The Politics of Claim-Making in India

Diego Maiorano

CLAIMING THE STATE: Active Citizenship and Social Welfare in Rural India. *By Gabrielle Kruks-Wisner.* *Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xxii, 336 pp. (Tables, figures) US$34.99, paper. ISBN 9781107199750.*

DEMANDING DEVELOPMENT: The Politics of Public Goods Provision in India's Urban Slums. *Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. By Adam Michael Auerbach.* *Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xvii, 304 pp. (Tables, graphs, maps, B&W photos.) US$39.95, paper. ISBN 978-1-108-74133-0.*

CLIENTS AND CONSTITUENTS: Political Responsiveness in Patronage Democracies. *Modern South Asia. By Jennifer Bussell.* *Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 390 pp. (Illustrations.) US$105.00, cloth. ISBN 9780190945398.*

Abstract

How do Indian citizens access the state? While a standard answer would be "through patronage," three recent books show that clientelism, while important, is just part of the story. Not just passive clients at the mercy of their political patrons, Indian citizens actively engage the state and their representatives to make claims and secure what is due to them. Gabrielle Kruks-Wisner's *Claiming the State—Active Citizenship and Social Welfare in Rural India* shows how rural dwellers navigate the local government system to access social welfare. Adam Auerbach's *Demanding Development: The Politics of Public Goods Provision in India's Urban Slums* documents how local political workers make claims on behalf of their neighbours and provide their settlements with essential services. Jennifer Bussell's *Clients and Constituents: Political Responsiveness in Patronage Democracies* persuasively demonstrates the importance of higher-level representatives in providing assistance to their constituencies. Together, these books not only demonstrate how political the daily life of ordinary citizens is, but also how the Indian state, while far from its Weberian ideal, is much more inclusive than previously thought.

Diego Maiorano is a research fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore. His research focuses on Indian politics and development.
Email: dmaiorano@nus.edu.sg

Introduction

How do Indian citizens access public services? A standard answer in political science would be straightforward: in most developing countries—especially in "patronage democracies" like India[1]—access to the state occurs via patronage networks and clientelistic ties. Three recent books—Adam Auerbach's *Demanding Development,* Jennifer Bussell's *Clients and Constituents,* and Gabrielle Kruks-Wisner's *Claiming the State* —challenge this view and offer in-depth analyses of how Indian citizens engage the state to access essential public services.

The starting point of the three books is familiar. The Indian state, because of a lack of capacity, scarce resources, and the pervasiveness of patronage logics, is unable to provide services in a widespread and fair manner. Whether it is getting a ration card, a streetlight in one's neighbourhood, or placement in a good school for one's children, many Indian citizens cannot expect the state to proactively provide these essential services. As Kruks-Wisner puts it, "these resources are rarely allocated in a rule-bound or regularized fashion; rather, they are subject to the discretionary—and, at times, arbitrary—control of local officials, as well as to leakage and graft at all levels of the administrative hierarchy. Access to the state and its resources is thus highly uneven and, for many, elusive—even as the state grows increasingly central to the lives and livelihoods of its citizens (642).[2] How citizens navigate India's political and administrative systems to obtain what they are entitled to is a central theme of the three books reviewed here.

The Books in a Nutshell

The books have a lot in common. First, they are all great books. Individually and collectively, they seriously challenge existing theories and assumptions about the working of the Indian state, by dealing a fatal blow to accounts centred on ethnicity-mediated clientelism as the crucial (if not the only) mechanism regulating the functioning of the state. Furthermore, the three books provide elegant and innovative theories of distributive politics and find an optimal balance between the necessary abstraction of theoretical formulations and the "noisy" reality on which the theories are based. On the one hand, the three books represent the vanguard of a new research agenda on distributive politics that "subverts" many of the tenets of previous scholarship on distributive politics;[3] on the other, they are books that will be impossible to ignore for those working on Indian politics and, more generally, comparative politics. The books are also important for other fields, including

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[1]   K. Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
[2]   For Kruks-Wisner's book, I refer to the Kindle edition locations, instead of pages.
[3]   Adnan Naseemullah, "Patronage vs. Ideology in Indian Politics," *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 59 (2): 2.

development studies, political anthropology, and—should anyone from the field venture outside their comfort zone—economics.

Second, the authors are all based in the United States, which has a clear influence on their methodological approach. This is particularly evident in the use of mixed methods, which has gradually become the standard in the US. While the three books rely heavily on quantitative methods, they are also based on an impressive wealth of qualitative data, which is not treated as a mere complement to the quantitative analysis; rather, it profoundly shapes the arguments and the theories developed in the books.

Third, while politics is obviously central to the three works, electoral politics is kept in the background. Rather, it is the politics between elections that takes centre stage. This element distinguishes the books from much literature on distributive politics, focused on investigating the relationship between electoral results and distribution of resources. In the three books under review, on the contrary, the processes at the centre of analysis are everyday political acts that Indian citizens and politicians perform to navigate the intricacies of India's democracy.

Finally, the three books could be considered—with a little bit of a stretch—three volumes of the same book. In fact, all three authors focus on explaining how Indian citizens access public services. The first two "volumes" are largely concerned with how citizens engage with the local state in rural (Kruks-Wisner) and urban (Auerbach) areas. The third "volume" (Bussell) brings the story forward, looking at what strategies Indian citizens employ when the tools analyzed in the first two "volumes" fail: chiefly, they escalate their requests to higher levels—that of their state or national representatives.

Overall, the three books provide a very detailed set of analyses that make us understand that politics is central to determine how, and on what terms, Indian citizens access services, which in many cases are crucial for the livelihoods of their families or the welfare of their communities. "Politics" here is not a bad word. While the word has accrued a dubious reputation among scholars working on public service delivery—the "good governance" gurus have been trying to convince us that if only we could get rid of politics (in particular, clientelistic and identity politics) then most problems of developing countries would disappear—the three studies under review show that this reputation is at least partly undeserved. First, as the three authors show, politics is ubiquitous and central to understanding both good and bad developmental outcomes. In fact, politics—including but by no means limited to, clientelistic politics—is one way in which the state becomes more inclusive, whether it is through constituency service (Bussell), claim-making by ordinary citizens (Kruks-Wisner) or intermediation by party-affiliated brokers (Auerbach). Second, the authors show that certain key political features of Indian citizens—in particular, their caste, religious background, and even political affiliation—have relatively little influence on whether they are able to access the desired services, in exchange for political support. This contrasts

with a long scholarly tradition that ethnicity-mediated clientelism is *the* key mechanism which explains both benefit distribution and political behaviour.[4] The image of the Indian state that emerges from these books is certainly quite far from the Weberian ideal, but it is equally far from the patronage-obsessed image that emerges from many earlier works on India and, more generally, other developing countries. Clientelism is important—but it is not the whole story. The three authors paint a portrait of a state that struggles to be inclusive, mainly because of a lack of state capacity (rather than because of politicians' eagerness to reward supporters and punish opponents). The authors show how both politicians and ordinary citizens respond to the lack of state capacity in the pursuit of their political objectives and their access to social services.

Claim-Making in Rural India

A first answer to the question "How do Indians access public services?" can be found in the very first pages of Kruks-Wisner's book: many rural dwellers in Rajasthan—the site of the author's fieldwork—manage to obtain desired services by asking for them. In fact, 76 percent of the respondents to Kruks-Wisner's survey "actively sought and made claims on the state, taking up a wide range of strategies—both formal and informal, direct and mediated —in an effort to secure public resources" (408–409).

The book contains a wealth of qualitative data on what forms these claims take: people write and sign petitions to state officials or local representatives; visit government offices or politicians' residences; ask local leaders or "brokers" to follow through on their petitions; attend meetings and protests; and combine all of the above. All these acts, the author notes, are not only coping strategies by citizens trying to access public services, but they constitute a quotidian form of "political participation"—between elections—that forms a crucial part of their "active citizenship," or the set of practices through which citizens negotiate with the state. This is an important point made by Kruks-Wisner, as it helps the reader understand how deeply political the lives of ordinary people are, especially those who are dependent on an ineffective state for accessing their entitlements. The practice of "active citizenship" thus becomes necessary to bridge the gap between state intentions—the provision of a more or less comprehensive safety net and essential public goods—and actual capacity.

The book answers two key questions: First, why do some individuals make claims and others do not? Second, among those who do make claims, why

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[4]   M. Weiner, *Party-building in a new nation: The Indian National Congress* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1967); L. Rudolph and S. Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1967); K. Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed* ; T. Tachil, *Elite Parties, Poor Voters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

do they adopt different strategies to access the state? Kruks-Wisner's theory is that two factors shape claim-making: the first one is what she calls the "institutional terrain" of the state. For citizens to make claims it is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition that the state is actually capable of delivering services in their area—which makes the state's actions visible—but unable (or unwilling) to distribute them evenly. The visibility and unevenness in service delivery not only generates awareness and expectations about what the state should provide (but doesn't), but also supports the main motivation for claim-making in the first place: why spend time and energy asking for a service that is readily available or, conversely, that is impossible to get.

A second precondition to claim-making is the ability to do so. This is not trivial, as making a claim requires a number of capabilities that are not necessarily common, especially among more disadvantaged groups. These capabilities include understanding the local political and institutional systems—who decides on what? —and the availability of adequate channels—brokers, political leaders, accessible state officials—to get access to those political and institutional systems. The discussion on capabilities is interesting because it is not only a precondition to, but also a consequence of, successful claim-making. Jenkins and Manor argue that one of the effects of working under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is precisely that of bolstering poor people's "political capacity": "their awareness, connections, confidence, and skills."[5] This might be seen as a virtuous cycle whereby people access welfare and increase their capabilities, which in turn make them better able to access further goods and services. In short, citizens make claims if they are sufficiently motivated to do so, if they think their effort is worthwhile, and if they know how to act or know someone who could act on their behalf.

Kruks-Wisner's empirical analysis shows that the majority of her respondents make claims to the Gram Panchayat[6] (62 percent). The role of brokers—omnipresent in the political science literature, which is highly focused on urban areas—is much more limited. Only 17 percent of survey respondents approached a broker to make a claim, although this rises to 34 percent if we only consider locations where brokers are actually present. These figures contrast with the findings of Auerbach's *Demanding Development*, which emphasizes the crucial role of brokers in mediating between urban residents and the state. In rural areas, it seems that the state is the preferential avenue for accessing services, underscoring the much more developed local-level democratic institutions (the Gram Panchayats) in rural, as compared to urban, areas. Kruks-Wisner's survey also "anticipates" one of the arguments of the third book under review, Bussell's *Clients and Constituents*, in which

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[5]   Rob Jenkins and James Manor, *Politics and the Right to Work: India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7.
[6]   The Gram Panchayats are village-level elected institutions, usually consisiting of a president and a council.

the author argues that citizens unable to obtain services locally will then approach higher-level institutions, like their MLAs or MPs. In fact, as many as 22 percent of Kruks-Wisner's respondents approached them to make a claim.

The next piece of the puzzle—why do some, all else being equal, make claims and others do not—Kruks-Wisner addresses by turning to the second main factor that shapes claim-making: "citizens' social and spatial exposure." People live in a constrained geography, whereby social and spatial boundaries—one's caste, class, gender, language, residency, etc. —limit a person's movements and who they meet or observe. Where these boundaries are porous, Kruks-Wisner argues, "the effects on claim-making are expansive: through exposure beyond the immediate community and locality, individuals gain information and knowledge of the state; develop expectations concerning service delivery; learn about potential claim-making strategies; and forge pathways to officials" (43). As a result, the more "mobile" people are, the more likely they will make claims on the state and potentially access the desired services.

One of the surprising findings of Kruks-Wisner's analysis is that class and caste do not explain much in terms of the probability of making a claim. The only significant social variable that makes a noticeable difference is gender, where women are much less likely to make a claim (reflecting in turn their reduced mobility compared to men in a highly patriarchal society like that of Rajasthan). However, within the category of women, socio-economic status impacts the likelihood of making claims in an unexpected way: for instance, ST women (the most disadvantaged group in the state) are more likely to make claims than upper-caste women. Socio-economic background, however, partly explains the variety of means through which claims are made. The wealthier and the more privileged are able to make claim through more channels, reflecting their higher social capital and mobility.

Claim-Making in Urban India

Adam Auerbach's book brings us to urban (slum) areas in Jaipur (Rajasthan) and Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh). While the setting is different, the main question of the study is somewhat similar to Kruks-Wisner's: "Why are some vulnerable communities able to demand and secure development from the state while others fail?" (3). While Kruks-Wisner's focus is on who makes the claims, here the unit of analysis is not the individual, but the slum settlement as a whole. However, the key mechanism is similar: settlements are able to secure development goods largely by asking for them, through brokers. This "every-day claim-making," from the bottom-up, is the central political process analyzed in the book (25).

A key difference between rural and urban India is the much more

pronounced role of mediated claims in the latter setting. Whereas Kruks-Wisner shows that rural dwellers mostly approach state institutions directly, Auerbach's argument is that "the chief determinant of the provision of public goods and services can be found within the political organisation of settlements and the degree to which they have been integrated into larger party networks in the city" (4). The more party workers (brokers) are active in a slum, the more services residents are able to get. The author identifies three key mechanisms that explain this empirical relation. First, the more dense party networks are, the higher the competition between party workers, as they are eager to show that they "get things done," hence maintaining their popular support and usefulness for their party. Second, a higher number of party workers in a slum means more avenues for the residents to reach out to important decision makers, most importantly senior party leaders, who are able to mobilize the state apparatus. Third, a higher presence of party workers enhances the capacity of residents to exercise pressure on the state through collective action.

Overall, Auerbach shows that one additional party worker in a settlement increases the presence of paved roads coverage (+6.72 percentage points), streetlights (+1.12 per 1,000 residents), trash removal (+2.35 percentage points) and medical camps (+2.94 percentage points). The other two indicators in Auerbach's analysis (piped water and sewer connections) are not influenced by the presence of party workers, presumably because they are more difficult to obtain (193). The author also shows that the best possible situation for a slum resident is when not only are there a good number of party workers available, but they all belong to the same party, which decreases the possibility that residents will fail to attribute credit where it is due (thus increasing the political appeal for senior party leaders to provide services and get credit for it).

The book is based on an amazing wealth of quantitative and qualitative data. The former includes surveys conducted in 111 slum settlements in both cities, as well as satellite data used to capture the presence of a particular service (like streetlights, paved roads, etc.). But it is the qualitative data that is particularly innovative and rich. Besides prolonged fieldwork in eight slums (four in each city), during which the author interviewed residents, politicians, state officials, and party workers, Auerbach was able to access and analyze the private "archives" of party workers in the settlements. These collections include newspaper clips, petitions, letter, pictures, posters, etc., related to their activities as "slum leaders," which, in some cases, go back for decades. On the basis of these materials, Auerbach is able to trace the micro history of the settlements (chapter 5), and he uses this data to develop his theory, establish the direction of causality in the relationship between density of party networks and access to services, and provide interesting insights on the day-to-day activities of party workers and their struggle to provide services to their fellow residents.

Two findings are particularly compelling: first, the ethnic composition of a slum doesn't seem to make much of a difference in terms of access to public services. If anything, Auerbach tentatively suggests, greater ethnic diversity could actually be beneficial, as this is associated with a higher number of party workers, which in turn is associated with better services. This goes against not only the widespread belief that politicians act on the basis of "caste arithmetic" when deciding to spend their political capital, it also goes against much of the literature in political science that claims an inverse relationship between ethnic fragmentation and public service delivery. According to Banerjee et al., this position is "widely accepted"[7] and "one of the most powerful hypotheses in political economy."[8] Aurbach's finding is probably due to the fact that the six goods in the analysis are public goods, from which no one can be excluded. Furthermore, slums are ethnically fragmented, which makes it more difficult to target co-ethnics (something that scholars found to be relevant in other contexts as well).[9] This might also explain the widespread presence of interethnic associations and mobilization, as documented by Auerbach. People might vote their caste, as the kind-of-unproven adagio goes, but, between elections, bread and butter issues trump ethnic differences.

The second interesting finding is the crucial role of political parties in mediating between the state and the citizens. This contrasts with the literature on India's political parties—reputed to be weakly organized—and it challeges a broader literature that would predict that urban dwellers had many more tools at their disposal to access the state directly, compared to their rural counterparts. Yet a reading of Kruks-Wisner's and Auerbach's books points in the opposite direction: rural citizens are much more likely to directly access elected and non-elected officials than slum residents, who rely more heavily on party organizations. The authors attribute this discrepancy to the rural population's greater democratic decentralization, higher visibility of service provision (and subsequent expectations), but weaker party organization—perhaps a consequence of relatively efficient Panchayats that makes party organization not needed for service distribution. This is an argument that the two authors have developed in a recent joint paper.[10]

[7]   A. Alesina, R. Baqir, and W. Easterly, "Public goods and ethnic divisions," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 114, no. 4 (1999): 1243–1284; J. Habyarimana et al., "Why does ethnic diversity undermine public goods provision?" *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 4 (2007): 709–725.

[8]   Abhijit Banerjee, Lakshmi Iyer, and Rohini Somanathan, "History, Social Divisions and Public Goods in Rural India," *Journal of the European Economic Association* 3 (April-May 2005): 639–647.

[9]   J.A. Harris and D.N. Posner, "(Under what conditions) do politicians reward their supporters? Evidence from Kenya's Constituencies Development Fund," *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 1 (2019): 123–139.

[10]   A.M. Auerbach and G. Kruks-Wisner, "The Geography of Citizenship Practice: How the Poor Engage the State in Rural and Urban India," *Perspectives on Politics* 18, no. 4 (2020): 1–17.

Claim-Making at Higher Levels

Finally, Jennifer Bussell's *Clients and Constituents* picks up where the first two books end. What happens when citizens' requests for services at the local level fail to yield results? Bussell's answer is that many rural and urban dwellers escalate their requests at the higher levels of the polity, that of the MLA and the MP. In fact, Bussell points out that meeting ordinary citizens and attending to their requests is "a predominant activity of many elected officials in India" (4), who spend, on average, about a quarter of their time in meetings with individual citizens (25). More specifically, and to give a sense of how time-consuming this activity is—as well as the level of detail offered by Bussell—national- and state-level politicians reported receiving, on average, 342 phone calls, 328 WhatsApp messages, 146 texts and 366 in-person visits a week (75). Yet again, a key strategy used by Indian citizens to access services is to ask for them.

The main focus of the book, as with the other two reviewed here, is on the politics between elections. In particular, the book analyzes a particular (and, in the literature on developing countries, often overlooked) form of distributive politics, namely constituency service, which the author defines as "noncontingent, nonpartisan attention to the needs of citizens" (6), offered by high-level politicians as a routine form of politics. The definition itself contains a major theoretical puzzle: in a "patronage democracy" we would not expect services to be delivered in a noncontingent, nonpartisan fashion. But that is exactly what Bussell documents in great detail and with an extraordinary wealth of quantitative and qualitative data, which include surveys of politicians and citizens (from nearly all of the Indian states), field experiments, interviews, and, perhaps most innovatively, "shadowing" of politicians (in five states), whereby the author followed and observed political leaders at various levels in their daily routine. (Bussell recently published an interesting paper explaining in detail the methodology).[11]

The puzzle is unravelled through a set of compelling arguments, each meticulously backed by very solid evidence. First, politicians have incentives to provide impartial assistance to their constituents, especially in terms of developing a personal—and somewhat independent from their parties—following. This is indeed an important asset for a politician in India, where it is far from uncommon for them to "jump ship" from one party to another.

Second, providing nonpartisan assistance does not mean that they do not rely on "traditional" forms of patronage to distribute goods, favours, and services. They do, chiefly at the local level and, as argued by Auerbach and Kruks-Wisner, mainly through local brokers (in urban areas) or panchayat officials (in rural areas), which are part of their parties' organizational machines. Constituency service, on the other hand, is a "personal" service

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[11]   J. Bussell, "Shadowing as a Tool for Studying Political Elites," *Political Analysis* 28, no. 4 (2020): 1–18.

that they provide on top of clientelist strategies and irrespective of a citizen's class, caste, or political affiliation. It is, in other words, a form of "post-clientelistic" politics, which other scholars have also identified as an important element of India's democracy.[12]

Third, and very interestingly, Bussell argues that it is precisely the fact that much of the distributional activities of political parties at the local level follow the logic of a "patronage democracy" that creates the conditions for both demand and supply of constituency services (see chapter 7). Echoing Kruks-Wisner, why would citizens spend time and energy to request the assistance of high-level politicians if services are readily available at the local level? Constituency service can thus "offer a particularly effective model for appealing to voters who are not integrated into local clientelist or partisan benefit-delivery networks" (10). Citizens from Karnataka assessing the effectiveness of such appeals seem to agree with Bussell: 89 percent of those who requested the assistance of MPs or MLAs said they succeeded in getting the desired service, compared to 69 percent of those who approached local politicians (232).

Constituency service, Bussell concludes, constitutes a genuine form of democratic accountability, although it is unclear what influence this has on electoral outcomes.

Conclusion

The three books under review are illuminating, methodologically sophisticated, and theoretically innovative, as well as offering an extremely rich base of evidence. Overall, they challenge a great deal of literature on distributive politics and provide a much more nuanced, and realistic, picture of how things actually work on the ground. This is, to this reviewer, the greatest merit of the books: their solid grounding in India's messy, noisy, chaotic reality, thanks to the wealth of qualitative data that the authors collected and analyzed. It is through these data that we are familiarized with the daily practices of citizens, brokers, and politicians—the acts that give substance to the practice of Indian democracy. In other words, the authors truly help us to understand how the Indian state actually works, in its daily functioning.

The picture that emerges is both concerning and promising. On the one hand, it is clear that, for ordinary citizens, the rule of law remains elusive. The state is far from its Weberian ideal. To get the state to act on their behalf citizens have to appeal to someone *"more equal"* than them. While this is true

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[12] C. Elliott, "Moving from clientelist politics toward a welfare regime: evidence from the 2009 assembly election in Andhra Pradesh," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 49, no. 1 (2011): 48–79; J. Manor, "Post-Clientelist Initiatives," in *Democratization in the Global South: The Importance of Transformative Politics*, eds. K. Stokke and O. Törnquist (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 243–253.

of most societies in the world, the fact that access to essential services is often contingent on having access to the right person is certainly a major cause of concern for India's development prospects. On the other hand, however, ordinary people, one way or another, do get access to services, if not through patronage networks, then through direct access to representatives. This is indeed, as Bussell argues, a form of (perhaps imperfect) democratic accountability that is a crucial element of India's patronage democracy.

In other words, the distributive mechanisms analyzed in these books show how politicians and ordinary citizens respond to the lack of state capacity that makes access to public services uneven. The key mechanism identified by the three authors is that citizens *ask* for these services, whether to the local representitives (elected or not) of the state (Kruks-Wisner), to intermediaries (Auerbach) or higher-level politicians (Bussell). And these actors do act on the citizens' requests. This response—some sort of quasi-institutional *jugaad* (a colloquial Hindi word to describe a creative way or workaround to respond to a problem)—might not be a governance-textbook one, but it is certainly effective in making the state more inclusive.

To conclude, the emphasis on everyday political processes makes these three books a great addition to scholarship on the politics of ordinary people in developing countries. This scholarship has gone from considering poor people as inherently passive subjects resigned to their destiny,[13] to recognizing them as playing an increasingly active role in contesting inequality, oppression, and power relations.[14] The books reviewed here, by focusing on the political agency of citizens in engaging the state to claim their due, bring the story of the increasing assertiveness of ordinary people a step forward.

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[13] O. Lewis, *Five families: Mexican case studies in the culture of poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

[14] A. Bayat, *Life as politics: How ordinary people change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); I. Roy, *Politics of the poor: negotiating democracy in contemporary India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); D. Maiorano, S. Thapar-Bjorkert, and H. Blomkvist, "Politics as negotiation: Changing caste norms in rural India," *Development and Change,* (15 June 2021), https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12654