Title of Dissertation: The State, Identification and Welfare: Documentary Practices in India

Abstract

This dissertation is written with the basic premise that welfare processes are subservient to the everyday materiality of identification documents. This dissertation argues that the realm of welfare distribution was discursively constructed through late colonial and postcolonial narratives surrounding what the document should look like, who it should correspond to and what its functions should be. In India, welfare dispensations are contingent on carefully calibrated categories contained within identification documents like age, gender, place of residence, household, nationality, etc. This dissertation is a study of two norms of identification in welfare discourse, namely, stable residence and family enumeration.

This dissertation argues that ID documents are not tame, in either their form or function, to imperatives of governance. Identification documents have lives that escape rationales of bureaucratic authority and discussions of power. They resist attempts to fix them as impersonal, bureaucratic objects with disciplined trajectories.

Drawing on the theoretical intervention of “the social life of things”, this dissertation explores the various biographies of one ubiquitous identification document, namely, the rationing document in India, and specifically in the province and later the UT of Delhi. The rationing document was notoriously diverse in form and purpose. It acted at times to emphasize bureaucratic rationality of everyday colonial and postcolonial rule and at other times to obscure it. Rationing documents (family and individual ration cards, permits, cloth cards, motor spirit coupons, etc) are examined in this dissertation in their imagined forms and as tools of rhetoric. This dissertation studies the affective assertions of communities, officials and marginal subjects as produced by identification documents in a context of social relations. Rationing documents are depicted to be everyday objects
that unleash affective energies and release emotional responses. In their everyday trajectories, ration cards re-territorialize urban spaces, mediate social relations and produce norms of entitlement. They enable marginal subjects to inhabit authority and complicate power structures. Rationing documents continuously recast and re-define the conception of identity in debates on entitlement and welfare benefits. The identification document disperses claims and contestations of identity in various cultural, economic and social spheres of exchange.

This dissertation encourages the reader to form an image of the ration card as an animated identification document which is constantly shifting in form and function. This dissertation argues that a conception of documents as having lives is possible only when we regard documents as loose entities that tentatively hold together practices such as fingerprint, signature, serial numbers and norms like family, residence and nationality. These practices are not presented in their mutually reinforcing effects to produce the unity of the document. Instead, these aspects are discussed as discursive formations that break down consistent rationales and homogeneous forms of the identification document. Practices like the fingerprint and the stable residence norm become pronounced in different phases of the biography of a document. A study of the social life of the rationing document is a foray into the historically wavering significance of these norms and features. The biographies of the rationing document illuminate rationalities of colonial power, assertions of cultural nationalism, self-representations of officials, the power of rhetoric and the contesting claims on the city.

Through varied ethnographic discussions of the identification document, this dissertation regards ID documents as inciting new definitions and debates of entitlement, eligibility and identity. Such a study illustrates the power wielded by the various norms within the rationing document over the welfare establishment at different points of time in late colonial and post-colonial Delhi, roughly between 1940 and 2010. Above all, this dissertation attempts to reconstitute and re-frame old objects of the ‘political’ (state, law,
etc) and suggest relatively new objects of the ‘political’ such as documents, the archive, signatures, seals and other identification practices.

Finally, this dissertation advances the argument that welfare distribution processes in India are overrun by anxieties pertaining to the identity of the citizen within bounded national spaces and as a citizen, her cultural and social eligibility to claim certain entitlements. Within social science research, there have been few attempts to theorize the discursive spaces in which such anxieties are enacted in policy, contested, reformulated and recast. A study of documentary forms and practices promises to partially fill the scholarly void of welfare policy discourse.