

## The QoG Podcast Ep 12

### Akshay Mangla: Making bureaucracy work in rural India

#### Victor Lapuente

Welcome to the podcast of the Quality of Government Institute, where we have conversations with well-known experts to try to make sense of politics and governments all over the world.

I'm Victor Lapuente, professor of political science at the University of Gothenburg, and today in the podcast we have political scientist Akshay Mangla, a well-known associate professor of international business at the University of Oxford, Saïd Business School, and Research fellow at Green Templeton College. He has also quite some experience outside the academia with extensive contact in the frontline of the delivery of public services working for the United Nations Children's Fund in the districts of Uttar Pradesh.

He uses very diverse methodologies, which is also very interesting. And he's author of one of the, I would say most interesting, illuminating and in several ways provocative books on bureaucracies that I have read recently: *Making Bureaucracy Work: Norms, Education and Public Service Delivery in Rural India* by Cambridge University Press. I recommend all of you to read this this book. On the one hand, the book is a kind of a praise of communitarian life. Like an example – it takes a village to raise a child. So it looks like a kind of a take even leftist book in that sense of community, pressing community and life. On the other hand, in his criticism of the legalistic bureaucracy. the book might sound almost like a right-wing libertarian. So I don't know if in the library that they must be in heaven. I don't know who enjoys more reading it. If Gandhi or Margaret Thatcher, but I welcome to the podcast Akshay.

#### Akshay Mangla

Thank you very much, Victor. It's really a pleasure to be here.

#### Victor Lapuente

And the first question is, what leads a person to spend over two years of ethnographic field research in rural India to study the delivery of primary education. Why did you embark in this enterprise?

#### Akshay Mangla

Ah, well, that's a long story, but maybe if I were to cut to chase, I was interested in understanding how services actually get delivered on the ground, and a lot of the literature in comparative politics of education I found quite illuminating, but it focused largely on across national differences in spending. And the key concern about implementation, which is how is it that once resources are allocated. How do they actually get utilized and converted into concrete services? I found that somewhat lacking it was difficult for me to understand those processes and as I spent time in the field, I saw that actually there were very novel ways that frontline officials were utilizing resources, building ties with communities or not. And as I as I kind of carried out the field work, it became more and more interesting to see the variation in the ways that officials did this. And so yes, you know more than two years. So it started with the summer. Then it moved on to another summer. And as I observed, different parts of India, I realized that actually, bureaucracy is not the same thing across this very diverse country. And so it encouraged me to think about how it is that one can use ground level field work to theorize or to reconfigure some of our thinking around the Indian state.

#### Victor Lapuente

One of the most interesting parts of the book is that, out of that immense variation that you find

there, you are able to develop a very cohesive argument on what explains that variation. And of course, simplification is always a problem in social science. So in some ways we always simplify to match, but I am really intrigued, I think it's a great contribution to the theory of public administration and to the empirical research and public administration this core idea of your book that I would like you to explain quickly to our readers. You talk about these two different cultures of implementing or two cultures of bureaucracy - the culture of legalism and the culture of deliberation. And you claim that this explains the existence of these two different cultures, explains the different outcomes that we find in primary education in India.

### **Akshay Mangla**

Yes. And you know, maybe I'll take a quick step back as to why is one even looking at cultures or I refer to norms in the book and I think there's a long-standing literature around the structure of the state. What are the formal institutions that the state needs to have work, that you've done for example, I've drawn on and thinking about the elements of a Weberian bureaucracy, so elements like merit, civil service protections and so on and so forth. And the need to look at norms comes from the fact that notwithstanding there being a formal structure, often a country vary in terms of how well that structure is actually realized. So they're middling cases across the world that don't really conform perfectly to a Weberian state, even though there's a good amount of research showing that having a Weberian state is helpful, it isn't particularly helpful to developing countries to say, well, just get a Weberian state, wait, it's hard to even get that going, but yet nonetheless you see variation in the efficacy of bureaucracy.

And so there has to be some other sources of motivation apart from just the formal structure, which is not to say structures don't matter. And so the search for finding that, you know what else really drove my interest in studying the culture of bureaucracy, now you mentioned these two ideal types I advanced in the book. I just want to before I talk about what they are imagine what a third alternative is, which is you know a non-Weberian kind of a patronage driven clientelistic state where the norm is actually not really to render the policy to the ground at all, it's to respond maybe to a selective and particularistic demands of the public, and in fact getting from that kind of clientelistic state which a lot of political science is focused around to getting to legalism is in itself quite I would say an achievement, by bureaucracies. So in the book I have these two ideal types, and you know, as someone who's read it, you'll be familiar with the notion that legalism is this idea of a rules based orientation, a culture of following rules, adopting hierarchy and protecting the state from external interference, and the idea there is that bureaucrats that are motivated by the rules and responsive to the rules will be in a better position to carry out certain tasks and the book really focuses on tasks required for education.

And in education there's tasks of varying complexity, and so you think about building a school you think about delivering a textbook all the way to monitoring the quality-of-service delivery. And what I argue is that a legalistic bureaucracy is better able to carry out those tasks that are quantifiable through rules, and which tends to be inputs into the education system. An alternative bureaucracy, which I theorize the deliberative bureaucracy rather than focus only around rules, is driven by problems, there's practical problems that the bureaucrat has to solve pragmatically and that may require bending rules, it may require working across hierarchical boundaries. It may even require interacting with societal groups who are seen from a rules-based orientation is kind of in informal and interfering in the formal state structure, but what that allows one to do the that set of norms is draw on a broader set of resources within the state and within society and get local knowledge to adapt rules to respond to local needs. And what I find is that a deliberative bureaucracy is better able at carrying out those more complex tasks that require the input of multiple actors. And here I

think it's important to recognize that education - that's the domain I look at - is one of those areas where societal input, in societal co production a la Elinor Ostrom and others is actually very important to deliver quality services. So deliberation leads to a local level adaptation that generates better quality services and hence better outcomes on outcomes like learning. Whereas the legalistic state gets you the inputs, which is very important and it's not as if that isn't a key aspect of implementation, it's just not enough to deliver quality services.

### **Victor Lapuente**

One of the things that I were thinking when reading your book is like the difference between legalistic and deliberative bureaucracy is a difference in degree or a difference in kind, in on the one hand, I was thinking following what you are saying now it's like, well, we have stages in the development of bureaucracy.

First we have, as you say, a patronage, a patrimonial administration. Then the second step would be a legalistic one. But the third one would be at the deliberation or more new public management if you want to call it like that, engaging stakeholders and coproduction and so on. But on the other hand I am not convinced of that, so I am not convinced whether there is a continuum and villages and schools are located in the legalistic on the one extreme and more deliberative on the other or actually and I don't know because from my experience from public administrations, in other traditions or in Europe, where you have this more legalistic more deliberative is that I don't know if this is stages or archery we are talking about two different worlds, one-of-a-kind of a vicious cycle in which you have more norms.

And since people do not fulfil the norm, you put even more norms and you end up in a kind of more norms, more red tape and even higher levels of corruption some economies would say. And in other where norms are replaced by trust and confidence, and so on and, so you have a vicious cycle on the one hand, and a virtuous cycle. Would you say that that is what you see more or do you think that there is kind of more hope because in your visit to the different villages, I mean the experience that you narrate here greatly in the book sometimes you get the feeling that some places are in those dynamics of issues and inverters.

### **Akshay Mangla**

Yeah, that's a great question, and I would say this is an element of the argument that I myself struggle with a bit, but I guess I would want to separate two different things. One is the analytical question, which is that if in theorizing how it is that bureaucracies are motivated by different cultures, do we theorize those cultures as being discontinuous, so you have this legalistic and then full stop, then you have deliberative and that's an analytical question. Or can we think about there being some continuum? I think analytically it is possible to think about a continuum.

And here's one argument, I mean to even have a bureaucracy, right, you need to have some notion of a Bureau which is a set of rules, something binding that bureaucracy that, you know, some connection to the law. And so I don't think a deliberative bureaucracy works out, operates outside of the law per se, and in that regard you can say a deliberative bureaucracy might build on some initial scaffolding of legalism, I think right. One can argue that analytically, because it would be difficult to say that deliberation without any sort of structural linkage to law or linkage to a kind of rules-based order, is a bureaucracy at all, so that I mean, that's an analytical question.

But the other question you raise is an empirical one, which is about stages. Is it that you kind of emerge out of client realism and enter legalism. And then slowly, you can move on. Or do you get stuck vicious, you know, I'm not a great fan of this kind of idea of vicious versus, you know, versus a

kind of virtuous cycle because it kind of has, it's kind of teeny logical like once you get it, that's it. And that's the end of it. The other is that, you know, there's multiple possible pathways. And in the book, I actually look at hybrid systems that are somewhere between legalistic and deliberative. And there you get a lot of conflict. When it is that you have pockets of deliberation happening inside and overwhelmingly legalistic bureaucracy, I think the key challenge there is to think about at what point might you have like a tipping point where that deliberation is more than just localized. You know, in a few far-flung districts but can actually become more central inside the system. And possibly there is a world in which you can imagine where a political leadership is such, and political dynamics are such and the bureaucracy is, is open to some shifts that can expand and scale up some deliberation within the state.

So I do think it is possible to kind theorize and potentially test a transition, but in the way you've brought it up, yes, I mean there's something about bureaucratic cultures that are self-reinforcing because over time, if I'm a bureaucrat, I get used to a certain way of working. And by the way, the book also looks at societal reinforcement. So you get societal feedback as citizens, I get used to working with the state in a legalistic way, so I might seek grievances through our legalistic procedures and documents and petitions versus, say, discussion with the frontline official and so that can be a reinforcing mechanism.

But I do think there's pathways out, it's just hard to get out and I think there's other research out there showing just how difficult it is to make these transitions in the 1st place, but I wouldn't kind of at the outset say that these are just, you know, very different worlds and there's no way because you can also revert to legalism, by the way. So you can have a bureaucracy that's engaged in deliberation, but say, international agencies come in and say, look, you have to follow a certain plan that we're giving you and respond to our demands for you to kind of meet these requirements of a public policy or of some financial aid requirement, and you can very much get a compliance orientation among officials within the deliberative bureaucracy as well. The question is, what is the central tendency and is there a way to shift the central tendency? And that's a question of institutional change.

### **Victor Lapuente**

It's great that you bring the issue of societal feedback because I wanted to ask you about that. I mean, the book starts a lot about bureaucracy, but, and that's talking a lot about the community and Ostrom. So it's a, it's a movement from Weber to Ostrom and I think a fascinating travel from one to the other. And there are similarities with the ideas of Ostrom, of these ideas that communities, local communities might provide public goods that, according to a very narrow rational choice perspective, individuals thinking about their own interest, they would not do that, but then you show how the communities engage.

Could you give us a little bit of an example of one of these engagements and that for the listeners can get a picture of what you mean by a deliberative bureaucracy, because we are more used to legalistic ones. We suffer a legalistic bureaucracy in many cases. This, but by this deliberative the bureaucracy, the examples are fascinating how societies are engaged in the mums, the mothers very particularly and so on. If you could put an example, I think that would be great.

### **Akshay Mangla**

Yeah, yeah, sure. And I think this is a helpful way to frame this. The kind of shift or I would say the, the linkage between Weber and Ostrom and here the idea goes back to co production of public services, and this may not apply to every public service, but education is one where it does take a

community in many ways because there's social elements of education. And so society does need to participate in the process. And so here I can give the example of women's associations in India.

There's a long history of women's involvement in the particular regions I look at, I look in North India and the example I believe you might be thinking about is this in the Himalayan region, the state of Himachal Pradesh began independence as one of the least literacy states. I mean 5% literacy and then emerged to become the second highest literacy state just after Kerala, which is well studied and people know about Kerala, the kind of model of social development.

Himachal Pradesh had a history of these Mahila mandal's women's association that grew organically quite often around natural resource management, and in fact a lot of Ostrom's work was on natural resource management and some of her co-authors have worked on the involvement of groups like these women's associations and managing forests, managing water in the hill regions of India. Now what's interesting is these groups, as the economy also shifted, a lot of men had left the region. Women had, I mean took on greater responsibility in governance and local governance, so it became kind of men outside in a remittance economy back in, and women were managing agriculture and in the process, they became far more engaged in managing childcare and child education.

So using their own resources would often develop childcare centres they would have these processes of supporting one another in the Mahila mandal, the members would take turns looking after each other's children, while one of them had to perform agricultural labour and what the state did is state took cognizance of this fact, every states in India have such groups. The state made, you know, actively dissuade women's associations from participating. There's also kind of a patriarchal history to the development of state and state bureaucracy. But in Himachal Pradesh, they observed that women were much more involved in managing the local school and they started with pilot programmes of what's called a mother teacher association in NTA, which, rather than the standard parent teacher association, recognises the agency of the mother. And so these women's associations got an opportunity to govern resources.

For example, India has the largest school meal programme, the midday meal programme, where a lunch is provided for free every day in a government school and it's a key import into improving student nutrition but also attendance. Women's associations would supplement the meal with their own locally grown vegetables to enrich the quality of the meal and in return, the state might be supporting the group in other ways. So the group might have demands for more resources. One school that I visited lacked electricity. The Women's Association came in and pulled together resources. For one thing, the state saw that actually, if we support the Women's Association, they can also help us get the electricity line plugged in, and so the last mile of getting the electricity line plugged in involved the Women's association finding the land for where to build the tower to get the power going to the school.

And so these are kind of areas where I think Ostrom's theory comes in where societal self organisation can lead to a complementary input to what the state is providing. And that is the kind of positive dynamic that I observed in villages in Himachal Pradesh over time. And so it requires though the states actually actively intervening at different points in supporting that collective action. So I just want to flag that it's not just a story of great social capital. I mean, you might have collective action in in other places too, but you're not having the state actively supporting it or interfacing with it in a way that sustains it overtime to get these complementary inputs, but you did in Himachal Pradesh.

### **Victor Lapuente**

Yeah, this is very interesting because you are, as you said providing a historical explanation for this in which you require both. You require the creation of the state, certain characteristics and the creation of the state and also the, the, the societal impetus. And I would like to ask you a little bit more about that, about the historic explanation. Why in some places the government made this commitment and in other places not. And from here, which are the normative implications? Because if this comes from history, if as you argue in the book, some bureaucratic characteristics needs to be present prior to the universalization of primary education, this is my, I don't know, up to which, is, then we are part dependent on we can break.

### **Akshay Mangla**

Yeah, I mean, this is an important question. I mean one, you know these policies for universal primary education came much later and that's just the empirical reality of India even if it was very late to invest in universal primary education in comparison to other developing countries at its level of income. And so in the 90s, early and late 90s up to then is when you see policy shifts and only in the 2000s do you see the opening up of India's education for all programme and input from the World Bank and so on. So the state, though of course is developing prior to that. And I mean, I begin in the colonial period, but I focus on the post-colonial development, and I do think history matters here. You know it's not, perhaps you know the ideal explanation for policymakers who want to change things today, but one needs to know, you know, what led the state to follow a particular path? And I focus on what my research identifies the importance of cooperation versus competition between politicians and bureaucrats.

And here I look at the sub national state history because subnational states in India have the primary authority to implement education, but they have to have some relationship with the central government to get resources and so on. And where those subnational states were marginalized in many ways, politically or economically, elites in those states, politicians and bureaucrats, had to come together. Whether it was to identify what are going to be our local policies and how are we going to relate to the center and how are we going to get resources out of the center?

And so Himachal Pradesh as an example, very poor state began as financially unviable, so the center had to send fiscal transfers to even fund the state machinery. Bureaucrats and politicians had an overwhelming interest to work together to find ways to maximize what they could get out of New Delhi. In every five years, there would be a finance Commission that came, observers would come to Himachal Pradesh and these officials work together to be able to demonstrate that they're actually able to utilize funds and so that cooperation, which really was the starting point of deliberation, percolated down the hierarchy are very different from a state like Uttar Pradesh, where Uttar Pradesh is India's largest state it sends all the prime ministers into New Delhi and there you see that actually the dynamic is very different.

The center needs Uttar Pradesh more than Uttar Pradesh needs the center and so political leaders in that state didn't have to work with bureaucrats in the same way. In fact, they were almost competing with each other. Where bureaucrats were seeking ways into the central administration and you see that dynamic unfolds and they're often having an antagonistic relationship with each other and the rules and legalism is a way for the bureaucracy to protect itself from political interference, from political incursions. And so I do think there is a kind of path dependency that does emerge over time where a dynamic unfolds like that. Now getting the switch is the challenging question, you know, how is it that once you have such a dynamic unfolding, can you get a switch? And here, you know, certain variables that I don't know political scientists are that are happy to be engaged with, like political leadership. I mean, what is the vision of a leader in a state like Bihar, which

I look at in a subsequent chapter, there's an effort to try to shift the bureaucracy within under a new leadership, right? But it's very difficult. And perhaps that's why political science just don't focus on individual leaders because it is kind of becomes very anecdotal. There isn't a kind of way in which you can identify the right type of leadership to get a shift from one dynamic to the other. And I find in the case of Bihar, they did shift to some extent, but also they had a hard time making the transition from legalism to deliberation. They really went from pure kind of patronage driven, clientelism to legalistic state bureaucracy, but really got stuck in that over time. And so I think the historical pathways do show that, you know, it's hard to really get the shift all the way. And so maybe that's not as, uh, you know, nice a finding for policymakers who want to just change things today. But I think being cognizant of that pathway might open up alternative mechanisms, right, of what change can look like.

### **Victor Lapuente**

Yeah, I think both now in your response as well in the book, you make it clear the importance of these factors that political science cannot measure, we cannot, we don't deal much as political leadership. Although there starts to be some works on that. You in the book, you say that the battle for welfare is often waged beyond the voting booth, so and I think it's very important to of course to emphasize the role of bureaucracy and I think that we normally tend to, public administration scholars disregard the role of politicians and public service deliveries as, as you have said before, we talk about interference, they interfere. But correct me if I am wrong. I think there starts to be a trend of more scholars studying the importance of politicians.

We have Toral studying their role of patronage in Brazil, Young on patrimonial development in China. Dasgupta and Kapur in APSR 2020, they also emphasized this idea, the importance of the politicians and I would like to ask a little bit about the similarities, similarities between their, their work on public service delivery in in India, with yours, which I think is very complementary, they talk a lot about bureaucratic overload, which is something that is implicit as well in your book, when you talk about the lack of resources. And so officials have with fewer resources obviously are worse at implementing rural development programs, but then they talk about the importance of political responsibility for the implementation, so there are fewer resources where the administrative units, they don't have a clear political responsibility. So how important are politicians in your in your state?

### **Akshay Mangla**

Yeah, I'm so I think you're right to point out there is an increasing interest in thinking about the interface between politics and politicians and the bureaucracy. I think this is a great area for, for theorization and perhaps we can even go back to Max Weber and reread some of his work on politicians and try to think about what he thinks.

### **Victor Lapuente**

Indeed, indeed.

### **Akshay Mangla**

Right. But just getting to this, the paper by Dasgupta and Kapoor, you know, really important argument, and I think in many ways complementary to my own, in which they identify that a local level official, a block development officer, is responsible for so many things. So there's multiple mandates, right, there's multiple tasks and the personnel are very few. And so in a setting like that, what ends up happening is that the, and they show in their research that block development officer ends up getting stuck in spending less time on the crucial managerial tasks of managing the staff and the projects and rather ends up doing these kind of, you know, either particularistic projects like one

off building a road, or it's kind of firefighting and the, you know, the lack of resources is a starting point for my work as well. These are, you know, weekly resourced agencies.

I think political direction is one way you can think about how norms actually play out, because in some sense for that bureaucrat to identify, what should I even be working on? What is my priority? They're seeking guidance and they're seeking guidance often by looking up and looking up either at their senior officials looking up from politicians and often it's through that process of a politician giving guidance. In tandem with senior officials within the state that these frontline officials can make better sense of what do I prioritize? There's in fact, you know, you might be surprised to hear, I mean, there's literally hundreds of policies that these local bureaucrats are responsible for and so I think norms come in and that a politician cannot be everywhere, and politicians keep rotating, right, it's a very competitive political systems.

And so in some sense, what matters is that as politicians are rotating in and out, is the message persistently clear as to what I have to be doing as a bureaucrat and what I observe is that actually the words can be very different in different states. The messaging and illegal state bureaucracy is focus on those tasks that are qualifiable and be responsive to the rules coming from above, and the politician can change. But, that you could say mode of operating persists. And that's one way of rationing your resources in a way. I'll just focus on those things, things that I can measurably, you know, I can, you know, demonstrate with, you know measurement to my senior officer.

In the deliberative bureaucracy the signal is well, you need to engage the public. You need to part to have more participatory decision making and defining what the problems are at the local level. And so there's a that you know that pressure coming from above is 1 to encourage more discretion, I suppose, or flexibility in how you think about applying the rules. And that's a different way of thinking about using scarce resources is that rather than responding to rules from above, what are people demanding from below? And so politicians play a critical role in both of these systems and the deliberative system the politician is brought in to help provide information. So what is it that the public wants? So we want quality education. We need more teachers in these subjects, those sorts of demands. In the legal system, the politician comes in by saying you have to follow my demands. This is what I want you to focus on, and it could be for a number of reasons that that they choose one or the other set of things to focus on. But politicians play a key role I think in both of these and just sustaining the system, but also in in kind of guiding what priorities the bureaucrat have.

### **Victor Lapuente**

Let's move a little bit to your methods. I really like your multi-level comparative analysis and I think it is very original and I think also a great contribution to both the study of education and public administration. The question that is like when we as you have said before already, and when we think about education and I was thinking, well, in India will be Kerala where it has a 96 % literacy rate, 20 % higher than the Indian average, 2010 % higher than the US. So, so, but it's not there and then you focus on this for northern Indian states and the question is like up to which is. Then you are not collecting a bunch of successful cases here in an area under provision of primary education. You take a some successful cases so. So which is which are the precautions you are taking in order to, yeah, to avoid this, just cherry picking these cases.

### **Akshay Mangla**

Yeah, that's a great question. I spent a lot of time thinking about the design of the study and it it's great you point out Kerala because that's a state that a lot has been written about. It's in many ways an outlier among Indian states in terms of how much the state has done, not just in education but in health. It also has fertility rates that are lower than many advanced economies. And so here you



have research that's been built around the what's called the Kerala model. And I think the research has looked at human development across India and you know, I draw on scholars like Amartya Sen and Jandres, who've looked at patterns of variation across the country and political scientists thereafter have drawn on their work to look at, you know, the sub national differences across India and a lot is made about the north-south difference. So it's not just Kerala but the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu and also the western coastal states that tend to do better on certain indicators of human development. I think that's important work. We always want to be able to think about the, you know, the full universe of cases, you know, within a country and beyond a single country. I think the project I was invested in was understanding causal mechanisms. And it becomes harder to identify these given the, you know, very different starting points, historical starting points, sociological processes and so on between North and South India.

So just to give an example, Kerala is fairly unique in its in terms of its religious composition in India. It has almost an equal number of Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, are Portuguese colonized, coastal state has a history of social movements of underprivileged castes and classes, all of which is very important in understanding why it might be that Kerala was an outlier. And so I wanted to understand how is it that in this region of the country, North India, which is seen as universally backwards in many ways, uh, is there a way in which one can study variation in that region itself and be in in a way control for certain factors that allow us to then identify these causal mechanisms s, this is not a region in North India where you had these large scale social movements of the same kind, at least to the same extent that you had in in southern India. Largely I look at, I mean these are landlocked state, you would not expect the same sort of support from say, trade networks that you saw in the coastal region that might have raised demand for education and so on.

And so I wanted to control also for cultural variables like caste, the nature of the caste system is very different, and so social composition could play a role. Gender norms are different, and so. Once you get to the nitty gritty and the causal mechanisms because you know there's societal variables that are very important in education, right, I mean, the very famous paper on social capital by James Coleman is social capital in the creation of human capital. That's the title of the paper, and so we have to be wary of understanding, of drawing, very broad-brush strokes, types of comparisons without getting into the nitty gritty of how society organized. And so on. So that is why I delimited it to North India and then these particular states because they allowed for really fine-grained comparisons, so Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand are two in in the Himalayan region of a similar size, similar caste composition, similar geography. Because we know for state capacity, the natural environment, geography also matters. So it provides almost a neat kind of matched pair comparison that allows one to then delve into the local level factors that could also be driving implementation.

Likewise, I look at the Gangetic plains and this the state of Uttar Pradesh and the state of Bihar again. Very similar in in in. In certain respects, in terms of their caste composition, in terms of their political dynamics in the states, these are states that have had parties developed these political parties that are organized around the demands of underprivileged casts. And so that's been argued to be a variable that pushes against in many ways universal primary education. Because these parties are as often associated with more targeted goods or selective benefits for their individual caste groups. So I'm trying to control for these, you know, you could say meso level factors, that can then allow me to understand what precisely is the impact of bureaucracy and through what causal mechanisms, and so the similar type of approach I took at the local level, so the villages I selected I also want to control for village level factors like social capital and so on. I think you get a flavor of what I'm doing there. And so then when I want to stand back and extrapolate from that I do think it provides some opportunity because you can revisit a place like Kerela and then think about, OK,

what role might bureaucratic norms have played there? And I have a chapter, a comparative chapter towards the end of the book where I have a section on Kerala and I revisit the development of the Kerala state. And there I think the introduction of private education very early in the states development is something that we've not paid close attention to, but other scholars, you know, Ben Ansell and Johannes Lindvall have written about the different trajectories of development of education in Europe and one of the key variables is: What is the relationship between the public sector and the and the non state sector, the church and the private sector. And here I think even arguments that are formed out of North India alone may have some purchase and of course one has to be very careful about conceptual stretching, about overstating what you can do. And I think field work is ultimately needed to extend the argument beyond, you know, the region I look at, but hopefully I gave you a sense of the kind of logic behind, you know, such a research design to focus on this part of India.

### **Victor Lapuente**

You give me a very good sense of the logic and I think the book is a masterful example of how to control for all these factors. You explain in all the villages the situation of the of the percentage of underprivileged castes or upper-class caste that they are there. And I think that that's very important. I will take advantage of this issue of the privatization of the education to talk a little bit about because I know Narendra Moody's at least some of the goals that he has for education would be on the one hand, the Hinduization or Indianization of the educational at the same time, aggressive privatization of education, because maybe the maybe, I don't know, the school was seen as to Congress leaning or to or to leftist.

But I would like to ask you a little bit about whether Moody is making bureaucracy work. In education, if you want to have something about education, but more generally about the general public administration, the Indian Civil Service has a strong tradition of neutrality and autonomy and independence. It seems that, at least since 2014, there are complaints about increasing politicization that the independence and autonomy are undermined by Moody's government, greater emphasis on loyalty than maybe merit and competence. And actually it is argued that in ministries there are these kind of individuals coming from the RSS. The organization linked to Moody's party, who apparently, they try to make sure that senior servants have the right ideology. So I would like to ask you about this, about whether I mean this of course accusations are similar to what was argued for Donald Trump and has been argued for Bolsonaro in Brazil. And many other let's say the nationalistic or slash populist, democratically elected leaders, and I would like to know your view in general about that or where your perception and in particular maybe about education. If you have something more specific about that at national level.

### **Akshay Mangla**

Yeah, very complex set of questions and probably difficult to do justice. Yeah. And difficult to do justice to them. I guess I would start by perhaps a slight correction to the...

### **Victor Lapuente**

Politically incorrect, I know.

### **Akshay Mangla**

..the first premise, which is that there's perhaps a left-leaning Congress approach to bureaucracy and education and actually Congress was historically, in my view, anything but left-leaning when it came to education. You just look at the public spending on education.

**Victor Lapuente**

It's not mine. I didn't. I don't think. Yeah.

**Akshay Mangla**

Oh, no, no, no, no. This could be a kind of popular kind of image that you have like a left and a right. Actually India doesn't really fall I think so neatly and tidily on this left, right spectrum. In fact, there's this kind of work coming out about a new form of welfarism. Coming out of, you know, out of Moody's government that is really about provision of public goods in a different way, but just this point about kind of Congress party, I mean pretty Moody, I mean for many decades, India's education system languaged under Congress rule. In fact, the under investment of public funds and primary education ought to be the subject of many more books, I think, one needs to understand why is it that at the time of independence from the Indian state, had these great leaders who were educated in Oxford, in all these places, they decided that actually we're not going to put our money behind mass literacy. And you know, this is a colossal failure. And so I think that needs to be just, you know, understood that this was happening under, you know, Congress rule.

Now the Congress did invest in the kind of higher elite level education. So the Indian Institutes of Technology, Indian Institute of Management, where you see that graduates of those elite institutions are now running the most elite firms and so on globally. So there was that investment. So that was happening. Now this question about bureaucracy and bureaucratic neutrality. I just want to clarify, this is not a new phenomenon either. So if you look at the development, particularly of the senior civil Service and I think that's where a lot of the attention goes. Which is the Indian Administrative Service and other All India services. So the IAS which is Meritocratically recruited these officers take an exam that I would never be able to pass. I mean it's so difficult only a fraction of them get there and I suppose those who failed might end up doing something else really great with their careers.

In the pre-Moody period and I'm turning to the kind of 70s under the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, there was also a period where the country went through political turmoil and tumult and a centralization of authority in New Delhi, India went through a national emergency where there was a suspension of elections and a suspension of normal democratic freedoms and so on. At that time, the bureaucracy was also penetrated, so there was increasing transfers of bureaucrats who were not, you know, in close cahoots with the regime. And there was a favoritism brought in particularism, brought in. So I think that was a part of India's history where you saw that this kind of. Notion of purely neutral bureaucrat was started to bend and then you see different trajectories at the state level as well. So I'm talking about the central government, but also in state governments a similar thing was happening to varying extents, right, So the story about what we hear today about there's this kind of strong leader in the center and it's like a Donald Trump, this is not a new thing for India. You know, India has had this kind of thing happening before.

Particular to education and what could be different now is that the leadership also has increasingly investing education with a particular ideology, which is a particular view about India as a nation and wants to influence education through that means. And so there you have non-governmental actors, like RSS, like others who are playing a role in who's getting, you know promoted into what positions in government, and education is a key part of a cultural project in a way that it perhaps wasn't as critical in, say, the Congress, you know, period of governance where education wasn't much of that, so here you're finding increasingly, yeah, you know. There're debates happening now about what should be included in school textbooks similar to what you hear about in the United States, you know, should evolution be taught in schools, for example? Now with this new political formation, there's the, the debates are around, like, how do we present India in terms of its political history,

science, and you know what elements of science do we say emerge out of the West versus out of India? And so these types of things are getting infused into the bureaucrat system and I do think there is an effect of having a leader at the top who's kind of seen as you know, the guiding light around all of this.

The thing with education, and this is where I don't believe that Moody can just kind of you know use a remote control to affect an education system. And I don't think he necessarily believes that either is that actually education is ultimately a local service, so you will be having these IRS offices at the top being influenced in various ways. But India has only 5000 of them and they're managing 10s of millions of public employees. And it's the frontline officials, district level officials, that will ultimately be translating policies into local services with communities. And so I think it becomes harder to actually control education, given the fact that it's a local level service. If you had a thoroughly coherent bureaucracy from the top to the bottom, say like you might in parts of China, I think perhaps that could be more, you know, closer to a reality. But that's not the case in India, there's just so many other factors at the local level that come into play.

And then you know, the last point I would make on this is that, that even if you imagine the world where there is a senior leader influencing education down, you know trying to kind of get implementation at the local level that leader is looking at what other policies can I be doing that take up less time because this takes up a lot of time getting teacher mobilized and so on. So the welfarism you're finding under the Moody regime is around things like, like bank accounts, so for direct cash offers investment in in gas cylinders. These are things that actually perhaps are easier to control politically, and that's one hypothesis I would have about the kind of new welfarism one is finding is that it's not really about education. It's about all these other services that are easier to direct from above and don't require as much co production from society and frontline bureaucrats.

**Victor Lapuente**

Thank you, Akshay, for illuminating us with this complex and fascinating picture of the Indian bureaucracy, which also I think gives hope about the Indian democracy similar to the in the US that maybe when even when you have a political leader at the top of a large federal state with very maybe strange or very personalistic ideas. Then maybe he's not able to implement them given the complexity of this multi-level administrations, thank you very much, Akshay, for a great conversation it has been a pleasure to have you in the podcast.

**Akshay Mangla**

Thank you, victor. It was a pleasure being here.