

Red Tape: Akhil Gupta on bureaucracy and poverty in India

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Speaking at LSE on June 11, UCLA's Professor Gupta theorised the role of bureaucratic procedures in perpetuating chronic poverty across India.

Why is poverty chronic and widespread in India, the world's fourth-largest economy? Why do two to three million people – especially women, girls, lower-caste and indigenous people – die in poverty each year? And why don't these deaths elicit a strong response from the Indian state and civil society? [Speaking at LSE](#) on Monday, UCLA's Dr Akhil Gupta addressed these questions by formulating a new theory based on the notion that the relation between the state and the poor in India is one of structural violence.



Dr Gupta explores this theory in his forthcoming book, “Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India”, for which he conducted extensive ethnographic research among officials charged with coordinating development programmes in rural Uttar Pradesh. He rejects the argument that chronic poverty is a legacy of the colonial state that the post-colonial state is fated to try to eradicate. Instead, Gupta points to political, administrative and judicial inaction that prevents poor Indians from accessing basic necessities such as food and shelter. This inaction – which Gupta reframes as structural violence – allows poverty to become normal and invisible.

During his talk, Gupta theorised the structural violence of poverty as a form of killing by the state—an active process rather than a passive one of ‘allowing to die’. A series of observations helped explain this theorisation. To start, Gupta pointed out that structural violence in the form of poverty persists despite the fact that the Indian poor are not excluded by the state—exclusion being a basis for violence according to Giorgio Agamben’s use of the *homo sacer* concept. Paradoxically, in India, the poor are included in the democratic process and are, in fact, a central part of the system.

Gupta also acknowledged that the Indian state is not indifferent to the plight of the poor; conversely, it sponsors

many poverty amelioration programmes, even if they have no economic rationale or other utilitarian purpose. Gupta questioned, however, why these programmes routinely fail and why their successes are uneven and erratic.

Here, Gupta provided an ethnographic example from his field research to demonstrate how the bureaucratic mechanisms used by the Indian state to look after the poor systematically produce arbitrary outcomes whose consequences can be catastrophic. Using the example of a pensions camp, Gupta argued that the implementation of development programmes is characterised by contingency, fortuitous accidents and the perverse effects of strict rule-following. According to Gupta, the bureaucracy works in barely controlled chaos although it is meant to be a rational apparatus of the state. As a result, bureaucratic processes themselves contribute to the state's structural violence against the poor.

Gupta also tackled the question of why widespread poverty and resultant malnourishment and morbidity have not been addressed more aggressively by the Indian state and civil society. Using the Foucauldian concept of [biopower](#), Gupta argued that poverty in India has been normalised through its documentation in various statistical projects. Once normalised as a feature of the population, deaths from poverty are no longer seen as violations – whether of law, justice, ethics or the constitution – and are thus not punished.

In light of these trends and processes, Gupta concluded that what should be treated as a national crisis has become unexceptional. For more information on Dr Gupta's theorisation of structural violence, see "[Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India](#)", forthcoming in July 2012 from the Duke University Press.

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