

Drowning in a paper sea: India's welfare efforts failed by its peculiar bureaucracy

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Credit: University of Cambridge

India's sophisticated laws and progressive policies fail with startling regularity. A new study locates a possible reason as to why in the convoluted bureaucratic system of the Indian state and its obsession with paper.

One of the world's largest anti-poverty measures – a scheme designed to guarantee 100 days' work to poor, rural households in India – has

become bogged down in a bureaucratic quagmire, according to recently-published research.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MNREGA) is the subject of Paper Tiger by Cambridge anthropologist Nayanika Mathur. The Act covers all of India's rural population (or about 70% of India's 1.3 billion people) and is supposed to guarantee work for unskilled labourers at the minimum wage.

Launched amid huge fanfare in February 2006, MNREGA's performance continues to be the object of strenuous debate in India. "MNREGA was put forward as a radical, progressive move, enshrining the right to work," said Mathur. "This was a sophisticated legislation that potentially has a lot of promise. But I wanted to see first hand how a law authored by elites in New Delhi, in English, gets put into practice in one of the poorest parts of India."

Mathur chose to study this welfarist statute through an innovative anthropological method: embedding herself within the development bureaucracy of the state in a remote and impoverished Himalayan district.

She spent a total of 18 months following the implementation of MNREGA through different levels of the Indian state. Almost a year was spent living in the town of Gopeshwar in Chamoli district, in the remote central Himalayan state of Uttarakhand. With its high levels of poverty, unemployment and distress out-migration, Mathur chose to base her research in the Himalaya to see how MNREGA was – or wasn't – being put into practice at a local level.

"The locals thought I was very odd," said Mathur. "They weren't suspicious of me, but they couldn't understand why I was there in the first place. The bureaucrats, in particular, didn't think anything they do is

of worth and feel very neglected and distant from the centre. It took months for the awkwardness to subside and for me to be accepted. But the surprise they felt at having someone take (what they consider) their dull, repetitive bureaucratic work seriously, never quite left them."

As Mathur followed the MNREGA around the high Himalaya she was surprised to hear it described as an "unimplementable" programme. Despite the desperate need for employment opportunities in rural Himalaya, the welfare scheme was conspicuous by its absence. Paper Tiger, as it meticulously traces the implementation of the MNREGA, presents some surprising findings.

The book argues that MNREGA has largely failed, not because of corruption (as is commonly assumed), but because of its anti-corruption measures. In her role as a participant-observer in small, crumbling government offices in Himalayan India, Mathur found that the legal requirement for transparent functioning had led to an exponential increase in the paperwork demanded of the state bureaucracy. Along with its sheer laboriousness and complexity, this paperwork was intervening in the traditional system of operation of welfare leading to a complete paralysis in welfare.

The extreme reliance on paper, documents, and files in the Indian bureaucracy has a complicated history in India and can be traced back to the operations of the British colonial state in India. Mathur argues that the seemingly-new drive to hold the contemporary Indian state accountable to its citizenry is, in fact, aggravating the documentary foundations of its bureaucracy.

"Ironically, it is the requirements to render the Indian state transparent and accountable that introduced a crisis of implementation with MNREGA," notes Mathur.

The drive for transparency at a national level also produced problems specific to the region where Mathur conducted her research. In order to stem corruption, a directive was issued asking for all wages to be paid through bank accounts. This created huge problems in the Himalayas where there are very few bank branches, and those that do exist were located miles away from most villages.

Most problematically, women were at risk of losing control over their own wages as they became dependent either on middlemen or male relatives to operate bank accounts for them. Unwittingly, the push for financial transparency had ended up creating an anti-women system.

Despite its evident problems, Mathur believes the Act is a clever, canny piece of legislation. In *Paper Tiger*, she uses the crisis in the implementation of MNREGA as a case study that helps make broader arguments about the nature of the state – and what it means when welfare schemes are found not to be working as they should.

Added Mathur: "My study of the operations of the state in the Indian Himalaya, allows for an understanding of the failure of the developmental Indian state that is not predicated upon corruption, violence, incapacity, sloth, or simple dysfunction."

"Rather, my attempt here is to make us understand what the welfare state in practice is. For it is only when we really get our heads round the very nature of the beast can we hope to ever reform it."

Provided by University of Cambridge

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