, especially of a dataset based on the affidavits submitted by nearly all the many thousands of candidates who stood for state and national election between 2003 and 2009. The book is meticulously argued and has prodigious numbers of endnotes reflecting extraordinary monitoring of media sources.

Local crooks used to bribe politicians to keep themselves out of trouble. But then as politics became increasingly uncertain, with decline of the Congress Party, they started to promote themselves, from the later 1970s, into holding office, looking both for self-preservation and financial rewards (chapter 3). What is most surprising in Vaishnav's analysis is the finding that candidates who have been charged with serious offences are three times as likely to win parliamentary elections as those who have not (chapter 5, on 'the demand for criminality'). The reputation of being someone who can 'get things done' goes a long way in the context of a polity in which the bureaucracy so often fails to deliver. It is generally true, in India, that given the inability of the system to deliver, politicians – even the most honest of them – do not consider good governance as feasible and certainly not as important for getting votes. The election of criminals into political office is not because of a lack of information on the parts of voters, Vaishnav shows. One way of commanding votes, indeed, is to be known to be a tough guy who can call the shots. And (chapter 4) criminal bosses can also contribute generously to party coffers, meeting the costs of expensive election campaigns – '(w)althy, self-financing candidates are not only attractive to parties, but they are also more likely to be electorally competitive' (p. 125). Thus we have the contradiction of contemporary Indian politics: on the one hand there is widespread complaint about the prevalence of corruption in politics, and on the other there are the evident attractions of muscular politics. And, as chapter 6 of the book shows, criminality in politics is more prevalent in places where there are incentives for politicians, and parties, to mobilise on ethnic lines.

There is a sense, perhaps, in which under certain conditions malfeasance and democratic accountability are compatible. But, Vaishnav argues, criminality in politics is a problem that must be addressed because it encourages disrespect for the law, and ultimately reproduces the malfunctioning of the state, whilst having – the available evidence suggests – a mixed impact upon the welfare of voters. Part III of the book exhaustively reviews ideas about 'what is to be done', but eventually emphasises the crucial argument that 'fixing what ails the Indian state is essential to reducing the demand for criminal politicians' (p. 293).

The book is, beyond question, a tour de force. It is also a rich source of intriguing observations and acute commentary. There is one way in which it seems somewhat lacking, and this is in regard to the culture that surrounds the criminal

politician. Vaishnav does observe of Mohammed Shahabuddin, one of the six temporarily released criminal politicians whose careers he describes at the beginning of the book, that 'The fear that gripped the minds of many residents when the name of Shahabuddin was uttered was often tinged in equal measure with respect'. But he does not develop the significance of this observation. For this one may turn to the work of Lucia Michelutti on gangster politicians, and to some other contributions in Anastasia Piliavsky's fine edited collection of papers on *Patronage as politics in South Asia* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014).

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Constructing modern Asian citizenship, edited by Edward Vickers and Krishna Kumar, Abingdon, Routledge, 2015, xiii + 365 pp., £110 (hardback), ISBN 978-0415855785

This edited volume seeks to understand how ideas of citizenship have facilitated the building of modern states in Asia. In the introduction, Krishna Kumar and Edward Vickers argue that education has been an essential means by which states have sought popular consent for nation-building processes. They consider education to be part of a process of modernisation or bringing forward of 'modernity' (a contested term which they take care to problematise). In the following 13 chapters, the contributors review diverse approaches to state and nation building across the continent.

Helen Ting Mu Hung reflects on the civics curriculum in Malaysia. She connects the content of the curriculum with the wider context of ethnic and religious politics paying attention to Mahathir Mohamad's ambition to connect Islam with a project of modernising Malaysia. Ting raises a critical point about the location of civics in the curriculum. In several versions of citizenship in Asia, many would want citizenship to spring from the individual character of the citizens which implies that civics should be connected to moral and religious education. She then goes on to analyse the content of history textbooks, which are oriented towards inculcating patriotism and promoting a concept of Islamic civilisation in which material and spiritual aspects are balanced. However, as Ting ably shows, this curriculum does not adequately address the diversity of Malaysian society. Rubina Saigol also discusses the ways in which school textbooks have been used to promote citizenship and national identity in Pakistan. She acknowledges the diversity in the textbooks used, they vary somewhat according to region and medium of instruction though the chapter concentrates on the government textbooks used in Punjab.