

# Challenging Organisations and Society

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## On the Move: Patterns, Power, Politics

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*Mohanakrishnan Raman, Balakrishnan Ramasamy  
and Bhavani Mohanakrishnan*

## **The Caste System in India: Its Power in Organizations and Politics**

### **Abstract**

The caste system in India relates to both organizations and politics. Controversial yet seldom debated, it remains relevant today, influencing relationships and dynamics especially in Tamilnadu's industries and educational institutions. This article is the outcome of the authors' unique sets of experience in the fields of teaching, consulting and research. It presents a documentation of facts and a debate on theories of power, ranging from the ancient scripts of India and Taminadu to the current theories of Michael Foucault. India has been exposed to modern types of industrialization as a result of liberalization, especially during the premiership of Narasimha Rao. Most organizations keep their old administrative models in the mistaken belief that they bear fruit. A peculiar system of caste stratification helping both general politics and organizational power politics has become the mainstay of most functions of organizational growth, resulting in low incentive and a motivational deficit for workers and a culture of reliance on fundamental elements. We include a section describing the concept of charismatic leadership and discuss how leaders become popular through various means, e.g. leaders who become popular in cinema and later invest that popularity in politics, rather than doing grassroots-level work to benefit the poor and having certain principles as the basis for their political actions.

Key words: power, politics, Indian culture, caste system, leadership, heroism

## 1. Background of Indian Culture and Practice

This article reflects our observations and experiences. We teach and practice change management processes at individual, organizational and societal levels. The first author, Mohanakrishnan Raman, is an organizational change management consultant; Balakrishnan Ramasamy works at the societal level by writing in Tamil, the local language, as well as in English, and is a critic of art and literature; and Bhavani Mohanakrishnan works at the individual level as a teacher at a master's level institute. Throughout our consulting and teaching experience we have affirmed that organizations are political in nature. In the theory of motivation in his 1961 essay 'Need for Power', McClelland states that established individuals have need for power and we opine from our experience that organizations are political systems in which power and politics work together vigorously. This view is elaborately discussed in the book "Images of Organization" by Gareth Morgan (2006). Human resources in the organization are driven by the need for power; through the opportunities they are given, they find and develop political skills in order to ensure their personal benefits. At the same time they support others who think as they do and use their power for the organization's growth. Power and politics work differently in various cultural settings. India is highly diverse and its culture is ancient; its civilization can be traced back several thousand years, and its ancient scriptures talk about the development of societies, political strategies and guidelines for ethical living. For example, the *Arthashastra*<sup>1</sup> talks about secrets of ruling the public and served as a guidebook for kings. *The Laws of Manu*<sup>2</sup> established the existence of aristocracy as a divine and unique system in which a ruler should be from an upper caste and designated the Brahmin as the superior community. The caste system in India has established different segments of labor.

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1 A quote from the *Arthashastra*: On account of his pre-eminence, on account of the superiority of his origin, on account of his observance of particular restrictive rules, and on account of his particular sanctification, the Brahmin is the lord of all castes.

2 A quote from the *Laws of Manu* (c. 1500 BCE): The Brahmin, the Kshatriya, and the Vaisya castes are the twice-born ones, but the fourth, the Sudra, has one birth only.

In our experience, productive relations in this society are not connected to the types of skills a worker has, or to wages or incentives in return for his production, but rather to a worker-owner relationship in line with sentiments, casteism, and closeness of customs or related cultural attributes. Workers in organizations are separated on the basis of their caste (Srinivas, 1965 & 2005).

Of late, Indian politics has tried and built a system that translates the distribution of people into blocks of votes. Organizations are modeled on this system and are established by individuals who rely on it for their power, with the result that the caste system does not wither away. In fact, because of this pattern organizations accumulate certain benefits. No doubt this is especially the case when Indian politics, which ought to help to create a casteless and classless socialist society, abandons this mission to harvest more votes and obtain power in a manner contrary to the principles of socialism. In this context we define power and politics as a combination of any set of principles and practice for governing individuals in an organization or an institution, based on which the individuals are grouped, regulated and directed towards production or service, such as a set of targets or tasks.

In the Indian political system each party strives first to continue to exist, then to achieve and finally to hold power. In essence, the whole process consists of talking about “change” while using the politics of division and the caste system. When organizations invite us as change consultants to initiate change processes, we must understand that these organizations are political, since they are part of the social system. Therefore, we must have the political will to bring the necessary and visionary change.

Indian societies are basically caste-based; a few castes are classified as upper-class and the rest as lower-class. The caste system has also produced the type of labor to be performed by the members of each caste. Thinkers throughout history—from Plato to Locke to modern political theorists like Michael Foucault, Antonio Gramsci and M. N. Srinivas—have all discussed the ideal form of social organization. In addressing this question, Indian Vedic literature

presents as the ideal the social system known as *Varnashrama*<sup>3</sup>, which divides society into four *Varnas* or occupational groups, and four *Ashramas* or stages of life. The four *Varnas* are *Brahmins* (priests and teachers), *Kshatriyas* (rulers and warriors), *Vaishyas* (farmers and merchants) and *Shudras* (lower-caste people who do menial services). The last group is exemplified by the present-day *Dalits*, who even do manual scavenging and sometimes carry night soil on their heads in poor rural areas. The type of labor to be performed by each individual is based on their caste, for example, barbers who cut hair for people who belong to other communities belong to a specific caste.

Conflict in such roles will take place when, due to democracy established after the nation freed itself from the United Kingdom on 15 August 1947, individuals are permitted to compete with each other on existing job markets, irrespective of caste. Talented individuals from the community of barbers may opt for different professions to achieve better lifestyles, and the result may be insufficient availability of haircutters. Diachronic conflicts which take place in the sharing of power require a change of framework which assigns power to select groups. However in India, thanks to a large population and too few jobs, there has been no scarcity of barbers. Caste in India is a system which runs parallel with class. Only a few communities tend to dominate in the Indian context, and hence governance is mostly vested in them. The dominant class will not let other communities wrest power from its hold, and affirmative action has not achieved its intended goals of empowering marginal communities in governance, even in governmental circles. This is also reflected in traditional organizations (governmental organizations, their schemes and social welfare projects), especially when most marginal rural communities are not able to achieve minimal educational quotas.

Conflict of individual interests would also likely be reflected in organizations when the designated principles fall apart. The team leader may grab, strike

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<sup>3</sup> According to Hindu texts, *Varnashrama-dharma* is not a man-made system but refers to natural classifications that appear to various degrees in all human societies. Individuals have different innate tendencies for work and exhibit a variety of personal qualities.

or pull an individual member of his group, especially a female, over whom he can exercise power “in the interest of the company”. The member may find it difficult to cope with such conditions and may accuse the team leader of abuse of power. In such conditions it is debatable whether this is deviant behavior.

## 2. Power Dynamics in Organizations

### 2.1 The Nature of Power

Power, according to Foucault, is the organization itself. In the process of transformation and confrontation, it either finds those of its own kind or may sometimes isolate itself from them. Its general design is personified in the form of law or social dominion.

*“[An understanding of power] must not be sought in a unique source of sovereignty from which secondary and descendent forms would emanate; it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the later are always local and unstable....Power is everywhere not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.”* (Foucault, 1976, pp. 92-93)

Power is distributed unequally throughout an organization. People in top positions are given more power than those at lower levels; people at the top of any hierarchy will naturally have some kind of veto power and can make individual decisions when required. Further, people with power can exercise it through the appropriate practice of power determinants, that is, by the use of knowledge (Rappa, 2011). The ability to make unpopular decisions, to deal with uncertainty and to make enemies into friends creates a basis from which to issue directions. Power is impressed upon the decisions and is manipulated through tools as well as symbols.

Instruments are used to increase power; the use of various tools and gadgets is based on the skills that an executive has inherited and may provide momentum

in getting results. Accessories like cars and planes serve as symbols that the executive will succeed in influencing relevant groups and attaining results. Luxury is one of the marks of power which easily open doors; reputation comes from past results, which serve as proof of success.

Organizations distribute authority and set the stage for the practice of power. Individuals who are highly motivated to secure and use power find a familiar and hospitable environment in business. Hence organizations serve as a location for power games. All organizations are subject to conflict, and rivalry between departments and sections may be negotiated and settled. Politics somehow includes a bit of irrationality, however, and groups in an organization may likewise tend to be irrational in the event of conflict with each other. Politics never exists without power, and the two run parallel in an organization (Buchanan & Badran, 2007; Levine, 2007).

## **2.2 Power Dynamics in Local Industries in Taminadu**

Organizations in Taminadu are characterized by improbability, discontinuity and volatility. Half of the employees are permanent and others are outsourced in general. People with better socio-political skills and knowledge may choose relevantly organized resources and strengthen the organization without deviating from the fundamentals. The rules of organizations, patterns and ethics have all changed in modern times (Rappa, 2011).

Foucault's argument demonstrates that power inequalities may create or provoke conflict. The backbone of local industries and organizations in Taminadu is casteism. So far India has primarily produced rural and agricultural products, and naturally the power pattern has been feudal. Indian feudal power is a unique, natural entity, essentially pantheistic, and depends on principles of production of which labor is a part. It revolves around principles of duty and faith. In a Foucaultian analysis of power, a feudal social system revolves around disciplinary power and sovereign power, since feudal societies are not mainly knowledge and technology dependent.

An agricultural worker is a sanctified man, behind whom the world walks. Thiruvalluvar, a divine-poet who lived two thousand years ago, originally belonged to the community of merchants during the time of feudal bureaucracy. In his immortal set of dual verses titled *Thirukkural* he wrote, “*Agriculture, though laborious, is the most excellent (form of labor); for people, though they go about have at last to resort to the farmer*” (Kural 1031). Such hallowed sayings have only helped the ruling class deny proper wages to agricultural laborers. The most exploited of Indian communities, they remain a powerless group even though they provide the most basic products needed by human beings. Their plight results in many suicides.

### **2.3 Loyalty More Important than Performance**

In handling their employees, Indian organizations have not progressed from the feudal mindset and have principally designed their power based on concepts such as faith, loyalty and honesty as the core mechanism in operating productive relations. Local organizations have merely adapted as their starting point the caste-based role model, upon which even the modern Indian social system is based. Caste, religion and geographical closeness play a greater role than the required skills in the offer of employment or the assignment of any specific task in an organization. For example, we put a group of job candidates through a set of psychometric assessments and presented the results to the organization. This occurred in an area dominated by one particular community, to which most of the managers also belonged. They preferred a candidate who was ranked last on the list, simply because he was a member of the same community, and disregarded other, more eligible, candidates from other communities.

Understanding power and politics and their dynamics, compromising and substantiating are the key factors in Indian organizations to achieve career growth or simple survival. Loyalty and personal commitment to employers are more important considerations than performance. Relationships matter; one's influence through the network or across hierarchies is always rewarded.

One needs a sponsor in the organization to create visibility. For example, the vice president of an organization likes one individual better than another and takes him to high-level meetings where the preferred individual attracts the attention of higher-ups. As a result, when the time comes for performance evaluations, that individual receives greater pay rises than the other.

Power relationships in Indian industries, particularly in local organizations, are not based on true and pragmatic associations between production and its value, which would be evaluated based on how much labor is available and how it can best be utilized. However, in India the efficiency and skill which are the real value of production are not considered; rather the labor resource utilized should come from a particular caste: the choice is based on attributes of faith and loyalty. Organizations set up frameworks designed on conservative principles into which individuals or groups can be trained to fit.

Organizational power in local industries or institution is mainly focused on interpersonal relations based on caste and related group attributes; importance is attached to principles of faith. That is, organizational interaction models are not based on true models of competency. Instead, individuals in an organization are rewarded with growth and stability based on their faith. We observed this is especially the case in local private industries and less in national institutions or industries.

### **3. The Alluringly Put-up Leadership**

#### **3.1 Charismatic Leadership Perception**

Leadership in India is understood to be charismatic; leaders may become popular through various means. For example, they may become popular in cinema and later invest that popularity in politics, rather than doing grass-roots-level work to benefit the poor and having certain principles as the basis for their political actions. From our observations, human resource and public relations professionals in leading organizations are known for their ability to

quote from old Tamil scripts and epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha*, because a person who has knowledge of these scripts and is a good orator is considered to be an expert in human affairs; this is more important than their skills in personnel management and counseling individual workers during crisis situations. Modern industry in India is a part of a global organization in an age of liberalism, but here in Taminadu the exercise of scientific principles in management is mostly lacking. Then how can abilities such as oratorical skills in one's native language help create a leader?

### 3.2 Film Heroes Becoming Political Leaders

Leadership in Taminadu politics revolves around heroes with mass appeal, media and film personalities whose charisma can generate huge blocks of votes resulting in political power. Most of the Chief Ministers in the past four decades have been from the tinsel town of Kodambakkam in Chennai, Tamilnadu State. The past governments in Taminadu were ruled by Chief Ministers like M G Ramachandran<sup>4</sup>. Then followed the rule of Jayalalitha, who was a heroine of his films. She entered politics in the year 1989; for three different time periods she was a Chief Minister and is our present Chief Minister of Tamilnadu State. These factors need no research as this is a reality any layman knows about. The film heroes achieve mass appeal because they campaign for virtue by fighting against poverty and establishing socialism in society as well as propagating inter-caste marriages and empowerment of the Dalit. This is the platform of Dravidian<sup>5</sup> politics, which advocates at least in principle a casteless society. In these films a member of the lowest class, the Dalit, is the protagonist and constantly wrestles with the upper classes for his community's empowerment. Former Chief Minister M G Ramachandran

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4 M G Ramachandran was an actor and politician and was a Chief Minister of Taminadu for ten years continuously from 1977 to 1987 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M.\\_G.\\_Ramachandran](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M._G._Ramachandran).

5 Dravidian politics is a movement which fought for the cause of lower caste people in India. The Dravidian movement with relationship to Taminadu is noteworthy for social justice to the common man.

was cast as such a savior in his films. He used his charisma in politics and reached colossal heights of power. The large Dalit population no doubt gained empowerment after the rule of the Dravidian parties, whose immunity was protected by the constitution of India, prepared by Babasaheb Ambedkar<sup>6</sup>, a Dalit Scholar and Western-educated lawyer. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, spoke for 'freedom for the marginal and the liminal'. The ceaseless reformation brought about by many rationalists like EVR Periyar<sup>7</sup> and Raja Ram Mohan Rai<sup>8</sup> has created a climate for improvement of living standards for the Dalit and an expansion of atheism. A further result was the declaration of the Indian state as a secular state, nullifying the caste system in all government recruiting and making India a secular state that declares the equality of all religious practices.

### 3.3 Central Role of Barbershops

Despite the established constitution of India, which tries to promulgate the concept of the secular Indian state, Hinduism is assumed as a practicing religion in most organizations. Hiduthuva<sup>9</sup> as a main principle of establishing the Indian nation was espoused by Golwalker<sup>10</sup> and actually runs deep in the currents of the majority of the Indian public. Golwalker's ideology

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6 A lawyer, politician and academic popularly known as Babasaheb. As independent India's first law minister he was principal architect of its Constitution [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B.\\_R.\\_Ambedkar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B._R._Ambedkar)

7 EVR Periyar was a leader of the Dravidian movement and the atheist movement in Taminadu; he advocated a casteless society [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Periyar\\_E.\\_V.\\_Ramasamy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Periyar_E._V._Ramasamy).

8 Raja ram Mohan Rai Rammohan Roy was an Indian philosopher, religious leader and educational reformer who challenged traditional Hindu culture in the early 1800's. He was a strong opponent of sati, the Hindu funeral practice in which the widow immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Roy also denounced the caste system, polygamy and child marriages and wrote about these issues in self-published newspapers.

9 Hiduthuva is a principle orchestrated by fundamental Hindu organizations like RSS or Bajrang dal, which means India is basically a nation of Hindus and its culture is originally Hinduism-related.

10 Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (19 February 1906 – 5 June 1973), popularly known as Pujaniya Guruji, was the second supreme chief of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Hindu nationalist organization of India.

has of late been espoused as political truth by parties like BJP<sup>11</sup> and RSS<sup>12</sup>, with resulting success in elections. In all governmental organizations in India, whether session courts or public works department offices, Hindu gods are placed at the thresholds and poojas are regularly performed for organizational growth. Discipline in general terms is imposed on all individuals as suggested by the Hindu scriptures and not otherwise. The ordinary citizen, however, chooses his ideologies from the low-profile establishment advocated by films, television and the press. Barber shops are the centers where the commoner discusses politics, and he chooses his leader from the posters on the street. No doubt he picks his leaders from among the film stars and run-of-the-mill soap actors. This is what we have observed throughout our lives in Taminadu. Good speakers and actors become politicians regardless of their lack of administrative abilities and scholarship in socio-political happenings; that is 'leadership' in political affairs in Taminadu, one of the prominent states in India. In contrast, in North India many crowd-pleasing heroes have not been successful politicians; this phenomenon is primarily prominent in South India.

### **3.4 Good public speakers become experts in organizations**

In organizations this phenomenon is even clearer: a good leader is expected to reflect sentiments that will stimulate loyalty and honesty in the employees. The leader helps the employee become a worker who supports his superiors and provides contentment. An organization may or may not have a set of scientific principles, but service is generated by the integrity of the leader. Good speakers and media personalities are placed in key positions in the organization, irrespective of their ideas; their aura helps them to become leaders. Popular speakers are invited by management institutions and film personalities by educational institutions. Managers and professors, instead

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11 Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) is a political organization following RSS principles and has just been elected to govern India for the next five years.

12 Rashtriya Swayam Sevak (RSS) Sang is a fundamentalist Hindu organization.

of involving themselves in fruitful research, vie to become good public speakers in order to be rewarded with leadership positions. Media personalities become expert skill trainers and leading writers of management theories, then disseminating their own models of success.

#### 4. Conclusion

The form and existence of organizations in India have been identified as outcomes of its socio-cultural pattern. This cannot easily be excluded because organizations once established depend solely on the existing social system and accumulate various resources it provides. This is a trustworthy practice and hence cannot be easily disqualified. The Indian organizational climate is strongly dominated by an inert caste-class system which still advocates placing high-caste people at the top of the hierarchy. When caste is based on religion we have found evidence of bureaucracy connected with Hinduism as the major religion. Leadership here is typical of the Indian system of adoring heroes and hero worship, which still includes great mythological characters like Rama<sup>13</sup>. Change may be possible due to the rise of multinationals and organizations led by people whose leadership principles come from Western institutions. We believe Western views on leadership focus on productivity, which implies that they rely more on competencies of employees and market needs instead of practicing the traditionally orchestrated caste system. We found evidence for this possibility of change through our observations from average call centers to sophisticated IT parks.

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<sup>13</sup> Rama or Ram is the seventh avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu and a king of Avodhya in Hindu scriptures.

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