

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF BUREAUCRACY TO THE PROCESS OF INCREASING THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC SERVICE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The new wave of anthropological literature on bureaucracy and its applicability in India is critically analyzed in this essay. Such studies highlight the situational and contextual aspect of the business of "state-making," focusing particularly on routine bureaucratic activities and their interactions with regional hierarchies of power, prestige, and money. In addition, they focus our attention on the everyday operations of the state through its materiality and discursive representations at various points where the state and its citizens interact in post-colonial India, which are invariably organized bureaucratically, as opposed to the normative, formal-institutional configurations of state power. The article concludes by outlining a few potential trajectories for further scholarly engagement with regard to studies of bureaucracy in India, while highlighting the implications of this change in theoretical, methodological, and substantive focus for our understandings of the interrelated ideas of state and citizenship.*

**Keywords:** *Bureaucracy at the local level, state, ethnography, post-colonial, anthropology*

### **Introduction**

Bureaucracy is an efficient type of governance defined by universalistic concepts including job specialization, division of labor, hierarchy, and unity of command, as well as rules and regulations, formal communication systems, and rigorous record-keeping for current and future use (Farazmand, 2010). It represents the rational-legal system and power usage. It asserts autonomy in decision-making and is firmly rule-based, avoiding ambiguity and informality. Bureaucracy is praised for its administrative efficiency, technical efficiency, speed, accuracy, continuity, discretion, and optimum returns on input (Yeboah-Assiamah et al., 2016). It follows impersonal norms and processes to simplify management. Bureaucracy, in the ideal-typical Weberian meaning, precludes partiality, making it a vital institution for modern state-building (Abrams, 1988; Gupta, 2012).

As various ethnographic studies have revealed, bureaucracy's real operations differ substantially from its idealized and typical depictions (Gupta, 2005; Gupta & Sharma, 2006b; Shah, 2007; Bernstein & Mertz, 2011; Williams et al., 2011; Witsoe, 2011; Mathur, 2012, 2016; Brule, 2015). For current bureaucracy ethnographers, Max Weber's notion of bureaucracy as a rule-bound exercise of power is ludicrous. "Bureaucracy is often seen as slow-footed, causing delays, including more paperwork and elaborate laws, and other measures that merely constrain the individuals rather than assist them," arecent research found. (Hoag, 2011). The current wave of field-based anthropological research has severely damaged the Weberian legal-rational model's emphasis on bureaucracy's autonomy, responsibility, and imperviousness to contextual processes and local histories. As a consequence, new theorizations of bureaucratic functioning have swung to the opposite

extreme of the conceptual spectrum, where discretion is the unifying element of a grounded knowledge of bureaucracy, especially street-level bureaucracy (instead of an impersonal rule-bound accountability).

Lipsky's idea of street-level bureaucracy, which emphasizes policy delivery organizations' front-line workers, marks this conceptual transition. Lipsky (1980) calls "street-level bureaucrats" state employees who interact with the public and have wide autonomy in their work. Local officials may change the law for their clients. The Lipskyan street-level bureaucracy approach goes far beyond the classical model and considers the logic of bureaucrats' seemingly irrational and illegal behavior, but it raises many issues in post-colonial societies like India, where people experience the state differently from those in developed Western societies, where Lipsky conducted his study (Benei & Fuller, 2000; Hansen & Stepputat, 2001; Mathur, 2016).

This essay argues against the uncritical acceptance of contemporary bureaucratic discretion studies inspired by Lipsky's popularity. We stress the difficulties of bureaucratic entanglements in a complicated society like India, whose history of state-making is significantly different from cultures in the West from which much bureaucracy theory has arisen, without essentializing an East-West dichotomy. This work shows the theoretical boundaries of Western street-level discretion research. After this opening, the essay has three sections. In the second piece, we examine how Lipsky and others have attacked Weberian bureaucracy. Representative ethnographic studies on bureaucracy and the state have challenged established theoretical approaches to bureaucracy research. In the third section, we discuss the effects of the scholarly shift away from normative evaluation of bureaucracy as a macro institution of rule-bound governance and toward its everyday practices and situatedness within the ongoing processual exchange of ideas, representations, cultural artifacts, and local histories between state and society in post-colonial India. Finally, we propose further study to improve our theoretical understanding of bureaucracy in India.

Bureaucratic entanglements affect a sophisticated culture like India, whose state-making past is fundamentally different from the West, where much bureaucratic theory developed. This work shows the theoretical boundaries of Western street-level discretion research. After this opening, the essay has three sections. In the second piece, we examine how Lipsky and others have attacked Weberian bureaucracy. Representative ethnographic studies on bureaucracy and the state have challenged established theoretical approaches to bureaucracy research. In the third section, we discuss the effects of the scholarly shift away from normative evaluation of bureaucracy as a macro institution of rule-bound governance and toward its everyday practices and situatedness within the ongoing processual exchange of ideas, representations, cultural artifacts, and local histories between state and society in post-colonial India. Finally, we propose further study to improve our theoretical understanding of bureaucracy in India.

Unlike informal groups and traditional organizations, it focuses on rule-based conduct. Formal protocols and procedures allow bureaucracy to do its job clearly and efficiently. "[A bureaucracy's formal framework] makes results for leaders of organizations and those functioning in conjunction with it extremely high degree calculable," Weber says (1978, p. 223). Fourth, formal logic makes bureaucracies predictable. This predictability is high enough to support long-term judgments and action security (Townley, 2008). Fifth, bureaucratic reasoning is impersonal. According to Weber, *homo politicus* and *homo economicus*

perform their duties best when they act without regard for the other person, or *sine ira et studio*, without hate, love, or any other form of personal preference and thus without grace, but solely in accordance with the impersonal duty imposed by their calling and not as a result of any real- world interpersonal connections. He works best if he follows the power structure's reasoning (1978: p. 600).

Sociologists and political scientists analyzed modern organizations using Weber's strictly logical, hierarchical, and codified bureaucracy paradigm (Bezes, 2020). Government bureaucracies were evaluated similarly. Public administration and organizational studies respected and supported bureaucratic governance for its practicality and efficiency. Proponents of bureaucracy say its rigid, impersonal rules and practices improve management. The idealized bureaucracy—standardized, organized, most predictable, and most effective—has been proven lacking in reality. Recent anthropological study uncovers bureaucracy's self-representations' weaknesses in its highly structured, efficient image. These studies reveal that the bureaucracy seldom follows Max Weber's ideal-typical model that so captivated the public and academia. However, "bureaucracies are extremely ironic when viewed in terms of their policies and everyday practices," as Hoag properly states. Bureaucracies frequently do the opposite, despite their self-descriptions as rational and successful, or even because of them (2011, p. 82). Bureaucracy has been characterized as opaque, power-obsessed, and Frankenstein-like, resulting in "rule by nobody." Bureaucracy scares those who deal with it. It disregards its constituents (Herzfeld, 1992). Bureaucrats are now seen as self-serving, power-hungry individuals. This image comprises opportunists, obstructionists, evil protectors of state resources, and submissives. Alpa Shah (2007) found that Jharkhand tribals try to shun state officials because of these negative portrayals.

Lipsky's 1980 research on street-level bureaucracy improved its reputation and provided a new conceptual framework for understanding its processes. Lipsky challenged the confining, unfriendly, and unrealistic bureaucratic model. Bureaucracy was real and still employed to organize government, he claimed (Lipsky, 1980). However, bureaucracy is diverse. Bureaucracy has little central authority. Lipsky stressed front-line workers' choice above bureaucratic behavior's rule-bound obligation. His restoration of agency to lower-level officials made it possible to rethink bureaucracy as a hierarchy of rationally managed groups. According to the Weberian model, top executives ran bureaucracies and stressed formal structures, written records, and standard operating procedures (Portillo, 2010).

However, Lipsky considered this rational, top-down bureaucratic view excellent.

Instead, lower-level bureaucrats amended laws and implemented services at their discretion, frequently in more effective and efficient ways. Front-line personnel with practical policy experience made key adjustments to official policies to "make them work," unlike policymakers who lack context and frequently don't grasp how things function on the ground (Lipsky 1980). This mainstream research's lack of front-line employee attention opened new theoretical avenues. Lipsky's thesis feeds the current generation of anthropological study on bureaucracy, which does not blindly follow the concept that bureaucracy is the formal, legal, and rational system.

Lipsky discovered weak, low-level gatekeepers in bureaucratic organizations (Lipsky, 1980). They govern below (Brodkin, 2012). Street authorities do this. Street-level officials, known

as "policymakers" rather than "policytakers," execute policy (Gofen, 2013, p. 473). Street-level administrators determine program distribution. Instead of warning, police question or penalize minor lawbreakers. Social workers disobey regulations to help clients. Street-level bureaucrats impact popular impression of government.

Business, non-profit, and significant government-owned for-profit firms make judgments depending on the job, workload, decisional context, internal culture, rules, and constraints, and external environment. Street-level bureaucracy is discretionary. Thus, Lipsky argued that street-level bureaucrats use "discretion" and "autonomy" to exercise power. Street-level bureaucrats work "at" organizations because they interface with the public. Thus, grassroots people should first engage street-level officials. Street-level bureaucrats execute policies in the real world and have tremendous control over the organization's resources. Street workers are ignored because they outnumber supervisors. This allows people to select work and home rules without continual scrutiny from their superiors (Gofen, 2013, p. 477).

Local governments may apply policies where they choose. Street-level authorities break rules to protect their citizen-clients (Gofen, 2013). Regulations must be assessed in context since they cannot cover every situation street-level authorities face (Portillo, 2010). Lipsky calls this the most astonishing aspect of street-level administration, which researchers often ignore. Local governments seldom have the resources to follow policy (Portillo, 2010). Street-level workers solve most issues without reading the rule book due to limited resources and changing environment. Thus, society, morality, and corporate norms govern behavior. They determine what's feasible. This stage sees street-level bureaucracy affected by discretion. Tummers and Bekkers (2014) recommend adding discretion to policies to boost customer value. It may increase social benefit and policy responsiveness. Discrimination may increase bureaucrats' "incentive to work" by elevating consumer significance (Tummers & Bekkers, 2014). Front-line personnel work harder and speak to more people when they believe customers care. These findings indicate bureaucrats value discretion. However, the discretion issue centers on whether public workers should obey laws or serve the public welfare and justice (Portillo, 2010). Front-line bureaucrats make judgments to manage their workloads and classify individuals based on their expertise and judgment (Moore, 1990; Portillo, 2010). Lower-level officials' internal and external experiences influence discretionary attitudes (Keiser, 2010). An organization's culture affects its structural features, which define the amount and kind of discretion used (Kelly, 1994). Bureaucrats' professionalism is connected to their tendency to disobey the law when serving customers (e.g., by neglecting financial resources or missing documentation) (Scott, 1997, p. 38). Human service businesses also consider client qualities (Keiser, 2010, p. 250). Advantages match well-stated demands. Consumers with greater education are thought to have benefited more (Tripi, 1984).

India has few street-level bureaucracy studies despite the Lipskian bottom-up paradigm of bureaucratic decision-making and operations. The link between politics and bureaucracy, the causes of corruption and red tape, the gap between policy and practice, and the social aspect of bureaucracy are the main topics of managerialist and macro studies of India's upper echelons (Panandiker & Kshirsagar, 1971; Misra, 1977; Pedersen, 1992). Municipal bureaucracy and policy implementation ethnographies are expanding (Gupta, 1995; Gupta & Sharma, 2006a, b; Bear & Mathur, 2015; Mathur, 2016). We critically assess these new

ethnographic studies without labeling them Lipsky's street-level bureaucracies.

### **State and Bureaucracy in 'Old Societies': The Indian Context**

Bureaucratic studies in India were based on the modernization paradigm, which held that modernisation would damage traditional societies. Even Clifford Geertz's sensitive anthropologist couldn't escape this framework, as evidenced in the title of his edited collection, "Old Societies and New States," so forget sociologists, political scientists, political economists, and area studies specialists (1963). Modernization framework-inspired research had to explain how institutional and cultural barriers prevented most post-colonial nations from modernizing. Bureaucracy best disseminated new programs and policies. As a respected rational-legal body, they had to act impartially. India's empirical studies of state capability and nation-building after Independence have disappointed. "Soft state," "weak-strong state," "failed state," and others emphasized India's democratic failure. Modern bureaucracy has rent-seeking, clientelism, red tape, and other issues. Official corruption, cronyism, and nepotism are hotly discussed. India's policy achievements and failures stem from bureaucracy (Kapur, 2020).

In recent decades, anthropological and historical study on the state and bureaucracy has urged us not to see the state as a single, undivided, monolithic organization with a separate autonomous agency (Abrahams, 1988; Das & Poole, 2004; Mitchell, 1991). This contemporary research "experiences" the state's often conflicting activities. This investigation revealed the permeable state-society split and gave citizen-clients agency. It has questioned the state's theoretical dominance as a change agent, which characterized social groupings and communities as passive beneficiaries of modernizing goals. State-citizen connections determine how people respond to modern governmentality, according to anthropological research. State-making is a two-way process (Weber, 1979).

In the second part of the 20th century, Indian anthropologists felt the state shaped social dynamics. Scholastic tradition elevates state above society. In his ethnographic study of Bisipara, Odisha, F. G. Bailey (1957, p. 13) said that low-caste social groupings "are extending beyond the political boundary of the village and striving to establish themselves as citizens of the state". Srinivas concurred with Bailey: "It appears as if they [low caste social groups] are being more evicted from the rural community of Bisipara into the political society of India." Bailey, 1957, foreword If unchecked, this pervades rural India and might change village life. These words demonstrate the state's role as society's creator (including the village communities). Most Indian village studies emphasized citizenship and governmentalization.

Globalization has changed the state (Spencer, 1997). After shifting from the all-powerful and all-seeing state to the everyday events where the state is implanted, anthropologists realized the limitations of the state's plans and policies to shape things up and its ultimate sovereignty (Scott, 1998). While shifting from the normative to the everyday has improved our knowledge of state-making processes and state effects, recent research seems to have gone too far and almost fully discarded the state in even the most distant regions. Scholars like Mathur (2016) recognize the state's true existence and how it recreates it via extensive documentation and paperwork. Das and Poole (2004) identify various regions where the state's authority is constrained and where its margins—defined not as a geographical region

but as constraints on sovereign power—influence state conduct in a unique way.

Comparative ethnographies demonstrate India's seemingly contradicting government operations. An official may benefit a caste member. Mathur (2017, p. 130) interviewed a rural Sarpanch who said, "If someone from my own caste puts their name on the BPL list erroneously, why should I say anything?" Take part of their money as all governments are corrupt. Help me. The same individual may strive to comply with official regulations in the most evasive and imprecise manner, damaging a qualified customer. Ethnographies and journalistic portrayals of bureaucracy in India contradict Lipsky's hopeful view of street-level bureaucrats who frequently prefer client-citizens out of their ultimate loyalty to justice and fair play. Instead, the opposite seems usual (Sainath, 1996).

Changing India's front-line employees' Lipskian eulogy does not advance theory. Lipsky's well-meaning, moral, discretionary street-level bureaucrat is as implausible as Weberian's illogical, law-abiding, accountability-driven, efficient, and well-coordinated bureaucracy. India's street-level administration lacks Lipskian and Weberian values. "It compels individuals and companies to negotiate bureaucratic mazes, buyoff government workers, and break the law to get the core components of governance" (Miklian & Carney, 2013, p. 37). Dwivedi and Jain claim India has two bureaucratic moralities (1988, p. 208). Ministers and other government officials often worry about corruption, yet they occasionally breach the law to help friends and relatives. Normal. Bureaucratic morality affects authority and generosity. "[W]hen a government official "fixes" applications and licenses with absolute indifference to merit but in line with family and caste relations," says Dwivedi (1967, p. 248), "he is following a code of social behaviour more old than that of the upstart state."

Bureaucracy confuses trusting individuals with convoluted procedures and other deception. India's colonial background complicates bureaucracy. For over 200 years, the British ruled India via bureaucracy. The subcontinent was ruled by the Raj's powerful bureaucracy (Verma, 1999). Indians usually dislike bureaucracy. India's administrative systems are primarily British-era (Maheshwari, 1970). Unlike South Africa, India retained its colonial government and enormous welfare bureaucracy after independence (Chipkin, 2017, p. 26). Millions of Indians who engage with the state via India's intricate bureaucracy sense its presence, even if the average Indian's view of bureaucracy hasn't changed (Gupta, 1995; Mathur, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

The ethnographic technique has helped us understand bureaucracies' daily operations, representations, and how governments develop their zones of governmentality by repeatedly reinforcing their authority and legitimacy. Because society and culture are under the state, our analytical base is stronger. We now understand how contemporary governments employ cultural items to claim authority and sovereignty. Bureaucracy's borders and integration into society and culture have supplanted worries about its structure and function. People may now learn about bureaucracy via media. These include newspapers and visual media, studies and assessments by think tanks, US agencies, and non-governmental organizations, and state-sponsored ceremonies like foundation stones, project launches, and human chains. Understanding bureaucracies extends beyond project review and program assessment—of goals established and objectives fulfilled. Even when bureaucracies fail to provide a public service or implement a policy, their "state effects" (Mitchell, 1991) are still produced through

their routine practices, documentation, and plethora of other "official" activities that create an endless paper trail naming, defining, and classifying individuals (for example, APL/BPL families). Bureaucracy is our most forceful ontological reality, reminding us of "the state system" (the institutional apparatus and its practices) and "the state concept" (the notion that gives the state its coherence, unity, and legitimacy) and how they legitimate authority and domination (Gupta & Sharma, 2006b, p. 279).

Bureaucratic operations—both big and mundane—mobilize statehood, according to recent study. This view does not perceive the state as a solid entity with sovereignty and power. Instead, the state looks to be a daily plebiscite and depends on the intricate links between its discourses, practices, and results and the society's ideas in power, hierarchy, legitimacy, justice, and righteousness. History and circumstance define this state. This literature questions the long-held (albeit vague and abstract) ethnocentric ideal of the Western liberal democratic state as the global norm and other situations as aberrations from it. Most scholars ignore bureaucracy's complex political, economic, and social past and concentrate on its mundane functions. The state's organizational structure underpins bureaucratic operations and portrayals. This perspective makes bureaucratic systems' goal "to bring culture back in" seem almost epiphenomenal. Millions utilize seals, certifications, attestations, testimonies, and other bureaucratic "materiality" to obtain social services and life opportunities. Bureaucratic position and influence, not foreign flags, decide public resources. Client-citizens are unaffected by governmental authority, coherence, and unity. Bureaucratic routines maintain governmental stability. They may promote the state's naturalized power. India's elected political system influences numerous bureaucratic operations. "The political society" mobilizes subaltern political society to impact state-making (Chatterjee, 2004). Chatterjee's "civil society" must be considered outside "the political society" of extra-legal methods, purposes, and agreements. Post-colonial theoretical perspectives have inspired scholars to explore several complicated governmentality, or state actions. Gupta and Sharma (2006b, p. 302) correctly state that "governmentality is not merely a tool of evaluating actions of government but also a way of judging the sorts of subjectivity that these activities afford." Popular political processes where citizen-clients adapt bureaucratic categories and practices to construct new claims on public resources and re-inscribe their rights in a vocabulary that restricts official citizenship discourses deserve academic research.

Finally, "processes of flexibilization of the public services that have partly or more profoundly challenged (and even dissolved) strong inherited institutional safeguards (status,)" (Bezes, 2020).

The blurring of public and private domains and the institutionalization of hybrid and highly fragmented systems with "many hands" of diverse kinds, merging central administrations, agencies, commercial, or non-profit companies, is also occurring (p. 178). Commercial firms, nonprofit organizations, consultants, project-by-project staff sponsored by foreign donors, and third-party agency workers have emerged due to these developments. These developments blur jurisdictional boundaries, upset command-and-control systems, and cause internal conflicts between state representatives and those appointed to provide certain public services, which may redefine public bureaucracy (Mathur, 2016). These modifications' long-term effects on public agency organization have not been studied.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

This article's authors reported no conflicts of interest.

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