

PART I

INTRODUCTION, PUZZLES AND THEORY

I

Introduction*Bureaucracy and the Politics of
Implementing Primary Education*

It is ironic that bureaucracy is still primarily a term of scorn, even though bureaus are among the most important institutions in every nation in the world.

– Anthony Downs (1965, 439)

The most striking fact about the Indian state is how varied its performance has been, spanning the spectrum from woefully inadequate to surprisingly impressive.

– Devesh Kapur (2020, 31)

I.1 INTRODUCTION

What makes bureaucracy work, especially for the least advantaged? During a field visit to the Himalayan region in the spring of 2010, I was struck by an education official's answer to this question. Mr. Chauhan greeted me in his office in Shimla district, the capital of Himachal Pradesh (HP). Our conversation about India's primary education programming took an unexpected turn as he described a schooling initiative for children from the nomadic *Gujjar* community. A pastoral tribe, the Gujjars spent summer months in the Shimla foothills, where they reared buffalo, goats and other livestock. During winters, they migrated to the plains of Saharanpur, a nearby district in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), disrupting their children's education. Local education officials experimented by creating mobile schools. The Gujjars were joined by a caravan of volunteer teachers who taught remedial classes. After a few years, the first cohort of Gujjar children from Shimla had completed primary schooling. In Mr. Chauhan's words, "Local administration needed to mobilize

teachers and parents to work side-by-side ... We had to uphold the policy structure (*dhancha*), but sometimes we let go of it. This way, the community felt it was our (*apna*) school.”¹

Mr. Chauhan articulated a vision of bureaucracy that was puzzling in many ways. Mobile schooling was costly and difficult for local agencies to administer. Parental participation was hardly guaranteed, as witnessed in the floundering of so many community-based development programs. The practical steps needed to make mobile schools operational were complex and politically fraught. District administration had recruited volunteers from among the Gujjars and later appointed them as contract-based teachers. Subsequently, they were promoted as regular teachers with civil service protections. These actions broke with administrative protocol and drew criticism from teacher unions. The Indian central government’s policy framework for primary education stipulated, in minute detail, the responsibilities of state governments, but there was no mention of mobile schools or the regularization of volunteer teachers. Nor was the mobile schooling program an aberration. Similar initiatives had surfaced elsewhere in HP, often led by bureaucrats working around administrative rules.

What motivated these officials to allocate scarce resources for marginalized populations and face local resistance? Equally puzzling, I observed no comparable bureaucratic initiatives in Saharanpur, where Gujjars resided in larger numbers, possessed land and had electoral clout. Nor were bureaucrats in HP more inclined to beneficence. The administrative structures, resources and career incentives for bureaucrats across the two states were similar. My fieldwork in UP revealed that local administrators there too had tried experimenting with programs for marginalized communities. But whereas local adaptations flourished in HP, bureaucracy in UP was hamstrung by a commitment to rules, enabling some initiatives to take off, but stifling many others.

This book seeks to explain when and how bureaucracy works for disadvantaged citizens, to realize the promise of education for all. One does not have to travel to Himalayan villages to recognize the importance of these questions. To provide every child with an education is a basic duty of the modern state. Most countries have laws making primary education free, universal and compulsory. Many declare education a constitutional right. How well states fulfill these promises has a profound influence on

¹ Interview with an education official, Shimla, February 2, 2010.

the quality of life that people lead. In that regard, the stunning growth of publicly funded primary schooling systems in developing countries occasions optimism. The United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) program reported that primary school enrollments in developing countries climbed steeply in previous decades, reaching 91 percent of children by 2015 (UNDP 2015). The number of out-of-school children fell by almost a half, from an estimated 100 million children in 2000 to 55 million in 2015. Enrollment rates in sub-Saharan Africa rose to 80 percent, even as a staggering 40 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty. In South Asia, a region with stark gender disparities, less than seven girls attended primary school for every ten boys in the 1990s. The gender gap in enrollment has reduced considerably, reaching parity in many places.

The breathtaking expansion of primary schooling masks another disheartening trend. Millions of children remain out of school, or receive services of abysmal quality, and are effectively denied *education*.² Dilapidated school buildings, teacher absenteeism, dysfunctional classrooms, high dropout rates for girls, broken systems of monitoring and academic support, a lack of community engagement – these are the maladies afflicting government primary school systems across the world. And whereas wealthy households have exited the government system to seek private schooling, the least advantaged continue to bear the brunt of low-quality governmental services. In some places, the poor too have opted to exit, committing scarce household resources toward “low-fee” private schools, some decent, others of questionable repute (Tooley and Dixon 2006; Srivastava 2013).

The impressive gains, and equally alarming gaps, in primary education across developing countries provoke questions of when, why and how bureaucracies effectively deliver public services for the masses. These questions are of intrinsic importance. For observers of political life, they raise longstanding conundrums. A venerable line of thought, going as far back as ancient Greece, suggests that democracy enhances human well-being. Democratic mechanisms of popular participation, electoral competition and a free press are believed to empower citizens and make states responsive to their needs. “It is not surprising,” Amartya Sen famously contends, that “no famine has ever taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy” (1999, 16). Democracy’s “Third Wave” saw

² Lant Pritchett (2013) distinguishes between the delivery of “schooling” inputs and “education” services, with the latter being more closely connected to student learning.

countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America adopt democratic institutions. Democratic accountability may have led some governments to commit more public resources to primary education and other social policies, as evidenced by cross-national studies (Lake and Baum 2001; Brown and Hunter 2004; Ansell 2010). Yet, public spending, while critical, is hardly sufficient for producing high-quality public services (Filmer and Pritchett 1999; Nelson 2007).³ Democracy, it appears, has not led states to acquire the bureaucratic capabilities needed to implement social programs effectively (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock 2017, 14–26). Famines may indeed be fewer, but illiteracy, chronic hunger and insecurity persist.

If we extend our analytic gaze beyond the high politics of state spending, to the mundane assignment of *implementing* public services, questions of state capacity come to the fore. Few developing country states are well endowed with what Mann (1984, 2008) calls “infrastructural power,” the ability to project authority and implement policy decisions over their territories. Fewer still have institutions resembling Weberian bureaucracy (Rauch and Evans 2000). Institutional weakness creates an enormous gulf between the aims of public policy and its execution, between what citizens aspire to attain and what they actually get (Rothstein 2011). Institutional weakness also diminishes the credibility of the state’s policy commitments, incentivizing politicians to channel resources in a particularistic fashion, to the neglect of programmatic services (Keefer 2007). These political dynamics are visible across the world, from Mexico to Brazil, Nigeria to South Africa, India to Indonesia and beyond. At the extreme, predatory bureaucracies license officials to extract public resources, but offer citizens few services in return. Yet, service delivery can also suffer when bureaucracies are coherent and public-minded, just as patronage politics can thrive even in well-established democracies (Piattoni 2001).

The dominant pattern in developing countries is not of outright failure, but of variation in state performance. Bureaucracies display large differences in their capabilities to implement policy, both between and within countries, across different policy functions, as well as across

³ The economics of education literature shows that, beyond a minimum threshold, public spending has little noticeable impact on the quality of education services (Hanushek and Woessmann 2011; Woessmann 2016). Summarizing the findings from cross-national studies, Evans, Huber and Stephens (2017, 387) observe, “[l]evels of expenditure are only weakly correlated to even the crudest measures of outcome, levels of enrollment.”

administrative tasks within a given function. There are also striking cases of effective public service delivery within developing countries (Uphoff 1994; Grindle 1997; Tandler 1997; Chand 2006). Public services do sometimes reach citizens, even where conventional theories least predict it. The uneven performance of public services in India and elsewhere motivates the central questions of this book: How does bureaucracy implement primary education, within the least likely settings? Why do some bureaucracies deliver education services more effectively than others? What, in short, makes bureaucracy *work* for the least advantaged?

My answer to these questions stems from the recognition that bureaucracies are collective agencies bound by norms (March and Olsen 1989; Ostrom 2000). Where formal institutions are weak or politicized, the implementation of public services may nonetheless vary depending on the informal norms that guide bureaucratic behavior. This book takes us inside the state. It casts light on the street-level bureaucracies that deliver education in rural India (Lipsky 1980). I argue that historical differences in bureaucratic norms have contributed to subnational variation in the delivery of primary education across northern Indian states. Conceived as the informal rules of the game, bureaucratic norms instruct public officials on how to interpret their policy mandates and the actions deemed appropriate in fulfilling them. Bureaucratic norms also influence how officials interact with individuals and groups in society, conditioning citizen expectations and collective action around public services.

Subject to the same national policy framework, as well as common political, legal and administrative institutions, I find that bureaucratic norms have evolved differently across Indian states, with material consequences for the delivery of primary schooling. Some Indian states have secured a commitment to *legalism*, norms encouraging a rule-based orientation. Legalism unleashes a protective dynamic, motivating officials to uphold rules, procedures and administrative hierarchies. Other states have norms committing officials to *deliberation*, which stimulates a problem-based orientation. Deliberation generates an organizational dynamic centered on solving problems, encouraging officials to interpret policies in a flexible manner. These distinct types of bureaucratic norms produce very different implementation patterns and outcomes for primary education. Legalism enables officials to secure compliance with policy rules and undertake less complex tasks, such as enrollment and infrastructure provision, but it weakens their ability to monitor schools and sustain community input over time, leading to uneven implementation of services.

On the other hand, deliberation enables the performance of more complex tasks, encouraging officials to adapt policy rules to local needs and sustain community monitoring, thereby improving the quality of services. I ground the argument historically, connecting the divergence in bureaucratic norms to the politics of subnational state-building. Bureaucratic norms are politically constructed and maintained through the collective strategies and relationships that have evolved between subnational politicians and bureaucratic elites, often in response to central administration.

I build and test this book's arguments in rural north India, a setting of endemic poverty, social divisions and political clientelism. Through a multilevel comparative analysis in four northern Indian states, I demonstrate that the divergence in bureaucratic norms is a causal driver of subnational differences in the implementation of primary education. On the basis of two and a half years of comparative field research, using ethnographic methods, including 507 interviews of senior officials and participant observation with street-level bureaucrats, I trace policy implementation across multiple levels of administration, from planning decisions in state capitals to routine monitoring by district administrations, down to village-level governance by schoolteachers, parents and wider communities.

In India and elsewhere, weak institutions are expected to render bureaucracy wholly subservient, captured, or corrupt. Bureaucrats are depicted as cogs who surrender their discretion to politicians. Rarely are they seen as having political authority of their own, let alone the ability to use discretion in productive ways. This book argues for a different approach, one that brings bureaucratic institutions back into the comparative political economy of developing countries. Against overwhelmingly pessimistic predictions, I find that bureaucracy in northern India can deliver primary education effectively in some cases. Yet, the quality of services varies substantially depending on the nature of bureaucratic norms that guide public officials. In demonstrating the different ways that bureaucracy works for disadvantaged groups in society, this book sheds new light on how states promote inclusive development.

I.2 FROM SOCIAL POLICIES TO CITIZEN WELFARE: STUDYING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PRIMARY EDUCATION

The battle for welfare is often waged beyond the voting booth, at the local interfaces between citizens and the state: on school campuses, at the service counters of employment offices and inside the waiting rooms

of medical clinics. Primary education occupies the empirical domain of this book, but the challenge of implementation stretches across a broader theoretical canvas. It raises more general questions regarding how states transform social policies into concrete services that improve societal well-being. Chapter 2 articulates the concept and measures of implementation used in this book. Here, I discuss the importance of studying primary education through the lens of comparative politics.

Few public institutions touch our lives more directly than primary schools. Primary education lays the groundwork for learning and skills acquisition, enlarging our life chances and prospects for mobility. Education is integral to the human capabilities that we strive to cultivate, not least of all the ability to lead a life of dignity (Sen 1999). At a societal level, primary education contributes to a country's stock of human capital, a recognized catalyst for productivity and economic growth (Goldin and Katz 2009; Barro and Lee 2015). Beyond the transmission of skills, schools impart civic lessons and help forge our relationship to the state (Gutmann 1999; Bruch and Soss 2018). Schools are formative political spaces, where children first encounter the "imagined community" of the nation (Anderson 1991). Schooling is a principal mode by which states broadcast territorial control, transmit ideologies and construct citizen identities. Mass public education, Ansell and Lindvall write, "marked the first profound extension of the state's powers to civilians" in nineteenth-century Europe and America (2013, 520). In France's Third Republic, the state consolidated its authority in the countryside through schools, transforming "peasants into Frenchmen" (Weber 1976).

Primary education also features prominently in political debates over redistribution and social welfare. "Full citizenship," in Marshall's (1950) classic statement, involves the progressive attainment of civil, political and social rights. The last of these rights is arguably the most difficult to realize. The provision of mass education has been an important ingredient in the protection of social rights, predating social insurance and other welfare measures (Iversen and Stephens 2008, 603). The American school reformer Horace Mann proclaimed that public education is "the great equalizer of the conditions of men," a pathway for social mobility.⁴ Today, early child education is seen as a pivotal policy mechanism for combatting inequality (Chetty et al. 2011). Yet, education has also been a great discriminator within society, "hugely important," Bourdieu

⁴ As quoted in Monroe (1940), who examines the growth of public education in America.

observed, “in the affirmation of differences between groups and social classes, and the reproduction of those differences.”⁵

For all of these reasons, primary education is a core public function and parameter for judging state performance. Yet, compared to other state functions, such as national security, regulation and industrial policy, we know far less about the politics of when, why and how states provide primary education. “The scholarly literature at this point is almost a *tabula rasa* on these scores,” Moe and Wiborg (2017, 4) write. The status of education research in other social science disciplines offers a lesson in contrasts. The economics of education has made strides following the pioneering work of Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964), from macroeconomic studies of human capital growth to rigorous, microlevel evaluations of education policy.⁶ Another fertile field, the sociology of education has illuminated the linkages between schooling and social stratification. Education research has spawned new sociological theories, such as social capital, influencing the study of politics and development.⁷

To be sure, the comparative politics of education is not an empty field.⁸ Research under the “Varieties of Capitalism” rubric has explored national patterns of skill formation, demonstrating how systems of higher education and vocational training complement economic institutions and shape inequalities (Hall and Soskice 2001; Thelen 2004; Iversen and Stephens 2008; Busemeyer 2014). Yet, less is known about the politics of *primary* education, an institution that touches more lives and has its own distributional politics.⁹ Moreover, attention to national systems and cross-national spending patterns has eclipsed subnational-level research on policy implementation. The need to study implementation is pressing, perhaps more so in developing countries, where the institutional challenges of providing quality services are enormous (Corrales 2005; World Bank 2018). Research from developing countries also reveals the

⁵ Interview of Bourdieu by Emily Eakin (2001) “The Intellectual Class Struggle,” *New York Times*, January 6, 2001. Available at: www.nytimes.com/2001/01/06/arts/the-intellectual-class-struggle.html.

⁶ Education research has helped transform development economics, spearheaded by Nobel prize-winning scholarship at the MIT Poverty Action Lab. See, for example, Banerjee et al. (2015).

⁷ Bourdieu (1986) pioneered social capital theory in a volume on education. Coleman (1988) refined the concept in a seminal article examining high school dropout rates, hence the title “Social Capital in the Creation of *Human Capital*” (emphasis added).

⁸ See review articles by Busemeyer and Trampusch (2011) and Gift and Wibbels (2014).

⁹ Recent exceptions include Ansell (2010), Kosack (2012) and Paglayan (2021).

weak correlation between school spending and outcomes, such as student learning (Hanushek and Woessmann 2011; Pritchett 2013).

Problems of implementation are not, however, unique to developing countries. The United States enacted far-reaching education reforms in the early-twentieth-century Progressive Era, but it struggles to provide quality education till this day. A crowded menu of reforms for urban school districts has yielded modest results (Hess 1999). More than sixty years after the US Supreme Court declared racial segregation unconstitutional in its landmark decision on *Brown v. The Board of Education*, the legacy of racial discrimination continues to be felt in American schools. Resource disparities between school districts are an obstacle, but public spending patterns do not fully explain educational inequalities (Hanushek 2010). In the state of Connecticut, for instance, the towns of Bridgeport and Fairfield spent, respectively, \$14,000 and \$16,000 per student during the 2014–2015 academic year, above the national average of \$10,800. And, whereas 94 percent of high school students in Fairfield graduated on time that year, only 63 percent did so in Bridgeport.¹⁰ These sharp differences between neighboring school districts within a single US state are a reminder that, even in wealthy countries, policy implementation can have profound consequences for social welfare and inequality.

1.3 THE PUZZLE: PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NORTHERN INDIA

This book investigates the delivery of primary education in rural north India, an unlikely setting for public services to function well. Chapter 2 presents comparative indicators to illustrate the large subnational differences in education within this region. India historically has earned accolades for its democracy, marked by competitive elections, high voter participation and smooth transfers of power. Stable democracy is an achievement given India's income level and extraordinary ethnic diversity (Varshney 2014). Between elections, however, citizen experiences of the state leave much to be desired (Corbridge et al. 2005; Gupta 2012; Kruks-Wisner 2018). Bureaucracy can be apathetic and capricious in its treatment of disadvantaged citizens, prompting scholars to ponder why India's poor even bother to vote (Ahuja and Chhibber 2012). Wearisome

¹⁰ E. Harris and Hussey, K., "In Connecticut, a Wealth Gap Divides Neighboring Schools," *New York Times*, September 11, 2016, Available at: www.nytimes.com/2016/09/12/ny-region/in-connecticut-a-wealth-gap-divides-neighboring-schools.html.