Governing Water in India

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bureaucracies, such as the water bureaucracy, are often viewed as nameless, faceless abstractions. In practice, the water bureaucracy is made up of individual state employees who are often left with the task of managing the stresses of water-related crises in the state. Consider the experience of the engineer in charge of Chembarambakkam Reservoir, which he described as he reflected back on his experience during the historic flood in 2015 (interview, January 19, 2021). He recalled being unable to leave the reservoir for a period of ten days while he monitored the flood levels, fearing that the entire reservoir would be breached. He recounted the political pressure of higher-level state employees phoning him continually as they faced mounting public anger from city residents. His own home was completely flooded, and his family had to evacuate to a hotel, but he could not leave his station for a moment because he feared being blamed for the flood damage. As a technical worker without a college degree in engineering, he had remained at the level of assistant engineer and was now only a few months away from retirement. The hidden work of such public sector workers and bureaucrats, who quietly persist in trying to do their jobs both in times of crisis and in routine contexts, usually does not merit much attention in the grand narratives on bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption on the one hand and institutional reform and good governance on the other. Yet “the state” is as much made up
of the microdynamics of such practices and employee action or inaction as it is of the grander processes of reform and policy.

Although debates on institutional reforms and questions of governance often focus on narratives of corrupt, inefficient, and recalcitrant bureaucrats in India, a more variegated institutional field is at play—one marked by differences between and within bureaucratic organizations. These patterns illustrate both the political and economic constraints on bureaucratic agency as well as spaces in which bureaucrats have tried to engage in constructive and effective governance. A complete account of the challenges of water governance and the dynamics of institutional reform requires a framework that incorporates a more complex understanding of bureaucrats. Such an account unsettles explanations of failures of governance and regulatory reforms in terms of exceptionalist arguments that locate such failures in a presumed monolithic inertia of the “Indian bureaucracy.” The complexities of the bureaucracy in the postliberalization period also lie in the fact that the bureaucracy is itself a target and site of restructuring as well as an agent in the implementation of reforms.

Consider one of the singular historical figures of Tamil Nadu’s water bureaucracy, Professor A. Mohanakrishnan. His professional diary contains the following comment on an Advocates’ Conference he attended as Tamil Nadu’s chairman of the Cauvery Technical Cell: “Very little done. I felt sad on waste of time and money and to satisfy my conscience, have not been joining the costly lunch provided by the hotel and carried my own butter-milk rice these days” (2016b, 72). Mohanakrishnan’s observations about a meeting that he had attended to discuss the Cauvery interstate dispute provide a rare glimpse of the personal reflections of a key actor in Tamil Nadu’s water bureaucracy. His reflections point to a realm that is rarely addressed in either public narratives or academic writings on India’s bureaucratic institutions. Mohanakrishnan refers to his response to the waste of time and money not in the terms of conventional rational actor models of bureaucratic agency or in the traditional terms of social and political narratives of resistance. Rather, he refers to his resistance to the waste of time and money—a familiar microexample for analysts and critics of bureaucratic practices—as a way to satisfy his conscience. This response unsettles the customary economic, political, or institutional frames that form the grammar of both public and academic analyses of India’s bureaucrats.
The idea of a bureaucrat’s conscience has had little discursive space, given the weight of condemnation of the figure of the Indian bureaucrat. Bureaucratic agency in both scholarly works and public discourses in India has largely been described through the control of information, access, and resources that is executed through vast mazes of paper, patronage, and petty power (Gupta 2012; Tarlo 2003). Scholarship in comparative contexts has rightly pointed to the ways in which bureaucratic structures are both embedded within and generative of exclusion, inequality, and what Michael Herzfeld has termed “social indifference” (Herzfeld 1992; Lipsky 2010). The bureaucrat has, often justifiably, come to embody the worst excesses of the state. Yet while the figure of the bureaucrat looms large in such analyses, there is little discussion of the bureaucrat as a complex subject of history. In the Indian context, the subaltern turn of analysis that has sought to present the subjectivity and agency of various social groups in nuanced ways has not extended to the bureaucrat. The figure of the “bureaucrat” in fact encompasses a widely stratified set of individuals and social groups. The top tiers of the bureaucracy range from the elite levels of the state, such as the national IAS cadres, to the top tiers of the state government. However, the full fabric of the bureaucracy consists of a broad range of intermediary employees of varying privilege and status, from generalist administrators to specialists such as engineers and technical experts to lower-tier public sector employees.

In many ways, the analytical and theoretical gaps in analyses of bureaucrats are an understandable effect of the structural location that the bureaucracy occupies in the political economy of India. The bureaucracy is the arm of the state that executes policies of development and is the institutional field responsible for the (often ineffective) implementation of state policies. The bureaucracy is inextricably wound up in both the historical weight of long-standing developmental failures and the legacies of singular but spectacular crises, such as the Emergency period. Critics of the effects of India’s developmental state have aptly shown the ways in which the bureaucracy has encoded various forms of power relations that have transformed poor communities into targets and casualties of state programs that failed to successfully ameliorate their lives (Bardhan 1984; Chatterji 2006). Public discourses on corruption and popular anticorruption movements that have arisen in recent years have tended to focus on the corruption of bureaucrats.¹ Meanwhile, India’s economic reforms advocate for a scaling back of the bureaucracy. The agency of bureaucrats is thus entangled in the very real web of
political and socioeconomic deficiencies produced by state policies on the one hand and political and public discourses on the bureaucracy on the other.

The conceptual challenge of addressing the complexity of bureaucratic agency requires an approach that addresses the ways in which bureaucrats are enmeshed in such broader political and socioeconomic patterns and are themselves complex social actors. Consider the historical formation of bureaucratic workforces. At the macro level, state investment in an expanding bureaucratic apparatus in the early decades of independence became a significant dimension of middle-class formation in postcolonial India. In contrast to the elite bureaucrats of institutions, such as the IAS, the vast majority of bureaucrats consisted of the middle and lower tiers of the middle classes. These sectors were employed in public sector enterprises or responsible for delivering services at the local level. Public employment has long been a central avenue for middle-class individuals as well as for upwardly mobile members of the lower-middle classes and working classes. An adequate understanding of bureaucratic agency requires an analysis of the distinctive nature of this class-state relationship, where bureaucrats are both the product of and the agents of state policies.

India’s bureaucratic field is shaped by three significant dimensions. First, the historical formation of institutional rules and norms—including both long-standing continuities and periods of institutional change in the post-independence period—continues to shape the postliberalization period in significant ways. Second, the bureaucratic field is shaped by the complexities of middle-class formation in contemporary India. An adequate understanding of India’s bureaucracy thus rests on a nuanced understanding of the differentiated material and symbolic dimensions of the middle classes and the role of the state in shaping middle-class formation in India. Finally, an adequate understanding of the bureaucracy requires a more nuanced field of the agency of bureaucrats, who must maneuver within the complex institutional, political, and economic structures that shape their employment.

**Historical Legacies and the Political Underpinnings of India’s “Steel Frame”**

The historic image of India’s bureaucracy is often captured by Sardar Vallabhai Patel’s characterization of the Indian Administrative Service as the steel frame of newly independent India. Cautioning that “you will not have a
united India if you do not have a good All-India Service which has inde-
pendence to speak out its mind,’2 Patel founded his advocacy of the IAS on
images of a highly professionalized and independent institution that embod-
ied the bureaucratic potential of the newly independent and interventionist
Indian state. In this context, contemporary representations of a dysfunc-
tional bureaucracy are often presented through a narrative of growing decline
of this ideal through the increasing politicization, inefficiency, and corrup-
tion that unfolded in later decades. The deterioration of the IAS and the state
bureaucracy in general is often marked by the systemic politicization of
Indira Gandhi’s practices during the Emergency period.3 Yet while Indira
Gandhi’s politicization of the bureaucracy during her Emergency Rule is well
known, this acute form of politicization that began in the mid-1970s must be
contextualized in a broader context, where India’s bureaucratic field has
been shaped by political processes since the inception of the Indian Civil
Service (ICS) in the colonial period.

The ICS was a central instrument for the exercise of colonial state power.
The image of the ICS as a “steel frame” that would later come to be popu-
larly associated with the IAS in independent India was in fact a metaphor
for the colonial state’s political project of retaining power and maintaining
law and order. As Lloyd George would note in his speech to the British Par-
liament in 1922, “If you take that steel frame out of the fabric, it would col-
lapse. There is one institution we will not cripple, there is one institution we
will not deprive of its functions or of its privileges; and that is the institu-
tion which built up the British Raj—the British Civil Service of India”
(quoted in Benbabaali 2008). Scholarship on the Indian Civil Service has
provided in-depth historical analyses of the political dynamics, which
included the politics of racial stratification between British and Indian
employees, the authoritarian nature of ICS rule, and active political inter-
ference in the face of a rising nationalist movement (Misra 1977; Nayar 1969;
Potter 1996). The colonial nature of the ICS meant that it was oriented toward
law and order and revenue collection in order “to limit the role of govern-
ment, to promote stability by minimizing change, to co-ordinate the activi-
ties of government, and to provide a tight chain-command control over
governmental actions and personnel” rather than toward developing wel-
fare-related dimensions of the state that would serve broader societal needs
(Nayar 1969, 10). This did not inoculate the ICS from processes of politiciza-
tion, which included transfers of ICS officers due to political interference,
the pursuit of partisan objectives, and the use of district administration structures as a means of repressing the Indian nationalist movement (for instance by increasing taxes on villages that supported the Congress organization (Potter 1996). Consider one example, where “in January 1921, the water level of the Godavari River fell rapidly, and it was necessary to reduce the area of second crop irrigation. The Collector, Bracken (ICS, Madras) and Wadsworth [Additional District Magistrate, ICS Madras], when making decisions on this, gave preference to those villages that had not joined the non-co-operation movement, ‘thereby demonstrating in the most convincing fashion that it paid to be loyal” (Potter 1996, 36).

This deep politicization of the ICS, as is well known, produced significant opposition to retaining the institution after independence. The point at hand is not that contemporary forms of corruption and politicization of the bureaucracy have been causally produced by colonial practices but that such processes of politicization do not emerge in a historical vacuum in the later decades of the postindependence period. The use of the administrative services both for partisan ends and for the purpose of repressing political dissent has a long historical legacy that has produced deep-seated interconnections between the bureaucratic and political fields in India.

In the early years of independence, the turn from the colonial to a newly independent developmentalist state would require the public bureaucracy to “undertake new tasks and discharge new functions which were till 1947 beyond its scope . . . [as] the bureaucratic apparatus of the security state was being gradually transformed into an instrument of [a] welfare state” (Prasad 1974, 29). In the process, the administrative apparatus became a central vehicle for the creation of relationships of patronage and dependence between the state and various socioeconomic groups. Given the single-party dominance of the Congress in the early decades of independence, political dynamics were built into this emerging role of the bureaucracy (Bhambhri 1971).

These early patterns of politicization of the IAS were deepened and systematized in the 1970s and 1980s. As the single-party dominance of the Congress was unsettled, the civil service increasingly became a site of political contestation, particularly as the rise of regional parties began to increase political tensions between the central government and the states. Such events produced new pressures created by the Emergency, local state politics, and regional nationalism (L. Rudolph and S. Rudolph 1987, 75). Prime Minister
Indira Gandhi’s rule, and the authoritarian excesses of the Emergency period, of course, represented the weightiest and most visible period in which the civil service, and the bureaucracy in general, was politicized. Indeed, the use of the bureaucracy to implement some of the most repressive state policies, such as the forced sterilization program, has imprinted the bureaucracy with an indelible mark of repressiveness (Tarlo 2003). However, the formation of a politicized bureaucracy has also unfolded in ways that have more broadly and systematically connected the bureaucratic and political fields in the postindependence period. Such concerns were intensified in the 1970s as “loyalty to the party in power became part of their [IAS officers’] reward structure” and affected promotions, postings, and transfers of civil servants in more systematic ways (Potter 1996, 156). Political patronage in effect became an intrinsic component of the institutional rules of the bureaucracy in ways that surpassed the specificities of the Emergency period or the Congress party’s era of centralized control.

As the deployment of political capital became a structural component of the bureaucratic field, the politicization of the bureaucracy cut across both national and local levels and across political party. While the IAS represents an elite and relatively small component of the Indian bureaucracy, this politicization signified a broader incorporation of political capital within the reward structure of the bureaucracy. This structural feature of India’s bureaucratic field led author and well-known journalist Prem Shankar Jha to characterize bureaucrats as a service-oriented “intermediate class” because of the systematic ways bureaucrats used their position to in effect extract money for the delivery of services. As he would caustically argue,

> Because they accept money in return for services, and they are members of the intermediate class insofar as the value of the services they render condoning black-marketing, bootlegging, smuggling, colluding in the evasion of excise levies, or speeding up the process of obtaining official sanctions, increases with the intensity of the shortages being experienced by the economy . . . the bulk of the police force, and the majority of the staff of the economic and technical departments of the Central and state governments, who come in direct contact with the public, can be considered members of this class. (1980, 100)

This acerbic depiction captures the ways in which the deployment of political capital became a more generalized form of patronage that was
systematically incorporated within the reward structure of the bureaucracy—a process of institutionalization that is overlooked by the more generalized or homogeneous discourses on cultures of corruption.

Reforming the Bureaucracy in Postliberalization India

The question that then arises is whether and how the rhetoric of reform has begun to transform the bureaucracy. While global discourses on good governance have become part of the Indian rhetorical lexicon on reforms, such reforms have in fact focused more on conventional processes of workforce restructuring, which are typical of structural adjustment policies. Developments since the 1990s reflect a restructuring of large sections of the bureaucracy that have paralleled forms of industrial restructuring that have targeted workers through cutbacks in employment without restructuring the underlying political nexus that has produced historical legacies of bureaucratic dysfunction. At both the central and state government levels, workforces have shown a gradual but steady reduction in employment in the first two decades of the postliberalization period. In addition, vacancies have not been filled. Meanwhile, financial pressures on local state budgets have meant that state governments have had to consider finding ways of managing the costs of state government employees. In the case of Tamil Nadu, a state well known for its populist rhetoric and policies, the state government has nevertheless restructured its government workforce and also attempted to make changes in its compensation (for instance by restructuring pension funds for state employees). Tamil Nadu’s state government workforce dropped from 587,111 in 2007 to 527,790 in 2017 (Sheelapriya 2008; Anbu 2016). While the scaling back of the state bureaucracy is a central component of the reforms agenda, this retrenchment does not address the deeper issues of the systemic incorporation of political capital within administrative reward structures of the bureaucracy.

Let us return, for instance, to the IAS, the most privileged sector of the bureaucracy. Recent research provides a vivid example of this process of restructuring, which has been skewed toward cutbacks in employee benefits without a change in the politicization of the reward structure. The historical trend of using transfers to exert political pressure on bureaucrats has continued well into the postliberalization period (Iyer and Mani 2012).
According to a Government of India survey, 52 percent of respondents indicated that they believed “that the postings to important posts and sought after stations are not decided on the basis of merit while 58% officers feel that the transfer orders are not issued keeping in mind the specific needs of the concerned” (MP 2010, 55). The survey also indicated that respondents believed that nepotism and political influence played a key role in enabling civil servants to gain access to top-tier positions. While the underlying party-administrative nexus of the bureaucracy has remained unchanged, economic shifts in the postreforms period have affected the status of IAS employment. As private sector white-collar employment has become more lucrative, the prestige and monetary rewards of IAS employment have shown a relative decline, particularly in contrast to upper-tier private sector employment (Vaishnav and Khosla 2016, 10).

The combination of the continued politicized and patronage-based foundation of the bureaucracy with declining prestige and compensation has further entrenched the institutionalization of extralegal monetary compensation as part of the bureaucracy’s reward structure. Understanding this process in ways that do not invoke simplistic languages of corruption is not an attempt to rationalize the damaging effects of bribery and graft but a means of grasping the institutionalized, structural foundations of such rent-seeking behavior. As Milan Vaishnav and Saksham Khosla have noted, “Endemic political interference can lead to rent-seeking behavior even for honest officers, who might feel forced to comply with questionable demands from superiors for fear of being punished. Furthermore, uncompetitive public-sector salaries (not to mention years of foregone wages as candidates devote an increasing amount of time to passing the civil services exam) encourage officers to make extra money while in office” (2016, 12). Processes of liberalization have thus left the political underpinnings and corresponding patronage structures of the bureaucracy firmly in place.

The continued political dysfunctions of the bureaucracy have led to two interrelated central lines of scholarly inquiry. On the one hand, scholars have focused on an analysis of the state as a political formation that is embedded in practices of corruption and relations of patronage (Das 2001; Chandra 2015; Gupta 2012, 2017). Political scientist Kanchan Chandra, for instance, has made the important argument that policies of liberalization have simply redirected state power so that “the retreat of patronage from some areas of the economy has been accompanied by a relocation to others”
(2015, 46). While the Tamil Nadu state government has reformed some aspects of the water bureaucracy, as we have seen, state power has been expanding in the management of water resources through the licensing of groundwater wells, the regulation of land acquisition, and the expansion of the power of institutions such as Metrowater.

What remains an understudied area of such shifts in the state in the post-liberalization period is an understanding of the relationship between this restructuring of the state and the processes of class formation of the bureaucratic workforce. One of the central dimensions of the Indian state both in the colonial period and in the early decades of independence has been the way in which the state produced and shaped middle-class formation. Historically, state subsidies of higher education and the role of the state as an employer of large sections of the middle classes meant that the state played a central role in the production and support of India’s middle classes. However, in recent years, the main focus of the reforms of India’s bureaucracy has been on the gradual but steady reduction of government employees. An adequate understanding of the restructuring of the bureaucracy thus requires a closer analysis of the bureaucratic field as a realm that represents this changing class-state relationship.

The Indian State and Bureaucratic Middle-Class Formation

One of the most astute understandings of the relationship between the state and middle class in recent years emerged not from scholarly analyses of contemporary India but from Modi’s 2014 electoral campaign and his deployment of the idea of a “neo-middle class.” In contrast to both celebratory public marketing presentations of an expanding, successful postliberalization middle class and academic scholarship that has reinforced conceptions of this middle class as intrinsically linked to (if not a product of) market-led growth and consumption, Modi’s rhetoric captured both the limits of access to middle-class status and the continued significance of state support for large sections of the middle classes in India. As the BJP’s party platform noted,

India has a large middle class with immense understanding, talent and purchasing power. In addition, a whole new class has emerged. Those who have risen from the category of poor and are yet to stabilize in the middle class,
the “neo middle class.” This class needs proactive handholding. Having moved out of poverty, their aspirations have increased. They want amenities and services of a certain standard. They thus now feel that Government facilities and services are not up to the mark, and hence resort to the private sector for things like education, health and transport. This is obviously costly, putting the neo middle class into a daily dilemma. As more and more people move into this category, their expectations for better public services have to be met. We have to strengthen the Public Sector for providing efficient services to our citizens (BJP 2014, 17).

At one level, Modi’s campaign rhetoric, in effect, pointed both to the symbolic power of the promise of upward mobility that has been embodied in images of India’s “new” postliberalization middle classes and to the limits of this promise of access, as large segments of society (including sections of the middle classes) have not benefited from wealth generated by new economy jobs within the services and informational technology sectors (Fernandes 2006). At another level, his rhetoric underlined the role of both the state and the public sector as a key foundation of support for these segments of the middle classes. Modi’s rhetoric effectively cast new policies of economic reform through historical state languages of development in ways that both grasped and capitalized on the ways in which large segments of the middle classes continue to rely on and to demand various forms of state support—a reliance that rests on the historical role of the state in shaping middle-class formation in India.

A focus on the bureaucracy as a site of middle-class employment provides the analytical space that can grasp the contradictory socioeconomic location of bureaucrats and their relationship to the state. The contradictions inherent in this location are shaped by the ways in which bureaucrats are entangled in a relationship with the state that is both an extractive relationship that allows for the appropriation of resources (Bardhan 1984) and a subordinate relationship of dependence through the conditions of employment. This stratified relationship complicates critical and analytical discussions of the state as an employer—whether in the bureaucracy or more generally in public sector enterprises (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2009).

Too often, criticisms of the public sector and the bureaucracy are implicitly or explicitly tied to normative views that advocate modes of material
public disinvestment through specific models of economic reform liberalization rather than much-needed correctives to the organization, utilization, and distribution of public resources. Indeed, it has long been easy to deploy images of a bloated and inefficient public sector and a corrupt bureaucracy, given the kinds of relationships of extraction that have haunted the state’s management of economic resources. However, the restructuring of the state in the postliberalization period also entails a restructuring of a sizable workforce with implications both for the employees and for the nature of class inequality. Public sector employment in both governmental and industrial occupations has steadily declined since the 1990s. Shifts in the postliberalization period have lessened the significance of public sector employment both in terms of size and as a marker of status, as top-tier private sector white collar jobs have become increasingly lucrative while top-tier jobs in the IAS have not kept pace. However, the impact of this downsizing of public sector employment must be understood largely in terms of its effects on the lower socioeconomic strata of public sector employees (Nagaraj 2014). Given that the nonelite middle classes are often more dependent on state employment than the upper tiers of the middle classes, who have been able to transition to more lucrative new economy private sector jobs in the postliberalization period, the restructuring of the public sector has reduced the security of less-privileged middle-class individuals without unsettling the primacy of the dominant proprietary professional middle classes. Meanwhile, as R. Nagaraj has argued, while large landowners and regional elites have engaged in a “pragmatic use of the public sector [that] seems to be almost entirely driven by electoral calculations,” the broader segment of middle classes has resorted to individualized strategies using patronage networks with a “hope to secure individualized gains from a plethora of sub-optimal government welfare programmes, however meager they might be” (2015, 45). The primary effect of cutbacks in the public sector has been to reduce the socioeconomic security of less-privileged sectors of the middle classes rather than to correct the extractive dominance of governmental elites.

Consider the case of state employment in Tamil Nadu. While Tamil Nadu has embraced many dimensions of liberalization and has actively sought private investment, the state government has also deviated from the ideological norms of liberalization through a heavy reliance on populist politics by both major political parties in the state, the DMK and the AIADMK.
Former chief minister Jayalalitha’s regime, in particular, drew on gendered constructions of motherhood that consolidated her own symbolic-political representation as mother or “Amma,” as she was popularly known, to systematically deploy a range of maternalistic populist programs, subsidies, and entitlements. Such policies ranged from the establishment of “Amma weekly markets” to “Amma Canteens” to the distribution of “Amma water” to the provision of bus passes to college students and the establishment of health insurance schemes. However, in contrast to such visible and substantive welfare provisions, the state government nevertheless engaged in steady cutbacks of its public sector workforce, in line with broader national trends of the restructuring of the state bureaucracy and public sector.

The centrality of governmental employment for the middle classes is underlined by that fact that despite such cutbacks, public sector employment remains a desired avenue for the middle classes in the state. As one report put it, in 2017,

Greater Chennai has recorded the highest number of registrations as there are 5 employment offices across the city. “More than 9 lakh registrations were made in the last financial year in Chennai city alone as the population is high compared to other districts. Even within Chennai, it is the Professional and Executive Employment Office (PEEO) that has seen the highest number of registrations, 4.96 lakh, till March 31, said an employment exchange official; 12.26% of the total registrations in the state happen in Chennai-based employment exchange offices. Experts say registration of graduates and engineers is an indication that they are not able to get employment in the private sector.”

By February 2021, the number of employees from the educated middle classes (consisting of graduates and postgraduates) looking for government employment through the employment exchanges in Tamil Nadu was estimated at 2,616,098 (EES 2021). While unemployment is a key factor for the high number of educated middle classes on the employment exchange rolls, one employee of the exchanges noted that public sector employment is the first choice of job seekers coming to the exchanges, despite a paucity of jobs in this sector (employment exchanges also direct candidates to private sector vacancies) (interview, January 9, 2017). According to the Tamil Nadu Labour Department’s 2016–2017 Report, in the preceding five years, 77,696 job
seekers were placed in government jobs through the exchanges, while 142,144 were placed in the private sector (Kafeel 2016, 80), confirming the department’s observation that the opportunity for employment “in the public sector is dwindling and private sector is increasing due to rapid industrialization in the State” (83). Such trends show that the restructuring of Tamil Nadu’s public workforce has taken place in accordance with policies of economic reform in ways that are hidden by the public populist strategies of successive state governments in the postliberalization period. Such temporary populist welfare provisions mediate but do not displace structural shifts in the nature of the postliberalization state.

Broad shifts in the employment of middle-class bureaucrats point to the need for a closer analysis of the bureaucracy as a workforce rather than as a mere arm of the state. This restructuration of the bureaucratic workforce raises the question of the agency of bureaucrats. The interplay between structure and agency plays out through questions of employment, social agency, and subjectivity in the water bureaucracy of Tamil Nadu’s Public Works Department. Such a perspective allows us to thicken our understanding of bureaucrats as political and historical subjects rather than as the objectified instruments of state power.

Rethinking the Figure of “the Bureaucrat”

The Public Works Department in many ways encapsulates the complexities and contradictions of India’s postliberalization state. The bureaucratic institution, one of the oldest in the country, embodies both the historical legacies of the colonial and postcolonial state and more recent processes of restructuring that have unfolded in the postreforms period. This is materially encapsulated in the physical infrastructure of the department. The head office of the Public Works Department in Tamil Nadu is housed in the historic colonial building. The once imperious building is relatively empty, in contrast to images of a bloated bureaucracy that still permeate contemporary discourses on the state. Meanwhile, the Institute for Water Studies, created through reforms associated with World Bank financial support, shows some signs of the high-tech turn to the mapping and management of water resources through remote sensing and GIS (geographic information system) technologies. While the institute is authorized to hold a total staff strength of seventy-eight employees, this more modern building is also relatively sparsely populated.
Middle-class employees in the water sector of the Public Works Department (all subsequent references to the PWD address the Water Resources Organisation of the institution) consist primarily of technical workers and engineers. However, in contrast to engineers and employees of Metrowater and TWAD, these employees are not directly involved in the provision of water resources to consumers in the state. The PWD represents a segment of the bureaucracy that is not primarily publicly embroiled in the conflicts, inequalities, and relationships of power that are associated with the “street-level bureaucracy” (Lipsky 2010) in Chennai. Existing studies of water politics and the bureaucracy in India have tended to focus on this consumer-related dimension of the bureaucracy within metropolitan areas and have illustrated the ways in which socioeconomic inequalities shape this dimension of the municipal bureaucracy’s treatment of urban citizens. However, a sole focus on the service-level bureaucracy within metropolitan areas also produces generalizations about the state, corruption, and inequality that are based on one aspect of a more complex bureaucratic institutional field. An exclusive focus on the service bureaucracy limits the analytical space needed for both a broader understanding of governance and an in-depth understanding of both the structural and agentic dimensions of bureaucrats.

Consider the major thrust of the PWD’s bureaucratic charge—the production and deployment of technical expertise both in field settings and at the level of planning. Engineers and technical workers are primarily designated either with the responsibility of managing and operating the physical infrastructure of water sources in Tamil Nadu or with the task of overseeing and developing technical schemes designed to manage the state’s water supply. Meanwhile, the public interactions of the PWD are structured by urban-rural cleavages. While the irrigation wing of the PWD is directly charged with providing water resources for farmers, the department is not tasked with interacting with either urban or rural household water consumption. Beyond this, the PWD’s interaction with members of the public is linked to questions of land acquisition and the need to protect public land and infrastructure from encroachments. Patterns of rent-seeking behavior have historically been concentrated on more subtle practices in the context of the physical construction of water-related infrastructure projects. As one government report noted, the “scope for corruption” within the PWD rested with a series of project-based practices such as “quality enforcement, paying contractors bills on time, [the] award of works and [the] negotiation of rates” (ARC 1973, 67).
Bureaucratic corruption in Tamil Nadu has been in line with broader national patterns. Public anger and charges over corruption that are endemic within India’s water bureaucracy are oriented toward the various components, with particular intensity directed at the utility Metrowater, the Chennai Metropolitan Corporation, and the PWD. In a judgment indicting the Chennai Corporation on widespread corruption, the Madras High Court, for instance, directed the corporation to “file a report explaining the nexus, collusion and corrupt activities largely found between the officials of corporation, police, local politicians, electricity board authorities and metro board authorities.”

Public complaints about the slow work of the PWD on the maintenance of infrastructure (for instance through desilting) abound in media reports. Or, to take another example of such complaints, in the context of the state’s drought, where Chennai residents were relying on water from Metrowater tankers, one individual claimed,

There is an unspoken corruption in the recently introduced online system for water bookings by the Chennai Metro Water. When I sent my son to check the status of water supply in tankers to Santhome Water Tank Shed (near Cemetery), he was informed that it would take ten days, after booking on line, as there was a huge backlog of bookings. The officials had then demanded Rs. 1,500 for a 9000 litre tank, rather than the usual amount of Rs 600 in order to get the tanker early. The incident explains the prevailing corruption and official inaction in the department. The officials had, in their defense, said that their service is better than the Rs. 2,000 that would be paid to the private tanker.

Public discourses in Chennai are in line with national trends where rumors and complaints about everyday corruption abound and are in effect a component of the making of urban middle-class identity. However, discourses of public corruption that are a continued part of the systemic rent-seeking practices of bureaucratic institutions are only a limited part of the broader dynamics of bureaucratic workforces in the water sector.

Bureaucratic employment in the PWD is a complex field that is marked both by the long-standing reproduction of social stratification and by emerging spaces of social change that are often hidden in stereotypical views of the bureaucracy. As is conventional in bureaucratic organizations, employment is structured through highly stratified internal hierarchies, with the rank of
chief engineer representing the pinnacle of achievement within the organization. A vivid symbolic visual representation of the power of this position is embodied in a board in the chief engineer’s office at the Institute for Water Studies that lists the names of all the individuals who have occupied this position since the inception of the institute in 1993 in the “Public Works Department Roll of Honor.” At the higher levels of the bureaucratic structure, engineers speak of this sense of prestige through a historical lens that is explicitly linked to the significance of the department in colonial times. Senior engineers that I interviewed repeatedly emphasized the historic nature of the department, pointing with pride to both the colonial and postcolonial history of the department as emblematic of a long legacy of engineering achievements in the service of national development. For employees, the creation and management of “public works” in this context were not simply a product of dispassionate technocratic expertise but an embodiment of status and honor.13

The broader workforce of the organization reproduces the internal hierarchies and forms of stratification that are typical of workplace settings. In the early decades of independence, the PWD’s workforce rapidly expanded in ways that mirrored national trends in the expansion of the public sector. By 1973, the organization had a staff of 2,861 employees (ARC 1973, 16; this consisted of 3 chief engineers, 19 superintending engineers, 124 executive engineers, 665 assistant engineers, and 2,050 section officers). Despite the expansion of the workforce, rigid forms of stratification within the bureaucracy produced various sources of employee workplace dissatisfaction. Engineers, for the most part, had limited space for upward mobility within the organization, and promotions to the higher position of superintending officer (and, in fewer cases, of chief engineer) would generally occur for individuals when they were close to retirement (18). Recent years have seen a restructuring of the workforce again, mirroring national postliberalization trends of the reduction in public sector employment. While, on occasion, employees have unsuccessfully tried to oppose dimensions of this restructuring,14 the reduction of the workforce has primarily occurred through the practice of not filling vacancies or by hiring employees on a temporary (project-contingent) contract rather than as part of the state’s permanent workforce. In the postliberalization period, the obstacles for upward mobility in the department are further structured by internal variations of class distinction that rest on educational capital. There is, for example, a significant
difference between employees with engineering degrees and those with technical diplomas, with strong limitations on the upward mobility of the latter group. Socioeconomic inequalities within the middle classes that are structured by credentialing practices are reproduced within the department’s workforce.

Within the context of such institutional hierarchies, there are also emerging spaces of change within the department. For example, the PWD has employed significant numbers of women, in accordance with the state government’s policy of providing reservations for women in governmental jobs.\(^{15}\) In the PWD’s head office, eleven of thirteen employees were women, while at the Institute for Water Studies, thirteen of eighteen engineers were women. One female engineer estimated that 40 percent of all PWD engineers are women.\(^{16}\) Within this measurable progress in gender equality, there remain various forms of stratification and inequality. For instance, the major posts of chief engineers continue to be held by men. Meanwhile, there are more men employed in field-based positions compared to higher levels of women employed within the head office and IWS in Chennai.

Women engineers whom I interviewed presented a complex understanding of their employment. For instance, one female assistant executive engineer questioned conventional ideas of choice and said that her employment “was more about her parent’s choice” rather than her own. Another female engineer viewed this in generational terms, noting that younger women had more space to make their own career choices. Their narratives also in many ways reflected dominant middle-class constructions of respectable employment and status. As one woman employed as an engineer noted, their employment choices were mainly structured by their performance on central exams. As she put it, “Medical is first choice. Engineering is second choice. Those are the two fields you can get a good job” (interviews, January 19, 2017). Nevertheless, the PWD’s employment patterns reflect an example of the success of the state government’s reservation policies in changing gendered patterns, particularly given the constraints on women’s entry into STEM-related fields in comparative contexts. As one women engineer said in response to a question about gender and engineering, “Gender differences don’t matter. Work is work” (interview, January 19, 2017).

Spaces of change are also evident in the ways in which dominant and disciplinary expertise in civil engineering has shown signs of shifting away from the emphasis on the construction of large-scale projects, such as dams...
and reservoirs. In part due to the scarcity of water sources and of land that
can be tapped through such megaprojects, the PWD’s focus has been on
smaller infrastructural endeavors, such as the construction of check dams
(interview with joint chief engineer of irrigation, PWD, January 10, 2017).
This is a significant shift, given the ways in which the engineering field has
focused on large dams as a central means of harnessing water resources.
However, such shifts are not purely instrumental. The PWD, for instance,
engages in collaborative work with the Centre for Water Resources at the
Tamil Nadu’s premier engineering university, Anna University. The focus of
this center is on innovative, interdisciplinary approaches to water manage-
ment that place a significant emphasis on questions of sustainability and
social justice. Indeed, internal reports and studies of the PWD often contain
important and critical discussions of land management and participatory
practices. This is not to imply that such innovative work translates easily
into policy shifts. In fact, political obstacles and a fragmented institutional
landscape mean that such innovations often rest on the sidelines or face
challenges in adequately integrating local participation and knowledge of
communities being affected by developmental projects. Local inequalities of
caste and class and long-standing interests of local contractors and leaders
pose significant hurdles to the effective implementation of such participa-
tory models of water management (Mosse 2003, 283). Change and effective-
ness within state institutions is foreclosed through complex configurations
of political dynamics, socioeconomic interests, and institutional practices.

Consider, for instance, the ways in which various forms of political inter-
vention constrain the operations of the PWD. In the early decades of inde-
pendence, scholarship on the bureaucracy (and the IAS in particular) debated
at length the tension between generalists and specialists (Nayar 1969). How-
ever, this tension was one that existed not simply within the IAS but between
IAS cadres and technical experts. As Tamil Nadu’s administrative reforms
report noted, there was a strong divide between engineers and the PWD
wing of the secretariat that “often led to a lack of understanding between
the policy-making and programme executing wings of the department”
(ARC 1973, 12). The secretariat, in this context, would be a central site where
political pressures and considerations would impact decisions and repro-
duce the state’s long-standing role of using infrastructural projects to consoli-
date electoral support. In recent years, intensified periods of drought and
floods only serve to accentuate the politicization of the management of water resources and infrastructure.

Or, to take another example, access to employment in the PWD is handled by the Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission and is based on both performance on central examinations and performance on an in-person interview. However, the composition of the Public Service Commission has itself become politicized. For instance, in 2016, the Madras High Court canceled the appointment of eleven members of the commission, stating that the appointees were members of the ruling AIADMK party who had been appointed without transparency and without following Supreme Court guidelines. As the justices put it, “This appointing process or lack of it was on account of a misconception that the appointment to the post of members of the Public Service Commission was part of the spoils system based on the patronage of the State government.”\(^\text{17}\) Access to employment in the PWD is shaped by this kind of politicization of external bureaucratic institutions and the relationships of political patronage that mold governmental practices.

Individuals attempting to produce change or to resist the complex political and institutional fields that structure bureaucratic employment must therefore negotiate a precarious environment. Despite the wealth of writing on the bureaucracy in recent years, less attention has been paid to the agency and subjectivity of bureaucrats who persist with such endeavors.\(^\text{18}\) Bureaucrats are unlikely subjects who do not fit well within the classic focus on subaltern subjectivity and agency.

Identity, Everyday Practice, and the Possibilities of Ethical Agency within the State

Contemporary work on India’s bureaucracy rarely presents an in-depth study of the work experiences or lives of employees. In the colonial period and in the early decades of independence, some autobiographies provided a window into the work experiences and lives of IAS officers.\(^\text{19}\) Much of the scholarly writing about India’s bureaucracy in the early decades of independence has focused on the elite cadres of the national bureaucracy, such as the IAS. The segment of the middle classes that was tracked into the upper echelons of national government employment drew primarily from existing middle- or upper-middle-class social groups. These segments of the middle
classes tended to be from urban metropolitan backgrounds and had access to elite middle- or upper-middle-class schools (see Mangat Rai 1973). However, it is the regional bureaucracies, and less-studied state institutions, such as the Public Works Department, that began to provide avenues for upward mobility for individuals seeking access to middle-class status in postindependence India.

Early in-depth sociological studies of regional bureaucracies reveal a complex set of organizational, cultural, and political factors that produce the kinds of institutional problems that are reduced to a static image of corruption. G. K. Prasad’s (1974) study of the governmental secretariat in Bihar based on fieldwork conducted in 1963–65 detailed deep-seated problems regarding the ways in which responsibility was delegated within deeply hierarchical organizational cultures. Writing in particular about the morale of bureaucrats based on field interviews, Prasad noted that local bureaucrats “remarked that while on the one hand merit, though valued very high, did not receive due recognition in government service, on the other, widespread corruption, which acted as a barrier to the efficient working was encouraged in a very subtle way” (98). Such sociological studies have shown a significant degree of discontent of employees in various bureaucratic organizations. Writing in a similar time period, A. Prasad (1976) produced an in-depth study of one of the central bureaucratic figures of the twentieth-century developmental state, the block developmental officer. The study reveals high degrees of dissatisfaction with both the organizational culture and practice and material terms of employment (such as salary and promotions).

Despite sociological evidence of complex problems with organizational and employment conditions, most public and academic discourse focuses primarily on bureaucratic corruption. In recent years, media coverage in India has concentrated on exposing corrupt bureaucrats through often vivid exposés caught on camera or by secret cell phone recordings. Such narratives converge with both proliberalization academic writings that have sought to cut back and reform state bureaucracies and postcolonial theories that have focused on modern state power and the subjugation of citizens. Bureaucrats in this web of narratives rarely emerge as complex individuals whose lives can both illuminate our understanding of state structures and exceed these paradigms by providing a more intricate understanding of the bureaucrat as a subject of history. Professor A. Mohanakrishnan’s career at the Public Works Department provides a unique opportunity to gain such a perspective
on the otherwise broad sweep of analytical categories such as the “state” and the “bureaucracy.”

Prof. Mohanakrishnan’s career at the PWD and in government service covered a seventy-year period close to the entire span of postindependence India. He worked in the PWD, gradually rising up from a junior engineer to the highest post of chief engineer from 1947 to 1984. He then served as a governmental adviser and expert in a number of significant positions in the decades since his retirement, finally concluding his career on December 31, 2012. Prof. Mohanakrishnan was also distinctive in his service, as he maintained a strong interest in academic research, writing, and teaching. His career encompassed five years of teaching at Anna University and a sustained period of administrative work at the university, including chairing the department of civil engineering. His receipt of an honorary degree from the university would give him the official title of professor. His academic bent produced a rich set of writings, including technical histories of major infrastructural projects, such as the Mullaperiyar Dam and the Telugu Ganga/Krishna Water Supply Project (whose design and implementation he executed) and a detailed autobiography and professional diary that provides rich insights into the inner workings of bureaucratic life. What emerges from this rich and layered career is a portrait of a bureaucrat that is far from stereotypical images that populate both popular and academic writings.

In his daily recordings of his work experiences, Prof. Mohanakrishnan provides an account of a presentation he made at a seminar on employment opportunities for students at Anna University on July 29, 1983. He describes delivering a presentation at the seminar that opens with the statement, “Government Work is God’s Work!” (2016a, 326). The reaction, as he describes it, was that “there was a loud uproar, which I did not mind, and made a convincing speech for 10 minutes. I said what I believed, and I still consider I had done nearly sixty years of unbroken service to the Government before laying down office and through the Government to the State and the people only with God’s help” (326).

As with most of his daily work recordings, he does not elaborate on the details of the event. The reader is not given any content on the nature of the “loud uproar” or what he meant by the depiction of governmental work as “God’s Work.” One can speculate about the potential skepticism of young engineers at the elevation of government service or about the reaction to the construction of state service and technocratic expertise as religious duty.
One can also see clear examples of a sense of religiosity that permeates Mohanakrishnan’s life and work. At various points, his professional journal documents a practice of building a small temple near a newly constructed infrastructure project and efforts to visit nearby temples during his many field visits and travels in addition to his regular practice of worship. This interwoven sense of service and religious duty provided an underlying foundation to Prof. Mohanakrishnan’s self-understanding and self-presentation of his life and work.

Mohanakrishnan’s philosophy of service consisted of a deep-seated set of ethical and professional principles. At first glance, the foundation of his professional outlook is rooted in the Nehruvian context in which he began his career at the Public Works Department. His autobiographical representation is steeped in language that emphasizes the technical efficiency and prowess of the engineering skills being employed in the execution of infrastructural projects. Echoing Nehru’s well-known characterization of dams as the new temples of India, Mohanakrishnan would present in detail the laborious construction work involved in his first major engineering project in 1948, noting that “I am detailing all these just to emphasize how methodical and steady were the preliminaries organized before taking up the great task of building the great dam” (2016a, 85). Indeed, the detailed description sheds light on the ways in which the construction of the dam was preceded by the construction of the physical infrastructure of a new community spatially stratified by class and occupation. As he would write, “The residential colony will consist of a few streets parallel, to house the junior assistants, senior assistants and up on the lines, quarters for the Supervisors. As if crowning these parallel streets, a semicircular formation was planned in which 12 SDO’s [subdivisional officers] were located and at the crown, quarters for the single Execution Engineer, which was the only terraced building with two floors” (85). The organizational hierarchy of the PWD employees was intricately spatialized in the physical infrastructure of housing that was built prior to the construction of the dam. Meanwhile, the workers’ housing lines “were built in rows, six units in each row, each unit consisting of a small veranda with one foot depressed roof, an all-purpose room with headroom 10 feet to the top of the roof to the left and a space for kitchen and eating behind the veranda. Six such units will be arranged in each row, the middle ones facing each other, for the residents to have social atmosphere at their level” (88). The construction of a stratified socioeconomic infrastructure
thus preceded the physical construction of the dam in a way that vividly encapsulates the ways in which the Nehruvian modernist project would come to reproduce an underlying form of class stratification within the architecture of India’s new interventionist state.

However, Prof. Mohanakrishnan’s own social location also reveals the complexities of class formation and the role of local state-level bureaucratic employment in providing avenues for new entrants to middle-class status in the early years of independence. Mohanakrishnan describes at length his modest rural background in a small landowning family with “a few pieces of land” (2016a, 7), growing up primarily in the house of his grandfather, a village postman (7). While he was from an upper-caste Chettiar community with some landed resources, as a Telugu speaker he was also a linguistic-ethnic minority in Tamil Nadu. Decades later, even though he was a well-placed member of the bureaucracy, his attentiveness to his linguistic identity would lead him to note when he had made effective and well-delivered presentations in Tamil (a language that he was fluent in) (2016b, 9–10, 31).

Prof. Mohankrishnan’s narration illuminates existing understandings of the relationship between the state and middle-class formation in a number of ways. His life story confirms the significance of the role of education in shaping middle-class formation and in the relationship between the educated middle classes and state formation in the early decades of independence (as the educated middle classes were tracked into expanding public sector employment). In keeping with this pattern, education plays a central role in Prof. Mohanakrishnan’s access to middle-class status and upward mobility through state employment. He opens his autobiography with an acknowledgment of the centrality of education in shaping his life and career. As he puts it, “I am fortunate in that I have been born in a family in the Chodavaram, now Sholavaram in Ponneri Taluk of Thiruvallur District, who were anxious to give good education to the children, though they had not crossed the Elementary School stage themselves” (2016a, 3). His autobiography presents detailed discussions of his teachers, ranging from preschool to his engineering training, whose support and encouragement he honors as crucial to his advancement.

However, Mohanakrishnan’s personal story also complicates existing conceptions of middle-class formation. Describing his preparation for an interview for entrance into the College of Engineering, Mohanakrishnan writes, “Till then, I had never worn a pant and a full hand shirt” (2016a, 59) and then details the process of purchasing the cloth and getting it stitched in
time for the interview. This vignette, of course, speaks to the ways in which less-privileged social groups must persevere in gaining the appropriate forms of social capital that are taken for granted by the educated urban metropolitan middle classes.

Public employment in technocratic fields such as engineering in the early independence period held deeper meanings for India’s middle classes, which were being shaped by new bureaucratic state structures. If education in disciplinary fields such as engineering provided public resources for individuals to gain access to middle-class status, public employment was infused with the new national ideals of technocratic developmental progress of the Nehruvian period. At the individual level, Mohanakrishnan’s writings illustrate how the implementation of Nehruvian modernism through the material execution of new national goals of technical prowess and efficiency shaped the identities of state employees in distinctive ways. As prime minister, Nehru would physically and ritually embody such principles for young engineers in the public sector. After five years of work on his first engineering project, Prof. Mohanakrishnan recorded with pride the prime minister’s visit to the completed dam: “Shree Nehru arrives 4PM, goes round the earth dam, all in open car, standing and wishing the people, given tea on top of the shutter House specially got ready for the function and then drives over masonry dam. When he got down on the masonry dam to walk for a short distance, I ran up to be close to him with my file of plans as part of the team” (2016a, 127). The bureaucrat’s file has in recent years become a symbol of the inefficiency and sluggishness of India’s public sector. Images of stacked dusty files on nondescript desks still vividly speak to the slow, low-tech pace of the state. However, for Mohanakrishnan, the file embodies a material link that connects his hidden labor of planning and construction, as he puts it, “as part of the team,” to a grander vision of the state, literally and ritually embodied in Prime Minister Nehru’s walk at the dam.

This sense of public purpose permeates all of Prof. Mohanakrishnan’s writings, as he meticulously documents his work, ranging from the painstaking task of making hydraulic measurements to the political intricacies of negotiating interstate agreements. What stands out in Prof. Mohanakrishnan’s autobiographical self-representation is a continued understanding—over a period of seventy-five years—of “public works” as a form of public
service. This understanding of public sector work as public service represents an ideational and experiential space that exceeds the structural dimensions of class formation and the relationship of extraction that, as we have seen, have come to characterize India’s public sector and state bureaucracy.

Prof. Mohanakrishnan’s conception of service was shaped by an ethical philosophy that produced sharp critiques of the deepening networks of political patronage that infused the institutional and infrastructural decisions of the state and a set of everyday practices that endeavored to challenge or circumvent this process of politicization. Consider the following description of work culture, which he documented in 1981:

Many officers make it a point to meet their superior officers, with sweets and presents on the New Year Day and greet them. Particularly the office bearers of the Engineers Associations go round in a group calling on the Hon’ble [Honorable] Minister, Secretaries and Chief Engineers and the Chief Engineers on their turn meet the Secretaries, the Hon’ble Ministers and so on. I had thought over the practice, I should follow, and took a decision, that I will just call on my immediate superior with a lime on hand and nothing else, as early as 1955, when I was sub divisional officer. (2016a, 310)

The practice of gift-giving in this context is suffused with the power dynamics of workplace hierarchies. What might otherwise seem like an innocuous ritual of giving sweets and presents in celebration of the New Year in this context serves as one of the naturalized practices that produce ingrained networks of patronage and supplication within organizational cultures. Mohanakrishnan’s writing reveals both a keen ethnographic eye in the observation of such practices and a sustained form of resistance, over his decades of employment, to being implicated in this workplace culture of supplication.

Indeed, Mohanakrishnan’s depictions of workplace practices confirm many of the public and academic narratives of patronage, personal power, and political influence that suffuse public bureaucratic institutions. Such practices range from engineers developing political connections with IAS officers (2016a, 277) to bureaucrats establishing relationships with high officials in government ministries to obtain promotions (2016a, 338) to the inclusion of lawyers for the Cauvery dispute based on “political influence”
(2016b, 44) to the personal political interventions that government officials would make to push for candidates when positions in the PWD would open up (2016a, 290). While such practices are not surprising to critics of India’s bureaucratic and state practices, what is distinctive is the sustained everyday persistence that Mohanakrishnan exemplifies in his endeavor to sustain his ethical principles of workplace behavior.

The dailiness of Prof. Mohanakrishnan’s ethical approach to his workplace is accompanied by both a critical analysis of and an attempt to circumvent larger structures of political patronage and influence. He documented a successful example of a circumvention of continued extension of a major canal beyond its technical capacity due to political pressure. Describing the entrenched and systemic nature of the politicization of infrastructure projects that engineers faced, he wrote,

> After the end of Congress regime in 1966, Tamil Nadu had DMK and ADMK rule alternatively every five years and with each change came more demands for extension of ayacut in their areas of followers and this was going on uncontrolled. Much later when I had to deal with their problem as the Chief Engineer (Irrigation), I sent a file with a note written in bold letters in Tamil saying this project is now committed to cater to a little more than 4 lakhs [400,000] of acres with canal extensions and so on and I see it is already bursting in its seam and would not advise even one acre more. The then Chief Minister Hon’ble M.G.R. who had great trust in my advice, rejected any further requests even from his own MLAs citing my Note. (2016a, 214)

In this example, Mohanakrishnan is successful in persuading the chief minister to resist political pressure from the MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly). Nevertheless, it also illustrates the immense historical weight of enduring patterns of political pressure that are exerted on government employees. The incident reveals that the expansion, or in this case overexpansion, of large infrastructural projects cannot simply be understood as the product of the technocratic outlook or disciplinary expertise of bureaucrats or engineers. Rather, elected officials, such as local MLAs, who may themselves be facing pressure from their constituents within civil society, are often at the forefront of pressing for infrastructural projects that can serve short-term electoral needs.
Mohanakrishnan’s autobiographical representation is in many ways a story of a technical expert deeply committed to ideals of hard work, honesty, and pride in the design, construction, and management of water-related infrastructure that is punctuated by the everyday improprieties of patronage, power, and influence. His professional diary, which reproduces a contemporaneous daily log of events, often contains deeply felt notations when he is falsely accused of having “not cared to send a paper to” a senior official (2016b, 20) or when he must handle “rude behavior” or time wasted with “gossiping” (96) that violates his sense of professionalism. Describing one such incident early in his career, he writes of his experience with his senior colleague in the PWD,

I had to bear his bossing, as a humble mild subordinate. He will keep calling me while in office to his room for discussion and instructions and will not allow me to dispose of the files that accumulate at my table. I am one who will not sign a file without personally reading through the current, the replies, office notes etc. Every file that is seen by me will carry my observations, made in a different ink. Once he said, “as Deputy Chief Engineer you cannot keep looking into files in office. Take them home.” I was doing so. (2016a, 277)

The anecdote illustrates the everyday workplace practices that accumulate in the slow pace of bureaucratic activity that has become a much-reviled feature of the Indian state. However, Prof. Mohanakrishnan’s daily entries also present detailed notes on a range of employees, engineers, and officials whom he characterizes as fulfilling high standards of hard work and honesty. It is this latter space of ethical agency within the bureaucracy that must be incorporated in any full account of bureaucratic agency.

Autobiographical works are of course performative productions of self-representation and selfhood that are not transparent reflections of a singular reality. However, this project of representation deepens rather than dislodges the significance of Mohanakrishnan’s ethical philosophy and practice of public bureaucratic service. The autobiography, while published as an internal document by the PWD, is primarily targeted at an audience of employees and students specializing in water resources management and is not a publicly distributed text. In addition, the second volume of the autobiography is in fact a reproduction of a contemporaneous daily diary of events and personal
commentaries that Prof. Mohanakrishnan kept during his employment. The thematic focus on his ethical struggles thus presents, paradoxically, both an unfiltered and a carefully crafted narrative for future generations of employees in the PWD and in related engineering fields. Seen in this light, Prof. Mohanakrishnan’s provocative statement “Government Work is God’s Work” must be dislocated from a one-dimensional interpretation that could cast it as evidence of an internalization of a Nehruvian vision of technocratic progress, a blind infusion of state ideology, or a static form of “Hindu identity.” The ethical space of Mohanakrishnan’s life and work is shaped by but not reducible to the bureaucratic institutional and political fields that structure employment in an institution such as the PWD.

Bureaucratic Agency and Its Limits

Mohanakrishnan’s history provides a highly successful case of an individual who managed to navigate through the complex institutional and political networks that at various periods prevented him from gaining promotions and positions he sought but that ultimately did not forestall his rise to the highest position within the PWD, chief engineer (irrigation). Noting that “my professional ambition is achieved,” he also concludes his autobiography by underlining that he “had no God fathers. I had no special favours done to me and I stepped in, following due seniority” (2016a, 319). However, Mohanakrishnan’s struggles and successes occur within the existing terrain of disciplinary, technical, and institutional norms of his field. Individuals who may seek to challenge such norms face steep constraints that are shaped by the intersecting structures produced by the dominant political and institutional fields of the water sector.

Consider, for instance, Ramaswamy Iyer’s personal account of his experience in challenging some of the technocratic norms of water policy at the national level. He describes his changing relationship with the Ministry of Water Resources as he begins to question the state’s technocratic approach to water management through large-scale projects, such as big dams and later on the national river-interlinking project. As he writes,

An account of that changing relationship in capsule form would be the following: when I was Secretary, Water Resources, in the Government of India,
in the 1980s, I enjoyed a very good relationship with my colleagues and subordinates; that goodwill continued for a while after my retirement, but changed to strong disapproval as I began questioning and criticising big-dam projects; the disapproval reached a peak in the years 1998–2005; then slowly, over a period of time, anger against me mellowed, and the broken relationship was partially mended—but only partially; some embers of the old uneasiness still remain and can ignite easily. (2013, 168)

Iyer describes in detail how in the 1990s, after his retirement from formal government service, his growing receptiveness to environmental criticisms of large dams, such as the highly contested Sardar Sarovar Project on the Narmada River and the Tehri Hydroelectric Project, angered what he classifies as the “water establishment.”

Iyer explains how his appointment by the Ministry of Water Resources to a “Five Member Group” and by the Ministry of Power to an expert committee to evaluate the environmental and displacement effects of the projects led him to a deep intellectual reconsideration of the costs and benefits of such large-scale projects that have been supported by the central government. He describes at length how his break from the dominant norms of the institutional fields produced significant resistance through the professional and organizational networks that structure such fields. As he writes,

My relationships with former friends and colleagues came under a strain. I was no longer welcome in my old Ministry. I used to visit the Ministry occasionally to meet people and get myself briefed on developments of interest, but this became increasingly difficult. Senior officials did not want to meet me. The Water Establishment’s disapproval of me was even greater than its disapproval of Medha Patkar. After all, she was the Enemy, but I had been part of the Water Establishment a few years earlier. In the eyes of the Establishment I was one of them. It was as a former Secretary Water Resources that I was nominated to various government committees and commissions, and there was dismay in official circles when my thinking changed and I began speaking a different language. The dismay changed to anger. I was regarded as a renegade who had deserted the ranks and joined the enemy camp. People in the Ministry and in the Central Water Commission (particularly engineers) who had earlier been well disposed towards me became cold. Some former colleagues
who continued to maintain friendly relations with me had to contend with the disapproval of their engineering brotherhood. (2013, 171)

Iyer’s brief but incisive personal account of his experience with the national “water establishment” points to the significant challenges of expanding an ethical challenge to dominant institutional networks and practices to address the more fundamental disciplinary and technocratic modes of power that shape large infrastructure projects. As he notes, the institutional and personal hostility subsided as the public contestation over the Narmada Sardar Sarovar project began to abate (and since the final intervention of the Supreme Court in effect sanctified the project). However, this antagonism arose once more with his sharp critiques of the national river interlinking project that is now underway with substantive state support. As he puts it, “The engineering establishment set much store by the project and were made angry by my criticisms. The dormant official disapproval of me became alive and active” (2013, 174).

Iyer’s personal account provides an illuminating understanding of the ways in which state power, institutional practices, professional networks, and disciplinary norms intersect and constrain the kinds of criticisms and challenges that can take place within bureaucratic structures. In this context, the disciplinary norms and professional networks of engineers are not simply determined in a simplistic way by state censorship or prohibition but are shaped by the weight of historical legacies that have connected the state, infrastructural projects, and the disciplinary projects of bureaucratic institutions that create, support, and manage such projects. As Iyer insightfully argues, since the colonial period,

the engineering profession has commanded great respect, and it has been customary to talk in reverent tones about “great engineers” or “eminent engineers.” The tradition established by [colonial British engineer] Cotton and others has been absorbed by successive generations of Indian engineering students. A certain professional pride and a sense that they are pursuing a socially useful profession has been inculcated in them, and quite rightly so. For a century and a half it has been taken for granted that it is good to build dams for irrigation or for the generation of electric power. Against that background, it must have been extremely disorienting for the profession to be told that dams are not necessarily benign, that they could do a great deal of
harm, and that dams must not be built unless they are unavoidably necessary. A highly respected profession which had taken for granted its value to society suddenly found its self-esteem undermined. (2013, 175)

The historical significance of engineering has been deeply embedded in dominant societal norms. In an evocative cultural analysis of poetic representations in Tamil Nadu, Anand Pandian has called attention to the ways in which communities in Madurai that benefited from infrastructural works of the colonial hydraulic engineer John Pennycuick have honored his achievements through a long history of popular cultural memorials expressed through song and poetry.

Pandian notes, in the midst of a rapidly changing liberalizing India,

In December 2001, a few young men from the bustling town of Cumbum [in southern Tamil Nadu] circulated invitations to an opening gala for the new internet café they had just established in the busy market. . . . The invitations proudly stated that their Green Valley Internet Browsing Centre was dedicated to the memory of “Respected Benny Quicc, The Founder Cumbum Green Valley.” This phonetic rendition of a foreign name may have been slightly off the mark, but the historical sentiment was unmistakeable. The browsing centre was inaugurated in the name of Colonel John Pennycuick, the colonial hydraulic engineer almost universally credited today with having brought a perennial stream of river water into the Cumbum Valley and the arid plains of Madurai. (2003, 12)

This historical memory that codifies the discipline of engineering with honor and social status intersects with a long history in which higher education in fields such as engineering has played a significant role in the formation of India’s educated middle classes (Fernandes 2006).

It is this sense of historical pride and self-esteem, as we have seen, that continues to serve as a legacy for engineers within institutions such as the PWD, even as newer institutions such as Metrowater have begun to take on more significant public roles in the water sector. Ramaswamy Iyer’s personal account is a useful cautionary reminder of the deep structures of the institutional fields that shape and constrain the agency of employees in such organizations. Iyer’s enactment of his bureaucratic conscience faces steep forms of institutional and disciplinary resistance that are in turn shaped by
the weight of intersecting modes of power of colonial, postcolonial, and postliberalization state practices.

Abuses of state power, including widespread corruption and rent-seeking behavior, are a significant material dimension of the bureaucracy. However, both ideological critics of development and advocates of reform too often tend to operate with unidimensional conceptions of bureaucrats as corrupt, inefficient, or homogenized rational actors. Such conceptions do not fully capture processes of class formation and state-class relations that are entangled in the production of the bureaucratic workforce or the complex forms of agency and subjectivity of bureaucrats who must navigate a difficult political and institutional terrain. The complexity of the figure of the bureaucrat in effect stems from the ways in which bureaucrats are in many ways the human embodiment of this unwieldy boundary between the state and civil society. This wider perspective is critical for any understanding of questions of effective and accountable governance.