

21A.506 Section III: Module 3

Summary of “Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State”

“Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State,” by Akhil Gupta, is an anthropological study of “the state” based on fieldwork in a small village in North India in 1984-85 and 1989 as well as analysis of English-language and vernacular newspapers in India. Research on “the state” generally focuses on “large-scale structures;” Gupta instead focuses on local, everyday practices by studying the state ethnographically, in small towns. These are sites where most citizens come into contact with the state and where their “images of the state are forged.”

Gupta uses a series of “vignettes,” which highlight the interactions of rural people with bureaucratic officials, to “give a sense of the local level functioning of ‘the state’ and the relationship that rural people have to state institutions.” These stories illustrate the prevalence, nature and nuances of corruption in India. One such story describes Sharmaji, an official who keeps land records. People come to his “office” to conduct transactions such as adding or deleting names to land titles, dividing up land, and settling fights. These transactions “cost money” but the rates are generally “well-known and fixed.” Gupta emphasizes the “performative aspect” of these transactions that has to be mastered; while giving bribes is commonplace, the way in which a bribe is given is nuanced, requiring cultural capital. Therefore, government services are often inaccessible to villagers, not only because of cost but also because of the difficulty in “[negotiating] deftly for those services.” The story revolves around two young men who bungle a negotiation for adding a name to a plot of land. The men claim that they will just do the paperwork themselves before realizing that Sharmaji is extremely well-connected, whereas relations between the men and the headman (whose signature they need) are not good. The result is that they will likely have to come back to Sharmaji, and in the process they will have to pay more than the going rate to get the same services. Such a story illuminates how, in some cases, “state officials [get] the better of [...] inexperienced clients.”

On the other hand, members of a lower class can appeal to the authority of people “higher in the bureaucratic hierarchy.” Such is the case of Sripal, a villager selected for a housing program by the village headman, Sher Singh. He has to pay a lot of money out of pocket for transportation of materials, and he never receives the reimbursement for his own labor cost. In the end, he can’t even live in the house because he does not have material for a door and a window. When Sripal complains about the headman, Singh threatens to beat him up. Sripal writes a letter to the highest administrative authority in the area about the threat, and the police investigate. This story demonstrates that “even members of the subaltern classes have a practical knowledge of the multiple levels of state authority.” They can use the multiple layers of the state to their advantage by pitting organizations against each other.

Gupta then goes on to discuss the “discourse of corruption” in public culture, using reports in local and national newspapers to analyze how “the state” is imagined. According to Gupta, “local discourses and practices concerning corruption were intimately linked with the reportage found in vernacular and national newspapers.” However, he notes that there are differences between the vernacular and national newspapers. The national newspapers focus “almost exclusively on large-scale events.” On the other hand, the local newspapers,

which correspond to lower levels of the state hierarchy, focus more on specific instances of corruption and have a practice of explicitly naming departments of the state bureaucracy. Furthermore, they are “much less prone to reify the state as a monolithic organization with a single chain of command.” Gupta notes two interesting details about these local newspapers: first, state officials high in the hierarchy are depicted as unresponsive to complaints, and second, emphasis is placed on “the public.”

Finally, Gupta discusses the “imagined state,” arguing that the government is being constructed in the “imagination and everyday practices of ordinary people.” Because higher officials are the ones who punish local officials for corrupt behavior, citizens tend to have a “hierarchical vision of the state,” whereby higher officials are seen as “benevolent and charitable” and local officials are seen as corrupt. Gupta also notes that local people’s analysis of state events often reflects the discourse that is disseminated by the mass media, and is therefore “translocal.”

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