

Bureaucratic Politics and Democratic Rights: Forging a Right to Education in India

BY

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AKSHAY MANGLA is an Assistant Professor in the Business, Government and International Economy Unit. His primary expertise lies in the political economy of development, with a regional focus on South Asia. His research aims to understand when and how public institutions work effectively in developing economies, particularly in the domain of public service delivery for the poor. To that end, his current book-length project analyzes the implementation of India's universal primary education program. In addition, he has conducted research on private initiatives to enforce labor standards in global supply chains. He is a faculty associate at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs and a Member of the Steering Committee of the South Asia Institute at Harvard.

About the Lecture:

Following a history of neglect, the Indian state expanded its role in the primary education sector significantly over the last two decades through the enactment of several new policies. This large and growing investment by the state poses a puzzle for existing research that characterizes India as a clientelist democracy, one that breeds particularism to the detriment of universal policies like primary education. What then accounts for the increasingly active role of the Indian state? This lecture finds that India's universal primary education policies were forged outside the realm of electoral politics. These laws were passed by the Indian Parliament with virtually no debate. Nor were these policies the inevitable consequence of rapid economic growth. Instead, Professor Mangla argues that the expansion of primary education relied on bureaucratic politics, and in particular, the initiative taken by a coalition of committed senior bureaucrats. Once the Indian state opened itself up to external agencies following the 1991 economic reforms, committed bureaucrats drew on foreign aid and technical assistance to pursue larger-scale policy experiments, raising the profile of primary education and their own status within the state. These initiatives were scaled nationally to become Sarva Shiksh Abhiyan (SSA), India's flagship education for all scheme. Throughout this policy expansion, India's education bureaucracy centralized its authority over planning and implementation, which enabled rapid infrastructure development while undermining downward accountability in the delivery of educational services. These findings are drawn from interviews conducted with public officials, NGOs and international agencies, as well as official documents and media sources. Professor Mangla sheds new light on when and how the state promotes the interests of the poor in developing democracies.

LECTURE TIME: 12 noon to 1:30 p.m.

VENUE: CASI – 3600 Market Street, Suite 560 (5th floor) Philadelphia, PA 19104-2653

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Founded in 1992, the Center for the Advanced Study of India (CASI) at the University of Pennsylvania is the first research institution in the United States dedicated to the study of contemporary India. The Center's key goals are to nurture a new generation of scholars across disciplines and to provide a forum for dialogue among the academic, business, and foreign policy communities.

