

# Introducing

# Anjali Thomas

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**Anjali Thomas is an Associate Professor in the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs at Georgia Tech in Atlanta, Georgia. She specializes in comparative politics and political economy with a focus on India. The questions that drive her research pertain to the politics of public service provision, local and multi-level governance, gender disparities, and distributive politics. We spoke to Anjali about her book on local democracy in the developing world, her work on water access in Mumbai, and two memorable fieldwork experiences from India.**



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**Your book, *Democratization from Above: The Logic of Local Democracy in the Developing World* (published by Cambridge University Press, 2016) explores why some developing countries introduce reforms to make local governance more democratic while others neglect or undermine it. How has your perspective on this topic evolved since its publication in 2016?**

My initial goal for the book was to try to understand why some state governments in India were motivated to grant more autonomy to local institutions while others were not. However, as I delved more deeply into the research, I began to understand that reforms framed as being about enhancing local autonomy often increased the dependency of local governments on their higher-level counterparts. A key argument I made in my book is that, rather than being a means to grant more autonomy to local actors, establishing local-level elections can often be a means for elites at higher tiers of government to gain control over local actors. One implication of this argument that I explore extensively in the book is that higher-level governments are motivated to establish an elected government at the local level when they lack

access to or face competition for control over the ruling party's existing party networks used to discipline local intermediaries.

Since the book's publication, I have been thinking more broadly about the factors that create dependencies between politicians at different tiers of government. For example, in my 2018 *AJPS* article "Targeting Ordinary Voters or Political Elites?" I examined the question of why national politicians distribute pork to state-level co-partisans. Using fine-grained project-level data from a public works program in India, I showed that the evidence was most consistent with what I term an "elite cooperation logic" of distribution. This means national politicians who distribute pork not only to win over voters, but also to win over the cooperation of co-partisan political elites occupying positions at lower levels of government. Similar to the argument in my book, this is another example of how actions that may be initially thought of as strengthening lower-level governments – in this case, a downward transfer of resources in the form of pork – may actually be used as a form of control.

**At the 2024 APSA Annual Meeting, you presented findings from a field experiment on why and how bottom-up pressure helps residents in Mumbai's informal settlements gain access to piped water. What else can you tell us about this project's scope and how you plan to build on it in the future?**

This project, co-authored with Nikhar Gaikwad, began in 2018. We have completed three rounds of data collection since then (our most recent round was in 2023) across close to 7000 households. The project involved partnering with local NGOs in Mumbai to field two interventions. The first assisted citizens with the bureaucratic requirements to apply for municipal water connections. The second assisted citizens with political coordination to mount collective pressure on government officials to demand piped water. Interestingly, we found that while neither intervention was successful on its own, they worked in tandem to boost the likelihood of settlement residents gaining access to piped water about five years later.

We have plans to expand on this project in a few ways. Firstly, even though we initially did not anticipate this, our data provides a unique opportunity to investigate how prior interventions that promoted citizen-state engagement influenced citizens' experiences during the large-scale internal migration crisis caused by the pandemic in our context. Secondly, we also intend to collaborate with Alyssa Heinze at UC Berkeley to explore how mobilizing around piped water, as a gendered public good, impacts women's well-being and empowerment.

**Finally, would you share a memorable moment from your fieldwork in India that has stayed with you?**

There have been many memorable fieldwork moments, so I must pick two. The first that was from several years ago, from the fieldwork for my project on piped water in Mumbai's informal settlements, which I mentioned above. During one of my visits, I witnessed first-hand the laying of the infrastructure for a piped water connection in a large informal settlement that had gone for years without access to piped water. The piped water connection had come about due to the efforts of our NGO partners during the interventions that were part of our project. The settlement residents gathered around to witness this milestone, and it was heartening to hear

them talking about the impacts it would have on their lives. I grew up in Mumbai, so it was especially meaningful to personally witness the impact of our project on "my city."

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The second memorable fieldwork moment was from my recent visit to rural Bihar – a state in North India – for a project collaborating with Sayan Banerjee, Charles Hankla, and our local partners from the Policy Development and Advisory Group. The project examines the influence of elected politicians on shaping attitudes towards girls' education. As part of the project's experimental component, we sought to record video statements from local elected officials discussing the benefits of educating girls. We would then disseminate these videos to respondents in a survey experiment to assess the influence of different types of elected officials.

While we sought to elicit statements from both male and female local elected officials, it proved particularly challenging to record statements from female local elected officials who had difficulty articulating themselves. This was due, in large part, to their own lack of education and confidence, as many of them were illiterate. Ironically, their husbands – the proxy representatives – recorded videos in which they spoke eloquently about the benefits of girls' education. At the same time, their wives were unable to speak due to their lack of education. While my *a priori* expectation was that videos from local female representatives would be more impactful in changing families' gender norms surrounding girls' education, what we witnessed during our fieldwork made me realize that the reality might be much more nuanced. This was a memorable episode in my fieldwork because it forced me to expand my understanding of the potential over the potential impact of female local representatives in this context.

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