

Petitioning to Capture and Kill
: Efficacious *arzees* against big cats in India

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In a political culture that experiences inordinately high levels of petitioning, what makes for a successful petition? This paper studies petitions that have been efficacious in their appeals to capture or kill big cats in Himalayan India. Rates of success for any appeal against big cats is rare in contemporary India given the stringent legal regime that is geared almost exclusively towards the protection of charismatic and endangered big cats as well as the hegemonic position occupied by wildlife conservationism. Furthermore, not only is it difficult to petition against cossetted big cats, but also it isn't an easy task for *any* petition to be heard and acquiesced to. Through an ethnography of efficacious petitions, this paper makes three related interventions. In the first and in the process of attending to the rarity of a handful of efficacious petitions, this paper argues for expanding our conceptualisation of what, in practice, a petition *is*. It does so by outlining the changing forms of efficacious petitions that can range from a telephone call, a register entry, a message on a smart phone, to the more traditional paper-based petitions. Beyond its ever-evolving medium this paper demonstrates the criticality of folding petitioning into a wider process that involves planning, performance, perseverance, repetition, and the capacity to elicit visceral responses. Finally, through an ethnographic foregrounding of human-big cat interactions, it demonstrates how an acceptance and elaboration of animal agency enriches the study of politico-legal processes.

An e-petition to Jacob Zuma protesting against the killing of Cecil the lion and asking for a ban on trophy hunting has gathered, at last count, a million and a quarter signatures.¹ The petitions that this paper studies constitute the polar opposite of this monster petition for a celebrity cat. I examine here petitions that are asking for the killing and capture of leopards or tigers in India; they tend to be written by either just an individual or a handful of people; none of them have ever reached the fame or circulation of the petition for Cecil. I also don't look at e-petitions – just because I am yet to come across one in the Indian Himalaya where the research for this is based – but I do consider how new technologies are changing the modes through which citizens now make appeals to the state. The core objective of this paper lies in examining those petitions that appealed for the capture or death of big cats *and* which turned out to be efficacious. By efficacious I do not mean that the demands set out in the petition were necessarily met, but rather that the appeals were given an audience; they were heard out; and acted upon.

My interest in efficacious petitions arises from, broadly speaking, two fronts. The first and foremost is that, in fact, most petitions are *not* efficacious. The normal course of action is, for the majority, quite the opposite – they are dismissed, burnt, lost, filed away and forgotten, or deliberately sat upon.² This studious ignoring of petitions arises partly due to the sheer volume and dizzying diversity of petitions every wing of the state receives. For instance, my previous research was centred upon the execution of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Guarantee Employment Act, 2005 (MGNREGA) that legally enjoins the setting up of a grievance redressal cells in

¹ <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/821/738/351/demand-justice-for-cecil-the-lion-in-zimbambwe/>
[Accessed Jan 22, 2016]

² N. Mathur, *Paper Tiger: Law, Bureaucracy, and the Developmental State in Himalayan India*, Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 2016.

districts and states. The grievance redressal cell most districts in Uttarakhand became so rapidly flooded with petitions – or in its language – “grievances” that it couldn’t cope and, in the end, they all had to be shut down in practice. The shutting down of the grievance cell entailed, at its core, the closing of a register on ‘grievances’ in the central district office – the MGNREGA “cell” – and thus foreclosing the space for any forms of petitioning around this gigantic welfare programme. Most bureaucrats I encountered considered this the right thing to do given what they consider “pathological petitioning” in India. In a scenario of what bureaucrats consider pathological levels of petitioning, the question then arises: how do some elicit a response?

What further propels me to think about those petitions that have been efficacious in the specific context of big cats is that in contemporary India it is extremely difficult, legally and bureaucratically speaking, to take *any* punitive action against big cats.³ From the late 1960s onwards, a series of wildlife conservationist legislations and measure have been passed that serve to provide a formidable level of protection for all wildlife. And this is particularly the case for tigers, leopards, and lions that feature in Schedule 1 of the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 that serves to provide them with the strictest protection of all. A powerful wildlife protection lobby exists in contemporary India as do a plethora of rules and guidelines that are aimed at the conservation of, in particular, big cats. While this conservationist infrastructure has not necessarily been successful in its objective *and* hasn’t ended poaching and trafficking of big cats, it has

³ For an account of the wildlife conservationist regime that protects big cats and other such ‘endangered’ animals in India see *The Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972* (available at: <http://envfor.nic.in/legis/wildlife/wildlife1.html>); V. Saberwal, M. Rangarajan, and A. Kothari, *People, Parks, and Wildlife: Towards Co-existence*, New Delhi, Orient Longman, 2001; M. Rangarajan, *India’s Wildlife History: An Introduction*, Ranikhet, Orient Longman, 2013. For a more global history of conservationism see W. M. Adams, *Against Extinction: The Story of Conservation*, London, Routledge, 2004.

made it extremely difficult for the state to openly and legally capture or kill these charismatic animals.⁴ Central to the governance on big cats in contemporary India is the production of evidentiary proof – in the form of documents – that attest to the aberrance of a specific big cat – in the form of a man-eater as they are popularly termed – and thus allows for his or her capture or death. Petitions by affected or frightened citizens is a key part of this process. Petitions presented to local officials allow for investigations into a specific big cat to be commenced. They help prove that the cat in question is, in fact, dangerous and deviant, and hence should be either hunted down or kept in captivity.

The diversity and vast numbers of petitions received by the contemporary state attests to a very long and complicated history and political culture of petitioning in South Asia.⁵ The post-colonial state has institutionalised the practice of petitioning as a legitimate mode of airing what in its current developmentalist language it terms “grievances”. Thus, Cody notes that from 1969 onwards every Monday is set aside and termed “Grievance Day” or “petition justice day” at district collectors offices in Tamil Nadu.⁶ In Uttarakhand, while there is no demarcated day just for the hearing of petitions, district officials and senior politicians are encouraged to hold *durbars* (courts). Thus, I have sat through several *janta-ki-durbars* (courts with the people) in Uttarakhand when citizens come and petition the state through a face-to-face encounter. While these moments do provide interesting instances of *arzees*, many of

⁴ N. Mathur. ‘The Reign of Terror of the Big Cat: Bureaucracy and the mediation of social time in the Indian Himalaya’. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2014, pp. 148-165.

⁵ Petitioning as an accepted and, in fact, encouraged mode of expressing dissent has a long history in colonial India that is now well-documented. See B. Raman, *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2012; R. Travers, this issue; L. Bear, ‘Public genealogies: Documents, bodies and nations in Anglo-Indian railway family histories’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2001, pp. 355-388; T. Sriraman, ‘A petition-like application? Rhetoric and rationing documents in wartime Delhi: 1941-45’, *Indian Economic Social History Review*, volume 51, no. 3, 2014, pp. 353-382.

⁶ Cody, *The Light of Knowledge*, p. 175.

the *arzees* discussed here are not those that get presented at set times through regular procedures.

This paper is rooted in ethnographic research undertaken in the Indian Himalaya over the past decade and draws upon the quotidian and regularised process of petitioning state bureaucrats. An ethnographic focus on efficacious modes of appeal, I want to argue, expands the very notion of what constitutes a petition. Within the state bureaucracy and in the English language, petitions most often get described as letters, complaints, grievance, application or just petition.⁷ The word most commonly used in northern India in Hindi and Urdu to refer to petition is *arzee*⁸. *Arzee* is a capacious term that includes requests, representation, appeal, demand, humble desire, and presentation of information. There is a dense assortment of meanings associated with *arzee* and its root word – *arz* – particularly if one is attentive to *arzee*'s usage in colloquial speech in northern India. *Arzee* is most commonly a piece of paper on which one types or hand writes an appeal but, through the ethnographic material presented here, I will argue that this is not always the case. To make an *arzee* means to submit a petition but it also encompasses a whole range of other actions around that act of submission. As the wider anthropology of claim-making has shown, there is a need to be attentive to the various forms an *arzee* can take.⁹ Beyond the very medium of the *arzee* – be it on paper or, as I show below, via smart phones – there is a need to capture those moments and utterances through which an *arzee* is made; the forms it

⁷ The interest in bureaucracy and different dimensions of paperwork in South Asia has led to a recent efflorescence of work that examines these documentary forms, including petitions. M. Hull, *Government of Paper: the materiality of bureaucracy in urban Pakistan*, Berkeley, California University Press, 2012; F. Cody, *The Light of Knowledge: Literary Activism and the Politics of Writing in South India*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2013; A. Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2012;

⁸ On *arzees* and their historical roots, see Travers (this issue).

⁹ For instance, see Englund for his analysis of the claims made and grievances aired through a popular Chichewa news bulletin broadcast on Malawi's public radio. H. Englund, *Human Rights and African Airwaves: mediating equality on the Chichewa radio*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2011.

can take; and the types of follow-up actions that need to be or are undertaken in order to fully make an *arzee*. An *arzee* then is not just a thing – the petitionary message via a specific medium – but it is also a process. It is such an understanding of *arzee* that this paper assumes its quest to understand how a chosen few *arzees* are heard and, even, acquiesced to.

In short, the ambition of this paper is to expand what a petition means from beyond just a letter/appear written down on a piece of paper or the formalised request for something to a broader, ethnographically-derived understanding of a whole series of practices and process that are strung around the *arzee* itself. A modern-day petition can be something as simple as a message on whatsapp or a tweet to a Minister or bureaucrat *and* it cannot be understood in isolation from the various processes that accompany it. These processes include *chakkar-marna* (going round and round) of offices; photocopying and repeatedly resending petitions to bureaucrats; the use of connections and social/kin networks; staging of *dharnas* (sit-ins) and *jalooses* (processions). Important work on democracy and cultures of protest as well as claim-making has highlighted how these practices – be it a *dharna*¹⁰ or notions of *jugaad*¹¹ – arose and work (or not)¹². In this paper, I make a case for enfolding the petition – presented via various mediums – into these associated practices of appeal-making.

¹⁰ R. Singha, *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in early colonial India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998.

¹¹ Jeffrey, C and S. Young. 2013. 'Jugād: Youth and Enterprise in India,' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 104, no. 1, pp. 182-195.

¹² There is a vast and rich literature on the anthropology of protest, democracy, and claim-making in South Asia that I do not rehearse. For a taste of the diversity of this work see Das, Veena. 2007. *Life and words: Violence and the descent into the ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Björkman, Lisa. 2015. 'The ostentatious crowd: Public protest as mass-political street theatre in Mumbai.' *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. 35, pp. 142–65; Chatterjee, M. 2016. 'Bandh politics: crowds, spectacular violence, and sovereignty in India,' *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 17, no. 3. Pp. 294-307. My ambition in this paper is to argue for enfolding these associated processes into the wider culture and politics of petitioning; to broaden out petitioning to include giving and drafting a petition as

Beyond an expanding out of the category of the *arzee* itself, I ask what happens when we bring the animal into the petitioning process. In the first place, we see a strong questioning of the wildlife conservationist regime that comes across as not just too stringent in its rules and regulations, but also one that inexplicably ends up valuing big cat lives higher than human lives¹³. Secondly, the animal comes across as highly agentic, more so than the humans in fact. Animal studies has wrestled, in different ways, with the question of, firstly, whether animals have agency and, secondly, if yes then how are we to access and describe such nonhuman agency¹⁴. This paper, which is drawn from a wider book manuscript on human-big cat relations in India, presents petitions and narratives that take the capacity of big cats to act and interact for granted. As *arzees* swing between the legal-rational and affective-visceral modalities¹⁵, they produce strong imaginaries of the beast in question. He (for man-eaters even when they are known to be female are referred to with masculine pronouns) is not just described physiologically as big/small, young/old, healthy/injured and possessing particular markings. More importantly, he has a personality and possesses agency of a form that dwarves the most agentic human. Thus, certain adjectives are used for the animal such as cunning (*chatur*), aberrant, vicious, scheming, powerful, dangerous, ill-mannered (*badtameez*), uncouth, all-

well as participating in public protests/subterranean pressure-application in order to have that petition heard and rendered efficacious.

¹³ A. Jalais, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans*, New Delhi, Routledge, 2010; Mathur, *The Reign of Terror of the Big Cat*.

¹⁴ A review of the debate on animal agency is beyond the scope of this paper but see Rees (2017) for a succinct summary of the core issues. Rees, Amanda. 2017. 'Animal agents? Historiography, theory and the history of science in the Anthropocene,' *British Journal of the History of Science* (BJHS), vol. 2, pp. 1-10; On big cats and the question of their histories, memory, and capacity to remember and act – be agentic – see Rangarajan; Mahesh. 2013 'Animals with rich histories: the case of the lions of Gir Forest, Gujarat, India', *History and Theory*, vol. 52, pp. 109–127;

¹⁵ Taussig, *Magic of the State*; V. Das, 'The Signature of the State: The Paradox of Illegibility.' In *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, eds. V. Das and D. Poole, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, pp. 225-252, 2004.

knowing, devout, and so on. In the arzees and the speech that accompanies them, we are made aware of a presence that is eerie but also compelling. This feline presence is often anthropomorphised but very often there is a nonhuman terminology evoked that individualises the cat and allows for a peculiar beastly intimacy.

Petitioning to Capture

We begin first with petitions to capture big cats and the hill-station of Shimla. Shimla is currently the capital city of the Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh. It used to function as the summer capital of the British Raj and therefore, possesses excellent infrastructure such as roads and rail connections and lavish constructions in Tudor and neo-Gothic styles¹⁶. These colonial era constructions continue to dominate the city, making it India's most popular tourist destination in the Himalaya. In the last two decades, the city of Shimla has witnessed a large urban expansion outwards with middle and upper class Indians buying cottages, high-rise apartments, and constructing bungalows that function either as retirement homes or summer getaways.

I went to Shimla with a team of wildlife biologists, conservationists, and photographers who were – in collaboration with the forest department in Shimla – undertaking a leopard census of the city¹⁷. Big cats in India are now being counted through the use of drones and, most commonly, via camera trapping. A camera trap is a remotely activated camera that is equipped with a motion sensor or an infrared sensor, or uses a light beam as a trigger. Set up in strategic locations, camera traps are able to – through their photographic evidence – provide excellent data on movements,

¹⁶ P. Kanwar, *Imperial Simla: the political culture of the Raj*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2004; V. Pubby, *Shimla Then and Now*, New Delhi, Indus Publishing House, 1988.

¹⁷ Wildlife comes under the purview of the forest department in India.

numbers, habits, density etc. of big cats. Our study indicates that there are approximately 9 individual leopards in Shimla city at the moment. The human population is approximately 180,000.¹⁸ As the total area of Shimla is about 25 square km this makes for a fairly dense leopard population and, hence, sightings of the animal are quite frequent.

While many residents of the city – especially those who have lived there for long or those hailing from villages in the mountains – are not particularly perturbed by the sight of a big cat strolling around the city, the new entrants to Shimla, especially the retirees and the Summer home-owners – most of them coming from the metros – are not equally sanguine. In the first place, they are unused to seeing wildlife in their own backyards. This shock at seeing big cats out of the supposed-wild by urban dwellers and considering them to be “straying” out of their own territory has been noted for the metropolis of Mumbai as well.¹⁹ In Shimla it is not just that the recent, well-heeled urban dwellers are disturbed by the presence of big cats in proximity to them, it is also that they are *seeing them* in a different way. A large number of them have installed security cameras in their bungalows or in the housing societies that they live in. The regular appearance of leopards on the CCTV imagery has led to, according to the forest department, an exponential increase in complaints against the leopards over the last 7-8 years. It is worth pointing out that there have been no deaths by leopards in Shimla in recent times and there has been only one case of a serious attack. This man, too, admits to tripping over a sleeping leopard in the dark as he was taking a short cut

¹⁸ <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/city/4-shimla.html> [Accessed 22/02/2016]

¹⁹ S. Ghosal, *Cats in the city: Narrative analysis of the interactions between people and leopards in the Sanjay Gandhi National Park landscape, Mumbai*. A Mumbaikars for SGNP project report. Submitted to the SGNP Forest Department. Mumbai. Maharashtra, 2012; F. Landy, ‘Urban leopards are good cartographers. Human-nonhuman and spatial conflicts at Sanjay Gandhi National Park, Mumbai,’ in *Cities, Towns, and the Places of Nature*, A. Rademacher and K. Sivaramakrishnan eds., Hong Kong, Honk Kong University Press, In Press.

home one night through a forested area. The leopard retaliated by biting his arm but then she immediately ran away herself. Despite the almost total absence of conflict – defined as unprovoked attacks or injuries or deaths of humans – for certain sections of Shimla residents the very sighting of a leopard in their midst is a cause for worry. For them this is an animal out of place. It has, as they say, “escaped” or “strayed away” from its prescribed beastly place that is a jungle or even a village and mistakenly or cheekily entered their historic city-space.²⁰

The most common reaction to a leopard sighting is to pick up the phone to lodge a complaint with the forest department. Shimla city has a 24-hour emergency helpline number that you can ring in order to report either the uprooting of trees or the sightings of leopards – admittedly two common problems even though they appear somewhat different. The complaints register notes the name of the complainant, time and place of leopard sighting, as well as a separate column for the specific grouse. The forest department responds to a chosen few complaints by installing cages with some sort of live bait – such as a dog or goat – in it to trap the big cats. Most of the time such trapping doesn’t work much to the relief of the forest department officials. In fact, they deliberately position the traps poorly in the hope that they do not capture the leopard. If they do, unfortunately, capture the leopard then it is sent to a zoo or a rescue centre. According to the most recent guidelines issued by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), a leopard cannot be kept in captivity for over 30

²⁰ The sub-discipline of Animal Geography has had a particular emphasis on space and the animal and demonstrated how notions of in/out-of-place beasts has developed. See, for instance, C. Philo and C. Wilbert, eds. *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations*, London, Routledge, 2000; J. R. Wolch, and J. Emel, eds. *Animal Geographies: Place, Politics, and Identity in the Nature-Culture Borderlands*. London and New York, Verso, 1998. In India, there has been some significant work arguing against the popular perception that big cats live within their proscribed spaces such as tiger reserves. See, in particular, V. Athreya, M. Odden, JDC Linnell, J. Krishnaswamy, U. Karanth, ‘Big Cats in Our Backyards: Persistence of Large Carnivores in a Human Dominated Landscape in India’. PLoS ONE, volume 8, no. 3, e57872, 2013.

days unless it is proven to be dangerous to human life.²¹ As none of these leopards have been thus convicted, they are released back into the jungles adjoining Shimla within 30 days. In other words, within a month of capture these cats come right back to their homes, which we are learning – thanks to some very advanced camera trapping technology - tends to be as much on the fringes of urban areas as in the perceived wild of India.²² The officials were reluctant to capture the leopards partly because they were made nervous by the Wildlife Protection Act and assorted guidelines, but also because they found the whole exercise a bit pointless as, in the end, the leopards being territorial animals will return straight back to Shimla, only now they will be – as one of them put it – more grouchy and grumpy (*khadoos*).

Running through the complaint register of the past 5 years it became obvious that the forest department ignores most of the sightings other than, broadly, two sorts. The first is when it is a person who possesses powerful contacts with politicians and bureaucrats and, especially, when they have some form of evidence of the leopards regular movements in their immediate vicinity. The death of domesticated pet dogs appears to particularly provoke a response i.e. the placement of a cage near the dog's owners home. For instance, a retired Supreme Court judge's dog, named "Heaven", was eaten up by a leopard and the entire heart rending episode was captured on CCTV. When I went to interview this person in his colossal colonial-style bungalow in the poshest part of the town equipped with multiple CCTVs and a 24-hour guard,

²¹ Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), 'Guidelines for Human-Leopard Conflict Management', Delhi, Government of India, April 2011.

²² Camera trapping remains to be studied in greater depth but see N. Mathur, 'The Beastly and the Beautiful: Caging and camera trapping big cats in India', Paper presented at the *Traps: technological mediations of human-animal encounter* conference at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH), Cambridge, 26-27 September 2016. For an analysis of the effects of radio transmitters and animal tracking on the making of wildlife see E. Bebson, *Wired Wilderness: Technologies of Tracking and the Making of Modern Wildlife*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.

he obsessively showed me – on loop – the clip. The Judge railed against the temerity of the leopard to enter not just Shimla but to bound over his high bungalow walls and reeled out a list of people he had rung to get the leopard captured. In this case a leopard was trapped in a cage put next to his home and she had been sent off to a “rescue centre” for – as the judge put it – “some time in rehab.”

In addition to phone calls, these petitioners follow it up with *arzees* that come very close to what we would just straightforwardly describe as letters in the English language to the concerned officials. So, for instance, a Dr Pathania of an area called Kelston in Shimla wrote in to request the capture of a leopard in his residential area. He describes the leopard as “moving freely” at night and requests that the animal be immediately caged (Image 1). This *arzee* is written in the English language, proficiently by hand with a clear instruction on what is to be done. It is a petition to the extent that he is requesting the state to do something for him but its addressed as if to an equal, if not subordinate, person. A similar tone is adopted by the Oberoi hotel – which is a major 5-star luxury hotel in Simla – that has many times captured on its CCTVs leopards walking around its parking lot and, even, taking a dip in the hot pool. So, for instance, in November 2013 the Oberoi hotel writes to the forest officer saying a “big Leopard” has been noticed near their hotel and asks for some action to be taken. Part of the justification they provide is that their hotel is open 24 hours and that most of their guests are foreigners (Image 2). The need to avoid mis-happening as the Oberoi letter puts it gets even more exacerbated when the leopards prey on dogs and monkeys. As an email from Mr Arora of Westline cottage put it, people are feeling unsafe due to the sighting of multiple leopards and hence the cats should be, as he puts it, “nabbed” (Image 3).

When it is not a retired Supreme Court judge with powerful contacts or a 5-Star luxury hotel worried about its foreigner residents, then the Forest Department responds only when there is a huge spike in telephonic complaints. There was one day when there were 96 complaints registered within 4 hours. The incident that set this off was when a leopard was sighted near the legislative assembly. Not only is this located in the historic heart of the city – on the Mall road around which the colonial city was constructed – but it was also seen as a particularly audacious appearance. As a local newspaper put it, “the big cat knocks at the door of the temple of democracy”. Every single person I spoke to would tell me about that day – the day the big cat appeared in front of the legislative assembly. Even those who were otherwise unperturbed by leopard sightings in the city, seemed to object to this appearance of the big cat for this was going a bit too far. The forest department appeared to agree and there was not one but 4 cages put up around the legislative assembly to trap the leopard. Duly trapped the leopard has been sent to a zoo and now resides there, having gained fame as the *Vidhan Sabha-bagh* or the Legislative Assembly leopard.

Central to the petitions to capture big cats in Shimla is the emphasis on space. This is not just ideas of urban space but also that of the private and the public as well as sacred spaces. To fully comprehend the relationship between big cats and humans in Himalayan India, *arzees* need to be located in space, time, and class. The clips of leopards walking around one’s well-manicure garden is deeply troubling for many upper-class residents. When the same beast is spotted in other public spaces, it becomes semi-comical. Thus, there are some grainy images of a leopard sitting at a bus stop as if it was waiting for a bus as well as one near a bank as if it was waiting to

withdraw cash from the nearby ATM. These images, that circulate furiously on whatsapp messages and newspaper items, acquire humour; they become objects of public comedy rather than fear or anger when the private space is transgressed. However, the entry of a leopard in certain public space too can become – as the case of the Legislative Assembly leopard demonstrates – a transgression. There are some public spaces such as the sites where democracy in India is enacted that must remain sacrosanct. And, above all, as has been argued by many when big cats turn on humans in rural areas or in the perceived jungle then these episodes are invisibilised not just due to lack of documentation and evidence but also due to the gradations of the value of human life.²³ Furthermore, there is a belief that a jungle, or the mountains, and even villages are spaces where wildlife belongs and, thus, such incidents are bound to occur.

Beyond its spatiality, what constitutes an *arzee* against big cats in contemporary Shimla also varies. It can sometimes be something as simple as a phone call, often in the English language but not necessarily so. It can be the more regular letter or an appeal put down on paper. It can also be a mere email that is subsequently printed out by state officials, stamped, signed, and filed away. Often it is a combination of various mediums – telephone calls, emails, or just a paper-petition. Similarly, the complaints register is a space where *arzees* are recorded in material form. While it possesses tables and a set form for the entrance of details, it can exceed that too as further details are scribbled in the borders or some complaints are barely recorded. The urbanity of many of the petitioners of Shimla as well as the very nature of the complaint/appeal allows for these diverse forms of petitions as well as acts that

²³ Mathur, *Paper Tiger*; Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*.

constitute petitioning. As we will see, in the neighbouring Himalayan state of Uttarakhand there appears to be a greater reliance on the ‘traditional’ paper-y forms of petitions even as the processes associated with petitioning are more complicated.

Petitioning to Kill

From *arzees* to capture leopards in Shimla, we move to the neighbouring Himalayan state of Uttarakhand and onto *arzees* that demand death. Uttarakhand has a very long history of human-big cat conflict with the earliest available records from the late 19th century showing that leopards were considered “destructive”.²⁴ One of the best sources for the 20th century come from the writings of the hunter-turned-conservationists, Jim Corbett.²⁵ Corbett authored many best-selling books on his encounters with man-eating tigers and leopards between 1907-1938. He makes frequent mentions of *arzees* written to him by villagers living under the reign of terror of man-eating tigers and leopards. For instance, a petition published in Corbett’s *Maneaters of Kumaon* (1944) beseeches Corbett (misspelt as Carbitt in the petition) to come and rescue the villagers from a tiger that was subsequently named the Mohan man-eater. It was originally written in Hindi but was translated into English either by Corbett himself or Oxford University Press, the publishers of *Maneaters of Kumaon*. This is a good example of what is termed “a humble petition” due to the extremely deferential language it utilises and the faith it reposes in the benevolence of Corbett (Image 4). The petitions I encountered in present-day Uttarakhand break from this mould of beseeching and humbly requesting even if they don’t entirely abandon some

²⁴ E. T. Atkinson, E. T., *The Himalayan Gazeteer or the Himalayan Districts of the North Western Province of India, Volume II*. Delhi, Low Price Publication, 1881 [2002].

²⁵ J. Corbett, *The Jim Corbett Omnibus*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2007.

of their elements, especially the expression of faith in the ultimate benevolence of the state. Below I compare and contrast the *arzee* to Corbett with an *arzee* that was submitted in December 2007 requesting the killing of a man-eater (Image 5). This *arzee* was submitted to the district magistrate in Chamoli district, which is a district located on the border with Tibet and where I lived for close to a year over 2007-08 for my doctoral fieldwork.

On the 21st of December 2007, a group of over 100 people took out a procession (*jaloos*) under the banner of Chamoli District's Residents Forum (*nagarik manch*). Amidst the beating of drums and cries of "Uttarakhand *Shasan Hai Hai*" (Shame on Uttarakhand Administration) and "District Magistrate *Murdabad*" (death to the DM), the procession met the District Magistrate to give him a petition. For the past 6 weeks a man-eater had been haunting the town – Gopeshwar – that is also the administrative headquarters of the district. Over a dozen attacks had already taken place and, thus far, there were three confirmed human deaths. Despite the obvious presence of a man-eater in the town, the district officials had been unable to officially declare the big cat a man-eater and, consequently, to obtain a hunting permit that would allow for it to be legally killed. The DM accepted the letter and made a short speech in which he claimed that he was doing all that he possibly could to regulate the leopard.

All petitions in Uttarakhand that have been written in the Hindi language and all barring one demanded death for the leopard. The subject line of this one reads, in bold and in a large font size "The terror of the man-eating big cat in Gopeshwar, district Chamoli". It begins with reference to the spread of the terror in different districts of Garhwal, one that is regularly reported in local newspapers. "Yet, the central

government, Uttarakhand government and district administration do not regard it gravely. The state has today put the worth of bagh greater than the worth of humans. Is there no value left to humans in Indian democracy today?” (*sarkar ne aaj manushya ke moolya ke apeksha, bagh ka moolya adhik bada diya hai. Kya bharatiya loktantra mein manav ka koeen moolya nahin reh gaya hai?*)

The letter goes on to list a series of recent attacks by the leopard with a stress on the manner in which in broad daylight (*din dahade*) the increasingly fearless leopard was barging into houses and grabbing children/attacking women. “After the experiencing of these incredible incidents, too, our *sarkar* remains mute” (*in unghatit ghatnaon ke ghatne pe bhi hamari sarkar maun sadhe hooen hai*)...the people are frightened; they are terrorized and our *sarkar* is sleeping a peaceful sleep (...*janata bhaybheet hai; atankit hai aur hamari sarkar sukh ke neend sau rahin hai*).

The letter sets out four demands (*maange*) to the Chief Minister including amendments to the Wildlife protection Act of 1972 and the provisioning of better compensation for victims²⁶. The petition was signed by over a dozen ‘eminent’ citizens of Chamoli including social workers (*samajik karyakarta*) and convenors of associations such as the Himalayan Peace Foundation, the Retired Soldiers Welfare Organization, the Municipal Corporation and the Women’s Forum. Interestingly, it was addressed to the Chief Minister and not the DM or the Forest Officer (DFO) who are more directly responsible for the leopard in this region. Mr. Rawat who was the

²⁶ The demands were: 1. To protect the common man there must be instant amendments made to the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972; 2. Provisions must be made for immediately killing the man-eating leopard wherever it might be. A provision must be made for compensation and the amount for the death of a human being should be immediately raised to Rs 10 lakh; 3. Set up a tribunal to look into compensation for the death of domesticated livestock; and 4. Whoever takes on a bagh must be awarded with a prize (for his/her bravery).

chief drafter of this *arzee* said they were tired of waiting for the DM to act and they know that the only way to exert pressure on the district authorities is by going over their head to the “big boss”. They had also got the petition hand-delivered to the CM in the distant state capital, but their chief line of attack had been to personally assemble a large number of people, hire the drums and march through the town shouting slogans. They had also made sure to check that the DM was in office today as they wanted to personally hand over the petition to him so that later on he could not pretend that the file never reached him. Indeed, one of the defining features of an *arzee* is that it is delivered by hand – you don’t just post it in the mail, but you make sure to hand it over yourself to the highest-possible official.²⁷ Mr. Rawat and the other *arzee* signatories put great emphasis on the affective charge of the moment in which he and his fellow petitioners confronted the DM in person in front of his office and the assembled crowd of onlookers and presented him with this letter and related their fear and anger to him. The procession had also roped in some influential members of the local press who stood by with their cameras. Next morning I saw pictures in almost all the local Hindi language newspapers of the procession head handing over the petition to a somewhat beleaguered looking DM. The petition and the press-coverage around it gave the DM the space to press home his demand for a hunting permit from his superiors in the distant state capital. After he had won the permit the DM rung up Mr. Rawat – to inform him of the “victory” and to thank him for his petition.

A recurrent theme in *arzees* in Uttarakhand that one can find buried in district archives, are musings on the value of human life. Members of this particular

²⁷ Cf. Hull, *Government of Paper*; Cody, *The Light of Knowledge*.

procession kept repeating the sentence that appears prominently in this petition: is there no value to human life in Indian democracy? Can it be that the Indian state values the life of a big cat more than a humans'. Who is bigger, cat or human? (*kaun bada hai?*).²⁸ One said: "you are my mother-father, yet you value the big cat more than my child?" Another: "it would be brave (*bahadur*) to kill the man-eater; the bravery doesn't lie in protecting it. It is us humans who need protection from this wild beast. Or is it that you are a coward?" Yet another petition read: "but what idiocy is this from you, my lord, who knows so much? It is but the aunt of a cat (*billi ki mausi*) and I am a human"

What is striking in the petition sent to Corbett in 1933 in contrast to the petition sent to the Chief Minister of Uttarakhand in 2007 is the assessment of what the state is doing to alleviate the terror. In the case of the Mohan man-eater the villagers write that the DM, the gentlemen *shikari*, and the forest officers are doing everything they possibly can. Unfortunately, they don't seem to have had much success and given Corbett's fame in Uttarakhand, the villagers are writing in to request him to kill their enemy, the tiger. In the case of the Gopeshwar man-eater of 2007, the petitioners are furious with the state for doing nothing and for sleeping a peaceful sleep while the people are terrified. There is a constant reference to the (sorry) state of democracy (*lok tantra*) in which the big cat appears to be valued more than a human. The 1933 petition is cajoling and respectful, the 2007 petition is angry and makes demands well in addition to the mere hunting down of a man-eater. Though both were petitioning for the same cause – the hunting down of a man-eating big cat – the rhetoric employed in both the letters is remarkably different. The wording of the *arzees*,

²⁸ Cf. A. Jalais, 'Dwelling on Morichjhanpi: When tigers became "citizens", refugees "tiger food"', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 40, no. 17, pp. 1757-1762, 2005

particularly with the veiled or even open threats some carry in them to wage a revolt against the state, carries import. It allows local officials to use the fear of a breakdown in “law and order” and speed up the process of getting the truant cat killed or captured. Note also the constant comparison between human life versus animal life. The anthropocentric assumption would be that humans are valued above animals, at least by fellow humans. But what the petitions buried in district archives all over Uttarakhand keep discussing is a species betrayal; one wherein big cat life is valued much higher than human life. The rhetoric of the *arzees* aside, it is also the accompanying performances that make a big difference to the eventual acceptance or denial of demands. In the context of the petition that was received in December 2007, it was the theatrics around the submission of the petition that allowed the District Magistrate to quickly marshal it and win a hunting permit against that particular leopard.

Chakkar Marna

In addition to careful wording and the public spectacle at the point of submission, a key tactic of petitioning the Indian state involves the following up of the original petition with further forms of pressure. The phrase used most commonly to describe this follow-up action is “*chakkar marna*” or to go round and round. One would describe the circumambulation of a temple in Hindi as *chakkar marna* but when used in the context of government offices it is meant to exude that sense of exasperation as well as an ensuing dizziness. *Chakkar maarna* can and often does include follow-up *arzees* by the same supplicant or new ones for the same cause. There is an interesting

trend of what I think of as piggy-back petitions or petitions that ride on the original appeal or grieve but also slip in an extra demand or two (Images 6 and 7).

For instance, villagers or residents of a town will send out *arzees* requesting the death or capture of a predatory leopard or tiger. Their local political representatives – members of the two leading political parties the Congress and the BJP will follow up with petitions requesting the same. They do so on their letter heads with the symbol of the parties stamped on them. What becomes part of these *arzees* are not just the need for death or capture of the truant cat or a greater alertness on the part of forest and police staff but also these *arzees* include requests for electrification, clearance of shrubs from roads, the construction of pukka roads. Piggy-back petitions aside, follow up action on *arzees* expands above and beyond a written document that might, indeed, have formed the original *arzee*. *Chakkar marna* highlights the processual nature of petitioning – it is, in other words, not just a thing – an *arzee* that you submit once – but in fact a series of steps taken in the valiant hope of getting your appeal heard.

In the case of hunting down man-eaters, when petitions such as the one described above proved to be ineffective for whatever reason – the district was unable to find a hunter or the hunting license was not issued or the hunters were unable to kill the right leopard – the agitations would gradually increase and the situation would arise whereby one would dispel altogether with pieces of paper or these letters that veer between humble request and outright threats – to the adoption of other methods to put greater pressure on the state. The most common of these methods is the staging of a

dharna and sitting on the body of a victim.²⁹ In my experience this has occurred twice in Uttarakhand. The situations went thus: a number of humans were killed by a leopard; patently these were not accidental deaths but, in fact, there was a man-eater at work; a petition or a set of petitions would be submitted to the district magistrate and the forest department; but to no avail. In such situations, a common tactic in the mountains is to not allow for the body of a victim to be cremated. The family and other villagers or townspeople will sit around the victims rapidly decomposing body and chant slogans against the state –death to the DM, down with the state. Both the demonstrations took place in key spaces of the town: the first at the entrance of the bazaar and on a major road; the other right outside the forest department headquarters. On both these occasions the pressure on local officials to quickly hunt down the leopard – any leopard – and present it to the victims family in particular becomes extreme. It also allows these officials to ring up their superiors in the capital and beg for re-enforcements, be it extra policemen or hunters or both, as the situation might pose a threat to “law and order”.

Administrative letters and official accounts in India appear to be perpetually in fear of unlawful and disorderly behaviour. This discourse is mimicked in official letters in Uttarakhand despite the fact that it has rarely, if ever, occurred in the mountains of Uttarakhand.³⁰ The only experience of this constantly-anticipated brute behaviour in the last 10 years at least took place the district of Chamoli about 2 years back. There is one particular region of this district that experiences extremely high levels of

²⁹ On the history of the *dharna* including threats of suicide or forms of murder see Singha, *A Despotism of Law*, pp. 86-90.

³⁰ Till 2000 present-day Uttarakhand used to be a part of the larger provincial state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). The mountain-dwellers of Uttarakhand have an expressive way of distinguishing their lives from those of UP. They claim that “the mountains are at peace” (*pahar shanta hai*) in contrast to the wider history of communal and caste tensions in UP. This reputation of peaceful mountain-persons (*paharis*) is one that is universally present amongst state agents of Uttarakhand as well.

human-big cat conflict for reasons that remain unclear. As it is a poor region with low population and is situated far away from the district headquarter, the presence of man-eaters is constantly ignored. This neglect partly stems from an absence of canny petition-writers who can bring the situation to the attention of senior district officials. Instead you have overworked and under-resourced ground staff that are only ever able to send across handwritten reports that list the details of deaths and request for some form of action from their superiors (Image 8).

Two years ago, there were attacks being reported almost every day and nothing was happening. The suspicion was that there were simultaneously not one but 3 man-eaters in that region. One day, a procession of about 50 people – most of them men – turned up un-announced at the forest department headquarter and doused 4 of their staff in kerosene. These men were dragged out of their offices by this crowd of protestors and the head of the forest department was sent a message saying that he had to give them a “*likhit ashwasan*” – a written promise – that the leopards would be immediately hunted down or else the four men would be set ablaze.³¹ The written promise was extracted and in the absence of a hunting permit, hunters were immediately sent out who killed a leopard the very next day. We will never know if that hunted leopard was indeed a man-eater but it did have the effect of calming down the residents and the release of the 4 men. The official who gave the written promise and then ordered the immediate hunting of any leopard that they saw described the situation as one of “law and order” that necessitated the “sacrifice of a leopard”. The dead body of the leopard was then presented to the villagers – again an unheard of occurrence as the corpses are always sent to the capital city for postmortems. The

³¹ This profound belief in the power of the written has been noted by several anthropologists of India. See, especially, Das, *Signature of the State*; and Mathur, *Paper Tiger*.

corpse of the dead leopard was then paraded around town. This incident is well known in official circles as well as in the Press, largely because it remains thus far a rare occurrence. None of this story appears in the government files, of course, making it a quintessential public secret.³² But it is not only through the threat of force that *arzees* to kill big cats are immediately acquiesced to. As the next *arzee* shows, there are mediums and moments that can unleash a visceral response and culminate in state action.

Whatsapp Arzees

Almost exactly a year back when I was living in a large town in Uttarakhand I woke up to find a whatsapp message on my phone. The message, in Hindi, simply said: “*hume insaaf chahiye*” – “we want justice”. Accompanying the message was a photograph of a young boy – called Krishna – who had become the latest victim of a leopard in a village adjoining the town. A particularly enterprising young man in this village had come up with the idea to whatsapp the horrific image out. The simple but powerful text and its accompanying photograph of a half-eaten up child circulated furiously in the town and even further. It was sent as a mass message to dozens of people including senior wildlife and administrative officials. The next day some of the local newspapers carried it too with headlines such as “another innocent has been martyred to the protection of leopards” and “what was his fault?” (*iski kya galti thi?*)

³² This story, as many similar such accounts of bagh murders in Uttarakhand, is never allowed to enter files and documents as these are direct contraventions of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. According to that statute and subsequent injunctions such as MoEF 2011, a leopard can only ever be captured or killed subsequent to the winning of a hunting permit for that specific leopard. This hunting permit can only be won after the accumulation of adequate evidence that the big cat in question is, indeed, a “man-eater.” As there was no time for this cumbersome bureaucratic process, this murder was strictly kept off record. More than the illegality of such actions, forest and district officials are careful about what details of deaths of leopards enter the records due to the fear of provoking the ire of conservationists in India.

The whatsapp message was also sent to the concerned forest official who issued a hunting permit – via sms – to three of the state’s most accomplished hunters the very same day. They were rushed into the city and, in a few days time, the leopard was hunted down. In normal circumstances, the killing of every leopard and tiger in a big town becomes magnified in the local press, with animal rights activists, wildlife organisations, and other assorted big cat-lovers leaping to the defence of the dead feline. In this case, though, the speed with which the big cat was hunted down and the widespread dissemination of the photograph with its simple demand for justice, led to a hushing up of the event. Furthermore, there is no paper trace left of the death of this leopard in the official accounts – the ‘*arzee*’ was a whatsapp message that wasn’t filed; the hunting permit was a sms that is equally unfileable in the way a document is; and a lot of the discussions took place via the telephone³³. At the moment there is a heated discussion on-going in India on the extent to which new technologies such as sms or whatsapp messages can be used in lieu of the regular paper-based technologies. While it is too early to see where these new technologies lead and how they shape the form of government in India, it is worth making one initial observation on the basis of the whatsapp *arzee*.

The *kaghazi raj* that formed the basis of colonial rule and continued into post-colonial South Asia has, I have argued, only been strengthened by the recent push to transparency and accountability or the so-called good governance agenda in India.³⁴ In an eco-system in which we are witnessing the profusion of paper-based forms of functioning and evidence-making in government offices, smses and whatsapp

³³ On the file and the authority it commands in the structuring of state bureaucracy in South Asia see Hull, M. 2003. “The File: Agency, Authority, and Autography in a Pakistan Bureaucracy.” *Language and Communication*, volume 23, no. 3-4, pp. 287-314

³⁴ Mathur, *Paper Tiger*.

messages such as the one described above possess some noteworthy qualities. The first is the sheer brevity of the message and yet its power. Unlike the 3 page *arzee* that big cat's heinous actions and bullet-pointed demands, we have short and punchy messages. The sheer simplicity of the demand for justice – which is what often lies at the very heart of all *arzees* – is presented as just that. No details, no remonstrations, not even specific demands beyond *insaaf* (justice). The power of the message is propped up with the photograph. Together they make for an extremely potent petition. I would often observe during my time in government offices in Uttarakhand how bureaucrats, especially the senior ones that felt overwhelmed with petitions and paperwork, never really read the (paper) petitions seriously. They would skim it briefly or even just ask their Personal Assistant what the missive was about before tossing it in a file or out-folder or marking it off to someone or, in some cases, ripping it to shreds. Going through the archives in different districts and Dehradun, I saw scores of petitions demanding the capture or hunting of man-eaters or pleading for compensation for attacks and kills. Many of these petitions, I was certain, had never been even seen by the officials they were addressed to. As I mentioned at the outset, there is a similar fatigue with the volume of petitions in the development wing of the state. In such an environment of pathological petitioning and dizzying volume of paper, what I think of as the 'whatsapp arzee' has the capacity to elicit not just a response but also a quick response³⁵. The second aspect of the arzee through whatsapp or sms is its speed. This is so for both the writing process and the time it takes to evoke a response. In the case of the Gopeshwar petition, it was after 2 kills and several attacks and several weeks that the petition was penned. While there was one enterprising person – a Mr. Rawat – who wrote it up under the banner of a larger

³⁵ Naturally, this situation of a whatsapp *arzee* being a canny tool of communicating with the state will remain so for as long as it's numbers are low, as the current situation in Uttarakhand is.

organisation, that petition circulated amongst several persons for their signatures. Once it had been signed and printed, there was plenty of organisational labour involved in the assembling of the procession (*jaloos*), the hiring of loud speakers, and the synchronisation of the petition-giving with the DM's movements. Compare this involved process with the whatsapp arzee when one young man in the village just sent it out within an hour of the first death. Again, with the Gopeshwar petition the DM called an emergency meeting that lasted for hours, there were letters and telegrams written, phone calls made, a committee set up. The hunting license was eventually won but the entire process took a long time despite the state being in 'emergency mode', so to say. With the whatsapp *arzee* the officials met the next morning and sent a sms hunting license before lunch time.

Speedy as they might be, arzees and orders sent on phones have the capacity to vanish with greater ease than paper petitions or orders. While there are several cases of paper petitions being torn up or binned (what I call the forgotten letters of the Indian state), in general the norm is for them to be filed away. Also, canny petitioners know to send multiple copies of the same arzee to different offices and also follow up the original petition with frequent reminders till the demands are made. The very system of government is such that even if nobody reads the petition there is a particular system of filing and archiving that allows for it to be archived or remain on within state spaces in some way. Furthermore, often petitioners know that in return of their application or demand or grievance they should be given a material receipt documenting its submission (the receipt is, for instance, a core feature of NREGA demands). In contrast, a whatsapp or sms message does not leave a trace in the same way. A text message can be deleted. A whatsapp message is heavily encrypted and

while it might remain on with the sender, the receiver can delete it. Even if the message goes viral, there is no way of making it an ‘official’ submission or to verify that the said official did act upon the *arz*. In contrast to emails that can be – and almost always are – printed out, scribbled upon, signed, stamped, and filed away just like a ‘regular’ *arzee*, whatsapp and sms messages are a relatively more ephemeral medium. Their ephemeral nature stems not so much from their medium, but more from the fact that, thus far, they are not routinely included into the practice of quotidian government in India in the same way as documents and files are. While phone recordings and spy cameras have been utilised in high-profile exposes such as the ‘Radia tapes’ or the ‘tehelka stings’, these are exceptional moments. In general and so far, messages sent on smart phones as well telephone calls do largely remain off record. This ephemeral quality does not, however, prevent them – especially the whatsapp *arzee* – from being a powerful medium of communication. The whatsapp *arzee* is a radically new form of making appeals, but it is so far an urban phenomenon. What form it will take in the near future remains open to speculation. At the moment, the vast majority of *arzees* remain the “old” ones of writing down one’s travails on pieces of paper. I am going to end, however, with a long-term petitioner who carried her *arzee* on her very self, so to say.

The *arzee* of this woman, who I call Uma, related to the sudden disappearance of her 20 year old son from a town in Chamoli district. The reasons for his vanishing remain unclear to date. Some suspected he had run away from home and the Himalaya to make a life in urban India in the plains – a very common phenomenon. Others wondered if he hadn’t met with some accident such as falling down a cliff or into the river Ganges or, again a not uncommon occurrence, had been killed and eaten up by a

big cat. Uma recited her story as one whereby she woke up one day and everything was normal in her life. Her son had breakfast, took his lunchbox, and headed off to work but then never returned. She had just one photograph of her son – a passport sized one that had been used for his college ID card – that she attached to an *arzee* she got written by a professional petition-writer 9 years ago when he disappeared. That *arzee* went into a fat file on missing persons in the district office as well as with the police.

On the first Tuesday of every month Uma would, without fail, visit the district magistrate's office in Chamoli where I too had been undertaking fieldwork. On one of these days I was sitting in his office as well waiting to speak to him alongside another 6 people. The other 6 held documents – some forms of petitions or forms – in their hands but Uma walked in without one; merely with her hands folded in supplication. When her turn came, she remained mute. The DM was obviously familiar with her and he quickly, but not unkindly, dismissed her by saying, “we will look at your *arzee* again and do what we can.” I followed her out to another room where a clerical officer who, again, immediately recognised her and automatically took out a thick file. From this he extracted her original *arzee*, made two photocopies of it, giving her one and marking the other to the police department with today's date and a scribbled note that read “please see”. Uma took the copy that was given to her to a Hanuman – the Hindu monkey god – temple located in the office compound. In the temple she muttered a small prayer under her breath and deposited the *arzee* near the main shrine.

This ritual was repeated every first Tuesday of the month for the year I spent in the district. Even when the DM was transferred and a new one came in, he was prepped

about the sorry plight of Uma who yearned to be reunited with her missing son. Uma knew that her *arzee* in the Hanuman temple – like the many others that were deposited there alongside hers – were swept away by the cleaner the next morning and put in the garbage bin. Yet she persisted in doing so on the day of the week – Tuesday – that is considered the designated day for the Hindu god Hanuman. While her repeat appearances in the offices were more familiar – this is classic *chakkar marna* – I was curious about the additional trip to the temple. When I asked her about it one time she shrugged her shoulders and said to me: “*kya pataa? Kaun kahan sun le?*” – One never knows. Who might hear you where.

The practice of depositing bureaucratic petitions at shrines or temples especially those located close to government offices is not an uncommon practice. In fact, in Uttarakhand there is a famous temple to the god of justice – Golu – that is devoted almost entirely to the submission of official petitions. As Malik has argued, there is a public intimacy that is created through the sharing of these extremely personal testimonials alongside an open expression of faith in Golu.³⁶ In November 2015 the *New York Times* carried a story on what the journalist considers a peculiar petitioning practice.³⁷ The site for this are the ruins of a 14th century fort called Firoze Shah Kotla built by the Sultan, Firoz Shah Tughlaq, in Delhi. The petitions are submitted to a Jinn who is believed to live in the ruined fort. Drawing on the work of an anthropologist, this piece notes – in amused and amazed tones – that the petitions are more “bureaucratic than worshipful”: they include police reports, detailed contact

³⁶ A. Malik, *Tales of Justice and Rituals of Divine Embodiments: Oral Narratives from the Central Himalaya*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2016.

³⁷ E. Barry, ‘A Castle Receives a Weekly Delivery of Delhi’s Secret Desires’, in *New York Times*, 8 November, 2015. goo.gl/Wo8nQT [accessed on 15 February 2016]. This newspaper report draws upon A. V. Taneja, ‘Jinnealogy: Everyday life and Islamic theology in post-Partition Delhi,’ *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, volume 3, no. 3, 2013, pp. 139-65.

information, and multiple photocopies copies of the very same form “as if addressed to different department of a modern bureaucracy”³⁸.

By way of an *arzee*-like conclusion, my submission is that an ethnographic account of *arzees* allows us to drop the incredulous tones of the New York Times article-variety by expanding our imagination of what it means to make an appeal and, relatedly, what forms an *arzee* can take. *Arzees* challenge dichotomies; they do not allow for the maintenance of uncontaminated pure spaces where, for instance, the legal is kept safely distinct from the sacred or the bureaucratic from the poetic. They question the assumption of a separation between the sacred – for instance a Hanuman temple – and the sacred – a clerical office. Or the difference between a language that is bureaucratic and legal and a language that is worshipful. Or, similarly, documents that are bureaucratic or deeply affective.³⁹ An *arzee* can have long details on which clause of which statute needs to be amended in what manner even as it simultaneously offers musings on the meaning of life and pontificates on the inevitability of death. Just as *arzees* can be presented to a state official so too can they be handed over to jinns or simply strung onto temple bells. Equally, *arzees* work through notions of the *darbar* or a royal court; through the hope of a *darshan* of an official – a viewing that holds connotations of the sacred – into much more of-the-moment institutions like a grievance redressal cell or email ids and phone numbers where you can offer suggestions or whatsapp your *arzees* using photographs and emoticons. As far as documents found in bureaucracies and state archives go, *arzees* are uniquely genre-defying. They carry elements of the humble petition, snatches of the worshipful, but

³⁸ Taneja (2013) traces this practice to a form of governance that was common in 14th-century Delhi, when royal guards were removed and subjects were allowed to enter the palace to directly petition the Tughlaq sultan.

³⁹ Bear, Laura. *Lines of the Nation: Indian Railway Workers, Bureaucracy and the Intimate Historical Self*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

just as much they can be combative, angry, and even threatening. In the same breath we go from: “You are my mother-father but what is this that you have done?” and “I submit to thee my humble lord; but be warned this submission is not absolute and I, too, can roar like a hungry tiger.” Another *arzee* that was furious and threatened a bloody revolt manned by Maoists shipped in from neighbouring Nepal signed off “But I shall remain forever your humble servant.” I want to suggest that these are not confused or contradictory petition writers but rather that ambivalence is written into the very heart of contemporary *arzees* that, in their quest for justice, find themselves battling big cats and the legal and bureaucratic apparatus of the Indian state.

Humans, in these *arzees*, appear in a peculiarly vulnerable position especially vis a vis the charismatic nonhuman animal. The big cats, on the other hand, comes across as powerfully agentive in his own right; an agency that is further bolstered by the bureaucracy and legal regime that has been set up to conserve them. In the demands to kill the big cats, power and the right to life are flipped around: it is the big cat that is valued more than humans, claim the latter, even though it should, by all rights, be the obverse. Not just, then, do *arzees* defy a neat genre or encapsulation within a space, medium, or series of petitioning practices. They can also serve to open up debates on peaceful multispecies co-existence and challenge a conservationist discourse that assume big cats to be peculiarly agentless and in dire need of human protection. In the *arzees* described here it is the human who deserves protection from the beast: be it from even sighting him or from being made his prey.

Finally, what of the efficacious petitions that I have discussed here? There is an element of predictability to them – the possession of English language skills and the

class privilege that comes with it; the habitus of one who can enter a government office or in an even-handed manner pick up the phone and make a call or, as we say, “have a word”; and the networks and contacts that can be marshalled to get yourself heard. A closer look, though, suggests a more complicated scenario. Theatrics at the point of submission, ingenious *chakkar-marna* or follow-up action, things like piggy back and whatsapp *arzees*, threats of violence, canny lobbying, the visceral responses to visuals or words, and sometimes the sheer aching vulnerability of the petitioner can – and, indeed, have – elicited responses. While there are some very real elements of serendipity involved – as Uma puts it, who know who might hear you where – there is a greater complexity to *arzees* that while not defying the easy narrative of privilege and patronage, do at least illuminate other modalities of engaging the state.