

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR THIBAUD MARCESSE

JOSEPH J. MURPHY IV

Thibaud Marcesse is an Assistant Professor of Comparative and South Asian Politics at Boston College. He received his Ph.D. in Government from Cornell University in 2018, and his research examines how institutional change in poverty alleviation affects the strategies pursued by political parties in rural India. His recent book, *The Accommodation of Democracy: A New Political Economy of Poverty Alleviation in Rural India*, analyzes the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in Uttar Pradesh and, through quantitative and qualitative data, reveals the existence of democratic accommodation, rather than true democratic deepening, at the local level in India.



JM: Hello, Professor Marcesse. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me to discuss *The Accommodation of Democracy*. I wanted to begin with a clarification regarding what some of the major terms utilized mean. You distinguish between the veil of democratic deepening in India and the reality of democratic accommodation beneath it. How do you distinguish between these terms and how can one differentiate between them?

TM: The broader point of this distinction is that there has been a tendency among recent scholars, who have looked at the evolution of India's democracy, especially at the local level, to assume that the fact that there are now elections at the local level means that democracy has effectively deepened. The question of a democratic deepening is itself, I think, problematic because assuming that having more elections is going to result in a better democracy is incorrect in my opinion. The democratic deepening is often sort of seen as a matter of fact, just because elections are happening when they were not, which in and of itself is a big deal.

The fact that there are elections at the local level is a huge deal. But I think there is a tendency among scholars not to really reflect on the meaning of those elections and to what extent are those elections meaningful. Do people actually freely express their preferences? Do they have the opportunity to run for office unimpeded? Yes, elections are happening. So, quantitatively, there's an element of democratic deepening, if you wish. And so the idea of an accommodation was to sort of emphasize or show, by contrast, that having elections did not mean that the meaning of democracy, which is accountability, was effectively happening. So elections are happening, but accountability, the sort of accountability that elections produce, is not really happening, or it's not always happening. It is happening in some places, but not everywhere.

JM: Do you think that the fact that not all of the electorate is being engaged is kind of a necessary step in democratic actualization, or do you think it's an aberration that sometimes occurs, like in the United States with portions of the U.S. electorate not having the ability to engage? Do you think that's something that is inevitable?

TM: It's a good question. I think it is inevitable to some extent because of the very sort of conditions in which democracy takes place. I would like to take the American example again.

Elections happen on a Tuesday. Some would say by design, right? It's more complicated, obviously, but this is going to have an effect, an impact on turnout and the broader engagement with democratic institutions that citizens should have. So, I think in the case of India, it's the same. Elections happen on Sundays and turnout remains very, very high for local and national elections in India, in fact, higher than in the U.S. But a lot of people are going to be excluded. A lot of people are not gonna be engaged the way they should be for a variety of reasons.

India is still a country in which about one person in five lives in poverty, severe poverty. And the measurement of poverty is itself very controversial. If you were to go by very standard measures of the poverty line, you would have very low numbers of people in poverty. But the reality is different. There are a lot of people in India who are either poor or economically vulnerable, right above the poverty line, which means that you're not officially poor anymore but you're not safe. So I think, in that sense, ideally there would be no form of democratic accommodation in that the bureaucracy would not meddle with the expression of popular preferences. Can that possibility be completely eliminated? I don't think so. Could it be more systematically pushed away? Yes.

JM: And to that end, with regards to the normative relationship between a bureaucracy and the actualization of democracy: how do you see the bureaucracy's role in relation to it?

TM: This is something that has been at the center of my sort of research and academic pursuits. It's something that has a lot of relevance in the U.S. today as well. Well, this is a conversation in the U.S. that has been going on for a long time, and I think it's a central tension in democratic societies, where the bureaucracy technically should be the executive arm of the people. What the people want should translate into legislation, that then gets implemented by the bureaucracy. However, we do know that in practice the bureaucracy has its own interests that it is also committed to sometimes.

A friend of mine wrote a book about how the bureaucrats actually do help with the implementation of policies in India, specifically in the field of education, by very simply exercising discretion. So sometimes a bureaucrat is faced with effectively implementing a policy that mandates that a school will be built in a specific district, and then it so happens that the

people living in the district are not living there permanently. They migrate. So in the winter they go in the hills, they take their cattle and move to the hills, and so that bureaucrat decided that applying the legislation, applying the policy by the book, was a mistake. By building a school half of the year, the school would be empty, the kids would not be attending because they would be with their parents in the hills. So he tweaked it in such a way that teachers could be moving along with the community and teach people in the hills. Well, that's evidently going against the letter of the law. But it's a good thing, right? So even though there's a popular mandate for a policy that says there should be a school in every district so that every kid can go to school and attend primary school, the bureaucrat found himself or herself in a situation where he or she had to exercise discretion, and that was good. It sort of resulted in a better outcome, an outcome that probably the majority of the population wants.

So there's a bit of a tension here. I think the tension can be limited to the extent that bureaucrats are well-trained and committed to democratic ideals, which is to say, they're committed to implementing policies that the people have decided they wanted to see implemented. But there's a bit of a tension, and we can see this here. Here it's very obvious, and now it's sort of centering on the discussion of independent agencies: are independent agencies part of the executive or not? It's kind of a gray zone, right? Like, it appears the Supreme Court says that it's part of the executive, it's the unitary executive theory. But not the Fed, apparently? So this is a tension that's found everywhere in all democratic systems. India is no exception to this. My experience of dealing with bureaucracy has been an experience where I've seen people distort the implementation of policies in a way that is not optimal, that the majority of the population would say is not good: taking bribes, charging additional fees, fudging data. But I can't rule out that in very different settings, another part of India, perhaps, bureaucrats would behave the way the bureaucrats of my friend behave, where they tweak the policy in a way that actually makes it better for citizens.

JM: Sometimes I suppose that level of specialization is needed for the proper implementation of policy.

TM: Yes and bureaucrats have agency. They exercise their agency. They have to make decisions. They have to make a decision on a very short notice and their judgment is involved, their sort of past experience, their sense of efficacy, all kinds of things. The bureaucracy is a living being in a way. We see it as a monolith. We see it as this very boring kind of executive arm of the state, but it's much more complicated in practice.

JM: So moving on to more about the methods on which your argument is based, there's a lot of quantitative data, from the census and the National Sample Survey Office. But touching on the more qualitative aspect of it, how did you find the experience of interviewing different bureaucrats and others? And did you ever run into any issues in translating these interviews into the larger points you were trying to make?

TM: The qualitative part of the work was by far the most enjoyable. The quantitative data is useful because it tells a story as well. Data are social product. I have a chapter that describes how bureaucrats enter data, and sometimes fudge data. So data are by definition social products. So they're not a faithful reflection of the objective empirical world. It's much more complex. They should be. And in most cases, they tend to be. But they're not. And so that's an interesting part of the story, but it's very limiting; you don't get a sense of how precise the data is or how the data is produced, and you don't get a sense of how people who actually produce the data deal with it, interpret it. The qualitative part of the work has been extremely rewarding in that sense because it has added a human story in addition to actually helping me make sense of the production of data. The human story has been really, really fascinating: shadowing bureaucrats, following bureaucrats, interviewing bureaucrats. And interviewing bureaucrats has sometimes involved just like chitchatting, getting to know them, hearing their personal stories, joking with them, hearing some of their more offensive jokes or comments. There's a human element here that has made working in this book absolutely very rewarding.

JM: Your book ends with a contrasting of local level democratic accommodation against national level democratic backsliding. So how would you say these two processes sort of interact and inform the actualization of democracy?

TM: Yeah, I think that's another really good question. I think the story of the democratic deepening is sort of showcased against the broader backdrop of democratic backsliding, which is very real in India today. India is a democracy that is becoming much less liberal and much more centralized. India is technically and theoretically a federal country in which local government agencies and state level government agencies have a lot of autonomy, and a lot of this is being taken away by the central government. So there's a story of backsliding, institutionally speaking, centralization, and also ideologically speaking. There's a move away from liberal democracy and pluralism, with an embrace of majoritarianism, a very distinct strain of majoritarianism: religious nationalism. So the local level is paradoxical because local elections are non-partisan. Local elections tend to be insulated from this broader trend. This is not to say that there are no tensions between communities at the local level either. But local elections, by and large, from what I've seen, (and I'm working on the second book now that is trying to understand why the local level politics is so detached from it, so insulated, and can continue to be insulated from national level politics), is that local level politics tends to be relatively immune to the broader sort of ideological shift at the national level, which is good. So my conclusion is local democracy is very good, normatively. But in practice, it doesn't exactly happen the way we would like it, or the way the people who reformed India's constitution thirty-five years ago now to promote local democracy, really envisaged it originally. But it is a story of resilience, especially given the sort of national level backsliding and ideological shift.

Local elections are very much about, you know, fixing a road. It's the same in the U.S. Yes, you vote for council members affiliated with either party, but by and large, local elections, especially in small towns and rural communities, are not very partisan. Because they're really about bread and butter issues and small sorts of infrastructure problems and what we call valence issues in political science, non-ideological issues. Everyone wants a good road. Everyone wants street lights to work. Everyone wants access to broadband network internet access. And I think it's the same in India to some extent. I think there's something to be said about how democratic resilience at the local level, despite its shortcomings, is a good thing given the sort of broader national level shifts. I actually don't even think the BJP in power at the national level really wants to change the rules of the game at the local level. Because they don't really think it's all that relevant, and I think this would really create a backlash, a huge backlash. People really do

like to vote at the local level now. The local elections are very popular. The turnout is very high. In every single village, there's a system of reservations, which constrains the ability of people to run for office. But where there are no reservations, and even places that have reserved seats, they have a very, very high number of candidates. These elections are very competitive in a good way, which is to say a lot of people run for office, and people do value local elections. They really think that this is an important accountability mechanism.

JM: Discussing applicability to students and their conception of democracy in the U.S., do you think that our electorate is provided with enough tools and resources to meaningfully engage with democratic processes?

TM: I'm pessimistic and optimistic at the same time, which I know is not a very satisfying answer to your question. This is year two of the second Trump term. A lot of scary things were done in my humble opinion last year, but it's not been as bad as I thought it could be. The midterms are still six months away and like a lot of things would happen in six months. But I do think people have the tools, like, look at the turnout for the "No Kings" protests. Massive turnout. There was a bit of an age gap, which is, I think, a matter of concern, because young people are not nearly as engaged in those protests as older people. But I do think people have the means to express themselves freely, make claims on the state, express dissatisfaction with state policies when those state policies are considered to be unacceptable. Minneapolis in general is a good example of that.

My concern for the democratic system doesn't have so much to do with the ability of people to express themselves. It has to do more with the disconnect between institutions, the way institutions operate, and the way people express their preferences. Which is another way to say what people actually want does not really translate into a policy for a variety of reasons, some good, some bad. Institutions are there for a reason. They help sort of organize participation. It is a good thing. It's a good thing to have a House and Senate with their rules. But the expansion of the role of money in politics today is a major threat to what should be a translation of people's preferences into policies at the institutional level. That's happening less and less in this country, and that is a major concern. All of this can be traced back to *Citizens United*, but money was

already a problem before that. It just became more of a problem. It's the fact that this is a government of oligarchs, for oligarchs, by oligarchs. India has similar problems, mind you, at the national level, at least.

JM: Are there any last thoughts you would want to get out about your book or any lessons to be taken away regarding India or democracy as a whole?

TM: Every book wants to engage the existing scholarship. And so I've been really driven by this desire to tell my colleagues who've written books before on the same subject or similar subjects, "I don't think you're getting the story right," or, "You might be right, but you're not seeing everything that I think we need to sort of look at." So that has been a big motivation for the book. Whenever you tell people, "I wrote a book about bureaucracy." A lot of people are gonna be like, "Sure." If you write a book about political violence, you're likely to have an audience. So I would love for people to see that this is much more than about the bureaucracy.

This really gets to this fundamental tension that I was telling you about at the very beginning. How can the bureaucracy be held accountable? One, should it be held accountable? Because, by law, it is technically accountable. It is supposed to be implementing policies voted by the people. But in practice, that's not always the case. So how do we solve that tension? Can that tension be solved or not? This is of relevance, not just to an Indian audience, but also to an American audience. Can the state really be held accountable by citizens? In the American political tradition, the state is the pure expression of the people. The state exists because the people want it to exist. In the European tradition, the state exists almost as a prior. So democracy makes the state legitimate. But the state existed before, and will continue to exist, presumably. It has its own kind of separate life trajectory, if you wish.

I would love for undergraduate students to read this book and say, "This is really making me think about what the real meaning of democracy is, given that the state is still involved in our lives and shaping our material lives on a daily basis, and what kind of state do I want? Do I want a state that is perfectly accountable to me, even in cases where policies are not effectively working? Or do I want a state that has a little more autonomy, that I can still hold accountable one way or another?" And that was the purpose of democracy at the local level. Oftentimes local

elected officials are at the mercy of bureaucrats, which is not okay, but that's the reality of it. So can we find a middle ground where bureaucrats do effectively implement policies with an element of discretion, because it benefits people, while at the same time being held accountable?

JM: That is a very wide-reaching and inevitable tension that needs to be addressed. Thank you again, Professor Marcesse, for your wonderful answers and for taking the time to meet with me to discuss *The Accommodation of Democracy*.

If you are interested in learning more about the matters discussed in the interview and about processes of democratization more broadly as well, please read *The Accommodation of Democracy: A New Political Economy of Poverty Alleviation*, available on Amazon and at Barnes & Noble.