

Vernacular Statecraft: The Domestication, Redirection, and Reinterpretation of Welfare Schemes by Rural Women in Andhra Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

Research on rural welfare program participation in India generally categorises the beneficiary demographic as either adhering to or deviating from the intended plan structure, regarding atypical utilisation as leakage, corruption, or cultural hindrance. This manuscript presents a different interpretation, utilising the anthropology of quotidian statecraft and grassroots governance, based on field data from five villages in Durgi Mandal, Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh. Instead of perceiving deviations from the scheme's design as failures, the paper illustrates a recurring trend where rural women and their families proactively reinterpret, redirect, and locally repurpose state welfare mechanisms — self-help-group credit allocated to debt repayment and life-cycle events, Anganwadi nutrition rations redistributed within the household based on locally determined risk categories, adult literacy programs disregarded as unsuitable for status, and MGNREGA employment guarantees rejected due to locally specific climatic and modesty limitations that the scheme's design failed to foresee. The paper posits that, in light of the anthropology of the "everyday state" and James Scott's examination of subaltern practical reason, these behaviours represent a type of vernacular statecraft: neither outright defiance of the state nor mere non-compliance, but rather a proactive, adept, and contextually unified method of integrating state resources into established household and kinship frameworks that the architects of the scheme failed to foresee and cannot entirely regulate. The manuscript contends that acknowledging this agency, instead of interpreting its results just as programmatic failure, provides a more accurate understanding of the data and directly influences the redesign of welfare initiatives to align with, rather than oppose, current local appropriation practices.

Keywords: governmentality, everyday state, welfare schemes, rural India, self-help groups, vernacular agency, development anthropology

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I. INTRODUCTION

The conventional evaluative terminology utilised for assessing rural welfare program efficacy in India — coverage, leakage, compliance, awareness gap — assumes that a program possesses a singular, clearly delineated stated purpose against which actual utilisation can be gauged as either successful or divergent. This article contends that this terminology, although essential for administrative purposes, conceals a more compelling and precise anthropological depiction of field observations: rural women and their households in Durgi Mandal, Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh, do not merely adhere to or reject the welfare programs accessible to them. They dynamically reassess the intent of each program in relation to established domestic principles of indebtedness, duty, prestige, and uncertainty, subsequently reallocating the resources offered by the program in a manner that transcends mere compliance or outright defiance, representing instead a skillful, contextually relevant adaptation of a governmental tool into an unforeseen setting.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: REGULAR STATECRAFT FROM BELOW

The anthropology surrounding the "everyday state" (Fuller & Bénéï, 2001; Gupta, 1995; Corbridge et al., 2005) contends that rural inhabitants do not view the state as a singular, coherent force imposing policies from above, but rather as a fragmented collection of experiences — including ration cards, frontline staff, forms, and cash disbursements — that villagers actively interpret, narrate, and respond to through their own lenses of meaning, frequently resulting in outcomes that the originating bureaucracy did not foresee or intend. Gupta's (1995) examination of corruption dialogue among rural North Indian villagers revealed that their discussions about the state often conflate "appropriate" and "inappropriate" utilisation of state resources, reflecting local moral

judgements regarding necessity and duty rather than the bureaucratic classifications of the program itself. James Scott's research (1985, 1976) on the quotidian reasoning of peasants contends that subordinate rural communities have developed an intricate, context-specific array of adaptive strategies to navigate external influences — characterised not by overt insurrection, but by a persistent, subtle process of modification, evasion, and selective participation aimed at household survival and social standing. This manuscript designates the phenomenon observed in its empirical data as vernacular statecraft: the adept, locally informed practice through which villagers appropriate a state apparatus and transform its material essence for their domestic economy of indebtedness, duty, and social standing, while generally preserving the instrument's external appearance (loan repayments persist; ration collections endure; scheme participation remains) despite the substantive application diverging from the programme design.

2.1 Distinguishing vernacular statecraft from related concepts

It is crucial to delineate how the notion presented herein diverges from three related and more recognised analytical categories, as this differentiation directly impacts the paper's thesis. It contrasts with corruption, defined narrowly as the unlawful personal gain by an official, since the reallocation described in this document is executed by the beneficiaries themselves rather than by intermediary officials, and generally entails no illegality — a self-help-group loan redirected for debt repayment is, in every instance noted here, formally repaid as scheduled (or defaulted in the conventional manner of credit), not misappropriated. It contrasts with resistance, as defined by Scott (1985) as intentional, albeit frequently hidden, defiance against an enforced system, since the households recorded here are not attempting to overthrow or subvert the initiative itself — they persist in pursuing access to the scheme, uphold group affiliation, and appreciate the resource it offers — but instead aim to manipulate its tangible elements for a purpose they deem more pressing than the scheme's declared objective. It contrasts with mere non-compliance or program failure, the residual classification typically assigned by development evaluation to any noted deviation, as non-compliance suggests a lack of positive action, while the behaviour recorded here is intentionally proactive: households are not neglecting to act; they are purposefully engaging in alternative actions with the available resources.

III. STUDY AREA AND METHODOLOGY

Fieldwork was executed in five villages of Durgi Mandal, Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh, integrating a systematic questionnaire provided to 513 female participants alongside comprehensive interviews, participant observation, and genealogical case analysis across three family lineages. The examination conducted herein utilises this information to delineate, through four unique welfare instruments — self-help-group/DWACRA micro-credit, Anganwadi nutrition supplementation, adult literacy provision, and MGNREGA employment guarantee — the particular mechanisms through which the scheme's material essence was redirected, reinterpreted, or selectively utilised by beneficiary households, considering each case not merely as a data point on a compliance continuum but as an example of contextual practical reasoning to be analysed independently.

IV. FOUR INSTANCES OF VERNACULAR STATECRAFT

4.1 Credit from self-help groups as a mechanism for debt consolidation

Loans from DWACRA/self-help groups in the research region, ostensibly provided for income-generating ventures, were frequently recorded as being utilised to settle prior private debts—often debts arising from a husband's alcohol addiction—and to finance life-cycle events such as weddings. Interpreted as a breach, this constitutes a failure of the program. Interpreted as vernacular statecraft, it involves reallocating a low-interest formal credit tool to address the household's paramount financial concern: liberation from a high-interest informal lender, which the household intended to prioritise with formal credit access, irrespective of the scheme's declared objective. The ongoing affiliation with loan groups and sustained (although strained) repayment, despite this shift, suggests that beneficiaries were not dismissing the program but rather integrating it into their personal debt-management approach while maintaining the connection that provided future credit access.

4.2 Redistribution of Anganwadi provisions based on household risk assessment

The accompanying analysis of pregnancy taboos in this research program reveals that protein-rich provisions designated for pregnant women were often diverted to children, based on a local risk assessment that deemed the same nutrient advantageous for a developing child yet perilous for a foetus. This exemplifies vernacular statecraft in its strictest interpretation: the material resource (the ration) is neither discarded nor misappropriated outside the household, but is instead purposefully redistributed according to a coherent local rationale that the scheme's architects, operating from a biomedical framework wherein only the pregnant recipient is expected to utilise the ration, failed to foresee and could not have devised without local ethnographic insight.

4.3 Adult literacy disregarded due to considerations of age-appropriate status

Adult education initiatives in the research region were noted for their persistent lack of attendance, with informants attributing this to a prevailing cultural perception: education is predominantly associated with childhood, leading to adults participating in literacy classes facing potential public mockery or derision (Dube, 1958). This does not signify a dismissal of literacy as an objective — numerous respondents acknowledged the importance of fundamental numeracy and signature literacy, especially for involvement in DWACRA group meetings that necessitate members to document transactions — but rather a repudiation of the particular institutional framework (a classroom environment designated as a space for children) through which literacy was delivered. The villagers were prepared to obtain the essential skill while rejecting the symbolically charged method of delivery, a differentiation that the program's design, centred on the school-classroom framework, failed to recognise.

4.4 MGNREGA diminished due to region-specific limitations that the scheme's framework failed to foresee.

The participation of lactating mothers and women in MGNREGA employment guarantees within the study region was limited by two locally relevant issues that the national scheme failed to consider: the lack of childcare facilities during a summer season characterised by local temperatures soaring to approximately 115–120°F, and societal norms regarding modesty that deemed public breastfeeding at job sites inappropriate. Instead of interpreting the low participation of this subgroup merely as non-compliance, the evidence suggests a locally informed cost-benefit analysis: the assured wage did not compensate for the dual risks of heat exposure for an infant and the social repercussions of a modesty breach, particularly due to the lack of on-site shelter as mandated by the scheme's guidelines. The uptake was not entirely lacking but rather contingent, meticulously adjusted to the existence or nonexistence of these particular local factors.

4.5 A final example: the selective embrace of institutional births through generations

An additional, extended example of vernacular statecraft, evidenced by the genealogical case material gathered in conjunction with the organised timeline (see to the accompanying methodology paper in this research initiative), pertains to the intergenerational acceptance of institutional births. Instead of a consistent transition from home to hospital deliveries after the scheme's implementation, the lineage data indicate a selective adoption on a household and even delivery basis: individual women from the same lineage and generation are documented opting for institutional delivery for certain births while choosing home delivery with an untrained midwife for others, based on specific, locally informed circumstances — such as the known presence of a female physician at the time, the lik This pattern aligns with the fundamental assertion of the vernacular-statecraft framework: households do not merely accept or reject state health-infrastructure provisions en masse, but rather engage in an ongoing evaluation, determining on an individual basis whether the offering meets their specific needs more effectively than local alternatives, and modifying their participation with the program as circumstances evolve, birth by birth.

V. DELIBERATION: AUTONOMY WITHOUT IDEALISATION

5.1 Whose authority is being utilised?

The vernacular-statecraft framework presented here does not aim to idealise these results as merely liberating, nor does it imply that reallocated welfare resources invariably benefit the woman recipient — the loan-diversion trend observed in Section 4.1, and elaborated upon in the accompanying paper regarding self-help groups in this research initiative, often directs funds toward repaying a husband's debts instead of fulfilling the woman's intended purpose, suggesting that vernacular statecraft A more accurate expression, aligned with the case data, posits that the household, rather than the individual nominal beneficiary, generally serves as the entity engaging in vernacular statecraft, with the household's internal hierarchy dictating whose interpretation of "urgent need" prevails when a scheme's material resources are reallocated — for example, a husband's determination that a personal debt supersedes a wife's planned micro-enterprise exemplifies an exercise of vernacular statecraft, functioning within, rather than in opposition to, the same gendered authority framework this research initiative elucidates in its other publications.

5.2 Differentiating between productive and constrained redirection

This qualification indicates a need for additional refinement to the framework: not every occurrence of redirection recorded here has an equivalent connection to the beneficiary's welfare. The Anganwadi ration-reallocation case (Section 4.2) and the adult-literacy avoidance case (Section 4.3) entail a redirection that likely aligns with the interests of the primary beneficiary, such as safeguarding a child's nutrition or evading an incongruous public role, whereas the self-help-group loan-diversion case frequently features a redirection enforced by a household authority figure whose interests conflict with or disregard the beneficiary's articulated goals. The diagnostic utility of the framework hinges on preserving this differentiation instead of considering all

instances of redirection as uniformly indicative of household-level rationality; certain redirections signify a truly collective household assessment, whereas others reveal the dominance of one member's priorities over another's, cloaked in the rhetoric of communal household necessity to justify what fundamentally constitutes an unequal exertion of power.

5.3 Contextualising in relation to the resistance literature

The framework's significance is analytical and interpretative instead of celebratory: it emphasises that redirection, reallocation, and selective engagement should be examined as results of locally coherent reasoning, shaped by genuine constraints and authentic household power dynamics, rather than relegated to a residual classification of "failure" that precludes deeper investigation into the specific nature of the redirection. This situates the paper's thesis at a calculated remove from both extremes of a well-known discourse in development anthropology: neither the traditional modernisation-theory inclination to interpret any divergence from the prescribed model as regression or hindrance, nor the contrasting romantic perspective, linked to certain interpretations of Scott's (1985) "weapons of the weak" framework, which perceives every case of subaltern deviation as a clandestine act of defiance or ethical triumph. The Durgi Mandal material does not align with either extreme; redirection is neither mere failure nor straightforward resistance, but rather a more commonplace phenomenon—everyday practical reasoning within genuine limitations, occasionally advantageous to the nominal beneficiary and at other times not, which a binary compliance/resistance framework inadequately captures.

5.4 Constraints

This paper's thesis is constructed from qualitative case studies sourced from a singular mandal and should not be interpreted as asserting that the four (or five) instances of redirection presented here encompass all possible manifestations of vernacular statecraft, nor that the particular mechanisms identified are universally applicable to other regions or types of schemes; the assertion made is that the analytical perspective — viewing redirection as a deliberate household practice instead of This paper's framework does not provide a means to discern, from an external perspective, whether a specific instance of redirection resulted from authentic internal agreement or was asymmetrically enforced, except through extensive ethnographic engagement (preferably involving distinct interviews with various household members), which this study's fieldwork could only accomplish for a select few cases.

VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMME DESIGN

Three consequences ensue. Initially, scheme oversight ought to be structured to identify and delineate redirection trends as outlined herein, rather than categorising any deviation from the declared objective as a uniform compliance breach, given that the particular nature of redirection (toward debt repayment, to another family member, or to a different yet locally more acceptable method of skill transmission) entails unique design considerations in each instance. Secondly, programs whose delivery methods imply unintended status implications — similar to adult literacy's link to childhood — might experience improved acceptance by separating the essential skill from its traditional institutional framework, such as integrating literacy education within a recognised adult setting like a self-help group meeting. Thirdly, national scheme directives ought to incorporate explicit local-adaptation measures—shelter and privacy provisions tailored to regionally documented climatic extremes and cultural modesty standards, as exemplified in the MGNREGA case—rather than presuming the uniform applicability of a singular national framework across diverse ecological and cultural contexts.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study contends that the involvement of rural women with state welfare programs in Durgi Mandal, Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh, is more accurately characterised as vernacular statecraft — a proactive, locally informed approach to reallocating and reinterpreting state resources within established household and kinship frameworks — rather than a simple dichotomy of compliance or failure. Analysing the diversion of self-help group credit, the redistribution of Anganwadi rations, the evasion of adult literacy initiatives, and the conditional involvement in MGNREGA through this perspective uncovers a recurring trend of adept local adaptation functioning within, and somewhat limited by, prevailing household authority frameworks, indicating that program design that acknowledges this adaptive behaviour, rather than perceiving it as a hindrance to be eradicated, is more likely to fulfill its fundamental developmental objectives.

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