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*Paper Tiger* is an engaging ethnography of the bureaucratic apparatus of the Indian state and the paper trail through which the state and its laws acquire life. The ethnography brings into view the intricate habits through which the state in India is made material and manifest by and to its functionaries on a daily basis. Specifically, the book examines the working of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) of 2005 in the remote Chamoli district in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand. Since its promulgation, NREGA has been widely regarded as an exemplary welfare legislation both in India and in the wider developmental context. Yet, local officials have found it difficult to make it into a success. At the heart of the book is the puzzle *Paper Tiger* sets for itself: why, despite its progressive objectives of guaranteed work, this legislation fails to provide employment in an area with high rates of unemployment.

The book is based on fieldwork conducted in the office responsible for implementing NREGA in Gopeshwar, the district headquarters. Mathur’s privileged access to a unique participative position facilitated her ability to breach the zealously hermetic Indian bureaucracy and “work” as a functionary in the local NREGA office. This allowed her to uncover the various translational processes and entanglements through which NREGA transmogrifies from a statute into a program of work, or NREGS (National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme—hereafter also referred to as Scheme). In and through its description of the implementation of NREGA and especially the translation of NREGA into NREGS, *Paper Tiger*
argues that the very qualities that distinguish NREGA from prior welfare programs render its successful functioning as impossible. In particular, “words on which NREGA’s legitimacy crucially depends—transparency, accountability, audit, participation, guarantee, […]” (2) become the very obstacle to its implementability. Yet, the work of the state remains the stuff of enchantment, if not indoctrination, for those who work in the bureaucratic apparatus.

The opening chapter introduces Gopeshwar, a remote town in Uttarakhand where Mathur conducted most of her fieldwork and takes up the formative role of its perceived remoteness in the minds of low-level state functionaries. The chapter ultimately argues that the state is never remote, even though at that distance, its presence is at best spectral (30). For most state functionaries based here, Gopeshwar is a “punishment posting,” a unique and ubiquitous turn of phrase in Indian bureaucratic parlance used to describe a place or role of physical and professional hardship with no attendant or commensurate compensation. Most functionaries relocate to Gopeshwar without their families due to its poor infrastructure and lack of modern trappings. They perceive Gopeshwar as “empty” and speak ad nauseam about devising exit strategies from its so-called emptiness. Because the book is so strictly focused on bureaucrats and bureaucracy, what receives ethnographic attention and elaboration is only that which touches or collides with the bureaucratic edifice. Mathur tends to speak of the neighborhood or “colony” where these functionaries live as if it were the whole Gopeshwar township. What remains curiously unexamined is whether Gopeshwar’s other inhabitants, who are not employed by the state, also perceive their existence as a result of some punitive divine arithmetic and/or characterize their lives and locality as empty.

Unlike life outside the office, the daily bureaucratic routine is far from empty and pivots on the elaborate paper trail it produces. In the second chapter of the book, Mathur brings to view the practices of documentation and the gap between lived reality and its documented version. Ethnographically, this chapter is based on Mathur’s work as a member of a social audit team evaluating the implementation of NREGS in Orissa in eastern India. She describes the elaborate nature of transparency work that is undertaken by local officials and henchmen in order for the paperwork to look right for the purposes of this audit. It is on this visit that the actual working of NREGS, in all its gaps and contradictions, first become revealed to Mathur. This transparency work requires the mobilization of
different documents that create necessary paper truths. Muster rolls collating village level employment data show high levels of employment, but at the same time most job cards—where all employment undertaken by an individual under NREGS is meant to be logged—are blank, indicating a gap between the implemented and the reported. Many individuals who have not received any employment under the Scheme may be aware that employment is now a right. But there exists no clarity on redressal of any infringement of this right, not least because there is no office or post that is clearly defined as in charge of this Scheme to which any complaints can be addressed (77). State effect is thus created in the assiduously maintained asymmetry of information, comprehension, and the expectations between the beneficiaries and the official and informal executors of the Scheme.

Having established this set of asymmetries, the book turns its attention to the ground-level working of NREGS in Gopeshwar. Through rich description of offices, functionaries, objects, files, and registers, Chapter 3 comprehensively lays bare the divergence between the two realities—of what actually happens in the daily unfolding of NREGS, and of its existence on paper. Mathur describes the paradox whereby, despite widespread unemployment in the district and enough funds for dispersal under the Scheme, jobs do not get created or filled nor do funds get spent. Hence, NREGS is widely held by local officials as “unimplementable.” Here, Paper Tiger makes its central argument that this unimplementability cannot simply be read as a failure to convert the corrupt middlemen or brokers to the loftier goals of the Scheme. Rather, according to Mathur, the culprit is the paper trail itself, which NREGS relies on to insulate its implementation from the malignancy of corruption and systemic leakages. What happens instead is that the Scheme collapses because the new auditory regime erodes the value of pay-offs and the new terms and conditions do not appear attractive to local contractors, and to the labor force dependent on the contractors for their employment. This failure creates its own life that needs to be papered over by another cycle of documentation and its accompanying processes. It is this paralyzing volume of documentation that distinguishes NREGS from other state developmental schemes of the past, which in turn owes its genesis to the emphasis on transparency underpinning the Scheme. Ironically, it is this ideology of transparency that is celebrated in the literature and by developmental professionals and activists (95).
A key feature of state bureaucracy is the repetitive nature of documentary and other processes that play a key part in creating stateness and state effect among its functionaries. Chapter 4 presents a detailed account of the bureaucratic routines around letter writing as vectors of state effect across wider power structures. Mathur lays out a schema of the “epistolary practices” she encountered in the field and their real and intended affect among the writers and recipients of official letters. She describes the meticulous care with which her colleagues insisted a letter must be written so that its exact intent is understood and/or conveyed appropriately. Widely regarded as a difficult art to master, in which the anthropologist is tutored by her “colleagues,” epistolary nous lies in correctly judging the tone in which to write to a junior but experienced colleague who has been remiss at their job, from another who has also been remiss but is new to the role (103). Proper tone can take years of practice, and even after years of practice not everyone can get it right. Furthermore, epistolary skills lie in not only perfecting the tone but also in achieving the optimum frequency and volume of letter writing. Similarly, Paper Tiger describes the highly choreographed and repetitive nature of meetings as integral to the working of any bureaucracy. Chapter 5 makes clear that routine meetings are not merely auditory events, but they too are a particularly effective means of communicating stateness among and by state functionaries for similar reasons outlined above.

The book ends with a chapter on the arrival of a man-eating tiger in Gopeshwar. When local residents petition the state to kill the animal, this at once paralyzes the state apparatus and throws it into a flurry of epistolary activity. Tigers are a protected species under the Wildlife Protection Act (1972), thus, the Act runs counter to this local demand as well as the need of the hour. The elaborate paper trail this development in the township generates reveals the baroque, though ultimately ineffectual, nature of the state.

Central to the book, then, is the critique of the existing scholarship on the failure of the developmental state and its reliance on the trope of corruption. Most works within and beyond anthropology place corruption, systemic leakages, patronage, etc. at the root of the inadequate workings of the developmental state. Mathur contends that what distinguishes NREGA (or, more accurately, NREGS) from past programs aimed at generating employment in rural areas is the rootedness of the legislation in transparency. As a direct consequence of these neoliberalist transparency
demands of creating detailed, repetitious, and voluminous paper trails, NREGA ends up producing what Mathur terms “bizarre effects.” It is these demands for transparency that prevent the uptake of employment in places where unemployment is high, and worse, guarantee employment better outside the Scheme than under it.

The book’s chief strength is the fine-grained ethnographic account of the translation work in and through the series of everyday activities which emerge or are tacked onto this new program of work. The objective in describing these repetitious state-making practices at the lower rungs of the bureaucracy, such as letter writing and meetings, is to make their effects (and affect) ethnographically available. These routines clarify the distribution, transmission, and absorption of power and hierarchy at different levels of the bureaucracy. The state and its bureaucracy are made vital through carefully cultivated scribal practices and strictly observed habits of interpersonal conduct. The translation work of legislation and programs such as NREGA are conduits for this vitality, though Mathur falls short of making such a claim herself. In her reading, it is the paper trail and practices of documentation that holds primacy in the life of the state, which instead of vitality, end up producing “absurdity.” The all too noticeable “document raj,” or the reign of documentation, is at once the exercise of power by all levels of the bureaucratic infrastructure in the image of the omnipotent state and simultaneously its hollowing out. The book thus presents a robust anthropological account of this dual life of the Indian state—as omnipotent on the one hand, and as an ineffectual paper tiger on the other.

*Paper Tiger* aims to unpack familiar tropes within which the developmental state, its bureaucracy, and law are studied. While Mathur is able to produce a strong critique of the anthropology of the developmental state and the anthropology of bureaucracy, what remains under-examined, if not somewhat misread in this otherwise excellent book, is the law, both as an anthropological category but also in its specific historical thickness. This is not so much due to a lack of attention to the law, but more so a result of some key conceptual slippages. For one, the book uses “the law” and “laws” interchangeably. NREGA is a statute, i.e., derived from legislative action. Legislation is only one aspect of the law. In *Paper Tiger*, there seems to be an elision between law and legislation on the one hand and law and administrative rule-making on the other, thereby often collapsing,
if not mistaking, parts for wholes. Ultimately, this prompts Mathur to lament the “law’s capacity to craft the social and introduce, in and of itself, a new politics” as “overblown” in existing scholarship (75). This is a particularly startling observation especially in the case of India, where the social has had a very specific and unique relationship to the law. But this may well be due to the fact that in the book the social itself remains remarkably under-observed and as a result under-theorized. There is little information on local hierarchies, the perception of these functionaries of the state by all range of citizens of the state, and local society within and across which these people work. Had Mathur dwelled on the sociological anchoring of her interlocutors, most of whom are entry level state functionaries, that alone might have revealed the law’s capacity in India to craft the social. In particular, it would have helped in better understanding the reasons for the capacity of rational laws such as NREGA to produce “bizarre effects.” In fact, it could be argued that NREGS does not work on the ground because the social has not been sufficiently mobilized within and by it. Local labor contractors that rely on social networks to carry out project work (19) find it difficult to operate under NREGS because the bald, deracinated, and homogenizing language of the NREGS paperwork is incommensurate, if not entirely incompatible, with the social. Since the failure to produce a new politics occurs in the translation of NREGA into a program of work, it might, therefore, be useful to consider what kind of law NREGA is, and what is distinctive about its translation work whereby its capacity to craft the social becomes limited.

While every legislation and statute requires some form of translation in order to be absorbed within the order of the state, auditory demands can only be placed on certain types of laws. Constitutional law concerns itself with rights, among other things, whereas the mainstay of administrative law is rules, and the efficacy of rules and rule-making. Unlike constitutional law, which relates to jurisprudence in the main, administrative law is mostly concerned with jurisdiction, procedure, procedural fairness, and such matters of governance. The translation work of constitutional law substantiates and makes vital its jurisprudential promise. NREGA is a statute derived from Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, the fundamental right to life, an irreducible component of citizenship. But, in its translation from the constitutional right to life to the statute guaranteeing work, NREGA acquires a different register and objective, that of a specific policy provision. Its subsequent translation and unfolding as a program
of work is inextricably tied to administrative governance rather than the substantialization of citizenship per se. Much of the translation work in “administration proper” lies in creating a “matter-of-factness” or a banality, rather than varying degrees of expertness, which is the stuff of law (Weber 1991:219). The capacity of administrative law to “craft the social” is therefore inherently limited. But such an assessment would simply not hold for the capacity of “the law” to reform the social for other types of law, such as common law, property law, and of course constitutional law, and even more so in the case of India.

In its final chapter on the tiger (constantly, if somewhat jarringly referred to as “the big cat,” as opposed to tiger, or indeed the vernacular “bagh”), the book moves into an altogether different and somewhat unanticipated conceptual register. The language shifts from the vocabulary and conceptual framework of the anthropology of the state, government, and documents to the new language of the anthropocene. Without any prior warning or build-up, people, individuals, functionaries come to be referred to as “humans” once the “human-eating” (!) tiger/leopard makes its entry in the ethnography. The “non-human” implied and referenced here is really only the tiger. If nothing else, this can at best be seen as a missed opportunity, for the book is littered with all manner of non-humans, all of which have a life and are generative of it—documents, signatures, files, registers, notes, etc. It would have been useful to see the anthropology of the anthropocene and the non-human in conceptual dialogue with the anthropology of the state and, indeed, the anthropology of things.

Despite these points of critique, Paper Tiger is an important contribution to the ethnographic inquiry of bureaucracy and its infamous routines. It adds to the rich body of work on the anthropology of the state and of contemporary India. Most of all, its fluent, literary prose makes it a joy to read.

References: