



**Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India***

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ANYONE FAMILIAR with South Asian bureaucracy will nod in recognition when reading *Red Tape*, an ethnographic exploration of local-level governance in India. While considering these pervasive but understudied bureaucratic processes, Akhil Gupta takes on scholarly debates about governance and structural violence. Why are grinding poverty and intense human suffering met with bureaucratic indifference? Gupta points out a painful paradox: citizens engage actively in Indian politics, and the democratic state explicitly aims to bring development to the poor, but the government structure impedes the care it officially intends to deliver.

Framing his analysis of bureaucracy within a discussion of governmentality, Gupta suggests that people who take Foucault seriously need to interrogate their assumptions about the unitary nature of the state. Drawing on vividly detailed ethnographic material, Gupta shows that “the state” in India is composed not only of the three branches of government (administrative, legislative, and judiciary), but also of multiple levels (federal, state, district, subdistrict, and block) and numerous bureaus and programs (dealing, for example, with education, medical care, housing, agriculture, and commerce). Far from operating as a seamless, purposeful, and well-integrated whole, the Indian bureaucracy instead bumps along in fragmented, uncoordinated, and decentralized fashion. Caught up in overlapping and sometimes contradictory bureaucratic mandates and structures, even well-meaning administrators end up dispensing uneven, arbitrary, and often harmful forms of governance.

Theories of disciplinary power often assume that states exercise penetrating biopolitical surveillance over citizens. Effective biopower requires classification and enumeration through accurate statistics, censuses, and maps in order to control the intimate, bodily lives of those administered. Gupta shows that the Indian bureaucracy generates a great deal of data, and in the process creates reified images of the state and its populations. But the low-quality information is rarely checked or verified, often originating as guestimates by workers who care more about generating a report than about making sure of its accuracy. Instead, dominant narratives (about gender, caste, and education, for example) set up expectations about the poorest citizens; the higher in the structure one works, the more likely one interacts with stereotypical representations of the poor rather than with the poor themselves. Data inaccuracies leave room for resistance but also provide a source of the arbitrariness that inflicts structural violence on the neediest citizens.

Pervasive corruption, one source of the failure of the Indian bureaucracy, systematically disempowers the poor by making essential (and supposedly free) goods and services unaffordable. Siphoned off on their way down through the system, govern-

ment funds fail to reach their intended beneficiaries, for whom they could make a life or death difference. Concentrated on their way up, bribes grease the wheels. The bureaucracy functions best for those who have political connections, cultural capital, and financial clout. Gupta provides examples of conflicts between bureaucrats and the people they minister to, as well as conflicts within and between government agencies. Elaborate relationships of hierarchy and status play out in supervisory inspections and the filing of written complaints (the only bureaucratically active form in which to request accessibility, accountability, and transparency). Demeaning representations and bureaucratic techniques of governance normalize the malign neglect of the poor.

On inscription, Gupta examines in detail the written elements of state functioning: the registers and records kept by administrators, the forms, statistics, requisitions, petitions, and complaints that travel up the bureaucracy in files, and the memos, orders, and funds that travel down. Gupta challenges straightforward causal explanations that suggest that improvements in literacy and numeracy will invariably increase people's ability to navigate the bureaucracy and receive entitlements from the state. The ability to read and write in English and Hindi does correlate with social capital, but literacy is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for political agency. At the same time, people place high value on educational degrees and the seemingly magical power of written documents to get things done. Because administrators employ writing in exploitation, literacy plays a key role in interacting successfully with the bureaucracy.

Gupta's work trenchantly challenges the assumption that a turn toward liberalization (India's opening to the global market in 1991) has undermined social welfare and entitlement systems. To the contrary, economic prosperity brought about by financial changes has filled state coffers and allowed an increase in welfare programs. Gupta ethnographically compares the Integrated Child Development Services program (a pre-liberalization welfare program distributing childcare, nutrition, and health advice to poor women and children) with Mahila Samakhyā, (a post-liberalization empowerment program that educates women in the neoliberal logic of individual responsibility and self-improvement). Despite their ideological differences, on the ground these two programs operate similarly by employing poor women who constitute the target population of the program, distributing little, and effecting almost no change. Regardless of the overarching political framework, entrenched bureaucratic micro-processes stymie real development while providing the illusion of moral care.

I assigned *Red Tape* in a senior-level seminar, and the book kept my students engaged by presenting contemporary theoretical issues and pushing the frontiers of these debates. Vivid, often wryly humorous examples sparked trenchant conversations. However, the book has several flaws: first, the work is replete with redundancy; about a third of the material could have been trimmed without losing the key points. Second, rigorous copy-editing could have rid the book of ubiquitous passive voice constructions. *Red Tape* nevertheless makes a significant contribution to anthropology of the state and an understanding of structural violence. It will interest anthropologists, South Asianists, political scientists, development practitioners, and those interested in discussions of bureaucracy, governance, and poverty.

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