

The tension between the liberal democratic tenor of the Constitution and the reality of a highly unequal and hierarchical society is what makes the experience of democracy in India so complex. Liberal ideas are challenged and are routinely tweaked in response to the groundswell of democratic aspirations. Instead of hoping to educate citizens to fit into the discourse of liberalism, it is liberalism and its ideals that are in need of modification so that the experience of democracy comes alive for the Indian citizen.

Krishna Menon
Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi
E-mail: menonk@hotmail.com

Jennifer Bussell, *Corruption and Reform in India: Public Services in the Digital Age*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2012. 306 pages. ₹ 895.

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Walking through the Bangalore Municipal Corporation (Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike) offices some years ago, I marveled at offices overrun by mountains of files stacked ceiling-high, their secrets guarded by a sullen bureaucrat, whose cooperation would be needed to unearth anything at all in that pile. Amidst this erstwhile forest, one might easily conclude that for all the technological progress India's private sector made, including many companies located not far from these offices on M.G. Road, India's government offices have remained untouched and unimproved by the digital revolution. But such a reckoning would be wrong, as Jennifer Bussell demonstrates in this impressive debut book. While the Indian administrative state might appear undisturbed, beneath its musty cobwebs, a stiff breeze, in the form of technology-enabled administrative reform, promises to clear the desks of bureaucrats nationwide.

The agent of this change is the eGovernment service centre that is mushrooming across India. At their most expansive, these centres permit one to accomplish some 45 distinct tasks, all of which once required standing in interminable queues, filling forms in triplicate (one copy of which was destined to rot in a file cabinet in some nondescript government office), engaging middlemen and, too often, paying a bribe to grease the path of one's application for the state's services. Against this backdrop, it is not hyperbolic to suggest that the reforms that implemented these technology-enabled service centres are revolutionizing how Indians deal with their government, though it would be so to suggest the revolution is near complete.

In fact, as Bussell shows through painstaking original data collection, the extent, design and scope of such service centres varies significantly across India's states. While some, like Andhra Pradesh, offer citizens a wide variety of services that can be accomplished through a service centre, others, like Uttarakhand, permit but a couple (p. 43). But if such administrative reform is more efficient, and presumably popular with citizens, why wouldn't all states utilize them equally? The answer, foreshadowed by the book's title, is corruption. Any reform that reduces opportunities to receive bribes in exchange for providing services threatens politicians' access to income used to finance re-election campaigns, and threatens the welfare of bureaucrats whose ability to deliver such rents secures their own livelihood.

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Where dependence on such bribes—what Bussell labels ‘petty’ corruption—is highest, incentives to reform for politicians and bureaucrats alike are lowest. Given the cynicism that characterizes any discussion of India’s politicians, this conclusion appears a double-edged indictment: yes, corruption hinders reform, but the mere fact that some states have embraced such reform implies that at least they are less corrupt.

Not necessarily, argues Bussell. In the most innovative and provocative part of her book, Bussell identifies a second, equally if not more pernicious though less visible, form of corruption, which she labels ‘grand’. Here politicians might be willing to crack down on their underlings extorting petty bribes from petitioners, but only because they obtain their revenues through crony capitalism in which they reward private sector partners with lucrative contracts in exchange for kickbacks. A case in point is Gujarat, often lauded for its reforms, yet simultaneously at the top end of Bussell’s measure of grand corruption (p. 188).

Bussell’s framework is fertile, yielding distinct hypotheses about the timing, scope and nature of the implementation and design of such administrative reform, with each aspect forming the focus of a separate chapter. Her empirical strategy is equally nuanced and multifaceted and highly recommended to any young scholar wanting to see what state-of-the-art research design looks like. Bussell leverages elite interviews drawn from fieldwork in 15(!) states, an original survey and field experiment in Karnataka, an original data set on reform trajectories at the state level and cross-national data to demonstrate the argument’s generalizability. The analysis uses sophisticated statistical techniques to demonstrate support for her hypotheses, while the experiment and qualitative data allow her to examine the plausibility of her theorized causal mechanisms. It is an empirical *tour de force*.

Bussell’s book raises important questions even as it answers many others. First, at its core, this is a book about how a policy innovation spreads across India’s states, yet Bussell stops short of directly modelling the diffusion dynamics. Second, for a strategic theory of policy adoption by forward-looking politicians, there is too little discussion of how India’s well-documented electoral volatility and anti-incumbency bias factor into politicians’ calculations. They might seek to maximize political advantage, but surely they recognize that the reforms they enact today might well serve another master after the next polls. Third, and building on the last point, it would be interesting to consider the unintended consequences of reform. Bussell suggests that the initial wave of reforms are designed to target particular constituents, but how these service centres evolve over a few electoral cycles is worthy of investigation too.

The Indian state occupies an outsized role in its citizens’ lives. Any reform that alters how citizens engage the state on a daily basis is therefore a crucial topic for political scientists to consider. In *Corruption and Reform in India*, Jennifer Bussell has made a lasting contribution to our understanding of public administration and citizen–state relations in India. Future scholars would do well to engage her argument and deepen our understanding of how to make the administrative apparatus of the world’s largest democracy worthy of that role.

Irfan Nooruddin
The Ohio State University
E-mail: nooruddin.3@osu.edu