

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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GABRIELLE KRUKS-WISNER is an assistant professor of political science at Boston College. She spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** and undergraduate research assistant **Therese Murphy** before her presentation on citizen claim-making in rural India at the Boisi Center.

OWENS: India is the world's largest democracy, with more than a billion people and hundreds of languages and religious traditions. How does Indian democracy manage this kind of diversity?

KRUKS-WISNER: With a lot of difficulty. We need to draw some distinctions between procedural democracy and substantive democracy in India. In terms of procedural democracy, there's a lot to celebrate. It's the world's largest democracy, as you said; there have been 60 years of free and fair elections, with the exception of the emergency in the 1970s. You have very high rates of voter participation, and particularly you have the poorer and the lower castes in tribes voting in numbers larger than most democratic theory would predict. So on all these counts, it's a real triumph, a really robust democracy.

But when you look at the substantive outcomes of the democracy, in terms of how people are represented and the extent to which they actually receive the resources that the state provides, there's a lot of unevenness. A lot of it goes back exactly to the diversity that you highlighted—religious, ethnic, class cleavages, gender divisions—it's an incredibly fragmented, incredibly diverse polity. From a multicultural perspective, this is an enormous resource, but it of course is a great challenge for governance and a great challenge when we think about

citizens' participation, because people are being variously mobilized along so many different identities.

OWENS: Can you help our listeners understand some of the structural differences between American and Indian de-



mocracies in terms of federal systems or procedures and cultures that you might flag as differences?

KRUKS-WISNER: India is a federal system. There are 28 states, so when people talk about the government of India, they are usually referring to what's called "the center," the central government of India, which does have an enormous amount of power. It is, in fact, a more centralized system than we have here in the United

States, even though it is federal. The states have a lot of governance authority and capabilities of their own. They have their own budgetary processes, they have their own assemblies, and they pass their own laws. But when it comes down to brass tacks, it really is the center that holds a lot of legal and legislative authority, and also holds the purse strings. While there are a lot of substantive and rhetorical efforts towards federalism and decentralization, the power really is still very centralized within the Indian system.

Within states there is also decentralization, so within states you have districts, then blocks, then villages. At the village level, which is what I study, you have village councils called gram panchayats. These councils—we can think about them almost like a New England town hall—are the most local level of governance and also the most local arena of electoral politics. Officials are elected every five years. The theory, but not necessarily the practice, is that these elected officials—at the local, state, and national levels—are supposed to work very nicely with each other. In practice there's a lot of interference and intervention from the top reaching down to the lower levels, so it's not as decentralized in practice as the theory would suggest.

OWENS: How deeply rooted are the democratic norms in Indian culture, compared to that in Western countries?

KRUKS-WISNER: There are different ways to look at that. I remember early in my fieldwork trying to ask people questions about what it meant to be a citizen of India and a citizen of the world's largest democracy; that kind of language and vocabulary did not resonate at all. I got a lot of blank stares in return. So when we talk about democratic norms in the sense of being part of this larger polity and commitment to constitutionalism and to rule of law and to all these things that those norms would entail, that is not language that an ordinary Indian citizen would use.

That said, the institution of procedural democracy, of voting for elected representatives, is a deeply rooted practice that people engage in very actively. In fact, at rates much higher than in the United States. They're very committed to it, in large part because of the sense or the expectation or the hope that there might be some material gain—protection or some substantive outcomes that will improve their lives.

OWENS: Is the overarching Hindu-Muslim divide in India present at the village level, or are individual villages too homogenous for religious tensions to arise?

KRUKS-WISNER: You'll find some villages that are very homogenous—fully Muslim or fully Hindu. But many villages are enormously diverse. In terms of caste divisions, you'll find a single caste village or a multi-caste village. So it's hard to talk about an emblematic village, since they are so diverse.

The region that I work in, Rajasthan, has a significant Muslim minority. It happens, though, that the particular areas that I work in are predominantly Hindu and so the particular villages and the sample of villagers that I work with is over 98 percent Hindu. So in my work, in particular, religious cleavages are not

very prominent. Caste cleavages, on the other hand, are.

Now that said, if we talk about rural India as a whole, religion does play a key role; it is a key cleavage. Your question is an interesting one—are these conflicts and these cleavages and these divides magnified at a national level, or do they really have this kind of grassroots resonance? I think it works in both directions. There can be times when this is the case, partic-

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ularly at election time where politicians try to use ethnic and religious identities to garner votes. You find in particular the BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party]—which is one of the primary parties contesting the elections that are coming up next year—trying to galvanize a Hindu base around a Hindu identity, in a sense of Hindu nationalism. But at the same time, electoral politics moderates some of those forces, so in order to really be a viable political

party and in order to gain enough to hold the majority in parliament, they also need to moderate some of their rhetoric and play more towards the center.

So you see a push and pull in electoral politics, and you see these religious identities coming to the fore and then being pushed to the back in electoral cycles at the national level and also at the local level.

OWENS: India has recently begun to grapple with a crisis of unpunished rape and sexual assault in the country. What have you seen in your own research, or what can you say more broadly, about the functioning of claim-making against the state in a context like this?

KRUKS-WISNER: That's a really interesting question, and I guess I'll pick up on one word that you said which was claim-making against the state. I'm actually talking about claims on the state as opposed to claims against the state. They're related, but they're distinct phenomena. When we talk about claims against the state, you think about maybe the protection of basic civil liberties—the freedom to be free in your person, the freedom to be protected by basic public security. With the recent rape cases, a lot of the critique has been that the public security system has failed, the police don't respond, and that there's too much bureaucracy, corruption and lack of oversight. There's nowhere for women to turn when they're in these situations. Sometimes the state itself is the perpetrator of violence, and so in that case, we can think about it as on the one hand, a claim on the state, claiming safety and protection from the state; and on the other, a claim against the state, where the state itself might be part of the problem, be part of the forces that are actually perpetrating this violence.

What I'm looking at in my work are claims on the state, where people are actively trying to claim services and resources from the state. That would be things like clean drinking water, paved

roads, demanding the teacher attend school—there’s a large problem with teacher absenteeism—or demanding that health officials actually attend public health clinics; basically, trying to make services work. Moving from the administration and bureaucracy down to the level of the doorstep of the village, to actually access and gain material benefit from these services that ostensibly one is entitled to. So I think about those as claims on the state—citizens with democratic rights and entitlements saying, “I have an expectation, a right, an entitlement, and I’m, as a citizen of India, demanding these things from my local representatives.” I see that as being different from making claims against the state, where it’s saying, “I have a right to autonomy, I have a right to protection, I have right to these basic civil liberties, and I don’t want the state to impinge upon those things.”

To be a little more theoretical about it, you can think about it in terms of negative and positive freedoms. My work mostly focuses on the notion of positive freedoms, the idea that with access to healthcare, with access to education, with access to paved roads and clean drinking water, one can lead a productive life where you’re able to pursue opportunities and expand your own human capabilities. I’m drawing here a lot on the work Amartya Sen, who developed this notion of development as freedom, as an expansion of human freedoms and capabilities, that it’s a positive sense as opposed to simply a negative sense which would entail a sort of freedom from interference from the state.

MURPHY: How does India’s immense diversity impact the state’s service delivery model?

KRUKS-WISNER: That’s the billion-dollar question. So we think about services and we often talk about “public” services—and I always put “public” in quotes because we have the sense, particularly here in the United States, that



when we turn on the tap, water will come out. We send our kids to school with the assumption that the teacher will actually show up and will actually teach. So we have this assumption as US citizens that, as part of a social contract and because we pay our taxes, that these “public” services will be delivered to the public, and they are indeed public—available to all.

In a lot of developing countries, we need to relax the assumption that these are in fact “public” services. Instead they are services that are delivered with a lot of discretion and a lot of distributional politics at play. What this means is that all these cleavages and identities and diverse lines that you reference come into play. So it can be a matter of distributing water and roads to this community but not that community. Things that are ostensibly public actually become politicized and become part of this broader setting of identity politics, where different communities are fighting over scarce resources that in other settings would actually be public resources. So something as simple as turning on the tap and expecting the water to flow becomes an issue of political contestation and in certain settings, of identity politics, because we can’t assume that it is actually public and equally accessible to all.

OWENS: You’re speaking in terms of contestation and identity politics, but you don’t mention corruption. Is that because the decision to provide these basic services for one group and not another is actually discussed and put out as a policy? Or do individuals and collectives make that decision on the basis of personal gain or identity politics?

KRUKS-WISNER: Corruption certainly plays a role, and I would say the description is more the latter way you were describing it. There’s an important work by a political scientist named Kanchan Chandra, who describes India as a patronage democracy. The idea here is two-fold. Number one is that the state plays a prominent and essential role in the lives and livelihoods of its citizens. Accessing the the state, at various levels, is really essential to the ability to live a good life in India, whether it’s through accessing basic resources like the drinking water, or whether it’s access to a job or to higher education. Without some kind of access to the state and its resources, it’s very hard to live a productive and fulfilled life. So that’s the first element.

The second element is that the way that those state resources are allocated is highly discretionary, in particular at the local level. This means that public officials—rather than following a

programmatically or rule-bound agenda in terms of considering certain goods to be rights and entitlements available to all—instead exercise a lot of discretion on a day-to-day basis in terms of who gets what and how things are allocated. This discretion is often equated with corruption. The interesting thing, though, is that discretion is also sometimes equated with greater flexibility and local accountability. So the act of discretion sometimes means corrupt allocation, favoring certain constituents over others, and other times discretion means flexibility and the ability to really listen to your constituents; so it's sort of a double-edged sword. The key difference, though, is that this is not a rule-bound, programmatic distribution of services that one would expect in the United States, although you could find communities here that would also question that. For example, the machine politics that came out of Chicago in the 1950s and '60s actually looked a lot like this, in terms of local exercise of discre-


tion in terms of allocations of goods and services.

OWENS: In the United States, I would argue, a fair portion of the population is suspicious of positive freedom and rejects the idea that the government should help individuals flourish by providing health-care, food or shelter. Is the tenor of that conversation—the focus on negative versus positive liberty—different in India?

KRUKS-WISNER: I guess I would push back a little bit; I wonder if it's actually true that we can generalize about what Americans really expect and want from the state and from the government here. Recently in West Virginia, there was a chemical spill in the local water supply, and our expectation that when we turn on the tap, government-provided clean water flows from it—which by extension allows us to lead healthier, productive lives and to flourish in the sense of positive freedom—was suddenly under question. There has been enormous outrage

in Congress, in the local legislature, and among normal, ordinary citizens that I've heard interviewed on the radio saying: 'we expect the state to deliver, we expect the state of West Virginia to deliver clean drinking water, that's our right as citizens.' So when pushed, a lot of ordinary Americans do have an expectation that as citizens, as part of our social contract, because we live in this country and we pay our taxes, we expect the state to deliver. We take a lot of it for granted, which is why I think some of the rhetoric often leans towards a discussion of negative freedoms, which, of course, is a strong tradition in the United States. But I think that there is also a deep commitment to positive freedoms here. They are sometimes in the shadows because we're not pushed to articulate them often, because most of the time, clean drinking water flows when we turn on the tap.


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