SOCIAL LIVES OF FORMS, APPLICATIONS AND FILES IN UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

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Volume 3, 2019

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Abstract

Analysis of nature of university bureaucracies that make the state and laws real for the community of teachers, students and its non-teaching staff has been a relatively unexplored theme within the studies of educational institutions as well as bureaucratic studies. In this article my intention would be to provide an ethnographically derived, situated analysis of the ways in which University of Delhi like most universities in India continue to conduct themselves through repetitive, mundane, and seemingly innocuous practices of 'paper-work' to signify rational bureaucratic authority. Through different ethnographic instances I discuss despite the constant presence of 'paper-work' at every level of university bureaucracy, and concerted efforts of digitalization, the bureaucratic efficiency of controlling and circulation of data lacks consistency, structure and predictability.

Key words: Bureaucracy, Papers, Materiality, University of Delhi

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I. Introduction

A significant body of literature exists on universities as institutions of higher education that encourage critical thinking as well as disciplining (Erdreich and Rapoport 2006); universities as a site of generative youth politics, and as a space for personal, intellectual and political experimentations that has a dialogic relationship with the rest of society (Jeffrey 2010; Lukose 2005, 2006; Casati 2016). Yet, an understanding of the ways in which universities function as an institution has been rather limited. In this article, I analyse ways in which bureaucracies manifest their power and authority over the individuals they interact with, and

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how institutions like universities are experienced by those who are enrolled and working with them. The article illustrates the ways in which research scholars, specifically in DU, experience their location within the institution and the method through which identities of individuals are created by the bureaucracy to build rational-legal engagements with them.

In September of 2012, two recently enrolled PhD students of DU enter the Central Library of the University. At the front desk they show their identity cards (IDs) to the library staff stationed at the desk and ask for directions to the new membership section. After quickly checking their IDs, the library staff raises his hand towards the left to direct them to the new membership section. Upon reaching the desk, they request for membership enrollment forms from the library staff stationed at the desk behind a computer. The library staff hands over two forms and asks them to complete and submit them to him with two copies each of their passport-size photographs. A few minutes later, when the research scholars returned with the filled out form and two passport-size photographs, the library personnel (hereafter LP) then asked:

LP: Where is the photocopy of your ID card and enrolment fee receipt?

Research Scholar 1 (hereafter RS1): Sir, You didn't mention or ask us about the photocopy of the ID and fee receipt.

LP: Get it now. Every form needs to have a copy of the ID card and fee receipt. There is a photocopy shop outside the library, get it done from there.

RS 1: Sir, I am not carrying the fee receipt with me right now. Wouldn't the copy of the ID card alone suffice for membership to library? I mean, isn't it obvious that my department would only issue me an ID card after I have paid the university fee? If you could let me submit my form today, this would allow me access to the library soon to begin my work.

LP: Don't argue with me. It is compulsory to submit copies of both ID card and enrolment fee receipt. The form cannot be submitted without attaching both of them. These are university rules. I will only follow what has been told to me about the rules.

The research scholars leave the library and return the next day with copies of their ID card fee receipts. They finally received their library ID cards a week later after they paid the library fees and deposited a copy of the receipt at the new membership division of the library.

Any individual associated with a public university like DU wouldn't perhaps find this anecdotal narrative exceptional by any stretch of imagination. In fact, narratives of such encounters only rekindle nostalgia of one's association with university bureaucracy. It is almost as if one never really lives through a public university life intimately enough if one has not experienced such mundane, non-commonsensical bureaucratic processes. Bureaucracy, in that sense, is not merely a system of organisation of individuals and their relationships, but a category of experience that validates the existence of the individuals and their relationships. Bureaucracy does not merely organise and systematise one's relationship with the library for smooth functioning, but the nature in which the library bureaucracy acts is the validation of the research scholars' location within the library and the university.

I present an analysis of how power of authority and laws are experienced and made real for the community of teachers, students and non-teaching staff in the university bureaucracy. Through an engagement with the two prime material artefacts of DU bureaucracy—Forms and Applications—the paper discusses how forms and applications act as the primary mode of engagement between the university and its various constituent members. Focussing on the train of forms and applications in the life of university bureaucracy, I argue how the mundane and repetitive paper work becomes the symbol and agency of the rational bureaucratic authority.

II. Structures of University Bureaucracy

The University of Delhi is one of the premiere institutions in the country for higher education. The university began initially with three college—St. Stephen's College, Hindu College and Ramjas College—and was officially constituted as a university in 1922 as a unitary, teaching and residential university by an Act of the then Central Legislative Assembly. In addition to a vice-chancellor of the university who is appointed for fixed tenures, the President of India acts as the Visitor, the Vice-President as the Chancellor, and

the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India as the Pro-Chancellor of the university. The university expanded from two faculties (Arts and Science) and about 750 students during its initial years, and is now one of the largest universities in India. Presently, DU comprises 90 affiliated and recognised Colleges, 16 Faculties, 87 Departments and 16 distinguished Centres. It offers more than 500 programmes, which include undergraduate programmes offered by colleges of the university, an array of post-graduate programmes (including Masters, Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy), and Certificate and Diploma courses to more than 6 lakh students under various streams. Considering the size and magnitude of the work load of the university, the administrative responsibilities today operate from two different campuses—North and South—that are located, respectively, to the north and south of the city of Delhi.

Each of the administrative offices in both these campuses are further divided into multiple divisions, such as finance, academics, exams, colleges, which are individually headed by deans, who in turn report to the specific registrars and Proctors, all of whom in turn report to the Vice-Chancellor of the university. In the maze of the established hierarchy of posts in the university system, 'construction of collective agency from the agency of individuals continues to remain a central task' of the university's bureaucratic activities (Hull 2003: 288). The power and responsibility of accountability vested on each bureaucrat thereby contributes to the building of aggregate power of the institutional bureaucracy. It is not as if the summation of various authorities and powers vested with all the deans and registrars is directly proportional to the cumulative authority and power of the university, but rather, the individual bureaucratic agencies embedded in each of these positions that manifests as the collective bureaucratic authority of the university.

The activities of the university bureaucracy are far reaching, ranging from provision of employment for teaching and non-teaching staff of the university, student's admissions in accordance with varied affirmative action policies of the Central Government of India, conducting examinations to confer degrees upon students, development of university infrastructure through continuous negotiation for funds from the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) or statutory bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC), to payment of staff salaries and ensuring timely accreditations.

The typical layout of the administrative building in DU constitutes two or three floors, each of which is further divided into multiple large rooms. A specific department, depending on the volume of work, could be functioning out of multiple rooms, which are usually marked by number: example, Finance I, Finance II, and so forth. Inside each of these rooms would be a specific arrangement of individual desks and chairs for bureaucrats in various positions of hierarchy to be stationed. The arrangement of desks in this room is not necessarily based on logic of convenience of movement or adequate space management, but is more an expression of the route through which the files will move. In case any of these offices have some degree of public dealings or are frequently visited by students, faculty or other staff, the desk positioned closest to door would handle most of the queries and enquires by the public. The desk farthest from the door would probably belong to the senior most bureaucrat in that room, who in turn would be least accessible or who would be available only after those below him or her in the hierarchy would have exhausted all possibilities. One of the most unique features of university bureaucracy is that despite all efforts to maintain a clearly defined division of labour for every single task and tenaciously follow the manual of rules and regulations, the university bureaucratic system is most reputed for its ever increasing backlog of files, resulting in a frustrating amount of delay in every single task to be completed. While there is a logic of division of labour that forms the basic premise of bureaucracy, the institutional bureaucracies are crippled by problems of under-staffed offices or prolonged hiring of contractual university staff at meager salaries who are either under-trained or not trained to handle the tasks they are delegated. An analysis of the political economy of university hiring mechanisms and processes is currently beyond the scope of this paper, but the method by which individuals are employed to become part of the bureaucratic system is often cited as a prime reason, if not the only reason, for the nature of inefficiency of Indian bureaucracy.

Matthew Hull's prolific work on bureaucracy in Islamabad underlines that 'bureaucratic organization is a social form designed for collective action, a social technology for aligning the efforts of a large number of people so that they act as one. And yet the mechanisms by which this done is the precise individuation of action—defining appropriate actions for individuals and identifying them with particular acts—to a degree not known in any other kind of social organization (2003: 287; 2012). Classical sociologists like Max Weber (1978) have described bureaucracy as one of key features of rational-legal authority witnessed in

modern society. In his essays on bureaucracy published posthumously, rational domination based on legal legitimacy would be an inevitable phenomenon in the process of rationalisation of societies. According to Weberian theory, one could interpret the phenomenon of bureaucracy as affirming the rationalisation of society which advanced the project of modernity by enabling the application of the general principles of logic and reason to address problems, fostering the ability to respond to uncertain environments and to manage the inherent complexity. The ideal type of bureaucracy would thereby facilitate rational actions focussed at controlling uncertainty; and that rational calculation would limit uncertainty for greater productivity and efficiency.

On the contrary, today, social anthropologists, sociologists and scholars of contemporary societies, particularly in South Asia (see Hull 2012; Mathur 2016; Gupta 2012) have pointed out that bureaucracy and its associated features like red-tapism have been largely responsible for the systemic failures of policies (Harper 1998; Chatterjee 2004; Gupta 2012) targeted at reforms, redressals or rehabilitation. Veena Das's (2004, 2007) work on state and the functioning of its machineries describes 'illegibility' of the state, the very 'unreadablity of the state's rules and regulations' (2007: 168). For Das (2004), the struggle with 'illegibilities' emerges not only from some incapacity of staff to comprehend law, but rather, from the very practice of making a law real. As Das notes, illegibility is not an exception but very much part of the way in which rules or laws are implemented (2007: 172).

Nayanika Mathur's work furthers Das's work and presents an engaging ethnography of Uttarakhand state bureaucracy to explain how the social life of laws like National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005 (NREGA) and the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 (WPA) get activated through the labyrinth of bureaucracy. Most significantly, Mathur's work tirelessly explores the perennial complaint against the Indian state: its staggering slowness and propensity for making people wait endlessly, even when swift, decisive action is desperately required, and how perusal of laws as they move through state bureaucracy shows why certain laws do not work as they ought to and how they are capable of producing absurdity (Mathur 2016: 2). Using the example of the execution of NREGA in Uttarakhand, Mathur describes how the policy of NREGA was endowed with official reality on a piecemeal basis by the Uttarakhand state bureaucracy through slow and careful translations of the authoritative texts, letters, meetings, sedimented institutional knowledge of preceding

rural employment schemes, and the incessant production of a variety of documents' (ibid.: 3). According to Mathur, policies like NREGA never reach a legibility of the sort its framers anticipated and expected; rather, aspects of it were made more or less officially real through the daily labour expended on it. Agents of the state know that rules can never be followed to the letter. Their energies are directed instead at making it appear *as if* the illegibilities have been overcome, *as if* orders have been followed, *as if* the NREGA has been made real. And the primary means through which this occurs is by the production, circulation, reading, and filing of the correct documents (ibid.:3; emphasis original).

Inspired by Mathur's work, this article attempts to analyse why, despite the division of labour and centralised modules of systemic rules to ensure efficiency, productivity and accountability, the bureaucracy of Delhi University is seen to be one of the most painstaking experiences in the university life of any student or faculty. Here, I specifically focus on research scholars' experience in DU within the landscape of university bureaucracy. By tracing the ways in which materiality of paper by way of forms and applications shape the authority of the university in the professional lives of research scholars, this article ethnographically analyses the bureaucratic rational- legal authority of the university. This, notwithstanding the fact that experiences of a research scholar in DU can find comparable experiences of different individuals in various other institutional bureaucracies. The choice of analysing a research scholar's experience is therefore not an attempt to isolate the object of research or treat it bereft of any influences of varying intensities.

III. University Records: Life of Files and Identities

University rules and regulations befuddle everyone who tries to and eventually becomes part of the system. This section describes the process of applying, joining, sustaining and finally submitting one's thesis as a research scholar in a social science department in Delhi University. Derived from auto-ethnographic knowledge and experience of being part of this system, I elaborate how the materiality of paper provides the tangibility of power and authority that commands, frames and defines the position and existence of a research scholar in the university system.

From the moment an eligible student applies for the position of a doctoral research scholar in the social science departments, the processes through forms and applications begin. Usually

the first step in the applying process is to fill out a form that seeks details of one's name, photograph, parents' name, address (permanent and correspondence), educational qualifications, marks, details of universities through which the said degrees have been achieved, details of the department to which admission is sought, tentative title of the project, status and result of state-funded scholarship 1 programmes or teaching certification 2 examinations. After the process of initial screening by the university authorities, a selected eligible candidate is asked to either appear for further qualifying examinations or proceed for direct submission of one's research proposal in order to appear for an interview before the department faculty members. Based on the specific case in question, after the second round of screening of eligible candidates through the marks obtained in the entrance examination or evaluation of one's research proposal or both, the candidate is finally called for an interview. The information on screening results, marks obtained, time and date of interview is usually communicated through the university website which a candidate is expected to check everyday after he or she has submitted the application form. The final round of screening involves an interview, before which the candidate should submit the research proposal through email as well as several hard copies to the department and for each faculty member of the department.

The interview with the department faculty members and discussion on a prospective supervisor follows a waiting period before the official announcement of the selection results. Once the candidate is selected, a new set of forms are again handed over to the selected candidate which seek information on name, photograph, parents' name, date of joining the university PhD programme, address (permanent and correspondence), educational qualifications, marks, details of universities through which the said degrees have been received, details of the department to which admission is sought, tentative title of the project, status and result of state-funded scholarship programmes, or teaching certification qualifying examinations. After the submission of forms to the department office for joining intimation, ID cards and fees deposit, a file in the name of a particular research scholar is created both at the departmental level and at the office of research studies at the university level, with all the deposited forms and copies of the degrees and certificates post-verification.

For the following years in the university, that file operates as the sole guarantor of one's admission, dossier of all the communications between the research scholar and the university or the department, progress report—in other words, the proof of one's existence as a research

scholar in the university. However, the standard norm of the university is to advise every student, researcher, faculty or staff to maintain one's own photocopies of every communication with the university. The file is upheld as sacrosanct at any moment of data authentication, research progress information or any dispute. However, the university bureaucrat's advice to keep personal copies of the same documents that it already possesses reflects an acknowledgement of the precariousness of the file itself. The loss of one's file is a matter of chaos and anxiety for the members of the office and the research scholar, not because it is difficult and inconvenient to start a new file or that it reflects loss of irretrievable information about a human being logically enrolled or present in the university, but because, loss of the official file is symbolically an erasure of the particular individual's identity within the university. Since the university bureaucracy considers the personhood of the specific research scholar only through the information available in the forms submitted and the certificates attached, the construction and validation of the individual's identity within the university system is through the construction a file. The absence of the file therefore means absence of the individual's identity for the university.

According to Hull, a file is a chronicle of its own production, sedimentation of its own history. For Hull, files are like graphic artefacts that are central to bureaucratic practices because they mediate the actions of individuals and the agency of the larger groups (like the university bureaucrats), including the actions of the organisation as a whole. Therefore, 'circulation of the file precipitates a multi-party interaction through which authorship and therefore agency, as constructed in official ideology, is distributed over a larger and larger network of functionaries. The contingent achievement of movement up and down the chain of command and laterally to other departments produces on the notesheet a representation of collective agency (Hull 2003: 303).

The existence of the file therefore anticipates circulation of papers through multiple different files in different offices that collectively work towards ensuring the completion of the degree of a research scholar. Hence, though the supervisor, head of the department and chairperson of the office of research studies directly engage with the file of a research scholar and communicate to him or her regarding various matters from time to time, the offices of examination, the dean of academics, the office of scholarships, the registrar of the university, the vice-chancellor's office, all collectively hold varied relationships to the file of the research scholar according to the specificity of the case. For instance, in a situation when the

research scholar needs an extension of the deadline to submit a thesis, not only the supervisor, but also the various bureaucrats in offices of research studies, academics, registrar, scholarships, examinations, would all circulate the particular file with due notations on the application made by the research scholar seeking extension. The circulation of the same application through various offices brings about the collective character of the decision offered by the university authority. The application written on a paper therefore becomes the communicating agent between the file and the rational-legal authority of the university that the various levels of bureaucracy collectively respond to.

When a research scholar, who already exists in the form of a file in the university, submits a thesis, he or she is again expected to fill out approximately 10 to 15 forms with one's name, parents' name, address (permanent and for correspondence), title of the thesis, name of the supervisor, year of joining the doctoral programme, certification that the research scholar actually conducted the said research in the given university, status of scholarship, etc.—all of which are time and again signed and authorised by the supervisor and the head of department. The multiple forms are destined to different offices or even within the same office; the multiple forms with almost the same information are purposely meant to inform different matters. In the samples of the submission forms below, one sees the repetition of information with minor addition or subtraction of information in each. On several instances, when asked about the logic of these multiple forms that could easily be condensed into a single or two forms, the university officials justify the 'physical' presence of different forms as the artefact of distinct authentication provided for each information on the forms. For instance, Form-1 asks for the name of the scholar, thesis title, name of the department and enrolment number in Hindi, and Form-2 requires the same information in English, with additional information on supervisor and co-supervisor's phone number and email addresses. Form-3 seeks the same information about name, title of the thesis and parents' name and address in English, but duly signed by both the head of department and supervisor, whose details have already been provided in the previous forms and logically already exist with the university since they would be functional faculty members of the university. Form-4, thereafter, once again seeks the same information in addition to the date of birth and religion of the research scholar.

Form-1

Form-2

Form-3

PARTICULARS TO BE FILLED IN BY THE CANDIDATE

1. Name of applicant (in block letters) ....
   आवेदक का नाम (ब्लाक शब्दों में)
   (Name must correspond with the name on the enrolment form)
2. Father's Name ....
   पिता का नाम
3. Father's Occupation ....
   पिता का व्यवसाय
4. Delhi University Enrolment No. ....
   नामांकन संख्या
5. Date of Birth ....
   जन्म-तिथि
6. Religion ....
   धर्म
7. If the scholar Belongs to Schedule Caste/Schedule Tribe/OBC he/she must mention it clearly.
   जाति (कौई जाति हो तो)
   (परीक्षार्थी अगर अनुसूचित जाति/जनजाति/पिछड़ा वर्ग का हो तो उसे इसका साफ-साफ उल्लेख करना चाहिए)
   S/C : Yes/No   ....
   अनुसूचित जाति : हाँ/नहीं
   S/T : Yes/No   ....
   अनुसूचित जनजाति : हाँ/नहीं
   OBC : Yes/No   ....
   अन्य पिछड़ा वर्ग : हाँ/नहीं
8. Original place of residence ....
   मूल निवास-स्थान
9. Name of the Istitution or College to which attached ....
   परीक्षार्थी जिस संस्थान अथवा कॉलेज से संबंधित हो उसका नाम लिखें
10. Please mention the following information related to passing of Master of Arts/M.Phil. Examination mentioning the following :
    कला-विद्यान/एम.फिल परीक्षा से संबंधित निम्नलिखित जानकारी अवश्य दें;
    University ....Roll No.................Year ....Division..............
    विश्वविद्यालय ....अनुक्रमांक.................वर्ष.........श्रेणी ....
11. Whether he/she has included the contents of any work in the thesis which he/she may have published on the subject? If so, state nature of such work ....
    क्या परीक्षार्थी ने इस विषय पर प्रकाशित अपनी किसी कृति के और शोधप्रबंध में शामिल किये हैं? यदि ऐसा किया हो तो जिस कृति के और शामिल किया गये हों, उसका स्वरूप बतायें.
    Copies of reprints/acceptance letter is attached.

Form-4

The repetition of information in each form is therefore not unintentional or merely inefficient duplication of tasks and forms, but rather a deliberate effort to treat every information on each form distinctly authenticated as an assurance against errors on the part of the bureaucracy in an unforeseen situation of dispute (Keane 1997, 2003; Messick 1993) between the research scholar, the state, or any other statutory body and the university. The regime of paper produced and transacted between a research scholar and the university bureaucracy summarily offers a collective agency to the bureaucracy to respond back to individuals or other agencies in a situation in which interpretation of law or its execution becomes a disputed matter.

Further, if bureaucracy is to be considered as an example of law that organises the transaction between state, individuals and different social relationships premised on promoting common good, then the opaque nature of bureaucratic processes questions the common good upheld by bureaucracy. Gillian Rose (2009) in her engagement with Hegelian thought presents, the critique of assumption of 'scientificity' that the empirical and organising principle of natural laws that underwrites Hegel's work. For Hegel, therefore, bureaucracy as an extension of empirical and natural law is both 'arbitrary, imposed schema and not a "scientific" engagement with the underlying structures of law' (Rose 2009:55). Hence, while university bureaucrats insisting on separate attestation of similar information may be perceived as a scientific approach to build the validity of the university bureaucracy's collective agency in the case of any dispute. It could be understood as instead an imposed schema of corroborating repetitive information with an arbitrary role assigned to each bit of information

that undermines the Weberian explanation of bureaucracy as a scientific organising principle of a society.

IV. Concluding Remarks

The bureaucracy is constructed as a system of organisation that aligns the actions of a collective that works towards a common good of rationalising and strategising individual and state relationship. Yet, the intentional illegibility of bureaucratic laws entangles the bureaucracy and individuals with opacity of logic and structure, as well as with inefficiency of the system to read and execute its own laws. The regime of paper produced and the deliberate repetition of information that gets aggregated in a file enable us to decipher how translation of law by university bureaucracy becomes real through the materiality of paper.

The second aspect addressed in this paper is how bureaucracy is not merely a certain structure that exists, but is an experience with the papers, files, inefficiency and engagement with an opaque, slow, arbitrary scheme of logic that ascertains its power and authority in the life of any individual. In modern societies today, it is hard to imagine an individual outside the realm of bureaucracy of some kind. It is not only about how bureaucracy as a collective agency tires out individuals through its illegibility and inefficiency, but rather, the experience of bureaucracy's arbitrariness and opacity that materialises power and authority remains a distinctive feature of university bureaucracy.

Notes

[1] JRF—Junior Research Fellowship—and later SRF—Senior Research Fellowship funded by the UGC for the top achievers of the National Eligibility Test (NET) examination.

2 The National Eligibility Test is considered as a teaching certification and research eligibility qualifying examination.

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