



PAPER TIGER: LAW, BUREAUCRACY AND THE DEVELOPMENTAL STATE IN HIMALAYAN INDIA

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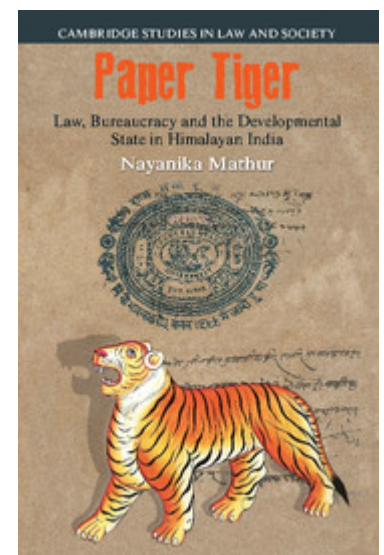


Nayanika Mathur's [*Paper Tiger. Law, Bureaucracy and the Developmental State in Himalayan India*](#) is an ethnography of the everyday life of law and bureaucracy. It reveals the complexity of bureaucratic practice as it unfolds in its most ordinary everyday embodiment - in the way representatives of the state read and write letters, hold meetings, file, produce and circulate documents, reflect on their official postings and the spaces they occupy as well as the myriad ways in which the state reveals and presents itself through a law it intends to implement;



apart from how it deals with a wild, man-eating big cat on the loose, unleashing a reign of terror! Locating herself in a remote hill town of a borderland Himalayan district, in the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand, Mathur meticulously weaves an intricate story of bureaucracy inflecting the law and how, subsequently, a complex assemblage of networks gets created as a result of this inflection. Anthropology of law, state and bureaucracy is not a new-fangled terrain of inquiry. However, Mathur's lucidly engaging ethnography presents the possibility of re-imagining these very conceptual categories anew, as lived, real negotiations of various actors shot through with affect, enactments and a particular kind of life. *Paper Tiger* as an ethnography is a complex story well told.

Paper Tiger can be broken up into two complementary thematic strands. The first is the ethnographic excavation of a particular law in its everyday enactment – the much celebrated and talked about National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), pronounced as *naregaa* in Hindi. The second thematic articulates the everyday realm of bureaucratic practice by ethnographically framing the ubiquitous term *sarkar* – a vernacular expression peculiar to the Indian context which simultaneously references the notions of both the state and the government, as well as a collapse between the two. Mathur's work, in my view, is located at the interstices of a law in its enactment, along with an articulation of what it means for the Indian state bureaucracy to live its everyday – or, in a word, to be *sarkari*.



The book presents a vivid picture of the atypical Indian state in its entanglement with bureaucracy which, paradoxically, constitutes the state as well as provides the state with work to be accomplished to fulfill its obligation of being a state.

The state works in “being *sarkari*” and by virtue of that it reproduces itself as a



state. This idea of what it means for the state to be *sarkari* and perform its enactment is, in and of itself, a generative concept which indeed is a powerful analytical trope that *Paper Tiger* presents.

Thinking about the everyday state in terms of this generative concept is contrary to some of the other reflections on the Indian state in the recent past. Unlike Gupta's (2012) argument of how the state through its complex structure of "levels" and "bureaus" inflicts "structural violence" in its very functioning; or Tarlo's (2003) account of how official papers as material artefacts embody social relationships, Mathur determines, through an ethnographic eye on the production and circulation of "paper truths," how the everyday life of the state, in spite of these structures and official papers, still persists. Describing herself as an "ethnographer of bureaucracy" (p. 167) Mathur reveals how the everydayness of bureaucratic life is contingent on the production of a very specific kind of bureaucratic performance which is at play continuously through various registers. She navigates the everyday production of this bureaucratic performance rather amusingly and accurately through distinct thematic sites which have been organised along six chapters of the book, over and above the introduction and conclusion.

Conceptual propositions such as the notion of "remoteness," the conception of a "state life" as opposed to a "real life" of law, the writing practices of the state and the oral performance of being a state which generates *sarkari* affect are truly perspicacious concepts to think through the interplay between law and bureaucracy.

Paper Tiger frames itself along a string of these incisive conceptual frames which bind the varying ethnographic details together.

The first frame which merits a discussion is the distinction between the "state life" and the "real life" of law which Mathur spells out in the context of the NREGA being implemented on the ground. Interested in tracing the material culture of the "paper state," she draws a distinction between what the



implementers of the law call the two lives of the law: the 'state life' (*sarkari zindagi*) and its 'real life' (*asli zindagi*). She describes the trajectory of a law from when it is enacted to the point when it finds itself articulated in the real lives of people far from the corridors that hold the power of that enactment. Using ethnographic vignettes from three locations, Mathur portrays how the state (*sarkari*) version of events are always distinct from the real (*asli*) versions; and how we need to recognise the fact that a law in spirit would always be far from the way it was originally imagined to be. Given such a scenario Mathur instead argues how it would be worthwhile to focus on the "regimes of practices" that ensure a particular complex of legal assemblages that get played out on the ground and how what remains of the law then is its own spectral presence.

While on the one hand Mathur talks about the state life of law which shows how its life on paper is intrinsically tied to the context it occupies, on the other hand she demonstrates how office spaces and entire towns could be seen as symbolic expressions of the static still decrepitude of the state apparatus.



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She lays out this argument rather poignantly by carrying out a narrative



recounting of the space where the ethnography is located - the town of Gopeshwar in the hill district of Chamoli - an out of the way remote place as it is often referred to. The conceptual frame which emerges as an analytical device is “remoteness” itself, which Mathur then uses to argue how such spaces paradoxically remain backward even though their very remoteness is used to target them for special benefits by the state. State officials posted in this town do not want to live there; they complain about how they cannot bring their wives along to live in a place like this and how the space itself, metaphorically and literally, exudes a particular kind of emptiness (*khalipan*). The backward remoteness of the area is thus reaffirmed in its lived everyday reality, even by those who are supposedly there to take care of it.

The use of an analytical category like “remoteness” which emerges from the ethnographic location itself is remarkable as it presents the possibility of articulating a sense of the everyday with something real even though it may not be apparent in tangible terms. Following the same impetus of looking for analytical categories that could shed light on the everydayness of bureaucratic practice, Mathur locates two very distinct sites as her ethnographic objects of inquiry: the practice of writing letters and the meetings that state officials conduct. She demonstrates how the paper state is literally pieced together and maintained through the quotidian practice of writing letters, which is nothing more than a cyclical repetition of drafting, re-drafting, interpreting and using the written word to ensure that *sarkari* life continues. The paper state thus makes itself manifest through a specific practice in which it participates. This argument is well complemented by her ethnographic foray into the official meetings that *sarkari* officials hold with themselves and with the public at large. She treats the latter as “public theatres” and it is the very enactment of these publicly acknowledged and recognised events that allows the state to persist. Meetings, she contends, achieve what she terms the generation and the playing out of the “*sarkari* affect.”

As Mathur says, “it is through participation in these frequent public theatres and the concomitant generation of sarkari affect that the state reproduces



itself" (p 119).



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The ethnographic co-incidence of a man-eating leopard arriving in Gopeshwar and killing people, towards the end of her field work, provided the perfect backdrop for Mathur to show how the “wait” for the state to eliminate the big cat perfectly exemplifies how any state practice is always an interplay of various material practices and processes inflected by a lived reality of law and bureaucracy. The manner in which the cat assumed sovereignty over people displays how the state is but a mere paper tiger without teeth and how people necessarily experience time as an ever continuing wait where the notion of the sovereign can shift between the bureaucrat, the office space, the law in its enactment, and even a man-eating leopard.



Mathur's contribution to the field of studying state practices, law and bureaucracy, apart from being a revelation of the peculiar context of the Indian state, is also a methodological novelty in the field of writing and doing ethnography. In my view, what she brings to the fore is the possibility of working on an ethnographic object of inquiry without an *a priori* methodology. The disciplines of anthropology and sociology need to whole-heartedly embrace this. We need ethnographies of the contemporary that rely on what the field throws up as its methodological anchor and its subsequent conceptual frame. I would always go back to reading *Paper Tiger* as it is a compelling and grounded ethnography which presents a reflective stance on the process of its own making while delightfully elaborating on what it engages with.

References:

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