“The Slipperiness of Things”: A Study in Identification Documents

Yet the Kingswood case and the Road Hill case showed up the slipperiness of things, made it clear that objects as well as memories were endlessly open to interpretation. Darwin had to decipher his fossils. Whicher had to read his murder scenes. A chain of evidence was constructed, not unearthed...The mutilated body at Road Hill might be evidence of rage, or of the impersonation of rage. The open window could indicate an escape route, or the cunning of a killer still ensconced in the house. At Kingswood, Whicher found the most definitive kind of clue: a piece of paper bearing a name and a physical description. Even this, it turned out, could point to the opposite of what it seemed – the theft of an identity rather than identity itself.

*The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher*, Kate Summerscale, 216-217.

*The Return of Martin Guerre* is an elegant literary construction of the historical tale of imposture in sixteenth century rural France. Eight years after Martin Guerre leaves his family and his village Artigat, a man emerges in a nearby inn claiming to be the lost heir to the Guerre family and the missing husband of Guerre’s wife Bertrand de Rols. If initially Guerre’s sisters and his wife embrace him, they eventually disown him when the “real” Martin Guerre surfaces in the impostor trials that take place to establish Guerre’s identity. It is established in one of these trials that the man living with de Rols after Guerre’s disappearance was a petty thief by the name of Arnaud du Tilh. In piecing together this historical tale, Natalie Zemon Davis is prompted to ask at some point, “how, in a time without photographs, with few portraits, without tape recorders, without fingerprinting, without identity cards, without birth certificates, with parish records still irregular if kept at all – how did one establish a person's identity beyond doubt?”¹ The absence of literacy among peasants in sixteenth century rural France who, for the most part, could not sign their names only vexed further the question of Martin Guerre's identity, Davis writes.

Partha Chatterjee, in an entirely different temporal location, casts the question of identity troubled by colonial and nationalist assertions in a similar 20th century mould. Deeming

¹Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1983, 63. Though Martin Guerre’s uncle initially accepts Arnaud du Tilh, he accuses him soon of being an impostor, when the latter, in his capacity as heir to the Guerre properties, tried to sell parts of the ancestral land. When this happens, Guerre’s uncle brings a civil suit against him and presses charges of impersonation.
the method of counterfactuals all-important, Partha Chatterjee cannot help but ask in *A Princely Impostor* what kind of veracity DNA or fingerprint-testing would bring to the mid-19th century impostor trials of the Kumar of Bhawal. He concludes that while such technologies would have helped disprove identity, they could never really prove identity beyond sufficient doubt.

The relevance of the written word in the “quest for historical truth” which both Davis and Chatterjee emphasize heavily cannot be underestimated here. These scholars perceive, either consciously or instinctively, a vital link between practices of identity documents and practices of documentation (documenting events and histories). Their remarks on the absence or inadequacy of identity document-related proof in the documented record of historical truth are extremely crucial to the arguments of this dissertation. While it is not concerned with the question of historical truth vis-a-vis individual identity, this dissertation is interested in *modern states’ institutional investment in written forms of identity.* While the historical truth of the real identity of Martin Guerre, the Prince of Bhawal, Sir Roger Tichborne and or other equally famous impostors does not interest this dissertation, it is fascinated by the modern state's hypnotized gaze at the territorially bounded body, the biologically distinct body (traces of the individual like signature, fingerprint, photograph, etc.), the cultural history, social relationships of its subjects and their discursive location within institutions of law.

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2Partha Chatterjee, *A Princely Impostor: The Kumar of Bhawal and the Secret History of Indian Nationalism,* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), 360-362. In this instance, a sanyasi claims to be the dead Kumar of Bhawal from a wealthy zamindar family thereby polarizing 19th century colonial society which was experiencing the initial stirrings of nationalism. His widow distances herself from the sanyasi while his mother and sisters embrace him. The impostor trials were important to establish the identity of the sanyasi, who if proved to be the Kumar of Bhawal was eligible to receive estate privileges and collect rents from tenants of the Bhawal estate.


4This is not to say that the historian is not interested in the institutional investment of the modern state in identity and identification. Both Davis and Chatterjee have a lot to say on the matter. I merely wish to point out that I am not interested in arriving at conclusions based on documented evidence about who a person really is or the truth of the historical event.
welfare and justice. This dissertation is deeply invested in the entanglement of modern governmental regimes with the documented identity of subjects.

In India, the realm of welfare distribution is a microcosm of the Document Raj or what has been described by a scholar as “the petty economy of documents.”6 Owing to the abundance of written claims, representations and applications asserting and contesting identity crucial to the enjoyment of entitlements and benefits, the site of welfare distribution presented itself as a natural choice for framing narratives of identification documents. In India, welfare dispensations are contingent on carefully calibrated categories contained within identification documents like age, gender, place of residence, household, nationality, etc. Welfare dispensations function by unleashing the bureaucratic and material world of identification documents marking the subjects sought to be enumerated, and the things they wish to acquire, purchase, consume, transfer and sell. The thing in question could be a commodity like foodgrains, cloth, a plot or a house. Or it could be a document to acquire another document. Whether she is applying for a food entitlement, a plot or a house or a document to acquire any of these, a subject in India, middle income or poor, must be familiar with everyday procedures and rituals of (ration card, housing board, registration) offices, banks, application forms and affidavits. The ubiquity of documentary habits in the sphere of welfare distribution has however generated little original research in India on an identification card like the ration card, the medical certificate or the caste certificate7. As a corrective measure, this dissertation is an attempt to recast the sphere of welfare distribution in the mould of identification documents.

Welfare processes, this dissertation argues, are subservient to the everyday materiality of identification documents. This dissertation argues that ID documents are not tame, in either their form or function, to imperatives of governance. Identification documents have

5Postcolonial states like India have characterized identity not merely through personal markers of identification but also through caste and community, religion and religious affiliation.
7Emma Tarlo has done some work on the demolition slip and the allotment letter in her narratives of the Emergency while Veena Das has studied FIRs in her work concerning the 1984 riots.
lives that escape rationales of bureaucratic authority and discussions of power. They resist attempts to fix them as impersonal, bureaucratic objects with disciplined trajectories. Drawing on Arjun Appadurai’s theoretical intervention on the social life of objects, this dissertation explores the various biographies of one ubiquitous identification document, namely, the rationing document in India, and specifically in the province and later the Union Territory of Delhi. Rationing documents (family and individual ration cards, permits, cloth cards, motor spirit coupons, etc) are examined in this dissertation in their imagined forms and as tools of rhetoric. They are depicted to be everyday objects that unleash affective energies and release emotional responses. In their everyday trajectories, ration cards re-territorialize urban spaces, mediate social relations and produce norms of entitlement. They enable marginal subjects to inhabit authority and complicate power structures. Rationing documents continuously recast and re-define the conception of identity in debates on entitlement and welfare benefits.

This dissertation encourages the reader to form an idea of a document as one that is constantly shifting in shape and function. It argues that a conception of documents as having lives is possible only when we regard documents as loose entities that tentatively hold together practices such as fingerprint, signature, serial numbers and norms like age, gender, caste, family, residence, nationality, etc. These aspects and categories become pronounced in different phases of the biography of a document. A study of the social life of the rationing document is a foray into the historically wavering significance of these norms and features. Such a study illustrates the power wielded especially by the norms of the individual, family and residence within the rationing document over the welfare establishment at different points of time in late colonial and post-colonial Delhi, roughly between 1940 and 1992.

An anthropology of the fragmented state
This dissertation benefits from a fairly old analytical clarification made especially in the proliferating field of the technologies of information-gathering – of the elusive, variegated, localized, fragmented and familiar nature of modern states. This clarification is however, by no means hermeneutically homogeneous across the scholarship delving
into the anthropology of the state. Scholars have challenged conceptions of the monolithic character of modern states by pointing out the multiplicity of documents which open up pores and crevices in the state where citizens can forge social relations and assume new identities. The analytical move to fragment the state is often coeval in the work of such scholars with the attempt to illustrate documents as productive of knowledge. It has been argued that the colonial state is minutely invested in very local practices of revenue settlement, regional histories of cultivation, cultural habits of dress and food consumption, caste-specific ritual beliefs and modes of prayer. Scholars like Bernard Cohn and Nicholas Dirks have pointed out that our knowledge of the social world implicit in categories and classifications is heavily drawn from the colonialists' records of indigenous principles of law and local customs.

At other times, the localness of the state was apparent not so much in the geographical location of the state but realized in its discursive dimension, as for instance, in the blurred boundaries between the material, everyday aspects on the one hand and the institutional aspects, on the other hand, of the state. Timothy Mitchell takes to task the constructions that various theorists of the state like Philip Abrams, Poulantzas, David Easton, Skocpol make in their writings of the state either as an ideological abstraction, as a sociocultural phenomenon that is present in the imagination of citizens and above all as a coherent unit standing above society and societal processes. Mitchell agrees with Foucault in the latter's suggestion that we perceive the distinction between state as an ideological and autonomous entity on the one hand and society and social processes on the other as one produced by the infinitesimal mechanisms of power. But Mitchell faults Foucault for not spelling out how this effect of power that produces this distinction is brought about. Through intricate practices like issuing passports, instituting border checks, passing immigration and currency control laws, these tactics and mechanisms of power are able

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to produce the effect of the state as structure. By not paying attention to the mechanisms of power and by dwelling instead on the ideological aspect of states, Mitchell contends that scholars perpetuate the myth of the “ghost-like” abstract state swooping down to order society and arrange social relations.

Another intervention in theorizations of the state has been to make a break from Marxist writings that reify the state by embedding it in social structures and by remarking on the “prosaic geographies of stateness”. Inspired by Mitchell’s work, Joe Painter uses this term to explain the enactment of the state in quotidian and mundane practices such as child-rearing, schooling, working, housing, drinking, travelling, dying etc through the incessant registration, recording, licensing and enumeration of these persons and practices. The symbolic presence of the state or the “stateness” is produced through mundane practices of enumeration and identification. Interestingly, this scholar also argues that in so far as the symbolic presence of the state is invoked in a particular prosaic everyday practice, the state as effect or “stateness” is experienced. So, a particular non-state organization or a collective of citizens is able to invoke stateness as much as the government is able to achieve. Joe Painter does not however imagine that in invoking such stateness, collectives or individuals also re-inscribe it and render it less distinguishable.

The sixth chapter of this dissertation shows how through their playful yet intensely invested attempts at purchasing, manufacturing and circulating identity cards that formed the basis of housing claims, slum residents may have been invoking stateness. But, in doing so, they were also fashioning it anew to make it less lethal in their lives, though, by extremely fraught means.

A noteworthy intervention on the state has been the move to trouble the line drawn between institutional forms of the state and social processes by illuminating the operation of the state within everyday circuits of social relations. Here, scholars speak of the state as produced by cultural processes of recognition, popular perception but also the

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11 Ibid, 758.
imagined ways in which the state shapes the cultural lives and selves of the people. These cultural processes through which the state is imagined occur within the framework of “proceduralism” or the world of rules and procedures. Scholars contend that the written world of banal procedures perpetuates deep social inequalities, as for instance, witnessed in the privileging of literate men and women over their unlettered counterparts in form-filling, signing, feeding data into computers, etc. This dissertation attests to this simple observation about documentary procedures sustaining oppressive or hierarchical social relations where labourers had to attach certificates of their employers in order to receive supplementary rations. Similarly, the head of the family’s photograph and his signature was required for the dependent to acquire a ration card.

Scholars contend that bureaucratic structures and procedures have become extremely familiar to people who both imagine themselves as officials and exploit such structures and procedures. It is possible to speak of the blurring of roles between public officials and private citizens where officials are deeply entrenched in the cultural forms of society. Scholars have argued that the modern state and its institutions are not readily part of the self-understanding of petty officials. While they fancy their state-recruited positions of authority, they have not discriminated their roles as public servants different from those of private and illiterate citizens of India that they deal with. These scholars write that it is also true that such officials do not have a critical understanding of the organizational and the normative functions of the state. The construction of the local state is useful to

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13 Ibid, p.11.
15 Ibid, 6, 9. A couple of scholars, Corbridge and Harriss describe the state which exists, "but in such a way that the authority and legitimacy reside in the private social status of the individuals since following the rules of the shadow state is the way to get things done". Sony Pelissery. “The Politics of Social Protection in Rural India: The Impact of Social Networks”, Ph.D. dissertation submitted to the Department of Political Science, (University of Oxford, 2006).
highlight everyday vernacular discourses and filters of informality which supersede modern impersonal norms of formal rational bureaucracy and secularized government.\textsuperscript{17}

In his discussion of political society, Partha Chatterjee urges us to consider the everyday forms of democracy thickly enmeshed in its institutional forms. He traces expressions of democracy in political society inhabited by marginal population groups within the institutional frame of popular sovereignty. When population groups like slum dwellers, refugees and squatters make use of the apparatuses and procedures of governmentality, they are able to negotiate better with representatives of political power.\textsuperscript{18} Such an instance of successful mobilization of political society would involve a representative leader from refugee colony or a squatters' colony coaxing a politician to give his recommendation for ration cards to be issued to the entire colony.

This dissertation finds many aspects of this scholarship blurring the boundaries between the state and society problematic. When these scholars speak of the blurring of roles of the public official and the private citizen, they do not acknowledge the productive tensions that this blurring delicately contains. Scholars imply rather uncritically that this blurring is achieved subconsciously by officials who have no instinctive understanding of bureaucratic rationality\textsuperscript{19}. They also indicate that officials owing to their irreducibly social identities could not immerse themselves in the language of bourgeois modernity.

An illustration from this dissertation’s ethnographic study of rationing documents which involved detailed interviews with retired and serving food officials may be in order here. Often, the Food Inspector (in these interviews) experienced an emotional struggle when faced with discharging routine official duties enforcing social norms of consumption. The

\textsuperscript{17}Fuller and Harriss, 23. This is apparent in the style of functioning of government offices which look like tea shops or homes rather than offices, say Fuller and Harriss. What is more, officials often readily accept applications for documents when they favour the social identity of claimants. Barbara Harriss-White, \textit{India Working: Essays on Society and Economy}. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 74, 84-85, Harriss-White writes, "When we look at the local state, the actually existing state below the level of the state capital, as we follow policies down the hierarchy of levels, we soon find ourselves in an economy that is on the edge of-or frankly outside-the ambit of state regulation...that is, in the local state."

\textsuperscript{18}Partha Chatterjee, \textit{The Politics of the Governed}. (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), p.73.

\textsuperscript{19} See Gupta, “Blurred Boundaries”, Fuller and Harriss, "For an Anthropology of the Modern Indian State" and Harriss-White, \textit{India Working}, op.cit.
Food Inspector was expected to enforce the Delhi Guest Control Order which capped the number of guests who could be invited to marriage, funeral parties, religious celebrations and other social gatherings. The struggle faced by the food official was one produced by the tension caused between his sense of kinship and cultural compassion for the father of the bride who invariably failed to respect the Guest Control Order rules and the formal-legal expectations binding in rules surrounding the rationing document. The bride’s relatives hosting the party would often exceed the maximum quota of rations allowed in the preparation of wedding meals and violate the rules stipulating the number of guests who could be invited. The food official expected to report these violations would often find himself in a tight spot owing to his cultural predisposition. This tension was very consciously and painfully resolved by the official (some of the ones interviewed, at least) in favour of the bride's father. Through this and plenty of other instances which the fourth chapter furnishes, this dissertation challenges the assumptions of the scholars (theorizing the local state) cited in this section. One assumption it takes to task is that procedures surrounding documents are overlooked or ignored subconsciously, or at any rate, uncritically in situations and spaces presenting pressing social realities. This dissertation argues that food officials choose to deliberately, at times emotionally and at other times affectively interpret or violate these rules and what is more, they imaginatively and inventively fashion themselves as public officials in an indigenous context while doing so. Through various detailed examples, the fourth chapter makes a case for the “signature of the official” or the “trace of the official” in routine activities of enumeration and document-based rule enforcement. In other words, this dissertation privileges the figure of the intermediary in the form of the Food Inspector, the Food and Supply Officer (FSO), the Fair Price Shop (FPS) owner and the dalal in the field of identification practice. Scholarship theorizing the local state and its blurred boundaries with society underplays the productive role of the intermediary. A figure like the Food Inspector makes very conscious ethical choices in breaching and side-stepping rules pertaining to identification documents. This dissertation shows how the official’s collaborations with

20I acknowledge the distinction that scholars have made between emotions and affects, I discuss this distinction at length in a section included in this chapter.
the subjects he enumerates involve very innovative practices of reading and understanding documents. This dissertation suggests that food officials ‘read’ bureaucratic rationality differently in certain cultural spaces and create “new knowledge”\textsuperscript{21} of welfare practice and procedure. This links with the dissertation’s broader argument that postcolonial governmental regimes would be hard put to exorcise affects of identity such as family, home and sexuality from their respective impersonal categories of household, residence and gender.

**The social life of material artifacts**

While the ‘anthropology of the local state’ line of scholarship yields useful analytical fodder for studying practices of the identification document, it has not been able to effectively meet a few epistemological challenges posed by social anthropology. Spelling out this challenge is paramount for the various arguments in the dissertation hinge on the perspectives and arguments expressed in this section. The sharpest of rejoinders to studying material artifacts such as identification documents in the manner suggested by scholars like Gupta, Sharma, Mitchell and Painter who stress proceduralism, stateness or the state effect has been that ID documents are viewed as mere templates for “state simplifications”\textsuperscript{22} and aggregate governmental schemes of control. This rejoinder has come from the heart of the literature that explores the “social life of things” which has critiqued the tendency to view records for instance, as merely productive of knowledge and illuminating of performances of state power. Scholars working with this trope would like to move beyond viewing documents as a symbolic frame within which one can imagine the state. Those working with the new trope have attempted to view objects as things having a life and social potential. This was a move that challenged the tendency to “excessively sociologise transactions in things”\textsuperscript{23} or to understand things as enjoying


significance only as a consequence of human social endeavour and interaction. While scholars here admit that identification documents draw their legitimacy from “a regime of authority and authentication”\textsuperscript{24}, they insist that they are more than referents to bureaucratic power and rationality. Scholars like Arjun Appadurai, Igor Kopytoff, Mathew Hull and Daniel Miller have argued that things enjoy biographies and careers, a move which immediately undermines the privilege of origins and the context of things in theoretical discussions. By paying attention to the properties of things, we are able to get a better grasp of the economy and cultural spheres within which things circulate and proliferate, these scholars argue.\textsuperscript{25}

The various uses to which things are put tell us something about those who own them, stay in them etc. Biographies of things, it is argued, can yield immense cultural and social information.\textsuperscript{26} This line of argument allows us to move beyond more restrictive theoretical frames of analysis such as Gupta and Sharma’s proceduralism and Scott’s legible societies which constantly urge us to keep in view the functional unity of the state. In studying a subject like welfare, for instance, one is no longer constrained to work with ID document narratives that conjure the state in popular imagination in its refugee efforts, rehabilitation schemes, etc. Instead, one can understand welfare as discursively constructed through narratives surrounding what the document should look like, who it should correspond to and what its functions should be. In short, it is possible to study welfare through a discussion of the infinite narratives relating to the diverse form and function of the identification document which runs across this dissertation, namely, the rationing document. The biographies of the rationing document illuminate rationalities of colonial power, assertions of cultural nationalism, self-representations of officials, practices of idiom in enumeration, contesting claims on the city. One of the scholars contributing to the edited volume that blazed the trail in research on the social life of


\textsuperscript{25}Ibid, 504.

things, Igor Kopytoff mentions two tendencies across various societies vis-a-vis the thing, commoditization and singularization: where commoditization refers to the exchangeability of a commodity, singularization alludes to the removal of a commodity from the sphere of exchange or restriction of the sphere of exchange. It is argued that the moment of singularization of a commodity could also be the moment of the dispersal of power. The sixth chapter demonstrates, for instance, the attempts by the Delhi government to singularize the ration card.

It is also possible to speak of the “interpenetration” of the tendencies of singularization and commoditization where by making things more singular, one makes them valuable. Kopytoff argued that groups and individuals classify objects, treat them with discrimination and seek to insert them into separate spheres of exchange, imbuing them with cultural sacredness when they do so. Sometimes, the individual is caught between “the cultural structure of commoditization and his own personal attempts to bring a value order to the universe of things”. In conversations with a few residents in field visits to a slum cluster in South Delhi, it emerged that there was a market in buying and selling ID cards needed for proving one's eligibility for allocation of plots in the face of demolition and relocation. The sixth chapter of this dissertation records a slum resident, Ramachandran as resisting the public culture of commoditization in ID cards owing to his nostalgia for the leader, V.P. Singh whose legacy these cards were.

I would like to provide a brief glimpse into the scholarly interest that has animated some other interventions in the social life of things. One scholar who uses this trope in his various forays into the philosophy of science, Bruno Latour, treats inscriptions as the life-
force of science and laboratories. There have been no remarkable revolutions in the
history of science; there have merely been innovations in visual cultures and efficiency in
recording “inscriptions” that have marked out modern scientific societies.\(^3\) The scientist
can establish his superiority only through his ability to manipulate inscriptions into an
endless series of documentary forms, Latour writes. Scientists can compete with each
other only by mobilizing their inscriptions (combining, superimposing, compiling, and
modifying inscriptions) into a chain of written artifacts – instrument readings into tables,
diagrams and graphs, and graphs in turn into published texts, so on.

In her work on the post-Partition making of borders through discursive practices such as
the disposal of evacuee properties and travel documents, another scholar constructs the
passport as having phantasmic properties.\(^3\) The passport which was created by a
disciplinary regime on both sides of the border to control the flow of and regulate the stay
of refugees, displaced persons and families, spawned various specters, this scholar
argues. The governments on both sides had to deal with the social life of the document. In
other words, they had to deal with people who travelled without a visa, travelled with a
visa but beyond permitted spaces; subjects who travelled without valid documents, those
who threw away their passports, illiterate subjects who could not be held accountable for
their uses of the document, so on. Having assigned a material authority to documents, the
Indian and Pakistani governments had to contend with the spectral life of the passport.
The last illustration of the social life of material artifacts is from a book that straddles the
miscellaneous worlds of fiction, forensic science, history and sociology. *The Suspicions
of Mr. Whicher* is a literary and archival reconstruction of a murder in a Victorian era
English household which conjures the bewilderment posed by objects or “mute
witnesses”\(^3\) and not just unpredictable human suspects. In an age where the irrefutability
of material evidence such as the weapon inflicting the fatal blow, fingerprints and

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\(^3\) Vazira Zamindar, *Divided Families and the Making of Nationhood in India and Pakistan 1947-1965*,
Ph.D. dissertation submitted to the Department of Anthropology, (Columbia University, 2003), 280, 282-3
\(^3\) Kate Summerscale, *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher or the Murder at Road Hill House*, (London:
Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008), 216
documents of identity were replacing subjective testimony in the forensic imagination, the detective was confounded by the “slipperiness of things”\textsuperscript{34}. As the epigraph at the beginning of the dissertation indicates, the material evidence at hand could mean something very removed from what it indicates or what the detective deduces it to mean.

Aided by this trope, one is no longer constrained to view documents as devices that help the state fulfill multiple imperatives of governance. Instead, one can regard ID documents as inciting new definitions of entitlement and new debates inquiring into subjects’ identity. The identification document disperses claims and contestations of identity in various cultural, economic and social spheres of exchange.

**The multiplicity of the documentary form**

The multiplicity of the identification document is manifest across this dissertation. The ID document is discussed at times as a ration card and at other times, as a permit or coupon, a statement of confession, an affidavit, a record, a survey and a diary. The document in this dissertation features at times as a commodity with value, namely as something that may be exchanged. A commodity may be so defined when it is imbued with value owing to the difficulty in acquiring it and its ability to function within spheres of exchange\textsuperscript{35}. The sixth chapter identifies the identity card as capable of functioning like a commodity with exchange value in certain situations where it is demanded widely as a document establishing eligibility in a housing survey. In the face of such demands, *dalals* manufacture and circulate the document in return for varying sums of money extracted from slum residents. The commodification of the document was necessary to encounter official measures to screen applications for relocation on the basis of their ID cards. But the same document (see discussions of the VP Singh card in Chapter 6) could also behave like an object with cultural value and less as a commodity sought to be exchanged. One slum resident, Ramachandran, believed the ID card to be culturally sacred owing to the nobility of the leader who sanctioned them and protested its public commodification. Another slum resident and an RTI activist, Udai Bhan thought that the ID card was

\textsuperscript{34}Ibid, 216.

\textsuperscript{35}Arjun Appadurai, 4.
reduced in value by the act of commodification. A document had its place in the legal universe and was not a commodity to be procured in an informal market pandering to desires and everyday struggles, according to this slum resident.

The identification document could at times be brought to life by a single act of imagined legality of an individual. In these instances, the document took the form of a “gift”36 or an object parted with in a spirit of sociality. This dissertation records two or three instances where food officials were willing to overlook administrative violations to issue ration cards. The ration card was extended as a gift to slum residents and middle class claimants who were not strictly eligible to receive it as a gesture of good will. In the sixth chapter, a leader offers ration cards to slum residents as a gift. Here, he does not expect any profit or kickbacks though there is a vague anticipation of electoral benediction which he hopes to receive from the jhuggi-residing population. This dissertation conjures the various forms of the document, as commodity, as gift, as object imbued with cultural value in different historical contexts.

**Inflecting the ‘everyday’**

This dissertation demonstrates how the social life of the rationing document is played out in everyday settings and quotidian encounters with power structures. When he wrote to retrieve everyday practices or ways of operating from their background status to crucial struggles of life, Michel de Certeau pioneered a revolution in social science scholarship.37 Certeau urges us to be attentive to the “tactics” of everyday life or “the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of discipline”38. In their everyday practices of reading, cooking, dwelling and walking as well as in their infinite acts of consumption, individuals and groups are able to insert their own memories, desires, pleasures and ruses into someone

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36 A gift conjures the “spirit of reciprocity, sociality and spontaneity in which they are typically exchanged”. They are not given with a view to gain profit and the act of gift-giving is not calculating or maximizing of self-interest. Appadurai, 11-12.
38 Ibid, xiv-xv.
else's text, into the commodities they buy, into the things they cook, so on. Certeau indicates that the “tactics” of everyday life are not petty acts of resistance but acts of making and operating where the individual or the group is able to inhabit a situation, a structure, an event, a place, a text, etc. These tactics of inhabiting things are varied where the person(s) may attempt to reconstitute spaces, appropriate and inflect law and language 39.

Indian scholarship has picked up some of the threads of Certeau’s discussion of everyday life to emphasize aspects of subaltern creativity and everyday reinterpretations of law, citizenship and entitlement. However, such scholarship surges beyond merely theorizing possibilities of using tactics and everyday intelligence to posit reflections on the coercive and often simply violent aspects of enforcing law, rules and legal norms in the everyday. In the process, some scholars working on everyday life in the margins of the postcolonial state have drawn attention to the illegible nature of state authority.

One key argument in this sphere has been that documents may be rendered in their everyday use into things that inscribe the illegibility of the state and normalize the illegitimate and violent acts of the state 40. One scholar writes that material artifacts like licenses can be used in an extra-legal context to make astonishing assertions of citizenship in urban spaces. Jonathan Shapiro who makes this argument makes use of the trope of “inhabiting power” 41 in his piece on Mumbai hawkers' imaginaries of the state and corruption. Reflecting on an event like the demolition of the Noor Masjid in Delhi, a few other scholars argue that religious intolerance is reconfigured in the urban aesthetic

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39 Tactics belong to the “other”. Subjects who use tactics lack spatial and institutional advantage and the privileged environment of the people who invent strategies. Those using tactics can only momentarily capture opportunities where they use their everyday intelligence to manipulate situations and score victories. Ibid, xix-xx

40 Emma Tarlo, Unsettling memories: Narratives of India's 'Emergency', (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003);
Veena Das, “The Signature of the State” in Anthropology in the Margins of the State, eds. Veena Das and Deborah Poole, (Santa Fe: University of California Press, 2004);

of an ordered city. Communal politics takes new forms in everyday spaces. Residents in middle class apartments or members of RWAs and DDA officials denote spaces occupied by the urban Muslim poor such as their slums but also their places of worship as dominated by filth and squalor which have no place in the city.

Another theoretical thrust of everyday life in the postcolony has come from the direction of legal studies scholarship. Here, a case is made for “legalism from below” wherein slum residents and other marginal populations are constantly sighting and citing the law in the face of the everyday transgression of state legal norms by policemen and other state and non-state actors. Scholars like Julia Eckert, Jonathan Shapiro, Laurent Gayer and Chakraverti Mahajan tacitly reject in their work the dichotomy between civil and political society with defined statuses, aspirations and strategies. They also refute Partha Chatterjee’s claim that subaltern struggles take shape only within hegemonic state formations. They argue that subjects even though they may act in an extra-legal terrain are desirous of moulding “good order.” Subjects are conversant with the language of law embodied in practices such as petitions, bail procedures and legal remedies. They (the subjects) are able to use a rich repertoire of legal and extra-legal practices in an everyday context to forge recognition for citizenship claims.

These scholars argue that subaltern subjects are engaged as much as say, middle class residents, in the documentary struggle for citizenship rights and not simply entitlements as Chatterjee would argue. All these scholars would probably agree that strategies deployed by the state in response to each class will vary in relation to hierarchies and social relations of power. The analytical frame of the “everyday” conceals the uneven terrain of force vis-a-vis different social classes such as the middle class Resident Welfare Association (RWA) resident, the slum resident, the refugee squatter. This dissertation attempts to trace through the social life of the document, these different class-

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44 Ibid, 50
specific effects of everyday interactions with the state. In this dissertation, the analytical construct of the “everyday” is evoked contrastingly by the articulation of middle class narratives of contempt regarding urban poor spaces and by creative manipulations of authority by slum residents in quasi-legal settlements. In an interview with a food official, the sixth chapter records Rajkumar, an erstwhile Food Inspector who explains why the 1990 ration card enumeration drive involved food officials taking the assistance of pradhans in locating slum residences. *Itni gandgi mein hum sabhi ghar nahin doondhpaate,* (we would not have been able to find all the houses in the midst of all the filth) were his exact words. Such assistance was indispensable because a middle class resident like the food official and a researcher like me (note the use of the hindi pronoun *hum*) cannot make sense of the distinct topography of colonies inhabited by the poor where dirt and squalor interfere with a natural sense of direction.

This dissertation’s study of the rationing document also presents narratives of the residents of a slum cluster of the surreptitious uses and the disruptive memories of the ration card, I-card and metallic plate in their everyday life. The latter set of narratives conjure an “artisan-like inventiveness” where slum residents in the last chapter both “enjoy” and “manipulate” authority in playful ways by naming the places they stay in and by making or imagining the illegal fabrication of identity cards. The naming of places and the imagining of the fabrication of documents illuminate but also inflect and move beyond Certeau's discussions of the art of creating or making things while engaging in sundry activities like dwelling and eating. Slum residents used the word *kalakari* (artisanship, creativity) to imagine the craft of the dalal who exploited the needs of those who were anxious to have their claims for plots recognized in DDA surveys and made cards for them. But their narratives of the dalals' *kalakari* contained ethical evaluations of the act of card making; while inhabiting the situation of card-making and the power of

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45Certeau, xviii

46These counterfeit ID cards were purportedly made in the slum cluster in South Delhi that I visited as part of my field work. V.P. Singh issued ID cards along with ration cards to slum residents in the early months of 1990 as part of a massive enumeration drive to enfranchise slum residents. The illegal cards were copies of the ID cards issued in this drive. See Chapter 6 for an elaborate discussion.
making documents, they were also very sharply criticizing the dalal for exploiting the states of mind and the socio-economic condition of the slum resident. It is possible then to perceive residents as not only manipulating and enjoying authority, but also distancing themselves from it, strongly critiquing it in ethical terms. A study of rationing document tells us that the everyday was thus manifest, though in a very disparate way, in both middle class narratives of urban aesthetics and slum residents’ narratives of state power.

Reflections on the colonial ‘everyday’

Much of the literature on the everyday has been accepted as an analytical frame theorizing the postcolonial city. Recent scholarship has however captured local rhythms of the economy, petty commerce and everyday cultural struggles in colonial spaces. There have also been some early instances of scholarship on the colonial everyday where a scholar like Bernard Cohn assiduously marks out the everyday as an analytical frame for colonialism. Cohn explores 19th century representations of Indian native subjects in narratives of clothes, headgear and other markers of cultural identity. In the narratives of Cohn and Nicholas Dirks, mastering the vernacular, learning classical and vulgar languages were all imperative to dispense with the services of the dubashees and the pandits, to engage in correspondence with native princes, to check corrupt native officials and in short, to manage “the everyday affairs of the Raj”. This everyday impulse of

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48See Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India*, (Delhi, Calcutta, Chennai and Mumbai: Oxford University Press, 1997), 110. Cohn describes objectification as a process whereby colonial authorities prompt native subjects into associating certain qualities, appearances, forms of address and salutation with their self-perception and their roles as members of a community. He sees the process as having significant and far-reaching cultural consequences where clothes and censuses, for instance, symbolically mediated relations of power and authority.

49Ibid, 21.
colonial rule was documented in literature too, with E.M. Foster noting the colonial official and his wife’s need to give orders and to avoid being slighted in the vernacular.\(^{50}\)

But it is in recent discussions of colonial identification documents and documentary practices that we find the most satisfying and elaborate treatment of the ‘everyday’. The material world of the circulating, constantly changing and mimicked document set up intimate everyday encounters of native subjects with the colonial state. Radhika Singha outlines how many identification practices and modern technologies such as the post office and the telegraph directory crystallized in order to fortify the colonial edifice from everyday threats such as the deserting soldier and the absconding contract-bound labourer.\(^{51}\) It was in a petty quotidian context of regulating the tenant and holding the ryot to his obligations, curtailing fraud on contracts or stamped paper that identification practices reared their head in colonial India. Similarly, the descriptive roll for the convict capturing his “name, caste, age, height, colour, particular marks, features or defects”,\(^{52}\) passes for criminal tribes and licenses for prostitutes, “palanquin bearers, hackney-carriage drivers and porters” all attested to everyday colonial regimes of controlling the routine and intimate affairs of native subjects. Another scholar who engages with the colonial ‘everyday’, Bhavani Raman, speaks of the creation of colonial legal protocols as a consequence of everyday fears and anxieties about perjury and forgery in “written declarations, depositions and confessions”.\(^{53}\) In the writings of both Raman and Singha, one can discern the analytical frame of ‘everyday’ as a scaffold of the colonial structure. Colonial governmentality could proceed only through quotidian acts of revenue collection, rent collection, recruitment of labour and conscription of the soldier. If this is a pretty basic way in which the everyday supported the colonial edifice, this dissertation

\(^{50}\)One finds references in E.M. Foster’s *Passage to India*, to the kind of vocabulary that officers and their wives felt it strictly necessary to learn to get servants to do the work they wanted: The Collector’s wife, Mrs. Turton, finds herself able to issue commands to Indian servants but at a loss to say hospitable words in greeting to the Indian ladies who come to her place for a party. E.M. Foster, *A Passage to India*, (New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley), 2006, 33-34.


\(^{52}\)Ibid, p.165.

shows how the everyday in these scholars’ writings as well as in this research operated as a site of colonial crisis, as an unraveling of the social. Native Indian subjects learnt to use and exploit the mandate for written evidence. The chapters of this dissertation comment on how writing protocols in the everyday were required both to curb fraudulent practice and to institute the credible presence of sovereign authority. The document worked in myriad ways, to affirm individual identity, to eliminate impostors and to reinforce the sovereign frame of authority. Both the second and third chapters must be read as an excursion into the discursive ways in which welfare is enacted, i.e through the life of identification documents. Set against the background of the Second World War, Chapters 2 and 3 illuminate the use of writing protocols at times to privilege everyday commerce and politics and at other times to reinforce the irrefutable imperatives of the war. The identification document acted at times to emphasize bureaucratic rationality of everyday colonial rule and at other times to obscure it.

Another colonial site of the everyday in recent scholarship on archives and documentary practices has been the regulation of the sexuality of Company officials vis-à-vis Indian women. The prospects of cohabitation, marriage with native women, employing slave women and keeping concubines threatened to hurt the untainted lineage of the British and entertained unwonted claims by Indian women and children of mixed parents on colonial privileges and finances and hurt the long-term interests of the British in India. The colonial state was apprehensive that such sexual tendencies, if left unchecked, would let Indian women barter away property, pensions, reimbursements and financial privileges reserved for exclusive British enjoyment. The documents preserved at the factory of Fort William included baptismal lists, marriage records and wills which were all subjected to close scrutiny. Here, scholars have remarked on the social and sexual relations between Company servants employed in different professions like pilots, Army generals, policemen and Indian women and the archival representations of these women. Owing to various moral anxieties and pragmatic considerations, Church authorities supported by colonial authorities attempted the archival exclusion of women from court records, church registers and records, family
papers and baptismal lists, directories and calendars of the East India Company. However, these archival exclusions far from causing native females subjects to disappear from the colonial archive underscored their presence and gave them an undeniable subjectivity. One scholar writing on the subject remarks that “women as historical subjects exist beyond the knowledge regime of the archive” while another writes that documents can unwittingly give us evidence of the subjects they wish to exclude or erase.

The discursive site of everyday corruption
The governing of both the colonial and the postcolonial worlds was marked by a minute investment with everyday corruption. This minute investment was enacted in the various markers, categories and practices of the identification document all of which had to be manipulated and perfected to anticipate and nip fraudulent practices. The identification document is often both the repository of fraud and a means to control fraud. Bhavani Raman writes that it was to regulate the proliferating world of perjury and forgery that the Company privileged literacy and writing practices and standardized attestation protocols in the 19th century Madras Presidency. By consolidating forms of writing and signing letters the Company hoped to be able to curb fraud and even more, to generate credible evidence. But in negotiating discursively with fraud, i.e. through attestation protocols, the Company was constantly rendering itself more vulnerable to petty acts of identity theft and forgery. Such vulnerability was produced by officials and clerks acting to pursue petty pecuniary interests and conniving with native residents to do so. One scholar documents the fraudulent use of blank card railways tickets as an instance of duping illiterate people in British India where railways clerks were assigned the role of writing the name of the station of destination if the station was a minor one. These clerks would write the name of a nearby station while they charged the passenger the fare for a

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station that was more distant, thus benefiting from the difference in fare.\textsuperscript{57} The second and third chapters in this dissertation on late colonial India explore how the identification document shifted form through encounters with various practices of corruption such as hoarding, misappropriation of rationed commodities and wrongful extraction of money. Chapters 2 and 3 illustrate this point by studying colonial correspondence on fraud in the files of the National Archives and the Delhi State Archives. In these letters, colonial food officials were extremely anxious to secure what were termed “vulnerable documents”\textsuperscript{58} by equipping them with security features. It was through various infamous incidents involving complicit clerks and duplicitous native residents that documents acquired and changed shape, were marked and re-marked.

This dissertation is, among other things a story about the “little leviathans”\textsuperscript{59} of postcolonial bureaucratic India, a term that Shiv Visvanathan and Harsh Sethi use in their edited volume on corruption. While touts, police inspectors and clerks are what this term has been invoked to mean in Visvanathan and Sethi’s volume, this dissertation includes another category of officials, the Food Inspector and the Food and Supply Officer (FSO). The fourth and fifth chapters explore what role these officials play in a postcolonial context of what Visvanathan characterizes as the expansion of economic activities of the government managed by a large “armoury of regulations, controls, licenses, permits”\textsuperscript{60}. This dissertation supports Visvanathan’s suggestions that these documentary practices spawned rather than controlled corruption. But it takes to task Visvanathan and Sethi’s volume for not theorizing adequately the circulation of corruption in the material world of the identification document and writing practices. Much of the postcolonial ethnographic work on corruption has focused on the “situational morality” of corruption, its social invisibility, its trite everydayness and its discursive role in popular constructions of the


\textsuperscript{58}R-1000 (15), Food, Rationing, 1944, National Archives of India.


\textsuperscript{60}Shiv Visvanathan, “The Early years” in \textit{Foul Play}, ibid, 27.
But none of this scholarship treats with any seriousness corruption as being reared and tethered by the identification document. Emma Tarlo provides us a rare glimpse into the chimeric Emergency world of documents – licenses, demolition slips, sterilization certificates and allotment letters – many of which served to normalize the extralegal, brutally exploitative and corrupt actions of the Delhi government. Emma Tarlo deploys the term “paper truths” to depict the reified nature of these documents which enjoyed a currency within the brief temporal context of the Emergency and a few years after. These documents had a symbolic meaning only within the confines of DDA and MCD offices, yet, they switched roles effortlessly from ensuring plots for the slum residents to obscuring such claims. The operation of corruption was obscured by the creation of documents that normalized the illegality of state operations where plots were arbitrarily and coercively assigned, sanctioned and regularized. Despite the clues she acknowledges clerks as giving her, Emma Tarlo however does not adequately pay attention to the deeply invested roles of individual (DDA or MCD) officials in this corrupt world of legally fictitious documents. This dissertation deliberately tries to overcome this treatment of officials as indifferent functionaries: the fourth chapter describes how Food Inspectors use documents like the application form, the affidavit and written statements of confession to lure smugglers, corrupt and coercive dealers and impostors. By dangling assurances of amnesty and prospects of lenient penal treatment through what Veena Das deems the magical power of documents, Food Inspectors and FSOs induced these corrupt salesmen and dealers to incriminate themselves. These documents had a magical power because they were created on the spot by the official bearing no legitimate sanction of the state. They (the documents that these officials conjured) had a presence more in the legal imagination of the creative official than in the gazettes of state law.

62Emma Tarlo, Unsettling memories: Narratives of India’s Emergency, 74
Genealogies of the (identification) document

This dissertation is a genealogical treatment of the identification document. It (my dissertation) draws on Foucault’s ideas to discard the search for origins and continuities of ID documents but to embrace the chance “details and accidents that accompany every beginning”63. It seeks neither to understand the document as a coherent unity nor does it see the document as conforming to a constant function such as the domination of the ruling classes. Though the rationing document was introduced as an artifact of wartime control, it was simultaneously the result of encounters with cultural nationalism and attempts to identify and contain the sources of fraud. The various aspects of a document, like the categories of residence and family, fingerprint and counterfoils are not presented in their mutually reinforcing effects to produce the unity of the document. Instead, these aspects are discussed as discursive formations that break down consistent rationales and homogeneous forms of the identification document.

A genealogical study of the document would require the scholar to abdicate frameworks that deal with documents very instrumentally. Such a discussion would also entail studying the form of the document and the trajectories of their individual aspects such as the photograph, the fingerprint and the signature. This dissertation draws on the recent wealth of scholarly studies that have treated identification documents as powerful, complexly constituted “salient artifacts”64 with intricate trajectories yielding significant insights into societies, social relations, populations and knowledge itself. In other words, these scholars dwell on the identification document as an inquiry into ethnography65, the distinctness of modern societies and modernizing states66, the constitution of civil statuses, citizenship and nation-states,67 the making of borders and the policing of

63Foucault, p.81.
65Ibid.
67David Allen Harvey, “Lost Children or Enemy Aliens? Classifying the Population of Alsace after the First World War”, Journal of Contemporary History, 34, no. 4, (1999); John Torpey, The Invention of the
mobility, the institution of nationality as racial difference, war, revolutions and genocide, the project of colonial rule, the management of disease, populations and the field of bio-power, the question of identity and imposture, modern state functions of surveillance and information-gathering, the magical modes of state operation and the ordering of urban spaces. Some scholars have attempted genealogical studies of a given aspect of the document like the fingerprint.


Emma Tarlo. Unsettling Memories, op.cit. Also see the collection of short stories translated by Shveta Sharda, Trickster City: Writings from the Belly of the Metropolis, (New Delhi: Viking (Penguin), 2010).

Scholars have traced the history of the signature as a legal-administrative practice to the regulation of 19th century ryots working on the British indigo plantations. In particular, see Chandak Sengoopta, Imprint of the Raj, (London: Pan Books, 2003), 70-71.
Scholars have perceived identification documents and related practices to have been central to constituting and complicating narratives of state-formation. A genealogical treatment of the practice of naming, in the writings of Jane Caplan and Gerard Noiriel, throws up configurations of royal power and its centralization, the nationalist rhetoric of secularism enacted through the abolition of aristocratic titles (place-names and estate-names) and the liberation of civil registration from the royal patronage of parish records. Where Churches had the power to endow civil statuses, now, municipalities were the consecrated sites where births, deaths and marriages were registered. However, many of the ‘free’ subjects in a country like France objected to the equal statuses that were made available to them through municipal records: those who feared forcible conscription in war made ‘common knowledge depositions’ to the effect of reducing their age or making ‘false claims of marriage’ to escape conscription. Such genealogies therefore traced the complex narratives of citizenship and nationalism as engendering enfranchisement implicit in civil registration and its undesirable implications for citizens such as taxation and conscription. Fewer scholars have commented on the male narratives of nation embedded in these enumeration projects. Official registers containing information about citizens often delineated gendered roles and perpetuated family norms in a national space. Household registers during the Meiji period gathered a lot of information about the head of the family where heads were male by law. Such a move had immediate implications in local power structures as it was only heads of households who could become members of the samurai class. Listed among the property holdings of heads of family were their wives, concubines and children. This dissertation discusses documents as enforcing patriarchies, mediating social relations and inscribing cultural norms of family. If official enumeration determines our knowledge of the social world, the dissertation explains how ration card-related information served to generate acceptance for nationalist constructions of family. Related to this argument, one can see ID documents as drawing “boundaries between communities, between localities, between members of the family and even

between different regions of the self”. In other words, ID documents draw boundaries between citizens who inhabit legible national spaces and those who inhabit the margins of the state. The fifth chapter talks about how the ownership or occupation of a house was rewarded with documents establishing equal entitlement while those who were homeless and hence less visible had to be policed as well as protected through beggars’ certificates and ration cards marked ‘homeless’. The sixth chapter discusses how in the space of a slum locality, officials used ID documents to draw fault-lines spatially and temporally between those who had set up homes pre and post the 1990 V.P.Singh enumeration drive, between residents of pukka and kuchcha houses, between the affective space of the family and the enumerable space of the household.

**Interrogating modes of writing and the ‘archive’**

Much of the research on documentary practices turns on the question of writing practices and their ostensible indispensability to modern governmental regimes. While this dissertation does not challenge the salience of cultures of writing (in some form or the other) to modern states, it does challenge the notion that such cultures invariably involve depersonalized modes of interaction. The third chapter on rationing documents in late colonial Delhi, for instance, argues that the writing of application forms involved very intimate performances, rhetorical pleas and personal modes of writing.

One scholar delineates what he terms “archival logics” in the identification of persons within US passport regimes. Modern procedures of identification and verification enabled logics of location (within a file, record or an archive), their official credibility and the possibility of their storage and retrieval. This marked a departure from conventions of local familiarity, personal recognition owing to the absence of impersonality in such recognition. The passport application was a personal request until the 1830s which came to be replaced by a more standardized procedure and form, a scholar writes. This scholar seems to sustain an essential difference between modes of writing practices occurring in

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modern and pre-modern states: the former turned on personalized forms of rhetoric while the latter privileged impersonal forms of writing such as application forms with seals, signatures, etc. Another scholar records writing as a practice of communication to be all-important to the modern bureaucratic state in its functions of organizational segregation\textsuperscript{82} and management of far-flung empires, regulation of clerks and officials in remote local areas and the lowest rungs of the government. This scholar, Jack Goody however remarks that Weberian writing practices were present even in non-bureaucratic and ancient states where too they (the practices) served to formalize administrative procedures\textsuperscript{83}. In simpler, pre-bureaucratic societies, booty inventories, royal contracts, international treaties and calendars were traditionally deployed to inscribe judicial norms in a sacred context, to invoke royal power, to spreading the word of God, etc.\textsuperscript{84}

Other scholars have highlighted the predominance of textual traditions outside the Western state and outside the realm of impersonal law. Brinkley Messick traces the genealogies of the Sharia and the Quran, their derivative texts such as the \textit{fiqh} manuals and the disputes around the authority of these texts within Islamic jurisprudence. His work attempts to demonstrate the formation of a textual polity in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century Yemen where contracts, deeds and the sharia idiom and discourse was central to the creation of Islamic states.\textsuperscript{85} So, recent scholarship furnishes evidence of impersonal forms of writing in pre-modern states on the one hand and rhetorical and personal modes of writing in modern states on the other hand.

The salience of impersonal forms of writing to modern bureaucratic regimes was challenged on another front, namely, that of rhetoric. Scholars draw our attention to the “rhetorical dimensions”\textsuperscript{86} of the documents of such regimes. It is argued that behind the

\textsuperscript{82}The separation of the various branches of the bureaucratic state such as the administrative, legislative, electoral and military branches was made possible through writing practices. Jack Goody, \textit{The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society}, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

\textsuperscript{83}Ibid, 106.

\textsuperscript{84}Ibid, 101, 112


\textsuperscript{86}Riles, \textit{Documents}, op.cit, 11
production of documents, lies many layers of rhetoric about the transparency and order embedded in modern forms of writing such as double entry book-keeping, application forms, recommendation forms, mission statements, etc. The use of rhetoric was not always subtle or invisibly embedded in the impersonal language of the application form. The third chapter looks at early forms of the application for the ration card during the Second World War which used rhetoric as a device to claim rationed commodities like motor spirit and electricity. These applications featured the applicant acknowledging the sovereign authority of the colonial state and make veiled references to its civilizing mission. In other instances, an applicant would appeal to the compassion of the colonial authorities, a Christian ethic that the authorities could scarcely afford to ignore. Contained within such rhetorical thrusts of the application form were personal and impassioned appeals to colonial authority. The second chapter points out how rhetoric was a mainstay of the colonial production and dissemination of identification documents. The Second World War was a period of hectic rhetoric across the Allied nations of the United States and the United Kingdom: Food Ministers in these countries featured in short publicity films explaining the uses and benefits of rationing and the ration card. In India, such films made by the colonial authorities were accompanied by advertisements warning against hoarding and bypassing the regime of ration cards.

If some scholars (Goody, Messick and Riles) challenge the myth of impersonality in documentary practices in the modern bureaucratic age, others (like Antoinette Burton and Achille Mbembe) interrogate traditional notions of the archive as enmeshed with the written word. The social science scholar’s understanding of history is no longer shaped by stable concepts of the archive housed in libraries, museums and state-held repositories of documents. It has been pointed out that the Internet and the tradition of oral narratives, among other things have decentered the archive. The fourth chapter of this dissertation demonstrates the living presence of an archive that has not yet been written, compiled or stored in the realm of welfare practice. The archive in question is one that exists mostly in

the memories and the imagination of retired food officials I interviewed. The fourth chapter presents many of the narratives of post-independence documentary forms and practices of the ration card through the prisms of anecdote and affect. Faced with a devastating archival void of proof in the form of tangible ration cards and Daily Diaries\textsuperscript{88} in the period post-independence (1950 to 1990)\textsuperscript{89}, I found the anecdotes of food officials vis-à-vis ration cards and practices related to them to be a treasure trove of the history of welfare practice.

It is now commonplace to remark on the archive as an artifact that has “the power to shape narratives”\textsuperscript{90}. Many scholars, historians especially, have exhorted us to tell stories around the archive rather than stories made available by the archive. Instead of viewing archival evidence as historical proof, it may be more productive to look out for “archival elisions, distortions and secrets”\textsuperscript{91}. For these scholars, to think of the archive is to think of the life of the archive and how it has lent itself to the rationales of state authorities, the imagination of bureaucrats, scholars, those in search of their genealogies or family trees, etc. One scholar attempts to draw up a biography of “an archive of mobility” in colonial South Africa: in such a biography, the accumulating files of certificates of identity, permits and photographs of mobile residents (travelling from South Africa to India or vice-versa) could be “read” to reveal gendered and personal narratives explicating the travails of everyday life. There is an attempt in this article by Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie to trace both the biography of the archive maintained in Cape Town and the biographies of individuals whose files were preserved in the archive.\textsuperscript{92} Another scholar hints at the life of the archive in his work where he speaks of the ritualistic processes by which the archive is instituted. He directs our attention to the possibility that documents have careers before and after they end up as artifacts stored in

\textsuperscript{88}The Daily Diary was a record maintained by the Food Inspector in which he had to make entries on a daily basis of the houses he visited, the ration cards he issued, the complaints he looked into, the Fair Price Shops he inspected, etc. See Chapter 4 for more details.

\textsuperscript{89}The National Archives and the Delhi State Archives had no record or preserved copies of ration cards post 1960. The Gazettes of India and Delhi in particular, while they yielded many documentary forms such as permits, licenses of tyre dealers, cement dealers, vehicle owners and application forms to open Fair Price Shops, were not helpful when it came to copies of the ration card.

\textsuperscript{90}Burton, op.cit, 6

\textsuperscript{91}Ibid, 2

\textsuperscript{92}Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, “The Form, the Permit and the Photograph: An Archive of Mobility between South Africa and India”, \textit{Journal of Asian and African Studies}, 46, no. 6, (2011).
the archive. The ritual of secrecy whereby the documents are closed to the public (for a while) and the authority exercised in determining which documents are to be preserved and which to be discarded produce the archive as “secular text”\textsuperscript{93}, thus ending their career as sacral objects in the hands of the author. By making the archive available to historians after a period of secrecy, the path is open for documents to enjoy a life and for the author to be retrieved though only through the voice and authority of the historian. The phases in the life of the archive reveal different conspiracies to kill, tame and silence the author of the document, this scholar suggests.

**The identification document and the worlds of affect and emotion**

In her article delineating documents as producing legal factions, Yael Navaro Yashin deems the identification documents produced, circulated and used by Turkish Cypriots to be “make-believe papers”.\textsuperscript{94} This is because they lack international recognition owing to the illegal status of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus that issues them. For the Turkish Cypriot, the ordeal of juggling the documentary protocols of various national and supranational organizations like Southern Cyprus and European Union along with those prescribed by the illegal administration of Northern Cyprus unleashes affective energies, argues Navaro Yashin. Drawing on Arjun Appadurai’s work on the life of things, Yashin insists that these energies do not stem from the subjective self but are produced and incited by the document. “When placed in specific social relations with persons, documents have the potentiality to discharge affective energies which are felt or experienced by persons”.\textsuperscript{95} Such insights into the affective interactions between subjects and documents are immediately useful to the arguments this dissertation makes. This dissertation too studies the affective assertions of communities, officials and residents as produced by identification documents in a context of social relations. However, this dissertation explores, in addition, the economy of anguish, anxiety, compassion and anger


\textsuperscript{95} Ibid, p.81.
unleashed by the cultural world of religion, kinship, regional affiliations and family affinities. While agreeing with Yashin that documents incite affects defined as momentary intensities, this dissertation believes that they also produce expressions of emotions deeply embedded in social structures and hierarchies.

Let me unpack this statement a little. To start with, I acknowledge the conceptual difference drawn by scholars between affects and emotions\textsuperscript{96}. Affects have been described to invoke an “intensity” that is not mediated through language or a history of experience. Affects do not strictly fall within the realm of consciousness; they are moments of intensity where the body responds to one or many stimuli. An infant, to cite the example given by a scholar (explicating the difference between emotions, feelings and affects) exhibits affect when he reacts to various bodily stimuli of our facial muscles, viscera, respiratory system, etc.\textsuperscript{97} Emotions on the other hand are an “expression of our internal state”\textsuperscript{98} and may contain ethical evaluations based on our social experiences. Martha Nussbaum keenly argued the presence of rational processes and complex families of belief in our emotions. Emotions are an expression of our ability to react to objects outside us and to embed social experiences within ourselves, she wrote. Keeping this distinction in mind, this dissertation argues that documents both in their material aspect and in their imagined form incite momentary intensities that are not very consciously experienced. For instance, a food official devised on the spur of the moment a strategy whereby he enticed a smuggler to perjure himself and to write a note stating that he (the smuggler) had in his possession various goods illegally acquired. The smuggler wrote the note but very momentarily and suddenly realized what the document could do to him. He crumpled and threw away the document in a fit of rage. The official had to use his instincts to retrieve the note and to soothe the smuggler. He put his foot


\textsuperscript{97}Eric Shouse, op.cit.

\textsuperscript{98}Ibid.
inconspicuously over the crumpled note almost as a reflex while he told the smuggler reassuringly that he needn’t give a note in writing after all. This incident reflected the power of the document to transmit affects or momentary intensities where both the smuggler and the official were responding in a barely conscious form to certain threats, risks and temptations posed by the document.

However, the identification document did not merely produce intensities or affects described in this pre-personal, nonlinguistic and subconscious sense. In other instances, documents were also capable of triggering anguished and prolonged emotional responses within a cultural context. The second and third chapters describe how communities felt the overwhelming need to fulfill their cultural roles in observing a fast, attending Church, cooking and consuming meals in a religious gathering as well as in their homes. The rationing document (ration card, coupons, permits) which was the centerpiece of the colonial regime of rationing of motor spirit, cloth, foodgrains, electricity, etc produced anxieties that were enacted repeatedly in the form of exhortations to colonial authorities for additional rations and threats of rebellion. For instance, the third chapter documents the deeply invested sense in which individuals and groups make cultural demands in response to the regulations of the ration card. If evangelical groups demand extra motor spirit coupons so they can attend Church service, Muslim and Sikh associations warn of a religious upsurge unless the ration card regulations are relaxed. The rationing document produced emotionally invested responses not only in civil society but also in the functionaries of the Delhi food administration. The Food Inspector and the Food and Supply Officer (FSO) experienced turbulent emotional upheavals when they were required to perform official roles of enforcing ration card regulations. This dissertation explores ‘compassion’ as an emotion that Food Inspectors said they experienced in their line of duty while enforcing ration card regulations in weddings and other social gatherings. It argues that such emotions consciously manipulated by the official extended his ethical awareness and added a new dimension to the field of welfare practice. The sixth chapter traces the affective responses of residents vis-à-vis the operational guidelines enacted by food officials in issuing ration cards and other identity cards in a
massive enumeration drive across slum clusters in Delhi. In the space of the slum cluster, identification documents produced a rich field of affective responses where residents sought to challenge official norms that entrenched the boundaries between the enumerable space of the household and the private space of the family. Slum residents partitioned their houses with flimsy curtains and placed two or three stoves in one house thus seeking to get two or three ration cards instead of one because they knew that one stove meant one ration card. In thus circumventing ration card rules, they may have been responding to not very consciously articulated or realized affects that they experienced while acting to procure food entitlements for their entire family. Through this and multiple other examples, this dissertation demonstrates how documents unleash a productive play of affects and emotions in the everyday lives of various subjects of the colonial and the postcolonial states.

Theorizing the city

The city is, in many ways, an inevitable prop for a project that is deeply invested in the everyday forms of the identification document. The city has been widely acknowledged to be a cornucopia of written claims of identity, documentary performances of citizenship and bureaucratic transactions. Almost every aspect of everyday life in the city, be it registering births, recording deaths, marriages, borrowing loans, applying for a driver’s license or a passport, implicates or interrogates the role of the identification document. In the history of welfare distribution, the village has mattered less than the city in schemes of written identification and verification. The second chapter demonstrates how the colonial scheme of ration cards originated as a means to fortify and revive the city whereas it was an optional measure in the village. The “statutory model of rationing” adopted in the city during the Second World War sought to protect the residents of urban areas from starvation by making the ration card compulsory there while the “non-statutory model” was preferred in the rural areas where the ration card could be used as a matter of choice, in government-run Authorized Retail Depots (ARDs).
Identification documents often ordered the politics of urban spaces in postcolonial India where different classes made claims on the city through ration cards, election ID cards, housing documents, etc. Schemes like the NREGA and the RSBY have meant that entitlements in the village too are filtered through processes of written identification that involve job cards and muster rolls. However, such schemes involving ID documents are not ubiquitous across villages and often parasitic on communication with the city.99 The newest technologies of identification like biometric card readers and smart cards are organically linked to the corridors of IT industries and the informational city.100 The village, thanks to such technologies, is more than ever being drawn into the snare of the knowledge and power produced in the city.101 Even if the village is a site of repeated encounters of residents with ID processes, it is not a space that sees the same flows of written information pertaining to identities as the city. The modern day specters of terrorism, illegal migration, real estate scams and financial fraud – all of which conjure vivid imaginaries of the identification document – are hunted out in the spaces of the city more visibly than in the village.

Apart from Delhi’s appeal as a provincial city and the capital city, my choice of Delhi follows from the crucial role it played as a nerve-centre of colonial wartime operations and postcolonial refugee rehabilitation efforts. Delhi was the laboratory for Emergency price control measures, housing and population control drives, and in the year 1990, Delhi was chosen for a massive enumeration drive of the slum population. All these drives and operations produced immense documentation and left in their wake many paper trails.

This dissertation therefore traces the trajectories of the city of Delhi through narratives of the identification document. It sees the everyday forms of the identification document as impinging on the city, shaping its contours, mediating social relations, altering the

99The NREGA employment programme and the RSBY health insurance scheme are functional only in a few select villages across the different states of India.
vocabulary of power, socializing and reterritorializing urban spaces. I would like to state how my project clearly departs from previous and recent theorizations of the city. Some scholars have stated the significance of a city like Delhi in purely historical terms: Percival Spear deemed it a consequence of “the accumulated sentiments of seven centuries and the mounting aspirations of the new nationalism”. Delhi’s famous historian Narayani Gupta has tended to see Delhi “as a museum”, i.e., through its layers of social and political history interspersed with geography. Others have approached the city of Delhi as a crisis of space marked by land use, architectural design and technocratic planning. A few others have positioned the city in the landscape of politics where they analyzed the surge of plebeian and vernacular expressions of nationalist modernity in the heart of metropolises like Bombay and Calcutta. Partha Chatterjee theorized the Indian city in recent times as being propelled by global capital. Many scholars have attempted to treat the city as a site of the formulation and the recasting of claims of citizenship. Others have theorized Delhi in the process of analyzing a ‘critical event’ such as the Partition, the Emergency or the 1984 anti-Sikh riots.

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103Narayani Gupta, Delhi between Two Empires 1803-1931, xv, ibid.
104See Narayani Gupta, “Delhi’s History as Reflected in its Toponymy” in Celebrating Delhi, (ed) Mala Dayal, (New Delhi: Viking, 2010).
107The middle classes of Indian cities are moving towards bourgeois tendencies of seeking the eviction and evacuation of dirty squatters from their sacred urban spaces. These demands are a result of the growth of “the post-industrial globalized metropolis” which has captured the imagination of the middle classes, Chatterjee writes. See “Are Indian cities becoming bourgeois at last?” in Partha Chatterjee, Politics of the Governed, 139-144, op.cit.
109Veena Das, Life and Words, op.cit, Emma Tarlo, Unsettling memories, op.cit,
My project is starkly different from these various interventions in urban studies scholarship. Instead of mapping the city’s significance within a nationalist imaginary, the landscape of politics, vis-à-vis the market, this dissertation casts the city within the everyday materiality of objects. It does not treat identification documents as weapons of the urban weak nor does it regard them as Partha Chatterjee would, as political devices to negotiate with urban population groups. Instead, this dissertation excavates the city from the energies unleashed by IDs, debates and disputes over the ration card, conversations and experiments with the rationing document. Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate the urban social categories that the ration card gave birth to in wartime India. Separate rationing application forms and documents (canteen permits, certificates of identity, application form for supplementary rations, etc) were issued to cater to different social and economic classes of the city such as the industrial personnel, the industrial workers, the labouring class and among the labouring class, the heavy manual labourer, soldiers and policemen, so on. Colonial rationing authorities sought on the one hand, to nourish certain urban classes they deemed extremely vital to the imperial edifice. On the other hand, they perpetuated social hierarchies within urban spaces: all application forms for rationing of the working class could be processed only through the assent of the employer, the contractor, etc. The fifth and sixth chapters illustrate how the enumeration of marginal population groups in Delhi such as slum residents and refugee squatters opens up explosive debates on city spaces, municipal amenities, the Master Plan, the aesthetic form of the city and urban citizenship.

Conclusions: Locating the ‘political’

This dissertation wishes to partake of the late 20th and the early 21st century’s carnival in interdisciplinary studies in the field of social sciences. Legal Anthropology, Subaltern Studies, New Historicism are only a few of the pioneering schools of scholarship that have celebrated this by-now familiar trend of transcending disciplinary boundaries. I have used the historian’s tools of archival research and oral narratives; deployed the ethnographic

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110 See Chapter 2 where I show how the application form of the heavy manual labourer could be processed only through the signature of the employer.
method from anthropology; and theorized courtroom debates, a habit among legal studies scholars; studied Speeches and Letters of Prime Ministers and watched publicity reels and propaganda films to be attentive to semiotic representations. Interdisciplinarity however requires moving beyond poaching tools across disciplines. This dissertation attempts to make a methodological departure from conventional political science by identifying new objects and reconstituting old objects of political study.

I would like to conclude by explicating how this dissertation attempts to expand the field of the “political”. As a rudimentary move, this dissertation links empirical study and theoretical analysis, and erases the boundaries between politics and other spheres of social, cultural and economic life. This dissertation does not jettison the conventional objects of the ‘political’. It however prises open traditional concepts such as the state, sovereignty, law, welfare, power and bureaucratic rationality to peer at them discursively. Simultaneously, the dissertations suggests new objects of the ‘political’. Practices of identification and writing like stamps, seals, stamp papers, ID cards have remained invisible in political science scholarship owing to their perceived roles as facilitators of state legitimacy, state accountability, legal adjudication, so on. It is only recently and that too, in fields other than political science, that such discursive practices have been recognized as interrogating legal discourse and state institutions. A study of the social life of the document opens up and expands the site of the ‘political’. Such a study illuminates the politics of urban spaces, the consolidation of social relations and hierarchies, political modes of application-writing (the use of rhetoric), the political economy of claim-making and cultural processes of valuation. The dissertation shows how documents prevail on subjects to form affinities and nostalgic associations with leaders. Other residents are described to use documents to imbue legal processes with political value while yet others attempt ethical critiques of administrative norms through the document.

This dissertation mobilizes various kinds of archives to render documents visible. The archives in question include the official files in national, state archival collections, gazettes of law, reports and records, judicial texts but also the memories of disparate
persons. In collating and theorizing the insights from all these sources, this dissertation has attempted to steer clear of an ideological framework. The conceit of the social life of the document emphasizes, for instance, the lack of an entrenched relationship between the state and identification documents. It highlights in its lieu, erratic governmentality and contingent modes of state operation. Such an approach to documentary practices of identification promises to disperse the seeds of “the political” everywhere, across the landscapes of the city, in every sphere of everyday life, the emotional lives of subjects, the encounters of marginal and middle class subjects with each other and the state.