

Introducing Tanu Kumar

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Tanu Kumar is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Politics and Economics at Claremont Graduate University, and a faculty affiliate at the Center for Effective Global Action. She completed her PhD in Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley in May 2020. Tanu studies the behaviour of citizens and bureaucrats in everyday politics at the local level, and her regional expertise is in urban India.

Can you tell us more about your research focus on the behavior of citizens and bureaucrats in developing contexts? What motivated you to explore this area of study?

I have always been interested in how ordinary people make decisions and create change in their communities. A lot of research in political science focuses on the behavior of elites because these are the people with obvious decision-making power. But at the turn of the last century, we saw a huge wave of decentralization that gave ordinary people a lot of power. There is also probably some motivated reasoning in my thinking; as an ordinary person, I want to believe that someone like me can take action and have even some small impact in my community.

Of course, studying the behavior of citizens is not new; people have been researching political behavior in developing contexts for a long time. What I'm trying to do is think about citizens as ordinary people rather than voters or parts of a political



machine. So much of the research on political behavior in developing countries is about vote buying, clientelism, patronage, and ethnicity and for good reason, as these systems do describe elections. However, I want to know how people participate in politics outside election time. What do they want? How do they get things done? And how do we think about the behavior of not only the very poor, but upwardly mobile citizens who have some amount of time, money, and influence? There are so many places citizens can try to affect governance outside of election time. To understand what role these institutions play in governance, we must first know what the people who use them want and do.

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The book I am working on, *Building Social Mobility: How Subsidized Homeownership Creates Wealth, Dignity, and Voice in India*, explores these ideas.

On its face, this is a book about how housing policy affects citizen behavior. But I think it's actually about how citizens participate in politics as they get wealthier, as the type of housing policy I study is a large wealth transfer. And what I find is that people participate more in local-level politics. They are more active in making demands on local government to improve services. This is because they have more time and feel like they have more status in society, and also because they want to protect their newfound wealth.

These trends actually line up perfectly with what existing literature says about the rise of the middle class: the middle class has the potential, in its own interest, to demand better governance and improve institutions. It's also possible that the demands of upwardly mobile citizens conflict with the needs of others, particularly the poor. So the bigger takeaway is that, as upwardly mobile citizens ask more of government, we need to carefully consider whether welfare distribution, growth, and upward mobility are broadly beneficial or just benefit a small group at the expense of others.

I'm also beginning to think more about governance from the officials' points of view. We must under-

stand the decision-making of the people responding to citizens – often bureaucrats. When do bureaucrats respond to and help citizens seeking to change their communities? Again, there is already quite a lot of research on bureaucrats in developing contexts! But most of this research is on when bureaucrats will listen to their appointing politicians. I want to know more about the bureaucrat-citizen side of the equation, and I suspect these interactions are less based on politics than bureaucrat-politician interactions. Again, I approach these actors as ordinary people and try to step into their shoes. I'm really interested in how bureaucrats' intrinsic motivations, empathy, and social ties to citizens shape responsiveness to demands to improve communities. This is what I'm exploring in my new work on bureaucratic responsiveness in Mumbai and rural India.

With your regional expertise in India, what specific aspects of Indian society and politics have you focused on in your research? Are there any unique challenges or dynamics you have observed in this context?

I focus mainly on local governance because I care about ordinary people and their communities. For a long time, I only studied urban areas. This is partly because I think urbanization is a really important trend in India. But this decision was also practical. As a woman with limited experience traveling alone in India, urban areas felt approachable in my fieldwork. Therefore, my first set of research projects was about service delivery in cities, and I think I'll always be most interested in whether and how governments deliver basic services – water, electricity, sanitation – to their citizens. I looked at how citizens demand these basic services and the incentives and motivations of frontline bureaucrats to respond.

I'm beginning to do more work in rural areas, which is exciting. I think India's most stubborn economic, social, and political problems are in the countryside, so there is so much to learn and so much opportunity to do impactful research. If we see challenges

in service delivery in cities, they are much bigger in rural areas. So my current work is on how bureaucrats in rural areas prioritize citizen demands.

As for the challenges and dynamics in these places, India is an extremely hierarchical and patriarchal society. The legacy of the caste system is real; there is a great deal of political mobilization along religious lines, and female seclusion is still common in certain parts of the country. For these reasons, I'm interested in the concept of dignity in Indian politics, which I discuss in my book. I think of dignity as a form of agency in one's personal life and relationships. It matters because it fundamentally shapes how people interact in society and how they make demands of government. Caste hierarchy and patriarchy can rob people of this agency, and I'm curious about what bolsters it. I think that material things like wealth, jobs, and housing can do a lot to increase dignity, even for the most marginalized groups, and I find this in my book using some new measures for the concept. In my future work, I'll be looking at how dignity for different groups has changed over time and the most important predictors for these changes.

That being said, things are changing fast. India looks different to me every time I go. So much is being built, and so many systems are being digitized, seemingly overnight. This is astonishing to see, and in some ways makes me very excited and hopeful about the country's future. On the other hand, it's not clear how broad-based this rapid progress is, who it serves, and what it costs in terms of environmental impact and the real freedoms of ordinary people. I'll be interested in learning more about the distributional consequences of trends like digitization, infrastructure development, and the changing party system—either in my work or that of others.

Finally, I know that you are interested in astronomy and astrophysics! Was there a specific moment or experience that ignited your curiosity about the universe?

I suppose my whole family has always been interested in outer space. We would spend a lot of time going to planetariums and science museums when I was younger. To me, the field really drives home why science is so exciting. Human beings have been able to learn so much about outer space through really creative methods, and even with limited technology—the computer aboard Voyager 1 (launched in 1979, over 14 billion miles from Earth and still transmitting) has only 70 KB of computing power! At the same time, we have barely scratched the surface of the secrets of the universe, and there is so much left to explore and learn. It's the type of scientific exploration where we can't even imagine what we might find. For now, I'm hopeful that we will see humans on Mars and evidence of extra-terrestrial life within my lifetime.



A photo of public housing in Mumbai.
Photo Credit: Tanu Kumar.

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