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in Himalayan India  
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## Paper Tiger

A big cat overthrows the Indian state and establishes a reign of terror over the residents of a Himalayan town. A welfare legislation aimed at providing employment and commanding a huge budget becomes 'unimplementable' in a region bedeviled by high levels of poverty and unemployment. This book provides a lively ethnographic account of how such seemingly bizarre scenarios come to be in contemporary India. Based on 18 months of intensive fieldwork, the book presents a unique explanation for why and how progressive laws can do what they do and not, ever-so-often, what they are supposed to do. It reveals the double-edged effects of the reforms that have been ushered in by the post-liberalization Indian state, particularly the effort to render itself more transparent and accountable. Through a meticulous detailing of everyday bureaucratic life on the Himalayan borderland *Paper Tiger* makes an argument for shifting the very frames of thought through which we apprehend the workings of the developmental Indian state.

**Nayanika Mathur** holds a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge. She is additionally a Research Fellow at Cambridge's Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities.

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# Paper Tiger

## Law, Bureaucracy and the Developmental State in Himalayan India

Nayanika Mathur



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*For Ravi and Tishya*

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## Glossary

<i>adamkhor</i>	human-eater
<i>asli</i>	real
<i>atank</i>	terror
<i>avashyak karyavahi</i>	necessary action
<i>bagh/baghin</i>	(male) leopard or tiger, (female) leopard or tiger
<i>bhrashta/bhrashtachar</i>	corrupt/corruption
<i>chai</i>	tea
<i>Collectorate</i>	The District Magistrate's office
<i>farzee</i>	fake or fraudulent
<i>jaloos</i>	procession of people
<i>janta</i>	the People
<i>kachcha</i>	temporary/raw
<i>kanoon</i>	law
<i>krit karyavahi</i>	action taken
<i>kaghaz</i>	paper
<i>kursi</i>	chair
<i>maidani</i>	plainsperson
<i>neeche</i>	below/down/down-there
<i>paisa</i>	money
<i>pahar</i>	mountains
<i>pahari</i>	mountain-person/s
<i>panchayat</i>	lit. council of five
<i>Pradhan</i>	village headperson
<i>prarthana patra</i>	lit. prayer letter; petition
<i>pukka</i>	permanent
<i>rozgar</i>	employment
<i>sarkar</i>	state/government
<i>sarkari</i>	adjective form of <i>sarkar</i> . State-like/government-y
<i>shikar</i>	hunting/the hunt

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<i>shikari</i>	hunter
<i>upar</i>	above/up/up-there
<i>vibhag</i>	Department
<i>vikas</i>	Development
<i>-wallah</i>	an indication of the human/animals association with the prefix
<i>yatra</i>	travel/voyage/pilgrimage
<i>zindagi</i>	life

# Acronyms

BDO	Block Development Officer
CDO	Chief Development Officer
CM	Chief Minister
CWW	Chief Wildlife Warden
DDO	District Development Officer
DFO	Divisional Forest Officer
DM	District Magistrate
DPO	District Programme Officer
FD	Forest Department
GP	<i>Gram Panchayat</i> (Village Council)
GPVA	<i>Gram Panchayat Vikas Adhikari</i> (Village Council Development Official)
IAS	Indian Administrative Service
JE	Junior Engineer
MoRD	Ministry of Rural Development, New Delhi
MR	Muster Roll
NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005
NREGS	National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
OG	Operational Guidelines
RTI	Right to Information Act
WPA	Wildlife Protection Act, 1972

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I was impressed and inspired by the assortment of people I have grouped together as the NREGA interpreters. Once again, I do not name any of them, other than Jean Dreze, whom it would be futile to anonymize. I fear they might not agree with all my arguments, but I do hope they will see that I share in their struggle.

All the events I describe are faithful representations of what transpired and are true to life. I have, however, scrambled places, names, acronyms, official designations, and times. The real-life identities of the people who inhabit this book have thus been rendered untraceable and unverifiable.

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Map of Uttarakhand





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## Prologue

*Yahan tumko kuch nahin milega*, ‘you won’t find anything here’, said the kindly senior bureaucrat. It was the September of 2006 and we were sitting in his large office, located in the Secretariat at the heart of Dehradun, the capital city of the State of Uttarakhand in northern India, which had recently (in 2000) been carved out of Uttar Pradesh (UP) as a separate political entity. I was dismayed. After weeks of petitioning, phone-calling, and waiting, I had finally managed to get 5 minutes with the topmost development bureaucrat in this new Indian state. I had just breathlessly reeled off my spiel about being a doctoral student desirous of studying the ‘inner functioning’ of the development wing of the state of Uttarakhand. To accomplish this, I had requested his permission to sit in his office for 12 months and follow through their implementation of the brand new and much-celebrated National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005 (NREGA). He was taken aback by this request to access, and participate in, office life. To think it through, he called in his ‘Number Two’, i.e., his immediate junior in the Rural Development Department. Both of them together puzzled over my request, again and again asking me why I would want to spend a year in their office for, ‘there is nothing here other than papers and files’, ‘you won’t understand anything of development by sitting here in Dehradun’, where ‘we are involved merely in routine business’. The ‘real work’ (*asli kaam*) of development schemes happened in the districts, according to both of them. They were not, I could plainly see, averse to my sitting in their office if that was really what I wanted to do, but they genuinely did not see any point in it. They gently suggested that I might want to have a look at the districts before I made a decision. If I did decide to work out of a district then I must, they said, give them a ‘report’ on what exactly was going on there for ‘God alone knows what those chaps get up to’.

I was slightly unnerved by the incredulity with which the two senior bureaucrats had responded to my request. Further, the dull grey offices I saw in Dehradun did not seem particularly conducive to unearthing the ‘state’s

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scandalous life' (Aretxaga, 2003, p.401) as I so hoped to do. I discussed possible field sites with other people in Dehradun – NGO workers, academics, bureaucrats, journalists – and they all told me that I would 'find nothing' (*kuch nahin milega*) in Dehradun for the 'real' (*asli*) things happen in the districts. Increasingly swayed by this near unanimous recommendation of moving down to a district, I decided to visit Chamoli district.

I chose Chamoli for many reasons.

First, NREGA, at that point, was operational in only three out of a total of thirteen districts in Uttarakhand, Chamoli being one of them. The district reported high levels of rural poverty and unemployment, which had put it on the Indian Planning Commission's priority list as one of India's 200 'most backward districts'. Secondly, the district shares a long border with Tibet, which brought to my mind the growing anthropological literature on territorial borders and frontiers that seems to imply a peculiar quality to these spaces on the edges of states. Finally, and most crucially, another senior state official I met soon after – the Chief Information Commissioner (CIC) – offered to introduce me into the district administration. The CIC concurred that I would 'find nothing other than paper just sitting here in offices in Dehradun', and eagerly encouraged me to go see the 'real situation' in a 'remote and backward' district such as Chamoli. As it happened, the CIC was going to be in Chamoli in early October to evaluate a project aimed at improving the livelihoods of bamboo basket weavers. Before I could even venture a suggestion, the CIC had peremptorily ordered me to meet him there so that he could 'fix matters'. I was to precede him up to Chamoli bearing a letter of introduction from him, to make the acquaintance of the district officials.

### *The district office*

Armed with my introduction, I made the 12-hour drive up to a small government-run tourists' rest house in the village of Pipalkoti, where the project evaluation was to take place. The letter was printed in Hindi, on the CIC's official letterhead, a thick cream-coloured sheet of handmade paper with the logo of Uttarakhand glossily embossed on it. It listed, in bullet points, the facts that I was a student of Cambridge University, was doing PhD research on poverty alleviation in Uttarakhand, and had chosen Chamoli district as my field site due to its 'backward status'. Therefore, 'full assistance' must be provided to me. It was signed by the CIC and stamped with his official seal. As we jolted our way up and

down mountains and valleys, I wondered at the archaic officialese of this piece of paper that I was so carefully carrying.

The town of Gopeshwar, administrative headquarters of Chamoli district, is located about 25 km away from Pipalkoti. Though I had arrived a couple of days before the CIC, the government rest house was already humming with preparations for the upcoming evaluation. The very first morning after arriving at Pipalkoti, I drove up to Gopeshwar to request an appointment with the top state representative in the district, the District Magistrate (DM). The DM's Personal Assistant (PA) did not even glance at me before telling me that the DM was too busy and I should come back after a 'few days'. At this point I silently produced the letter from the CIC. As if by magic, the PA instantaneously sat up and took notice of me. I was quickly ushered into the DM's office with the hushed announcement that I had 'come on CIC sahib's recommendation (*sifarish*)'. The DM glanced through the letter, said, 'Of course we shall provide you with every assistance you could need as CIC *sahib* says', and promptly rang up his subordinate, the Chief Development Officer (CDO), whom he ordered to meet me immediately. The DM told me the CDO was the one who directly handled all the development work of the district, and would be able to 'give me' what I was looking for. I was escorted out of the DM's office by a peon who walked me down to the CDO's office where, again, I was immediately shown in.

The CDO was struck dumb by my request to spend a year in his office. He immediately called in his 'Number Two' – the District Development Officer (DDO) – for a consultation. The CDO and DDO understood my objective of studying the implementation of NREGA, but kept asking me how I would be able to do that by sitting in an office all day, that too for an entire year. Both of them assured me that it was pointless to work out of the district office for the 'real work' (*asli kaam*) on NREGA actually happened in the blocks (a block is an administrative unit comprising a cluster of villages with each district containing a certain number of blocks 'under' them). I would, they told me with total certainty, 'find nothing here' (*yahan kuch nahin milega*) for 'we are just tied up in files and routine'. The CDO suggested that I look at Dasholi block, which was not only nearby but, 'if the reports they send up are not *farzee* (fake/fraudulent)', was performing well. Like their senior colleague in Dehradun, the two officials also told me that I could make myself useful by telling them what – if anything – their juniors in the block office were doing. The CDO, somewhere between seriousness and jocularly, said that I could, in fact, function as their 'spy' (*guptachar*) in

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the block, for no one would ever suspect a young female student of espionage. Before I had time to react to this rather alarming suggestion, the CDO had telephoned the Block Development Officer (BDO) of Dasholi and informed him of my impending arrival. I was then given instructions on how to get to the BDO's office, which was in Chamoli town, located at a distance of 12 km below Gopeshwar.

### *The block office*

The BDO was uncomfortably officious, obviously taking the CDO's verbal orders to provide me with 'full assistance' very seriously. He, too, said he would be happy to have me sitting in his office observing NREGA for as long as I wished, but felt obliged to inform me in advance that:

'You really won't find anything here...We just simply follow orders issued from the district and the work really happens in the villages. Why don't you choose some villages to do your research in?'

He then pulled out a map and pointed out villages close to the main road, so that I wouldn't have any difficulty climbing up to them. I was beginning to tire of this litany of 'you won't find anything'. I heard him out, thanked him for his advice, and left to ponder what I should be doing.

### *The village office(r)*

On my way down to the main road from the Block office, I paused to catch my breath and admire the startling blue of the river Alaknanda, snaking between the sheer brown mountains on her way down to meet the Ganges. A man came up behind me and initiated a conversation. This gentleman turned out to be a village-level development officer. I explained my project to him. His instantaneous response was:

'Then why are you here? You should be in New Delhi to see how they make the rules that they send down to us here. We just try to follow orders from above. You won't find anything here in the villages.'

This line – *yahan tumko kuch nahin milega* (you won't find anything here) – had been repeated to me at every single office I had been to so far. Now, even functionaries positioned at the absolute end of the delivery chain were authoritatively declaiming it at me, and on the road at that. Was it a platitude to get rid of me, a mechanism to absolve themselves of responsibility, or something these officials really believed to be true? What was it they thought I was looking

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for, anyway? With my pre-planned research methodology in ruins, where and how was I ever going to locate ‘the developmental Indian state’? The state, it appeared, was always elsewhere, never here.

On reaching my little rest house in Pipalkoti, I was greeted by its manager, a waiter, and three young men who were involved with a bamboo basket weaving co-operative. They, like everyone else, were most curious to know what I was doing gadding about the district. Over a cup of *chai* I explained my research-student position and my interest in studying *sarkar* (the state). On a hunch, I asked them – five men in all – where they saw the state (*aapko sarkar kahan dikhta hai*). Instantly, a couple of them pointed up in the direction of Gopeshwar. Pipalkoti lies in the valley while Gopeshwar is atop a large mountain, out of sight from where we sat, but the men gestured in that direction and one said

‘Gopeshwar *mein virajman hai*’ (the state is seated in Gopeshwar). The hotel manager said, ‘but, you are coming from *sarkar’s gaddi*’ (the throne of the state) i.e. New Delhi, and the waiter noted, ‘Here it is at DM-*sahib’s*’ (*yahan par to DM sahib ke yahan hai*).

I was deeply struck by this very physical and literal location of the state in administrative headquarters, spaces, and bodies. The instinctive gesture towards Gopeshwar and the mention of DM-*sahib* were in stark contrast to the bureaucrats who had consistently pointed to ‘elsewhere’ as the place best suited to study the state, or the ‘real work’ of state-led development. At long last, here were tangible and definitive directions. That night, I decided the most sensible course of action at the moment would be to begin by working out of Gopeshwar and see where events took me. The next morning, I marched back to the CDO with a request to be allowed to work in his office. Once again, the DDO was summoned and informed of my decision. Both officers appeared bemused by what they, no doubt, saw as the fundamentally flawed research strategy of a wilful young elite woman, who had little idea of how the state works and how development is made to happen. They were both certain that once I had found ‘nothing here but paper, files and routine’, I would, of my own accord, relocate to a village or even to the block office. But to pander to my whim, they smilingly agreed to ‘post’ me in their office in the best location possible. This was adjudged to be with a ‘staff of subaltern officials and scribes of all sorts’ as Weber (2006, p. 50) might have described them, the members of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) cell. This little cell had been created especially to operationalize NREGA in its schematized form as the NREGS.

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I was inducted into the cell with the designation of ‘Researcher’ through the means of an official letter ordering the same.

The pages that follow describe what I went on to ‘find’ in this little cell and the wider world it connected to – the town of Gopeshwar, the Himalayas, development policies and rationalities, bureaucratic instruments, artefacts and rituals, and, even, hungry big cats.