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**SARA BALDWIN:** India is a huge country. But if you look at it through a social development lens, many of its states appear worlds apart. Some have social outcomes on a par with sub-Saharan nations, while others have outcomes comparable to those of Northern Europe. How to explain such differences within a single country and among states that started at a similar point in history? And what does that mean for societies beyond India?

From Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, this is trending globally. I'm Sara Baldwin. We're joined today by Prerna Singh, Mahatma Gandhi assistant professor of political science at the Watson Institute, and an expert on the politics of social welfare. In her award winning book, *How solidarity works for welfare: subnationalism and social development in India*, she analyzes the very different evolutions of social policy and welfare systems across states in India. Welcome to the podcast, Prerna.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Thank you so much, Sara.

**SARA BALDWIN:** Thanks for being here. First of all, I learned that your book recently came out in paperback.

**PRERNA SINGH:** That's right, it's quite exciting. That means it's affordable.

**SARA BALDWIN:** Yeah, that's fantastic news. So let's start with a most basic concept. Talk to us about solidarity. What is it and how does it connect to social welfare provision?

**PRERNA SINGH:** Great, thank you. So as you said, the book is called *How solidarity works for welfare*. And it's in many ways a new and quite provocative argument for how social welfare regimes get institutionalized and then continue. And when I talk about solidarity, I mean something not quite-- not dissimilar to what you have in mind when you think of a kind of sense of solidarity. Except I show how it's a strength of solidarity with the political community.

So you can have a sense, I think of it sometimes as a sense of oneness, a sense of wholeness, a sense of identification. A sense of emotional attachment, allegiance, loyalty to a particular political community. And so this solidarity, it exists between individuals in a family. It can exist at a neighborhood level. It can definitely exist at levels of cities.

So I think of things like the I heart New York City t-shirts, as a indication of a certain degree of

a solidarity at a city level. And of course, we have solidarity with the nation, which we might think of as nationalism or patriotism. But in the book, what I delineate is solidarity at the regional or at the provincial level in India. And so I call that subnationalism. And so it's a type of nationalism, it's a type of solidarity at the subnational level. And I argue that this sense of attachment and identification with the subnational level is a critical determinant of social welfare policies across Indian states.

**SARA BALDWIN:** So explain how that connects?

**PRERNA SINGH:** So in a sense, most of the existing scholarship tries to explain differences in social welfare by thinking for instance, most prominently in terms of economic development. So you might think that differences in levels of social development are determined by how wealthy a particular region or a state or even a country is, and therefore how much money they have to allocate to things like education or health or drinking water.

There are others that have said that this has to do with the strength of social democratic parties, the general idea being that communist parties do a better job or parties that have a strong left leaning component to them. There are also arguments about the degree of political competition. And so solidarity is a different type of argument.

The way that I think about it fundamentally, is that if you feel a sense of identification with your region, with your state, then that makes it more likely that you are going to support an idea of collective welfare. So education and health are fundamentally redistributive. The rich across the world will often have the luxury of sending their children to private schools. The people who send their children to government schools, government health centers are often those who cannot afford any other type of service delivery. And so under what circumstances are political elites willing to put pressure state resources into things that are more likely to benefit the poorer, the less well-off, the less fortunate members of a community?

**SARA BALDWIN:** And it's in those areas that these elites feel connected to or feel some sense of solidarity?

**PRERNA SINGH:** So what I show in the book is, when there is this sense-- and in India, it's linguistic. So because states in India are defined since the 1950s in terms of a common language. So for instance, one of the states that I study is the state of Kerala, which is in southern peninsula India. And I show that when you feel a sense of Malayali identity, you feel a set of mutual obligations, ethical obligations and commitments to all Malayali's. So you want to put your money into those kinds of services that are of benefit to all Malayali's. And so historically, I

show mostly through archival work, that social policies get put into place as a result of these solidaristic identifications.

**SARA BALDWIN:** How do you measure that?

**PRERNA SINGH:** The bulk of the book is a comparative historical analysis of five states. Two neighboring southern states and three neighboring North Central Indian states. Kerala and Tamil Nadu in the south, and Rajasthan with their British and Bihar in the north.

And in the qualitative historical part of it. And so one of the things, for instance, that I look at is, are the boundaries of a state the result of administrative dictate, essentially. Or are they because the people of the state came together to demand the creation of a state? Kerala, again, is a good example, so is Tamil Nadu, because there is a huge popular movement for the creation of these states under colonial rule in the 1950s that emerged as movements, which were language based movements. Saying people who speak Malayalam are right now divided between the princely state of Travancore, the princely state of Cochin, between Malabar. But really we're all one. And so we need one state.

And you see something very similar in Tamil Nadu, which is actually-- so the name is quite important and interesting. Kerala is a name that really refers to a kind of mythical homeland of Malayali's. There was no state of Kerala until the mid 1950s. Similarly, Tamil Nadu means the home of the people who speak Tamil.

So it's quite interesting that even in the naming of these states, and certainly in the history of how they came to be, you can see that they were a result of movements that were premised on this kind of subnational pride and attachment. There's a interesting anecdote about the state of Uttar Pradesh. Uttar Pradesh just means the northern provinces. And this was the one state that had a very hard time coming up with a name for itself.

**SARA BALDWIN:** Because the sense of identity was less?

**PRERNA SINGH:** Exactly, exactly. So they couldn't come up with the name.

**SARA BALDWIN:** Sort of generic.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Very generic in fact, it was basically decided for them. So in a sense, it really thought of itself as India. And so when it came up with names, it came up with names that really referred to all of India. And they often think of this kind of association with the level of the nation as

something to be proud of. What they haven't realized is the downside, which is no subnational identity. You eventually you just get called UP as a kind of geographic appellation. And because they used to be called the United Provinces, so they were referred to colloquially as UP. So [INAUDIBLE] was like, let's just call them UP.

**SARA BALDWIN:** That's so interesting. And I'm going to guess that the outcome-- social welfare outcomes are less good.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Yes. I mean, to give you a sense, even today if you happen to be a woman born in the countryside in UP, you can, on average expect to live about 15 years.

**SARA BALDWIN:** Oh, my gosh. And literacy, probably.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Literacy, very similar. I mean, UP, huge state. Larger than Brazil, larger than Russia. And so when you think of national indicators in UP-- I mean, in a way, India's four levels of social welfare are to a large extent, a result of what's happening in two or three very populous but very underdeveloped provinces, of which UP is certainly one.

So to get back to your question of how I measure it. The case studies are very rich, historically. So I talk a lot about, how does a state get named, how does a state get created. How many people speak a common language in the state? So what's quite interesting about Southern India, is that the only state in India where anyone speaks Malayalam is Kerala.

So they all speak Malayalam, and they're distinguished from their neighbors who speak Tamil. But if you look at North Central India, it's basically-- it gets called the Hindi, Hindu heartland. Because there is no distinguishing-- there's no linguistic distinction. There are many, many dialects and in many ways, those dialects are languages in themselves. But they all speak Hindi.

And so in a way, they speak different types of Hindi, which are these dialects. And in many ways, they speak a language that does not distinguish them from any of their neighboring states. And so it's both the lack of a common language and also the lack of a distinctive language, and then UP has always had this very serious religious divide. Not always. But I actually showing in state, how in the historical part of the book, I show how this divide really gets created towards the middle, and the end of the 19th century.

But the Hindu-Muslim divide becomes quite critical to UP, and then Hindi becomes the

language of the Hindus. And Urdu, which is essentially the same spoken tongue, becomes distinguished as the language of the Muslim. So then you get the politics of Hindi and Urdu. So that factors in to how I think of subnationalism.

And then the statistical part of the book, which is towards the end, I have an index of subnationalism that I create, which is a product of four components. Language, whether or not your state boundaries are a creation of a popular movement. Whether or not you have a sub nationalist political party. And finally, whether or not you have a secessionist movement.

So in 2001, the state of UP was divided. And a new state was created, which was essentially the divide that had always existed between the hills and the plains.

**SARA BALDWIN:** Well so, if you do have a history of some secessionist movement, then the level of subnationalism is lower and then social welfare is [INAUDIBLE]. Because it's divisive.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Exactly, so my brother-in-law, who technically comes from what used to be the undivided UP. But his family really is from is [INAUDIBLE], which is the hill parts of it. And [INAUDIBLE], which the secessionist state from UP, after it's [INAUDIBLE] secession from UP has done really well. Because they have this kind of sense of a egalitarian, hill people. Very different from the crude plains. i mean, that's the kind of-- But stereotypes are important parts of this. And the construction of the other.

**SARA BALDWIN:** I've heard you talk about this sense of weness, this we. But as you've just pointed out, when there's an us, there a them.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Absolutely, absolutely. I mean, as the North Indian doing fieldwork in these southern states, that was very obvious. I was the them. I was a Hindi speaker. I was in their eyes a relatively lighter skinned Aryan, which is again, a construction. And I was certainly-- I was from Delhi. And Delhi at the center has always been the them.

**SARA BALDWIN:** Is there something comparable in the United States? Some sense of of us and themness?

**PRERNA SINGH:** I used to find it quite interesting, when I initially came to the US, this idea of license plates. And every state has a license plate. Because again, when I think of how subnationalism-- what are visible signs of subnationalism? I often think from my research in India things like whose statutes do you put up? What do you name your streets? What festivals do you celebrate? What stamps do you issue?

So India, we don't have this concept of license plates, that you just get one. And so this idea that you can choose your license plate, or that there's something written on your license plate doesn't exist. There are other things. In the US, I find it quite interesting. Because in a way it's a kind of pithy statement of what your state stands for.

So like in New Hampshire in the middle of New England, live free or die.

**SARA BALDWIN:** And you to sort of rally around that in a way.

**PRERNA SINGH:** You do, or even think of someplace like Quebec in Canada, where the license plate says, we will not forget. We are different. And this is this constructed memory, you see it every day. We are the constructors of our own identity.

American nationalism can mean what in a sense, Donald Trump imbues it with. But it can also mean, which it has historically meant at different points in time, the Statue of Liberty. The fact that America is a country of immigrants, that all are welcome, that there's a certain kind of work ethic, that there's an American dream. I mean, all of those are contested and constructed.

So the fact that Confederate soldier statues are removed in the city of New Orleans is very much this idea of a construction of an identity. This is a solidaristic move. Because it's basically showing that these statues do not represent who we are as a community. Is I think of a brave decision.

So I think in the US you can see it today, there is controversy over whether for the first time in the history of the United States, a national monument could lose its status. So most people don't think of it as headline news. But for me, in the same week, the city of New Orleans says, we will remove these statues because this is not who we are.

**SARA BALDWIN:** These constructs are not immutable.

**PRERNA SINGH:** They are not immutable. And I always think when statues move, that's major seismic changes.

**SARA BALDWIN:** Well, it seems like there's an upside and a downside. But taking for a moment the upside of this sense of subnationalism and solidarity, is that is that something that can be created?

**PRERNA SINGH:** I think it's always created. I definitely-

**SARA BALDWIN:** I mean, but mindfully. With the intention of improving social outcomes, let's say.

**PRERNA SINGH:** So I think that that would be an implication for the book. What I show historically is in the states that I study in India, that it is very much constructed. They don't have social welfare at all in mind when they're constructing it. Subnationalism emerges because it's a tool to basically win a political contest with an established elite.

So in the state of Kerala, the established elite are these small section of Tamil Brahmins in the mid 19th century. And the word Malayali really becomes repurposed in a way to define the native population, the indigenous people of the state. In a way to both unify them, but then also to distinguish them from this "them", that Tamil Brahmins.

So it is constructed, but it's constructed because of a set of very instrumental, selfish, you might say, reasons on the part of a certain set of elites. I think what you're asking me is that in a sense, what is a lesson from the research, right?

**SARA BALDWIN:** Yeah, for policy.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Exactly. And I think, yes. I mean, when we think of improving social welfare, we do not think of things like what statues do we put up? What do we name our streets? What national holidays do we celebrate? And what songs do children sing in schools?

We usually think of other factors like levels of economic development, political competition, you know. And so yes, I would say that there is certainly a way in which identity would have to be at the unit of analysis, which controls social policy. So if social policy is controlled at the city level, or then I would imagine that the unit that you want to build solidarity with is the city.

**SARA BALDWIN:** It's almost an argument against social welfare policies at federal level.

**PRERNA SINGH:** It can be. What I say in the conclusion to the book is that the debates about decentralization are all about the pros and cons of decentralization. They don't really pay attention to what unit is being decentralized to. So one lesson is, decentralized power to a unit that is actually a locus of strong popular identification.

I can imagine that something like what the city of New Orleans is doing, this construction of an identity, can have implications for many things that happen at a city level. So whether that's trash pickup or sewage cleaning, or in the state of New Orleans, natural disaster preparedness. Because in a sense, it's about how do you bring people together and overcome a collective action problem? Because we all have different identities, right?

So, I am a woman. I could be-- I am a particular religion. I can identify with various different types of identities. And I'm not making an argument that in order to have-- to be a subnationalist or to be a nationalist, or to be a New Yorker and have that identity be central, you stop being all these other things. You remain all these other identities, but this idea that you also have a larger, overarching identity that in a way sits above all these other identities. And I think that identity has always been and can be constructed.

One of the things I talk about in the conclusion is that we think about policy in the arts and policy in culture as a very different and distinct from social policy. But in a sense, the kinds of-- Kerala spent a lot of money, initially-- invested a lot of money, I should say, in the celebration of a festival. And there's a celebration of a festival, which is quite unusual. Because when you think about it, most of the festivals we celebrate-- and I think that's why Thanksgiving is unusual in the US, are usually religious festivals.

But Kerala has this national festival called Onam and Kerala is a very religiously diverse state, it has a lot of Hindu's, lots of Muslims, lots of Christians. And yet they're all bound together in this Malayali identity that is celebrated on Onam. And so the state funds these lavish celebrations of the festival of Onam.

**SARA BALDWIN:** That brings them together. How is this different from identity politics?

**PRERNA SINGH:** I mean, in a sense It is all identity politics, right? To me, it's this idea that both in popular parlance but also in academia and scholarship and social science scholarship, identity gets to be seen as this bad word. And so I try to make the argument, demographics is not destiny, right? So even if you're a plural society, it doesn't mean that you can't have a sense of solidarity that is overarching, and that includes members of the political community that also subscribe to different allegiances.

What I try to show in the book is that you can have this overarching identity above other identities, and that can be a force, a constructive potential. And it's not the case that identity politics is always destructive. It's really a question of how it gets constructed and how it can-

**SARA BALDWIN:** And for what?

**PRERNA SINGH:** And for what, exactly. And so what I show historically is that the construction of it, historically has come independent of the social welfare. The social welfare follows from it, but it was not constructed, at all, instrumentally in mind by saying, oh let's do this,

**SARA BALDWIN:** Let's do this altruistically.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Yes, no, not at all.

**SARA BALDWIN:** It's a product of it.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Yeah, it was a product of it, but it was not intended in the construction of identity. And I think the lesson though, what you're saying is absolutely there. Is that we can now try to construct these inclusive, cohesive identities with social welfare in mind. So we can learn from that and do this more strategically. And I think that that is something-

**SARA BALDWIN:** It's almost like taking what you have learned and found from history and using it, even though it wasn't performed altruistically, using it to improve social welfare outcomes.

**PRERNA SINGH:** In the US, I think sometimes when you think of it at the city level, I think it's sometimes more obvious. But I sometimes think of pride in different cities, what different cities stand for, and city level projects. I mean, I do think there is a way in which you can call on that New Yorker identity.

**SARA BALDWIN:** Or Boston.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Or Boston, right. Yes. And you see it, I think in particular when that community comes under stress. When that identity is there and it's inclusive, there is a way in which that power of that identity can be harnessed. So I think there are almost two questions. One is, how do you construct that identity and in an inclusive fashion? But then when you have that identity, I think sometimes we underestimate its potential. We don't realize what we can ask from it.

And so the city that I come from, Delhi, which I think most Delhiites will agree we don't really have a sense of-- it's the kind of city that people love to hate. But I often think now the biggest problem that kind of confronts Delhi which is air pollution. And in a way it's a classic collective action, because everybody breathes the air. The rich and the poor. So how do you solve this?

**SARA BALDWIN:** How do you create a sense of Delhiiteness?

**PRERNA SINGH:** Yeah.

**SARA BALDWIN:** That is shared.

**PRERNA SINGH:** And I find it quite interesting, because when I was doing archival work actually in Delhi last year when I was on leave from Brown. I found it quite interesting because they had begun this odd, even rule, which is also in many cities across the world, including Beijing. So you can only get-- you can only drive your car, the odd license plates and then the ones.

But it's quite interesting how it was framed. There were all these radio broadcasts about Delhi, we have to do this together. This is your city and if we don't pull together, this will not happen. And even though many people had suspected that people's response would simply be buy yourself another license plate, right? But I have a feeling that actually the consensus was that it was actually a moderate success. I mean, they didn't continue with it very long.

**SARA BALDWIN:** We are in this together.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Yes, it was very much, we are in this together. I mean, we had our neighbor knock on my mother-in-law's door saying that can I take your car on the odd day, and you can carpool with someone, and maybe you can mine? People were figuring out ways to do this, and the metro was crowded and the line was really long. And I was getting impatient. And then I was like, look at all these people, they're standing in line. No one is pushing, no one is shoving. And it's like, we're all in this together.

**SARA BALDWIN:** Oh, yeah. That's such a great example of you seeing it play out.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Absolutely. And some amount of shaming, I think when you're constructing that identity is that we're in this together, Delhi. Let's do this together. So this is-- we're doing this for Delhi, but this is what being a Dehli-ite means.

**SARA BALDWIN:** So those outliers who are not acting in the "us" mode become "them" in a way.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Well, yeah. You know, all groups work on sanctions. Not that I'm a huge fan of them, but I do think that there is-- and you can have moral sanctions.

**SARA BALDWIN:** But it's join us or not.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Well, yeah. And I mean, do have to construct that sense of ethical obligation and mutual commitment. And so, these are not easy things to do. I mean, it's not easy to construct these identities or these solidarity's. But I think that they can be very rewarding. And in a world, I think in which we really need to think of creative solutions, out of the box, and really in a way tap human potential. This is one--

**SARA BALDWIN:** Yeah, at all levels.

**PRERNA SINGH:** At all levels. This is one dimension that I sometimes feel frustrated that policy practitioners don't realize that this is quite central to a lot of what they want to do.

**SARA BALDWIN:** I wonder if you talk about that in your teaching? Do you bring this up in class, this larger notion of-

**PRERNA SINGH:** Of identities?

**SARA BALDWIN:** Of identity and potential and the imperative of-- the hope-- I don't want to put words in your mouth. But the sort of-- how to harness the positive potential of subnationalism or identity,

**PRERNA SINGH:** Yeah, today nationalism is seen as-- it becomes almost conflated with the Trumps, the [INAUDIBLE], the [INAUDIBLE] the Xi Jinping's. This rise of nationalism that is exclusive, that xenophobic, that's jingoistic.

So I fear that we have that throwing the baby out with the bathwater problem, is that as liberal elites then we, in a way, entirely secede from nationalism. We are losing control of our definition of our own identity by letting these other people define it in this exclusive, chauvinistic fashion.

But my point is, don't give up on nationalism. See, this is not the nationalism that we stand for, there is an alternative nationalism. But don't give up on nationalism. Don't say that, oh, these nationalists. You know? I mean, I think there's been there's never been a more urgent time to be a nationalist.

Again, when I was back in India last year, there had been these-- which is part of a larger trend, a Hindu nationalist government is in power in India. And they had begun these really serious, very worrying attacks on universities. Which are obviously sometimes the first to be attacked, because they are spaces for free thought.

So one of India's best known universities, where some of the most leading thinkers and academics have come from, Jabara [INAUDIBLE] Nehru university, they came onto campus, they arrested the student union leader--

**SARA BALDWIN:** Yeah, I remember that.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Delhi was like-- Delhi was on the streets. So when I went for this protest, I was making my sign in the auto ride on the way there, and I had all these markers. And a few of our friends I think give me a second look, because I had painted a large flag of India, and I had written on it, "Who's India? Our India."

And it wasn't I would say the model type of poster, which was much more against the state, against the idea of the nation, much more radical posters. But this poster to me was my way of saying I don't give up on the idea of India. I don't give up on the nation. You do not have the monopoly to define this. I'm an Indian Nationalist. Because in a way, my research shows me that it's the way that you construct these identities, it's what you imbue them with.

**SARA BALDWIN:** There are so many lessons in your book for today's world. It seems just so incredibly relevant, too.

**PRERNA SINGH:** And I mean, in a way, the book began with a concern for real world issues. I mean, present issue. So I really began by looking at social indicators across Indian states. And realizing the same thing that you were struck by is that the quality of life that you lead is determined so critically by which state in India you're born in. And that today.

The way that I got into history is more tracing that back and saying OK, there was a moment in time when that was not the case. When states in India looked quite similar in terms of social welfare indicators. And so what happened? What happened for these southern states to become these in a way much healthier much more educated places, as compared to North Central India.

**SARA BALDWIN:** Right, and by extension, it doesn't have to be this way.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Exactly It doesn't at all have to be this way. It was quite an unexpected route that the research took. Because I didn't really expect, going into the project to say, well, it really has to do with the way this linguistic identities got constructed. So it was a unexpected link to me. Again I think-- but the thing is once I got it, it just made so much sense. And when you oppose this to people in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, in a way, to me, the litmus test for the argument was whether this would be plausible in India.

**SARA BALDWIN:** Would it have currency with them?

**PRERNA SINGH:** Yes. And I think the fact that the book is met with this overwhelmingly positive reception in India but also in Kerala, Tamil Nadu where people are like yes, this is it.

**SARA BALDWIN:** It makes sense.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Our regional pride is not coincidental to our levels of social welfare. This is what it means to be a cohesive Tamil community. And so I think that has been quite rewarding.

**SARA BALDWIN:** That must be so gratifying.

**PRERNA SINGH:** It is, it is. You never know where it's going to go.

**SARA BALDWIN:** Oh, Prerna, this has been so interesting and I think intensely useful for people in policy making positions to think about.

**PRERNA SINGH:** Yeah, I hope so.

**SARA BALDWIN:** Thank you so much for talking to us today.

**PRERNA SINGH:** No, thank you so much for inviting me. This was great. Lots of fun.

**SARA BALDWIN:** This has been trending globally. Politics and policy. If you enjoyed today's conversation, you can subscribe to the podcast on iTunes, SoundCloud or Stitcher, or download us on your favorite podcasting app. If you like us, rate us, and help others who might enjoy the show find us. For more information, go to [watson.brown.edu](http://watson.brown.edu).