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Mathew S. Hull, Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan

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REFERENCES

The civilian bureaucracy has been central to everyday life and the imagination of ordinary citizens in Pakistan in a way that is almost unique in South Asia. Pakistani public discourse and scholarly debates on the country’s politics, internal security, foreign policy, and its overall direction inevitably return to the role of the ‘bureaucracy’ and the ‘establishment’ in charting the course of people’s individual and collective lives. These terms are used in the singular in conversations, indicating that, to many Pakistanis, the civilian component of the military-bureaucratic oligarchy appears as a unified and autonomous agent rather than an instrument for implementing official policy that is framed by the political leadership. These popular attitudes towards the bureaucracy reflect its dominant role in shaping Pakistan’s political system, a role that has few parallels elsewhere in South Asia. In the decade after 9/11, the civilian bureaucracy’s fame has been eclipsed by the Pakistani military, especially the ubiquitous secret service to whom people refer simply as ‘the agencies.’ Yet the centrality of the term ‘establishment,’ pronounced ‘astablishment’ in local parlance, remains despite the civilian bureaucracy’s fall from grace in the post-Musharraf era.

Combining long-term ethnographic fieldwork and archival research with meticulous description and bold theoretical insights, Mathew Hull explains why and how the civilian bureaucracy shapes the lives of ordinary Pakistanis. The author is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan who has carried out long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Pakistan and India. The book’s central claim is that written instruments of bureaucratic decision-making such as petitions, letters, files, and lists are graphic artifacts that bring together a range of actors within and outside the government as these artifacts travel from one desk to the other within and across government offices in the capital city of Islamabad. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin (1981)’s insight that words are moored and wrapped in their socio-historical context, Hull argues that official documents are more than mere representations of a reality that they seek to portray and control. Their physical attributes, manner of circulation, and possibilities for manipulation embed them into the very reality they seek to represent and control. He refers to this embedding of official documents into everyday life as the materiality of bureaucratic artifacts. This process opens up an otherwise formal and closed realm of bureaucratic decision-making and makes it vulnerable to influence by ordinary people on the basis of local norms of patronage and with appeals to everyday moral discourses (beyond their formal rights as citizens and petitioners). On the whole, these processes turn the ideal of a rational and disinterested bureaucratic decision-making process on its head and create an economy of the circulation of official paper that blurs the distinction between private and public interests. This vulnerability of formal bureaucratic decision-
making to manipulation by private individuals, in turn, facilitates highly contingent outcomes of struggles over land and housing that depart sharply from the ideal of planned neighborhoods and communities enshrined in the bureaucratic vision of Islamabad, Pakistan’s purpose-built capital city.1

The evidence for Hull’s claims comes from ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Islamabad from 1996 to 1998. The bulk of his field research was carried out in the offices of the two main governing bodies of Islamabad, the Capital Development Authority (CDA) and the Islamabad Capital Territory Administration (ICTA). The author spent significant time observing and, to a limited extent, participating in routine bureaucratic activities in these two offices such as disposal of petitions for land allotment, meetings between petitioners and CDA officials, and the processing of letters and petitions on paper files that form the basis of governmental decision-making in Pakistan. This close attention to the minutiae of office work enabled him to follow the movement of petitions, letters, and files closely. To become familiar with the social geography of Islamabad, he lived in three different neighborhoods of the city located in different residential zones and stayed for a short period in Islamabad’s sister city, Rawalpindi. In addition to the government functionaries who are the main characters in his portrayal of the Islamabad bureaucracy, the writer spent significant time with a broad range of Islamabad residents, including house owners, residents of informal settlements, Imams of local mosques, bankers, shopkeepers, architects, and real-estate dealers. This was supplemented by a close reading of the archival records on the planning of the new capital from 1959 onwards that are kept at the National Archives of Pakistan and at the Capital Development Authority (CDA).

In successive chapters of the book, Hull explores the colonial roots of South Asian bureaucracies’ excessive reliance on paper and the emergence of the contemporary ‘political economy of paper’ in the postcolonial period by following the trails of different products of official paperwork. In the introductory chapter, he argues that Pakistani bureaucracy’s belief in paper as the only acceptable record or medium of an official transaction is rooted in the British East India Company’s attempts to control its officials’ corrupt practices by relying on a paper trail or graphic record for even the smallest transaction. This attempt to control company officials would subsequently transform into the discourse of ‘native corruption’ that was so popular among British colonial officers in India. Each document in the colonial system of governance was vouched for by another document thereby obviating the need to rely on personal testimony or accountability for transactions. This has meant a thorough paper mediation of everyday life in Pakistan to the extent that the paper record of reality has become more important than the reality of a situation. This precedence of paper over reality is revealed to the author in a tragicomic fashion when he finds out that a clerical error in the recording of the engine and chassis number of his car cannot be corrected even though the actual numbers are clearly etched in metal on the engine and chassis themselves. The concerned clerk in the Motor Vehicle Registration Office bluntly informs him that the information recorded in his car registration documents takes precedence over the actual numbers.

In Chapter 1 Hull documents the attempts of Pakistan’s first military dictator, Ayub Khan, to sanitize and rationalize the work of government officials by relocating the national capital from Karachi to Islamabad. Among the many justifications put forward for this relocating, Ayub Khan’s advisors argued that Karachi, the commercial heart of Pakistan and the nation’s first capital, was not suitable as the national capital because the
proximity of government officials to the business community and ordinary people engendered a culture of corruption; vested interests might influence the process of governmental decision-making. To realize its dream of a bureaucratic utopia devoid of the messiness of everyday politics in Pakistan, the Ayub regime hired the services of celebrated Greek architect Constantine Doxiadis who visualized and helped build the new capital along a rational and orderly geometric grid.

In the four ethnographically thick chapters that follow, Hull shows how the unassuming office file and related bureaucratic artifacts came to overshadow Doxiadis’ elaborate master plan and maps as the main instruments of decision-making for the CDA in Islamabad. Chapter 2 describes how petitions, visiting cards, and ‘parchis’—little slips of paper with requests for favor scribbled on them—mediate encounters between bureaucrats and ordinary people looking for the resolution of their grievances. On the surface, petitions and parchis appear to be opposites: a petition enacts political subjectivity through the citizen’s direct address to the government for solving some problem while a parchi establishes personal contact between individuals based on participation in a common circle of friendship, kinship, or work. In practice, they travel hand in hand, with the parchi anchoring the petition document in a social network of influence and patronage that ultimately help decide whether the petitioner’s plea will be considered seriously by the concerned officials or gather dust among a pile of similar unattended petitions.

Chapter 3 follows the trajectory of the humble and unwieldy office file with its green note sheet, dusty khaki jacket, and piles of documents secured together with a flimsy cotton string that is the main instrument for deciding individual cases for land allotment, permits of housing construction, and extension. Hull shows how files act as the sites of inscription for a continuous dialogue between various officials over a particular case, which results in the production of a collective voice. Collective agency is produced through the juxtaposition, layering, and clamor of conflicting opinions and fragmented voices of individual officers rather than a single voice that reflects an overarching organizational consensus.

Chapters 4 and 5 show how the political economy of paper shapes the making of places and struggles over land rights by tracing the relations among people, place, and paper in the governance of specific projects. In particular, Hull documents local residents’ practice of building dummy houses on otherwise unoccupied land in Islamabad’s outlying villages that the CDA plans to expropriate for redevelopment. He explains that even though the compensation offered by the CDA is substantial according to the criteria of agricultural land use and the prevailing living standards of the villagers, the villagers feel that it is not a fair compensation. The villagers contend that they need substantially higher compensation because the CDA would be selling their agricultural land after redevelopment for urban housing at prices that will be several times higher than the compensation paid to them. They also argue that they have a moral claim to a higher share in the profits that the CDA will be making on the redevelopment of their land. In order to force the CDA to pay them the amount of land compensation they feel it genuinely owes them, they use the tactic of erecting dummy houses on their land, sometimes settling outsiders as temporary residents in these fake houses, to show that it is built-up space and that, therefore, the owner is entitled to payment of higher compensation. In more extreme cases, the affected villagers forged their compensation case files with the help of lower-level functionaries in the CDA to buttress their claims for
higher compensation. In this way, villagers’ moral discourses on what constituted a fair compensation for land expropriated by the CDA became entangled with the illicit circulation of official paper to shape the outcome of struggles over land in and around Islamabad.

9 Government of Paper stands out among recent scholarship on Pakistan and South Asia in general, and on the bureaucracy in particular, for its attunement to local practices and original theoretical insights. In a post-millennial decade dubbed as the age of globalization and portrayed through the frictionless flow of commodities and ideas across borders, it brings the analytic focus back to how the state is experienced in everyday life. Responding to Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2001)’s call to move away from over-arching descriptors such as ‘the state’ and ‘globalization’ in favor of mid-range conceptualizations, the study shows how state-effects are produced and how the government is experienced by people through particular encounters with government officials and the paperwork they generate. In doing so, it takes issue with earlier anthropological and sociological research on the state that tended to overstate the ability of state authorities to shape society on a large scale (Scott 1998). In particular, Hull shows that bureaucratic discourses are neither fully self-referential, that is, independent of the discourse-external world, nor capable of writing the society in their image without being influenced by their own social milieu.

10 The book also makes several important contributions to the broader study of bureaucracy in South Asia. It departs sharply from stereotypes of bureaucratic corruption and nepotism and challenges received notions of governmental organizations in South Asia as distant, closed, and monolithic entities. Instead it shows that bureaucratic practices are very much intertwined in the texture of everyday life in Pakistan. The choice of a well-planned city like Islamabad and a relatively well-resourced government organization like the CDA as the subject of analysis further strengthens the empirical case for his arguments. Based on Hull’s study, it can be argued that the process of incremental, fragmented, and contested bureaucratic decision-making is central to South Asian bureaucracies and cannot be ascribed to the lack of human resources, training opportunities, and financial constraints in governmental organizations, especially at the provincial and district levels. At the same time, the book emphasizes the need to pay closer attention to local norms and moral discourses in order to understand bureaucratic practices and their outcomes in particular places.

11 Nevertheless, there are some important omissions in this book that bear on the study of state and society in South Asia. First, in his preoccupation with bureaucratic artifacts and discourse genres, Hull tends to downplay the significance of the broader moral critique of the bureaucracy in Pakistan. People in Pakistan, as well as elsewhere in South Asia for that matter, participate in presenting parchis from powerful people to influence government officials, grease the palms of clerks to move their cases forward, and make the rounds of government offices forever in order to get things done. However, getting things done is not the same as accepting how things are done. This process places an enormous burden on and causes significant suffering to citizens and lends weight and force to a moral critique of corruption and an earnest desire for political change and bureaucratic reform. This has been evident in the recent rise of the Anna Hazare movement and the Aam Admi Party’s (AAP) surprise election victory in India, and cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan’s challenge to the more established political parties in Pakistan on a platform of ending corrupt practices in the government.
Secondly, it is important to note that the CDA makes decisions about Islamabad alone and is accessible to Islamabad residents (victims or beneficiaries of its decisions) who, in turn, make attempts to influence the outcome of those decisions. However, Islamabad’s legion of ministries, divisions, and directorates makes decisions about the rest of Pakistani citizenry who may not have timely information, physical access, kinship networks, or financial resources for influencing those decisions. Rather than being completely exclusionary, distance acts as a physical, social, and political barrier or filter for individuals and minority ethnic groups such as the Sindhi, Baloch, and Saraiki people who have differential access to the corridors of power in the national capital. Lastly, Hull tends to adopt the position of an anthropologist who has gone ‘native’ and does not reflect in depth on how his position as an American anthropologist from an elite academic institution structured his access to the bureaucracy and his perception of bureaucratic encounters. As a result, his narrative has the tenor of an adventurous journey down the rabbit hole of Pakistani bureaucracy and does not give equal weight to the feelings of trepidation, fear, anxiety, and outright rejection that most Pakistanis feel when approaching a government office.

On the whole, Hull’s book is a landmark ethnography of Pakistani society and should serve as a touchstone for future social research on Pakistan and South Asia. It is a welcome addition to a growing body of fieldwork-based scholarship that works against the grain of reductionist and essentialist representations of Pakistan as a problem to be fixed and, instead, treats its subject, the Pakistani government and people, with attention, care, and respect. As Amelie Blom (2012) and others have argued, the bracketing of Pakistan within a narrowly constructed Western security and developmental discourse has led to the production of generic analyses that obfuscate the crucial problems facing Pakistani people. Government of Paper is an essential read for scholars, graduate students, and policymakers interested in understanding Pakistani society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. The contrast of the religious, even puritan, connotation of the name Islamabad—the abode of Islam—and its popular association with uncaring bureaucrats and palace intrigues is deployed to ironic effect in everyday conversations, art, and theater in Pakistan. For instance, in a famous TV
drama by Pakistani playwright Amar Jalil, an Islamabad resident advises an outside villager searching for his missing son Islam who had come to Islamabad in search of employment: ‘Go back where you came from. You will not find Islam in Islamabad!’

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