

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5110-8 (paper); ISBN: 978-0-8223-5098-9 (cloth)

Red Tape opens with puzzle: how, within an Indian state whose legitimacy is based upon the bettering the lives of the poor, have six decades of development efforts continued to coexist alongside unacceptably high levels of endemic poverty? Akhil Gupta conservatively calculates that poverty results in over 2 million excess deaths per year nationally, a distressingly high level of structural violence that is made more surprising both by poor people's high levels of engagement with India's democratic system and their deliberate inclusion within a raft of government programmes designed to provide for their 'uplift'. Gupta's solution to this puzzle is to look not at the formulation of policy, but rather at the point of implementation of development programmes. The book therefore examines the everyday operation of bureaucracy to understand why India's significant (and growing) expenditure on welfare and poverty systematically produces arbitrary outcomes, and the normalisation of levels of suffering that would be deemed unacceptable in other circumstances.

The book's first section examines the relationship between the state and poverty, starting with Gupta's depiction of poverty as structural violence. He argues that a social order in which extreme poverty is perpetuated, accepted and normalised needs to be named as violent, even if this is violence is inherent within the structure of power rather than identifiable as the result of individual actors. Although his definition of violence here is perhaps problematically broad ("any situation in which some people are unable to achieve their capacities or capabilities to their full potential" [p.28]), he insists on its use to stress the moral imperative to question a social order in which rising wealth exists alongside inequalities whose effects are both life-threatening and life-shortening. Chapter 2 then

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

presents the case for a disaggregated study of ‘the state’, calling for a more detailed understanding of how different levels, branches and agencies of the state operate. Two arguments are advanced here. The first is that theoretical positions insisting on the unity of ‘the state’ implicitly support the assumption of centralised control of a coherent bureaucratic machinery. For Gupta, this fails to recognise that “biopolitics is an internally contradictory, contested project”(p.71): although there is little political or ideological resistance to the idea that the state should act to alleviate poverty, the detailed mapping and effective management of the population that biopolitics requires is simply not present in India. The second argument is that this lack of institutional and informational unity together ensure that state interventions into the lives of the poor inevitably produce arbitrary outcomes. The everyday practices and routine operations of these disaggregated agencies therefore need to be brought under closer scrutiny if the seemingly contradictory juxtaposition of increasing political inclusion of the poor alongside persistent structural violence is to be understood.

The rest of the book then takes up three themes – corruption, inscription and governmentality – to guide the investigation of these everyday practices, which are, like the whole book, illustrated through Gupta’s own ethnographic study of local government officers and offices in Mandi sub-district of Uttar Pradesh. The section on corruption begins with a reworking of his 1995 paper in *American Ethnologist*, ‘Blurred boundaries: The discourse of corruption, the culture of politics, and the imagined state’, and this is extended by ethnographic accounts of government officers’ attempts to control their staff through inspection visits, as well as through a discussion of representations of the state in popular fiction and classical anthropology. Gupta uses this material to show how poor people experience state officials on a day-to-day level. Corruption here emerges not simply as a tax on the poor to receive state services that should be theirs by right, but in addition as a set of practices that people have to master (through the correct deployment of their educational and cultural capital) to make the state work on their behalf, and also as a discursive terrain

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

through which the state's duties and its failings are understood. Stories about corruption are everywhere, he argues – within and outside the bureaucracy – as governmental plans for the redistribution of the surplus value it extracts from the Indian economy in the form of development projects and poverty alleviation programmes are inherently emotive. They provide highly visible instances of the bureaucracy's flawed and contested action, and of people's attempts to 'work the system', that are bound up with the broader legitimisation of the state. The link to his argument around structural violence is that these programmes should also result in transfers of wealth that make potentially important contributions to poorer people's livelihoods, but end up doing so capriciously, and with a callous indifference to those they exclude.

The section on inscription provides a detailed understanding of the role of writing in the everyday operation of bureaucratic power. Here Gupta traces the forms of writing that circulate within the state – files, reports, and complaints – to argue that these are not merely records of, or substitutes for, action, but rather constitutive of action itself. By moving through the bureaucracy as documents, materials such as attendance registers, government orders, or written complaints gain a status and have effects that go far beyond oral communication, triggering processes that require responses and further action on the part of officers and their subordinates. It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that attempts to police what gets admitted into government files emerge as a central concern for the lower-level officers of Gupta's study: a villager or subordinate staff member who can be bullied or pacified away from submitting a written complaint, or an internally-coherent register reporting the distribution of midday meals within an *anganwadi* (village child health centre), are vital to the representation of proper government functioning. What is written becomes crucial to the visibility of government workers to their seniors, regardless of any mis-match with reality. Unsurprisingly, when putting the official record in order becomes a priority, this only magnifies the arbitrary nature of government delivery for the rural poor.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Where this section is particularly interesting and helpful is in Gupta's refusal to simplify writing to a form of 'power over' the illiterate poor held by an educated elite. Rural Uttar Pradesh is a context in which illiteracy is widespread, but also one in which the poor recognise the practical importance and power of official documents, and through the service of scribes and readers are able to press their claims within the literate world. Far from being helpless, poor people are knowing participants in a "parallel economy of the inauthentic" as subaltern people are forced to "circumvent the arbitrariness of state procedures" (p.230-1) through the production and purchase of fake documentation to support their claims on the state's resources. It is thus the systemic power of writing that is Gupta's main concern here, and if anyone is duped by claims that literacy directly correlates to personal empowerment it is government officers themselves, with their fetishisation of educational certificates' ability to capture the 'merit' of their colleagues, regardless of their disconnect with practical competence.

The final section, on governmentality, is more brief, and compares two forms of 'pro-poor' intervention: the Integrated Child Development Service programme under which *anganwadis* have been operated since the early 1980s; and the Mahila Samakhya, a post-liberalisation programme run through government-organised NGOs to educate women about their rights and make effective claims on the state's existing forms of welfare provision. Each is seen as capturing a particular ideology of poverty intervention: within the ICDS, this is a paternalistic, welfarist concern for women and children and investing in the nation's future, whereas the Mahila Samakhya "exemplifies the concerns with empowerment and self-help characteristic of neoliberal governmentality" (p.240). Gupta argues that whilst these ideological contrasts are stark, and capture different transnationally-produced policy ideas circulating on either side of India's shift towards market liberalisation in the early 1990s, in their everyday operation they prove to be remarkably similar. Both are, ultimately, culturally bound up by the red tape of bureaucratic practice: both show a drive towards the enumeration

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

of their subjects in the hope of calibrating their poverty-alleviating effects, but in doing so rather than generating the resources for biopolitical management merely produce an avalanche of data that is little scrutinised (as well as being of dubious accuracy). Both also perpetuate gender-based forms of structural violence. In contrast to the self-perceptions of *anganwadi* workers as teachers and government servants, and that of Mahila Samakhya participants as social activists and leaders, the state portrayed the women within both schemes as embodying values of motherhood, and their work as a “naturalized extension of women’s reproductive work”. Gupta is right to highlight the cruel irony at work here in this symbolic and material devaluation of their labour: “by not paying these women a living wage, the state perpetuated the structural violence that it was employing these women to help their sisters overcome” (p.272).

Gupta ends the book with some interesting comments on the effects of ‘neoliberalization’ on poverty policy in India. He argues that it is impossible to represent policy change through a narrative of state retreat and a unified ideological shift from welfare to self-help, driven by thinking in the World Bank or IMF. This would not only miss the national reworking of international policy ideas and the strong continuities of implementation practices across putatively different programmes, but also ignore the significant fact that budgets have expanded not only for empowerment-based programmes but also for ‘pre-reform’ welfare-based measures such as the ICDS. This expansion, which has its analogues in South Africa, Brazil and elsewhere, is vital to the task of building a degree of political legitimacy for India’s post-reform governments. To be *seen* to be doing something to help the poor has gained importance within a period of economic growth that has primarily benefited those with the cultural and educational capital to access ‘high-end’ service sector employment. His epilogue to the book reflects on the potentially corrosive effects on India’s polity of growing income disparities, and decreasing middle-class solidarity with the rural (and, indeed, urban) poor. This changing economic environment, he argues, deepens rather

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

than resolves the paradox with which he opens the book. The political salience of continuing to act in the name of the poor increases, but at the same time the marginalisation of the poor from new arenas of economic growth naturalises the intractability of India's poverty problem – with the result that structural violence is perpetuated.

This is, therefore, a book that engages with a long tradition of understanding the role of the state within India's political economy, but does so from a very different starting point from classic texts such as Pranab Bardhan's (1984) *The Political Economy of Development in India* or Lloyd and Susannah Rudolph's (1987) *In Pursuit of Lakshmi*. By putting programme implementation at its centre, it also distances itself from accounts of neoliberalisation which focus on the politics of policy change, such as *Reinventing India* (Corbridge and Harriss 2000), for example. As with any attempt to tackle a canvass as broad as this, Gupta's change in perspective is important both for what it brings into focus, and for what it makes disappear. In terms of the former, the focus on the power effects of everyday bureaucratic practice enables the book to make an important and original contribution. Gupta's considerable skills in closely reading the detail and nuance of bureaucrats' interactions with each other, and their encounters with the public, are also clearly on display here, as too is his talent in communicating these snapshots to his audience. The place of these encounters within the book remains, however, illustrative rather than central, with the result that the reader knows rather less about life in Mandi block or the operation of the ICDS programme, say, than one might expect. This is no doubt in part a result of the fact that the incidents drawn upon span fieldwork that began in Uttar Pradesh the late 1980s and has continued to the present, as well as his primary aim of raising a range of provocative questions on the nature of bureaucratic power. But while other writers have managed to raise equivalent questions within the context of much more 'situated' accounts – Emma Tarlo's (2003) *Unsettling Memories* or Tania Li's (2007) *The Will to Improve* both being signal cases

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

in point – Gupta’s ethnographic vignettes remain surprisingly under-specified in time or place.

In terms of what disappears from Gupta’s account, one significant absence is a detailed engagement with poverty itself. Whilst Gupta repeats the importance of not homogenising the poor, or taking governmental definitions of ‘BPL’ (Below Poverty Line) households at face value, the experience of those living in poverty is largely absent from this account. Because we never really get to hear from or about ‘the poor’ themselves within the book, they become a rather undifferentiated subaltern mass - an assumed counterpart to that other analytically under-defined category of writing on contemporary India, ‘the middle classes’. This matters because what happens in poor people’s lives outside the encounters with the state – their differing experiences of class-, caste-, gender- and education-based discrimination, and differing levels of economic security – is vital in shaping the conditions under which they seek its support. Gupta makes strong claims about the state’s role in perpetuating structural violence through its arbitrary redistribution of government resources, but because these aspects of poverty are not explored, *Red Tape* provides no clues as to how important the state’s failings are relative to other forms of structural violence experienced by the poor (such as the direct extraction of surplus value from them through coercive debt or labour relations).

If a detailed discussion of poverty was beyond the aims of the book, Gupta’s choices over how to deploy his considerable ethnographic insights have perhaps caused him to underplay the ways in which bureaucratic practices are changing over time and space. The cover illustration for *Red Tape* is Jan Banning’s photograph of a Bihari assistant clerk shot against the backdrop of her office *almirahs* (cabinets) groaning under the weight of heaped jumbles of forgotten paperwork (see <http://www.dukeupress.edu/Red-Tape/>). This is a great motif for the book, but one that, like Gupta’s somewhat de-contextualised vignettes, arguably helps to replicate a rather unchanging view of the state and its operation. A contrasting

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

picture emerges from research I'm currently engaged with in a Kerala inner-city slum. Here digital images – created through the cameras of lower-level government-officers but also the mobile phones of slum residents themselves – are incorporated in official records to verify the allottees of a slum upgrade programme, and verbal disputes about programme implementation enter the sphere of officialdom through their (covert) capture by residents, again on their mobile phones. I would certainly not want to suggest *a priori* that technological shifts will automatically democratise information flow into or out of bureaucracies, or that the use made of digital records is likely to be any more just, ordered or rational than that suggested by the chaotic, decaying paperwork of Banning's striking image. The point is rather that new media, and changing expectations of the state, all potentially alter the relationships which Gupta is looking at, and raise new questions for the subjects that are central to his book, such as the situated understanding of the relationship between written and oral communication. Certainly, any such changes may be more important within urban Kerala rather than they are in rural Uttar Pradesh, but that is in itself an important point of distinction to be made within a book of this scope. History and geography surely matter for ethnographers too, especially those that raise such important questions about the role of the state in reproducing poverty in India.

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Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

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