
Book Reviews

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Louise Tillin, Rajeshwari Deshpande and K.K. Kailash (eds), *Politics of Welfare: Comparisons across Indian States*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2015. 256 pages. ₹850.

Comparative political studies across Indian states are not new to political science literature. Their prominent beginnings can be traced back to Myron Weiner and Atul Kohli, but at that time studies of Indian states were hard to find in the midst of the overwhelming national focus. By the 1990s, there was a shift towards examining Indian states, with due recognition that financial federalism and the emergence of regional parties had increased the autonomy of state politicians. The forceful advocacy of interstate studies came from Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar's 'Ten Theses on State Politics in India' (2008), which threw the door open for serious engagement. The subsequent work in this evolving space has opened new avenues for research.

The central theme, cutting across the six comparative state essays in the book, is the interface between public policy and politics. As the introduction of the book testifies, this is an infrequently studied subject in the context of not only India but even Europe and the US. As a result, there are few theories the editors could readily draw upon. They offer a theoretical frame that categorizes states based on welfare 'performance', a term that covers the policy chain from policy making to policy implementation. This conception differs from the predominant view that states are primarily policy implementers and not policy makers, and in this way broadens the scope for investigating state autonomy. However, as we see with the book, the ambiguity in the theory leads to inconsistencies in interpretation across essays, which is a problem.

The book covers a wide territory, with the six paired case studies spanning 11 states or union territories (one state appears in two essays), and a wide variety of welfare policies including health insurance, social security, food subsidy, employment guarantee and education. It is, however, difficult to identify a consistent basis on which the state pairs were selected. The essays may be fitted into three broad types. The first type compares success stories in two states either with regard to policy modification (K.K. Kailash and Madurika Rasaratnam) or about how two states delivered on reducing corruption in service delivery (Rob Jenkins and James Manor). The second type consists of pairwise comparisons between a well-performing and not-so-well-performing state in terms of either a policy initiative (Rajeshwari Deshpande) or implementation efficiency (Louise Tillin, Anupama Saxena and Yatindra Sisodia) or programme monitoring (Divya Vaid). The essay by Rajesh Dev forms the third type, focusing on the failings of two states in implementing the ideal of participatory governance.

The essay by Kailash and Rasaratnam presents an engaging comparison of health insurance policy in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The broad contours of the policy are drawn at the national level, but the chapter deals with how the two states manage to tweak the policy to benefit the public health care system.

The arguments are quite convincing in the case of Kerala, where political parties ideologically favour the public sector, but the political drivers they identify, for why Tamil Nadu adopted the public bias, are less persuasive.

The intricate and carefully documented paper by Jenkins and Manor examines the implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Two aspects are particularly enlightening: the highlighting of how two different models for government–civil society engagement can lead to surprisingly similar outcomes, and the description of the intricate details of the corruption chain that operates within the boundaries of the transparency-focused design of the scheme. The final section of the chapter, which reports all-India data, gives the sense of being an advocacy report and is the weak element in the otherwise persuasive exposition.

Comparing states or union territories with regard to programme performance, the paper by Deshpande presents an intriguing puzzle of why an apparently pro-business state of Maharashtra has been more proactive in legislating a social security guarantee for domestic workers than an expressly pro-labour regime in West Bengal. She traces the trajectory of trade union influence in the states, and identifies the inclusion of domestic workers in the trade union to be a key factor for the representation of their interests. It is a telling reflection of how political exigencies and the structure of politics can have a more far-reaching impact on policy than the ideological orientation of political regimes.

Tillin, Saxena and Sisodia's paper, comparing the implementation of the food subsidy programme in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, present intricately researched results. They identify political agency, governmental inter-agency cooperation and the nature of relationship of the government with non-governmental actors as three determinants of the success with reforms. A key structural difference between the two states is that Madhya Pradesh has an established bureaucratic machinery, while Chhattisgarh is a newly constituted state with an evolving set of bureaucratic rules and practices. It is therefore questionable whether Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan of Madhya Pradesh could ever hope to receive the degree of bureaucratic autonomy that Raman Singh was blessed with in Chhattisgarh.

Vaid presents a technical comparison of the monitoring of education policy in Delhi and Chandigarh but falls short of analyzing the political drivers behind the programme management issues. The paper by Dev highlights the failures in implementation of the participatory governance model of MNREGA in the scheduled areas of Meghalaya and Jharkhand. The twist in the tale is the manner in which the bureaucracy has used the scheme design to sidetrack both the elected members of panchayats and the customary leaders. The areas selected for their study have only recently (and partially) adopted local self-government institutions; further research should investigate whether the domination of bureaucracy in MNREGA implementation is pervasive even in places where local self-governments are deeply embedded.

The six essays in the book present a valuable contribution to political science literature on comparative state politics and herald a beginning for studies on the interface between policy and politics. Given that the existing theory is scarce, more of such rich empirical descriptions and analyses are necessary for catalyzing advances in theory.

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