

Blurred Boundaries Summary

Akhil Gupta conducted fieldwork in a small village in North India, and most of the stories told in casual everyday conversations centered around corruption and the state. These conversations utilized specialized vocabulary, and demonstrated the extent of the state's involvement in everyday life. Gupta performs an ethnography of the state by observing discourses of corruption in contemporary India, which involves looking at how local bureaucracies function on an everyday level, and how the state is constructed in public culture. Gupta argues that corruption may not be a dysfunctional aspect of the state, but rather a means by which the state is constructed. Gupta aims to look particularly carefully at public culture and transnational links in this ethnography through the lens of news media.

Most Indian citizens encounter the state in relationships with local government bureaucracies. In bureaucratic offices, villagers cluster in small groups, and this is where opinions about policies and officials are determined. Examining these settings allows us to discern the relationships between the state and clients at the local level. Gupta outlines three relationships between state officials and local villagers. In the first relationship, he describes a situation where young men approached Sharmaji, an official that keeps land records, in order to add a name to a land record. The young men did not understand the cultural landscape behind negotiating a bribe, and as a result, Sharmaji could extract a larger payoff from them, while also making the bribe seem like it would be a kind gift rather than a bribe.

In another instance Gupta described, a man named Sripal consistently complained to higher level bureaucratic officials throughout the course of construction work on his house. When he was threatened for complaining to the village development worker at the Block office for the slow construction work, Sripal went to the police. Sripal's actions demonstrate how members of lower castes have knowledge about multiple levels of state authority. Sripal was able to determine that in order to have his way, he would need to climb up the bureaucratic hierarchical ladder and appeal to someone with more power. Sripal used the state's power to send a message that he could use the state's power as protection against threats and physical harm.

In a third example described by Gupta, the Bharatiya Kisan Union organized to arrest officials or camp out on their lawns. In this manner, the BKU is able to influence officials to cater to their needs without bribery. Gupta concludes the description of these three relationships by stating that on the local level, the state operates in a discrete manner and is not necessarily a coherent body. He emphasizes that although corruption is more visible at the lowest levels of the state, higher-level state officials still may participate in corruption by extracting higher bribes from a smaller number of individuals.

In public culture, newspapers are the most central way discourses on corruption are circulated. Vernacular newspapers are of particular importance because they describe local news. Local newspapers are able to better represent the multilayered nature of the state because they focus on local state forces, while also discussing matters concerning higher levels of the state. Also, local newspapers discuss the local public, in an effort to allow the common people to complain about the flaws in government.

The public culture and discourse constructs government. Although citizens' perceptions of government are formed by their individual interactions with bureaucracy, it is also constructed by news media.

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