

Gupta, Akhil. 2012. *Red Tape. Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. xiii + 368 pp. Pb.: \$26.95. ISBN: 9780822351108.

The Indian state has seen remarkably high rates of economic growth in recent years, yet it continues to have the world's highest number of acutely poor people, defined by those who live on less than one dollar per day. In *Red Tape*, Akhil Gupta argues that such an outcome should be understood as the product of structural violence: a 'direct and culpable form of killing made possible by state policies and practices' (p. 5). Violence towards the poor is structural in the sense that it cannot be attributed to individual culpability of misdemeanour. It is normalised and rendered invisible through the workings of bureaucratic practice. Drawing on fieldwork in Uttar Pradesh in the early 1990s, Gupta seeks to disrupt the explanatory logic according to which the premature death of millions from preventable poverty 'does not constitute a scandal' (p. 18). Questioning accounts that would see enduring poverty as the inevitable outcome of Indian modernisation or a condition that will eventually be alleviated by the trickling-down of wealth, he shows that it should rather be seen as the outcome of a kind of institutionalised arbitrariness that is 'systematically produced by the very mechanisms that are supposed to ameliorate social suffering' (p. 24).

The core of the book is concerned with this production of arbitrary outcomes, and the theoretical implications of this dynamic for considerations of poverty, biopolitics, and development interventions. Empirically, the central chapters focus on corruption, bureaucratic writing, and the management of the population as critical sites for these politics of included exclusion (or, as the titles of Parts Two, Three and Four put it: Corruption, Inscription, Governmentality). Scholars familiar with Gupta's work on the everyday narratives of corruption and the discursive reproduction of the state in India will recognise parts of his published corpus in these middle chapters, as well as arguments developed in his earlier articles about the need to disaggregate the state, analytically and empirically. The innovation of the book comes in trying to link up this discussion of the state bureaucracy as it is encountered at the localised level with a theoretical discussion about the normalisation of the 'exception' in contemporary India. Drawing on Foucault's conception of biopolitics, and Agamben's reading of 'bare life', Gupta traces the mechanisms through which violence against the poor comes to be seen as something *un-exceptional*: the necessary underside of rapid economic growth, for instance; or the outcome of petty corruption by low-level officials.

To do so, he follows the working of bureaucracy at its lowest administrative level where most poor Indians encounter 'the state': the block office, responsible in this case for administering around 30 development programmes. Gupta argues that corruption, inscription and governmentality serve to reproduce structural violence, not because of the individual lack of care (or rapaciousness, or laziness) of individual state agents, but through particular organisational modalities, such as the way entitlements are distributed; the highly prescriptive requirements for complaints to translate into files and hence to be taken seriously; or the way that welfare programmes intended to empower poor women

through employment reproduce inequalities by not paying their workers a living wage. Individual ethnographic vignettes provide a poignant demonstration of the way that poor people are rebuffed, denied recourse to justice, reprimanded, or outright cheated in their encounters with the state in the village. They also show how injustice is reproduced by the arbitrariness of reporting requirements and inspection regimes, which mean, for instance, that villages located near to a main road are more likely to receive promised nutritional supplements than those that are far away; or that statistics gathered on attendance at government-run *aganwadi* centres constitute a bureaucratic reality, rather than reflected real levels of use.

These examples highlight the value of posing as an empirical question the conditions under which the state comes to be experienced as a singularity that is ‘over and above’ society, rather than taking such singularity as a given. However, while the book is rich in evocative vignettes, the lack of sustained ethnography or political and temporal contextualisation means that the empirical material does not actually sustain the theoretical work that is demanded of it. Periodisations of India’s recent past are vague, and the times and political contexts of research are largely written out of the ethnography. In the epilogue, which feels somewhat disjointed from the broader narrative of the book, the reader jumps from the focused concern with Mandi district in Uttar Pradesh in the early 1990s to the Naxelite movement in 2009, without a clear connection between the two. One effect of this is that decontextualisation is that the reader is given little sense of how—or when, under which circumstances—structural violence might motivate the politics of protest. Nor does it provide tools for understanding the enormous diversity in development outcomes across India’s different states. There may be violence in the arbitrary outcomes of bureaucratic interventions, to be sure; but ‘arbitrariness’ as analytic does not help to make sense of the quite regular, systematic, and in some cases quite intentional discriminations that occur on the basis of class, gender, or caste. As a magnum opus of Gupta’s recent scholarship, there is much in *Red Tape* that will be of value to scholars and students alike. There are particularly rich discussions of paperwork, forgery, and the workings of the bureaucratic file (the origins of the term ‘red tape’). However, to me the book succeeds more for its powerful insights into the way that the state in India is encountered, imagined, mocked and reproduced through the everyday actions of its rural and small-town functionaries than it does in explaining the reproduction of extreme injustice in conditions of economic liberalisation.

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