

## Claiming the State

Citizens around the world look to the state for social welfare provision but often struggle to access essential services in health, education, and social security. This book investigates the everyday practices through which citizens of the world's largest democracy make claims on the state, asking whether, how, and why they engage public officials in the pursuit of social welfare. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in rural India, Gabrielle Kruks-Wisner demonstrates that claim-making is possible in settings (poor and remote) and among people (the lower classes and castes) where much democratic theory would be unlikely to predict it. Examining the conditions that foster and inhibit citizen action, she finds that greater social and spatial exposure – made possible when individuals traverse boundaries of caste, neighborhood, or village – builds citizens' political knowledge, expectations, and linkages to the state, and is associated with higher levels and broader repertoires of claim-making.

GABRIELLE KRUKS-WISNER is Assistant Professor of Politics and Global Studies at the University of Virginia. She was previously an Academy Scholar at the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies, and Assistant Professor of Political Science at Boston College. She holds a Ph.D. in Political Science and a Master's in International Development and Regional Planning from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a B.A. in Sociology & Anthropology from Swarthmore College.

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# Claiming the State

## *Active Citizenship and Social Welfare in Rural India*

GABRIELLE KRUKS-WISNER

*University of Virginia*



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*To Kiran and Asha, my rays of light and hope*



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## Preface

Initially, I intended to write a book about social welfare provision in rural India. I ended up writing one about the *pursuit* of social welfare: that is, the strategies through which people seek public goods and services central to their well-being. These subjects, while closely intertwined, represent two different dimensions (supply and demand) of the puzzle of variable social outcomes in rural India – a region in which a quarter of the population lives in poverty, where one-third cannot read or write, and almost 50 percent of children are malnourished. Governmental efforts to resolve these problems through social spending and programs in the areas of education, health, and social security are well studied. Much of this work examines the arenas in which social policy is crafted or, at a more local level, the dynamics that influence bureaucratic performance and policy implementation. I first traveled to Rajasthan, a state in northern India's poverty belt, with the idea that these "supply side" studies were missing a critical dimension: citizen demand. Despite a global proliferation of "demand-driven" programs, the practice day-to-day of citizen claim-making is often overlooked or taken for granted in studies of service provision. In fact, we know relatively little about how citizens' interests vis-à-vis the state are formed and articulated, or about what the state and its service delivery apparatus look like through the eyes of ordinary people. I therefore wanted to study whether the ways in which people approached and petitioned the state influenced their access to essential services.

I first became interested in Indian citizens' pursuit of social welfare in a setting far afield from Rajasthan, during research in south India in the wake of the 2004 tsunami. There, working in affected fishing villages, I observed that different people – men, women, and members of different caste communities – sought aid through very different channels: some turned to elected local representatives, some to traditional caste leaders, and some to NGOs. Moving from the post-tsunami environment, I wanted to study similar dynamics under the

more quotidian (but, in many ways, also disastrous) conditions of being poor and underserved in rural India. How, I wondered, did citizens in India's northern poverty belt navigate access to the state? Where or to whom did they turn when the water pump was broken, when the health clinic was unstaffed, or when seeking income support? I expected to find that differently placed citizens, set apart by caste or class or other features, would approach the state differently. My hunch was that the different pathways citizens pursued would have a bearing on their material access to public resources.

Once on the ground in Rajasthan, however, a new set of puzzles emerged. Through conversations about service delivery, many of which took place at water sources or in local schools or other community buildings, I noted that people expressed very different opinions about what the state *should* deliver, *if* it would deliver, and whether it was *worthwhile* to speak up. I also noted that these differences did not appear to conform to some of the patterns that I initially expected: citizens' approaches to the state varied within the same villages, as well as within socioeconomic and caste groupings. This variation, I realized, could not simply be a matter of rich versus poor or high versus low social standing.

My research agenda thus began to shift. The central question of how citizens navigated access to the state remained the same. But I quickly realized that there was another, fundamental puzzle that needed to be addressed: namely, *why* citizens' approaches to the state varied in the first place – not just across but *within* communities. Why did some people make claims on the state while others did not? Why did some directly seek out local officials, while others sought assistance from political intermediaries? And why did some turn again and again to the same actors or institutions, while others diversified their approaches? As time went on, I came to see these questions as uncovering a central but often neglected dimension of local citizenship practice, with important implications for our understanding of participation and representation (Who speaks up? Who speaks for or through whom?), as well as distributive politics (Who gets what from the state?).

This book sets out to do three things. First, it aims to open the black box between and beyond elections, to describe the strategies through which citizens in one of India's poorest states pursue social welfare. Far from being locked into static or singular patronage structures, I find that citizens utilize a wide array of channels, acting not just through political parties but through a range of local officials, bureaucrats, and nonstate actors. Some, though, do none of this: instead, they retreat from the state, even when faced with pressing needs.

Second, the book aims to explain the varied patterns of citizen action and inaction that emerge. The central argument, broadly stated, is that claim-making is both state induced and socially produced through direct and narrated encounters with and observations of the state. Those who traverse boundaries of community and locality (for example, of caste and class, neighborhood and village) gain information and ideas about, as well as linkages to, the state. The

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core insight is that this social and spatial exposure is associated with a greater likelihood of making claims on the state and with a broader repertoire of claim-making practices.

Third, the book reflects on the implications of the observed patterns of citizen claim-making for democratic practice more broadly. Here, the story is unfinished. Rajasthan, like much of rural India, stands at a crossroads. Rapid social and economic changes are afoot: boundaries of caste, occupation, and village – once powerfully constraining – are becoming less rigid, although not uniformly so. At the same time, the reach of the state is also shifting, penetrating deeper into the lives of the rural poor through decentralization and a proliferation of social programs. The combined result is that there is “more state” visible at the local level along with more mobile citizens, leading to greater citizen–state encounters. These are conditions ripe for claim-making. Whether this is a democratic success story depends crucially on the institutionalization of claim-making over time: that is, on whether and how citizens sustain these practices and whether and how officials respond. The potential long-term effects – virtuous or vicious – are enormous.

This book began as a doctoral dissertation at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the members of my committee, Richard Locke, Suzanne Berger, Lily Tsai, and Daniel Posner, who helped to shape the project since its very inception, pushing me on all aspects of the work – theoretical, methodological, and empirical. As the dissertation wound its way to book, I benefited enormously from colleagues kind enough to offer their guidance. I am particularly indebted to Thad Dunning, Patrick Heller, Anirudh Krishna, Evan Lieberman, Ashutosh Varshney, and Steven Wilkinson, all of whom provided invaluable feedback at an author’s conference hosted by Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies. John Echeverri-Gent, Rob Jenkins, Devesh Kapur, Sandip Sukhtankar, and three anonymous reviewers also commented on full drafts of the manuscript – gifts of time and intellect for which I am profoundly grateful. For their insightful reading of chapters and papers related to the book, I also thank: Matt Amengual, Adam Auerbach, Kate Baldwin, Rikhil Bhavnani, Rachel Brulé, Jennifer Bussell, Melani Cammett, Erica Dobbs, Herbert Kitschelt, Sonia Kruks, Akshay Mangla, Carol Mershon, Sara Schneiderman, Prerna Singh, Tariq Thachil, Ben Wisner, and Adam Ziegfeld. For rich discussion and comments at various conferences, workshops, and presentations, I thank Amit Ahuja, Simon Chauchard, Emily Clough, Jennifer Erickson, Kristin Fabbe, Janice Gallagher, Jason Jackson, Francesca Jensenius, Michael Levien, Lant Pritchett, Meg Rithmire, Neelanjan Sircar, Mark Schneider, Ken Sharpe, Pavithra Suranarayan, and Milan Vaishnav.

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## Note on Caste Terminology

Throughout this book, I refer to members of different caste and tribal communities in India, the categorization and labeling of which are fraught tasks. I use the term “Scheduled Caste” to refer to those caste groupings that have received official designation in the Indian Constitution, recognizing their history as disadvantaged and marginalized communities for which special provisions are made for social, educational, and economic advancement (including reservation of seats in elected government, in higher education, and in certain public sector jobs). Historically, the same groups were referred to as “untouchables” – a derogatory term that denotes a sense of “pollution” should higher caste members come into contact with members of such “lower” castes. Some have instead employed the term *Harijan*, or “Children of God,” as coined by Mahatma Gandhi, to refer to the same lower caste groups. This term, though, has been critiqued for its paternalistic overtones. Others, including some activist groups among the lower castes, have employed the term *Dalit*, meaning “broken people.” I, however, do not use this term for two reasons. First, some activists and scholars rightly object to the implications of a “broken” or downtrodden status. Second, in the state of Rajasthan, where I carried out research for this book, the term *Dalit* was rarely employed and appeared to have little resonance among members of the so-called lower castes themselves. They instead tended to use the term “Scheduled Caste,” or “SC.” I follow suit in using the term Scheduled Caste, despite its technocratic overtones, since it is (1) the most value-neutral label of those in common usage, and (2) because it mirrors the language used by villagers themselves in Rajasthan.

The “Scheduled Tribes,” also referred to as *adivasis*, are indigenous communities that are also recognized in the Indian Constitution as historically disadvantaged groups for which affirmative action provisions have been made. They span a diverse set of communities, most of which have distinctive cultures,

languages, and religions – many of which, though, also practice syncretic elements of Hinduism.

In the text that follows, I refer to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (abbreviated as the SC and the ST) as collective groupings encompassing all caste or tribal communities that have received constitutional designation as “scheduled,” while keeping in mind the heterogeneity of castes, *jatis* (sub-castes), and tribes that these categories encompass. I use the terms both as nouns (referring to collective categories) and as adjectives (to describe individual members of the groups, or the nature of a village or neighborhood – e.g., an SC man or an ST village). This broadly mirrors the language used on the ground in Rajasthan, where members of these communities often referred to themselves and their own communities in these same ways.

I refer to non-SC and non-ST members in one of two ways. First, the “Other Backward Classes” (OBCs) are an official designation applied by the Indian states to communities that, while not included in the original “schedules” of the Indian Constitution, have also contented to varying degrees with histories of social exclusion and economic and political marginalization. They refer, broadly, to the lower-middle rankings of the Hindu *varnas*, or caste hierarchy. OBC categorization remains a highly contested and conceptually unclear status, which varies from state to state. In the text that follows, I follow official Government of Rajasthan designations when referring to members of the OBCs.

Second, I refer to all other “unscheduled” and non-OBC caste groupings as the “General” Castes (GCs). The GCs, also sometimes referred to as the “unreserved,” typically hail from those communities in the middle to upper echelons of the Hindu *varna* system, reflecting their relatively higher social (and often economic) status – although this classification also encompasses a great diversity of people.