Interview - Milan Vaishnav

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Dr Milan Vaishnav is the director and a senior fellow in the South Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. His primary research focus is the political economy of India, and he examines issues such as corruption and governance, state capacity, distributive politics, and electoral behavior. He is the author of *When Crime Pays: Money and Muscle in Indian Politics* and co-editor (with Pratap Bhanu Mehta and Devesh Kapur) of *Rethinking Public Institutions in India*. He is co-editor (with Devesh Kapur) of a forthcoming volume on money and electoral politics in India. His work has also been published in scholarly journals such as *Asian Survey*, *Governance*, *India Review*, and *India Policy Forum*. He is a regular contributor to several Indian publications. Previously, he worked at the Center for Global Development, where he served as a postdoctoral research fellow, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the Council on Foreign Relations. He has taught at Columbia, Georgetown, and George Washington Universities. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I consider my field to be the political economy of India, broadly defined. There are so many interesting lines of inquiry it is impossible to keep count. Here are a few which immediately come to mind. First, there is a longstanding debate over whether urbanisation in India would lead to a decline in caste and other identity-based attachments. India has embarked on the largest urban transformation ever, but this question is still unresolved. Some emerging evidence suggests that the dislocation caused by massive urbanisation is causing people to double-down on identity attachments.

Second, there is a debate about public institutions and the state. India is very much a 21st century power governed by a 19th century state. Why has the state lagged so far behind the country's democratic aspirations and economic progress? There are various hypotheses that have been offered, but we await a definitive account. India has myriad colonial-era laws still on the books. The British have moved far beyond them, so why hasn't India?

Last but not least, there is the question of money in politics/campaign finance. It is the worst kept secret that the failure to manage the costs of elections fuels a great deal of corruption in India. But we are still scratching the surface when it comes to understanding the sources of campaign finance, the nature of expenditure, and the distortions that are introduced from political selection to policy outcomes.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I have been really lucky to have great mentors who are leading lights in the field – starting with Devesh Kapur to Pratap Bhanu Mehta to Arvind Subramanian. Devesh, in particular, was the first to train my attention on the issue of crime and politics. When I first began to look into this issue – at his urging – there was very little literature on the nature of this interaction. Now, I would say, there is a burgeoning body of work looking at various aspects of criminal politicians. In terms of how my thinking has evolved, it's tempting to see India as a *sui generis* place. On so many indicators, it is an outlier. But over time, I have realised that using a comparative framework to understand India is incredibly helpful and rewarding.

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What were some of the challenges that you faced while writing your book *When Crime Pays: Money and Muscle in Indian Politics*?

The first issue was the lack of data. In 2003, the Supreme Court ruled that candidates had to submit detailed affidavits with their criminal antecedents, financial assets and liabilities, and educational details. This was a major boon. However, this data only go so far. The next challenge was doing fieldwork to try and piece the puzzle together. Why did politicians with criminal records gain the support of India's major political parties? And why, given a choice, did voters vote for them? It took a while to figure out how to get people to talk and to identity who to talk to. As result of both of these things, I realised pretty quickly no single source or methodology would suffice. This was a matter of triage. This experience really shaped my thinking on how to do research. The holy grail of perfect data rarely exists. You have to build a case using what I call the "beg, borrow and steal" method; in other words, form a composite picture using all the evidence you can muster from as many sources.

In your book you wrote that demand and supply side factors have caused corrupt and criminal politicians to be elected in India. How do you reconcile this finding with the electoral successes of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal who have both risen to power on an anti-corruption platform?

I think India is in an interesting phase right now. On the one hand, voters are enthralled with the idea of a strong, "Mr. Clean" CEO politician who will cleanse the system. But, on the other hand, they realise that the downward reach of any politician – even Modi – is limited. Therefore, in their own neighbourhoods or villages, they need an insurance policy. That is where the strongman politician comes in. At some point, the top-down and the bottom-up will hopefully meet, but most people calculate this is going to take a while. In the interim, they need someone to look after their interests.

You proposed that the nexus of crime and politics can be solved by clearing the cesspool around election campaign finances, improving accountability within political parties and enhancing the provision of public services. What are the roadblocks that could scupper the successful implementation of these proposals?

Obviously, politicians are going to do whatever it takes to resist any move which reduces their rents or their ability to manipulate the rule of law. Therefore, legislative fixes – while necessary – cannot be the only remedy. Thankfully, India's judiciary has been a major proponent of cleansing India's dalliance with political corruption and criminality. The courts, for instance, have passed several landmark judgements which have tried to empower citizens. And ordinary citizens have used India's "public interest litigation" route to petition the courts to take action when they believe their fundamental rights are being infringed upon. One of the most important roadblocks obviously is on the demand side. We've seen a progressive exit of the middle class from the political sphere. Civil society is often divided on caste, religious or ethnic lines—limiting its collective action potential. In some cases, a lack of information or popular awareness is to blame.

You recently wrote that Indians should no longer "take the health of India's apex institutions – Election Commission, Reserve Bank of India, Supreme Court – for granted". What could be done to regenerate some of these elite institutions?

For starters, there needs to be a strengthening of these institutions' independence. Political interference is rampant and today threatens even India's well-respected apex institutions. There is no shortage of reform proposals but what India lacks are politicians who move on these reforms as a matter of public interest. In addition, internal accountability mechanisms have withered. Across the board, power is far too centralised within India's institutions. This gives the boss incredible amounts of discretion, which can be damaging if the person at the top has a particularistic agenda.

In an article entitled "India at 70" you said that India embarked on a "radical democratic experiment". How successful has this experiment been considering that many developing countries in Asia chose to

democratise only after achieving a level of economic prosperity?

It has been massively successful, in my view. What India has done is unprecedented. If you went back in time to 1947 and had to place a wager on India's democratic longevity, I am not sure how many people would have bet in its favour. But here we are seven decades later. There are issues with Indian democracy, and I would the first to acknowledge that. The poor still get poor services. Freedom of speech and association faces real challenges. Electoral democracy does not always translate into democracy between elections. But no other developing democracy can boast India's record of democratic longevity. That is nothing to sneeze at.

Has India's democracy fostered accountability since the "cash-for-votes" scandals and the criminal cases that are now pending against a third of the Members of Parliament elected in 2014?

I would turn the question on its head a bit. Part of what I argue in the book is that India's criminal politicians are compatible, at least partially, with democratic accountability. People often vote for them because, rather than in spite, or their criminal reputations. They are seen as more effective in "getting things done," especially for their caste or community group. The reason I say "partial" accountability is because such a system produces lots of losers (i.e. those who are in the out-groups). Secondly, there are broader (negative) ramifications for welfare, especially those not part of the winning coalition. And third, their continued success casts doubt on the sanctity of the rule of law. Having said all of that, my own view is that it is more profitable to see criminals in politics as by-products of democracy rather than democracy's antithesis.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Modi will be seeking re-election in the General Elections to be held in May 2019. Can the opposition Congress Party stage an electoral comeback?

The Congress faces a steep, uphill battle. They were badly decimated in the 2014 elections, winning only 44 seats (out of 543) in the lower house of Parliament. The Congress is only now grappling with two existential issues regarding leadership and ideology. If the election were held today, my belief is that the Congress would do better. But winning 100 seats would be a major accomplishment at this stage. Their own strategists are not hoping for an outright win; rather, they hope to give the BJP and Modi a bloody nose.

What is the most important advice that you would give to scholars studying international politics?

I will always remember something that Devesh Kapur once told me when I was kicking around a rather tired dissertation idea. He said: you want to be the first person to do something, not the thirteenth who comes in and tweaks what someone else has done. He was encouraging me to take risks, to stop worrying about fitting into this literature or that literature. He always emphasised novelty and relevance to the real world. I do my best to adhere to that warning—even if I don't always succeed!

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This interview was conducted by Bhargav Sriganesh. Bhargav is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.