

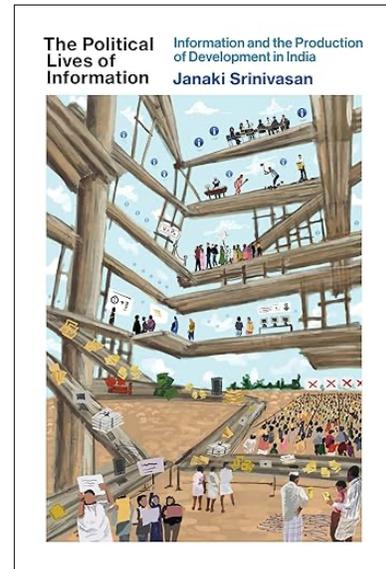
Janaki Srinivasan, **The Political Lives of Information: Information and the Production of Development in India**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022, 276 pp., \$40.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Rajdeep Pakanati
OP Jindal Global University

It is said that we live in an information age. But what we miss is that, amid the plethora of information, context is very critical. In the absence of context, information can reveal as much about things as it can hide. ***The Political Lives of Information: Information and the Production of Development in India*** stands out for looking closely at the political dimension of information and its various lives in different milieus of development. The author of this book argues that the “definition, creation, provision and use of information is always political whether or not an initiative frames it thus” (p. 88).

The entry point for the book is that discourses around development have primarily been addressed in technocratic or even economic terms. As a result, information is, on one hand, increasingly regarded as commoditized, corpuscular, measurable, and (based on advances in information economics) possessing economic value. On the other hand, information is also imputed as an autonomous value—in the sense of being educational—that is relatively context independent. It is this possibility of moving between the two senses of information—particularistic and abstract—that has allowed for a linking of bits, bytes, and documents to development and socioeconomic transformation (p. 11). The author therefore attempts to develop “an alternative framework that squarely situates information in social relations and material practices” (p. 3).

The book unfolds in eight comprehensive chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 lay the context for the work, which is about the less seen and less analyzed “political lives of information.” Chapter 2 provides a very good historical and contextual understanding of how governments deal with information and locates the author’s work in the context of information order, which includes “the information systems, laws, procedures, documents, and records that frame such interactions, as well as the physical and social infrastructures that are made use of in the course of such interactions” (p. 27). The methodological approach adopted by the author is also described in this chapter. This is done by describing the three locations in India where she undertook fieldwork. A “relational comparison” allowed the author to assess how the differences in the three locations “were produced, rather than focusing on these differences as a given” (p. 28). The study was focused on three sites in India that saw initiatives to provide: access to price information to fisherfolk in Kerala; information about public welfare programs in Puducherry; and documents about poverty alleviation programs in Rajasthan. The choice of the sites is appropriate, as it helps the reader to engage with the development discourse in diverse settings where information is seen as pivotal.



Chapter 3 elaborates on how information was conceptualized in each of these sites and cases. This provides a rich description of how the rapid growth in ICT was used in development initiatives. The introduction of mobile phones was seen as an effective tool during the auctions of fish to discover the true market price and improve the welfare of the fisherfolk. Similarly, the introduction of an information shop as part of the Information Village Research Project (IVRP), undertaken by the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, was seen as an initiative to reduce information poverty and provide avenues for users to enhance their livelihoods by accessing state welfare programs. In the campaign in Rajasthan, information was seen as essential to prevent corruption and assert the rights of the people vis-à-vis the government. It tracks the work of the *Mazdoor Kisaan Shakti Sangathan* (MKSS; union for the empowerment of laborers and peasants) over a period of two decades.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 form the substance of the book, where the author shows how politics were *denied* in the case of fisherfolk seeking information in Kerala; politics were *bracketed* from other factors in the case of villagers in Puducherry seeking information; and politics were made *explicit* in the campaign to create an accountable state through the right to information movement in Rajasthan.

The key finding of chapter 4 is that the nature of price information in economic frameworks is not as straightforward as suggested. Rather, the discovery of price in a market mechanism is determined by contextual factors that fisherfolk encountered daily. The logic of reducing asymmetry between buyers and sellers of fish was affected by the scale of fishing operations, gender of participants, and even geographic regions between North and South Kerala.

As the author presents in chapter 5, the functioning of information centers, or village knowledge centers (VKCs), in Puducherry did not happen in an apolitical context, but the work of the VKCs was shaped by the economic, social, and political relations in the areas served by the VKCs. In fact, VKCs became producers of information for the government, which relied on those who were embedded in the local context. The VKC was able to assist villagers in providing information to avail of the rural employment scheme or build a house, but they were limited in assisting the villagers to get proof of residency in Puducherry, as "people were required to prove that they or their ancestors lived in Puducherry in or prior to 1964" (p. 105). This made the people feel that the "fundamental problem of the village was not about how much they knew about government schemes or procedures but simply about their inability to fulfill the conditions and prerequisites of these schemes and procedures" (p. 107).

Chapter 6 focused on Rajasthan is by far the most well-studied site of research in general. This chapter builds on the existing work on the internationally renowned campaign on the right to information led by the MKSS. The key insight from the study in Rajasthan is that the campaigners were instrumental in how information produced by the government and contained in government documents, files, material samples, etc., was challenged by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), which made "visible the gap between official records and people's lived experiences" (p. 145). The chapter shows how the MKSS campaign contributed to the adoption of the Right to Information Act (RTI) in 2005 and including *social audit* in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005.

Finally, chapters 7 and 8 synthesize the findings in the three case studies, examined in relational comparison to arrive at these key findings:

First, studying different phases in the cycle of information initiatives—I identified the definition, production, and use of information, for instance—will be important while making sense of an information order. Second, paying attention to diverse channels and agents of communication also will be crucial in going beyond a singular analysis of information. (p. 153)

The primary impetus for the book is to address how information in the context of transparency and accountability has been studied, but the political nature of information was less highlighted. This book might be read together with Himanshu Jha's (2020) *Capturing Institutional Change: The Case of the Right to Information Act in India*, which looks at how changes in the supply side of information by the government came about and acknowledges the political dimension of information. In this work, the author shows how the RTI Act was the culmination of an incremental, slow-moving process of ideas that emerged endogenously from within the state while also highlighting the importance of the state–society interaction through epistemic communities bound through ideational linkages on openness.

Rajesh Veeraraghavan's (2021) *Patching Development: Information Politics and Social Change in India* is another book that speaks closely to *The Political Lives of Information*. In *Patching Development*, the author focuses on how the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act is implemented by focusing on the social audit, which is the key instance where information about the policy is made visible through technology and participation of the marginalized citizens.

This book draws on material completely from India, as seen in the choice of sites, but the book does not explicitly make a connection on how these findings assist us in thinking about development in other contexts. Do these insights translate into other developing countries, or similar contexts where ICT is being used for development goals?

Overall, this book makes an original contribution to the literature on information in the context of development. The author's methodological approach also stands out for the imaginative use of ethnographic techniques, formal interviews, unstructured conversations, and even working with the MKSS. The photo elements add depth to the book that transports the reader to the sites under discussion. In addition to its scholarly value, the book also provides context for policy makers who engage with this issue area.

References

Jha, H. (2020). *Capturing institutional change: The case of the right to information act in India*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.

Veeraraghavan, R. (2021). *Patching development: Information politics and social change in India*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.