

*Petitioning and Political Cultures in South Asia: Introduction**

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On 4 May 2014, as a tumultuous general election in India drew to a close, the *Indian Express* newspaper published a column by Tavleen Singh, with the headline ‘No more petitioners: no more petitioners’. The column went on to quote P. Chidambaran, the outgoing finance minister of the defeated Congress government, who diagnosed a historical shift in the mentality of the Indian electorate. ‘India has moved on,’ Chidambaran was reported as saying, ‘from a petitioner society to an aspirational one. Treating people as petitioners is a mistake ... even the poor demand a better life and are no longer resigned to their fate.’¹ In India, the column argued, ‘poor people’ now had ‘middle class aspirations’, desiring ‘jobs and development’ rather than ‘charity’ and that this was a major reason for the success of Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2014 elections. To be a ‘petitioner’, in this analysis, was to be ground down

* We are grateful to the American Historical Association and the Centre for History and Economics at the University of Cambridge for hosting panels and workshops where these articles were first presented. We are particularly grateful to David Washbrook, Tim Harper, Fei-Hsien Wang, William O’Reilly, Joya Chatterji, David Gilmartin, Jon Wilson, Philip Stern, Doug Haynes, and Emma Rothschild for their comments and suggestions.

¹ Tavleen Singh, ‘No More Petitioners; No More Petitioners’, *Indian Express*, 4 May 2014, <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/no-more-petitioners/>, [accessed 16 October 2018]. We are grateful to Mathew Hull for pointing out this reference.

by poverty and resignation, and dependent on the ‘charity’ of others. It was a passing historical condition, a sign of underdevelopment that could be sloughed off by the sudden awakening across society of ‘middle class aspirations’.

Yet just as the *Indian Express*, via Chidambaran, was announcing the end of a ‘petitioner society’, petitioning as a practice seemed to be undergoing something of a revival not just in India, but across many regions of the world. From the growing popularity of ‘writ petitions’ to the Indian Supreme Court challenging violations of constitutional rights, to the vogue for ‘e-petitions’, which can gather many thousands of signatories, petitioning is often held out as a vehicle for expanding popular participation in politics, and for creating new forms of accountability and responsive governance.² Meanwhile, academic scholars too have increasingly been drawn to the subject of petitioning as a quotidian form of political, legal, and bureaucratic action, involving both individuals and larger communities, through which changing norms of rights, justice, and representation have been expressed and contested. In 2005, historian Majid Siddiqi, in a richly suggestive essay on colonial-era petitioning, highlighted ‘the importance of petitioning in India, a process too much ignored until now’.³ Since then, however, petitioning has become a more prominent object of analysis in South Asian studies, ranging from studies of early modern artisans, to studies of colonial scribal culture, to recent anthropological studies of bureaucratic ‘red tape’ and ‘the government of paper’ in India and Pakistan.⁴ This mirrors a broader interest in

² For a recent discussion, see Scott Wright, ‘Epetitions’, in Stephen Coleman and Deen Freelon (eds), *Handbook of Digital Politics*, Elgar Publishing, Northampton, MA, 2015, pp. 136–50. For a study of how literacy activists in rural contemporary Tamil Nadu are training Dalit women to write and sign their own petitions to state officials, see Francis Cody, ‘Inscribing Subjects to Citizenship: Petitions, Literacy Activism and the Performativity of Signature in Rural Tamil Nadu’, *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 24, 3, 2009, pp. 347–80. Cody’s subtle account of the ‘partial felicity’ of the act of petitioning by marginalized subjects draws attention to the ‘limits of a governmental communicative reason that would conflate written subject and agent’, especially in a post-colonial context ‘where the construction of those citizens that would be represented is in fact a product of the very act of representation’. See also Francis Cody, *The Light of Knowledge. Literacy Activism and the Politics of Writing in South India*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2013.

³ Majid Siddiqi, *The British Historical Context and Petitioning in Colonial India, with an Introduction by S. Inayat A. Zaidi*, XXII Dr M. A. Ansari Memorial Lecture, Jamia Milia Islamia, Aakar Books, New Delhi, 2005.

⁴ Among numerous recent studies, see, for example, Nandita Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest. The State, Society, and Artisans in Early Modern Rajasthan*, Oxford

petitioning among humanists and social scientists working on many world regions, in studies of 'everyday' forms of state-formation, the social history of rights, the growth of popular politics, civil society and the 'public sphere', and international institutions.⁵

The goal of this special issue is to take stock of this growing body of work, and also to spur further debate and exploration of the many pasts, and possible futures, of petitioning in South Asia. The volume grew out of a conference held at the Centre for History and Economics at the University of Cambridge in June 2014, and brings together historians (and one anthropologist) working on diverse periods and regions of South Asia. The focus is on petitioning as political and legal practice, and on the critical importance of different kinds of written petitions within state bureaucracies in South Asia since the early modern period. The articles explore how the written petition has long been an important means for legitimizing the power of centralizing states by incorporating subjects as petitioners. While they often

University Press, New Delhi, 2006; Potukuchi Swarnalatha, 'Revolt, Testimony, Petition: Artisanal Protests in Colonial Andhra', in Lex Heerma van Voss (ed.), *Petitions in Social History*, International Review of Social History Supplement 9, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 107–30; Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2012; Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape. Bureaucracy, Structural Violence and Poverty in India*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2015; Matthew Hull, *The Government of Paper. The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2012. For an influential earlier study which foregrounded petitions as a site for the emergence of urban public culture in colonial India, see Douglas Haynes, *Rhetoric and Ritual in Colonial India. The Shaping of a Public Culture in Surat City, 1852–1928*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991.

⁵ For a useful survey of historical approaches to petitioning, see L. H. van Voss, 'Introduction', in van Voss (ed.), *Petitions in Social History*, pp. 1–10. For some other examples of recent historical work on petitioning from several different regions and periods, see Ho-Fung Hung, *Protest with Chinese Characteristics. Demonstrations, Riots, and Petitions in the Mid Qing Dynasty*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2011; Yuval Ben-Bassat, *Petitioning the Sultan. Protests and Justice in Late Ottoman Palestine*, I. B. Tauris, London, 2014; David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2000; Ravi De Costa, 'Identity, Authority and the Moral Worlds of Indigenous Petitions', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 48, 3, 2006, pp. 669–98; Susan Pedersen, 'Samoa on the World Stage: Petitioning and Peoples before the Mandates Commission of the League of Nations', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 40, 2, August 2012, pp. 231–61; Daniel Carpenter, 'Recruitment by Petition: American Anti-Slavery, French Protestantism, English Suppression', *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 14, 3, September 2016, pp. 700–23; Brodie Waddell (ed.), *Addressing Authority in Early Modern Europe. An Online Symposium on Petitions and Supplications in Early Modern Society* (2016), <https://manyheadedmonster.wordpress.com/2016/11/01/addressing-authority/>, [accessed 16 October 2018].

emphasize the disciplinary or pedagogical role of petitioning regimes and how the written forms of petitions were mediated by official and non-official structures of power, they also point to the role of petitions as adaptive expressions of community and individual rights, and as vehicles of political dissent and popular mobilization. They tend therefore to complicate any teleological interpretation of petitioning as an ‘archaic’ practice, a ‘traditional’, monarchical residuum within the mainstream of modern citizenship. Rather, varied modes of petitioning have been, and remain, a constitutive element in modern political regimes, through which notions of the rights and duties of individuals, communities, and sovereign states have been claimed and contested.

Just a year before the *Indian Express* was declaring the death of a petitioning society, the *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* published an article by anthropologist Anand Vivek Taneja, which examined a relatively recent development in the long history of petitioning in South Asia. Taneja describes the growth, since the late 1970s, of the popular veneration of jinns—saintly spirit forms—in Firoz Shah Kotla, a ruined fort near Old Delhi dating back to the fourteenth-century rule of the Delhi sultans. On Thursday evenings, according to popular belief, jinns would come to the fort to read and respond to written petitions for justice that were left in the niches and alcoves of the fort by mainly working class petitioners. Taneja describes how ‘people petition the *sarkar* or government of the jinn about their most intimate problems, in the ruins of palace, a premodern space of sovereignty, while using the bureaucratic forms and mechanisms of the modern state’.⁶ Locating this practice within the long history of the destruction and dispossession of Muslim sacred spaces and communities in post-partition Delhi, Taneja argues that ‘the presence of the jinn-saints in the ruins of a fourteenth century royal palace, a location of precolonial Islamic sovereignty, is an image, a counter-memory of precolonial ideas of justice flashing up against the violence and illegibility of the postcolonial state’.⁷

As Taneja and (in the concluding article of this volume) Nayanika Mathur emphasize, presenting written and oral petitions at saints’

⁶ Anand Vivek Taneja, ‘Jinneology. Everyday Life and Islamic Theology in Post-partition Delhi’, *Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, vol. 3, 3, 2015, pp. 139–65, p. 160. See also A. V. Taneja, *Jinneology. Time, Islam and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2017.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

shrines and temples has long been a common practice in South Asia. Just as the English word ‘petition’ is closely shadowed by the notion of ‘prayer’ as the invocation of divine power, so the varied forms and meanings of petitioning in South Asia often carry with them traces of the sacred. Yet Taneja’s article, and the articles in this volume, suggest how petitioning as both a secular and sacred practice, while often freighted and reinforced by long chains of historical memory, has also been constantly reworked to reflect particular configurations of power and desire.⁸ Petitioning cannot therefore be seen as a timeless or ‘traditional’ aspect of South Asian culture, but must be located within specific historical processes. As the articles in this volume bear witness, this recursive yet dynamic and adaptive quality of petitioning, makes petitions vital sources for illuminating the changing configurations of state power over the *longue durée*.

The question of what counts as ‘a petition’ from one place or time to the next is not easily answerable in general terms, but requires attention to be focused on changing historical venues and terminologies.⁹ In his recent anthropological study of contemporary modes of bureaucratic practice in India, *Red Tape*, Akhil Gupta draws a clear distinction between a ‘petition’ as a plea by a supplicant for ‘favour’, staking a personal or communal claim for ‘special dispensation’, and a ‘complaint’ ‘as a demand to redress wrongs committed by a person in power’. Petitions and complaints are also further distinguished in Gupta’s account from legal suits or ‘plaints’.¹⁰ Moving backwards through historical time, it becomes more difficult to draw such hard-and-fast distinctions between different modes of petitioning and complaining, although one of the important themes running through these articles is the regular production of new official distinctions between different genres of address as an aspect of the

⁸ Similarly, studies of the Kumaoni shrine to Golu Dev, worshipped as a god of justice, evidence growing number of petitioners asking for *mannats* (pledges to make an offering if a request is granted) on pieces of notarized stamp paper, bringing together folk belief and modern legal practice. The petitions, made by private individuals, must be displayed in public, mimicking the structure of a state court. See Aditya Malik, ‘The Darbar of Golu Dev’, in Helen Basu and William S. Sax (eds), *The Law of Possession: Religion, Healing and the Secular State*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2015, pp. 193–230; C. M. Agarwal, *Golu Devta: The God of Justice in the Kumaon Himalayas*, Shree Almora Book Depot, Almora, 1992.

⁹ Lex Heerma van Voss offers this useful general definition of petitions as ‘demands for favour, or for the redressing of an injustice, directed to some established authority’.

van Voss, ‘Introduction’, p. 1.

¹⁰ Gupta, *Red Tape*, p. 167.

growth of more centralized, and more specialized and differentiated, state systems. One important root for modern conceptions of the petition in South Asia is formed by the Persian terms *'arzi* or *'arzdasht*, which have been carried over into modern South Asian vernaculars as one of many terms translatable as 'petition'. While *'arzi* or *arzee* was often translated as both 'petition' and 'complaint' in the colonial archives, in pre-colonial South Asia this word referred to a variety of forms of address and supplication—which could also be rendered as letters, reports, or requests rather than petitions—but it usually implied a hierarchical relationship between an 'inferior' presenter of the *'arzi* and a 'superior' recipient.¹¹ Meanwhile, the English term 'petition' itself has been used to refer to diverse modes of supplication or demand, more or less informal or formal, and more or less 'private' or 'public' in nature. In the early modern period, the term petition coexisted with, and was not always neatly distinguished from, other English terms, like memorial, address, letter, complaint, or plaint, which all described common forms of writing that staged interactions between supplicants or complainants and figures of authority.¹²

This collection of articles takes a relatively open-ended view of what constitutes, or constituted, a petition. Rather than creating a narrow definitional template for comparative purposes, the goal was to see what the broad category of petitioning might mean for scholars working on different regions and periods of South Asian history, and therefore to glimpse something of the range of historical terms, genres, and practices that encompassed forms of address to political authority involving claims for favour or redress. Despite the many variations in the forms of petitioning studied in the articles in this volume, an important feature of the history of petitioning has been the trans-regional, cross-cultural breadth of petitioning as a practice. From the medieval period onwards, with the expansion of integrative cultures of governance, paper, and writing, including the growing

¹¹ For a longer discussion of different early modern terminologies of petitioning, see especially Abhishek Kaicker's and Rosalind O'Hanlon's articles in this special issue.

¹² For discussions of petitioning in British and Anglophone politics in the early modern period, see Mark Knights, 'Participation and Representation before Democracy: Petitions and Addresses in Premodern Britain', in Ian Shapiro, Susan C. Stokes, Elisabeth Jean Wood and Alexander S. Kirshner (eds), *Political Representation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009. See also Sarah Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, pp. 97–98.

reach of Turko-Mongol and Persianate forms of rule in South Asia, basic templates and formulas for petitioning rulers spread over wide areas.¹³ Yet different languages and cultures of political writing were never bounded or discrete but constantly interacted with other, more or less, localized or trans-regional idioms of power. As O'Hanlon's article on early modern western India especially emphasizes, the language of written petitions reflected the polyglot politics of South Asia's diverse early modern states.¹⁴ In the cultural crossroads of early modern South Asia, petitioning could also act as a kind of intercultural 'bridge' or semi-familiar protocol that enabled diverse kinds of mobile subjects to insert themselves into networks of social and political power.¹⁵

The Scottish private trader or 'interloper' Alexander Hamilton told an interesting story from the reign of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (1658–1707) that suggests the fluid, incorporative logic of petitioning as a way of managing diversity within the vast realms of the Mughal empire. As Hamilton told the story, an English East India Company servant, one Mr Boucher, was expelled from the Company's service

¹³ For a discussion of practices of petitioning in the Islamic world, as connected to the 'classical Islamic institution' of the *mazalim* court, see Ben Bussat, *Petitioning the Sultan: Protests and Justice in Late Ottoman Palestine*, I. B. Tauris, London, 2014, pp. 20–44. Bussat particularly emphasizes the 'global phenomenon' of petitioning as a demand to the ruler for 'extra-judicial' forms of redress, arguing that 'surprisingly similar patterns of submitting petitions exist in places far removed from each other on the globe'. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁴ The 'impurity' of diction in eighteenth-century Bengali language petitions, which included numerous words derived from Arabic, Persian, and Hindustani, became an object of critique for British officials producing Bengali grammars. See Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink. Script, Print and the Making of the English East India Company*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 244–46.

¹⁵ For the role of petitions in managing the 'polyglot, cosmopolitan world' of subjects in late seventeenth-century Bombay under East India Company rule, see Philip J. Stern, 'Power, Petitions, and the "Povo" in Early English Bombay', in Aparna Balachandran, Rashmi Pant and Bhavani Raman (eds), *Iterations of Law: Legal Histories from India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2017, pp. 186–209. For the notion of 'bridges' that mediated early modern encounters between different 'courtly cultures' in the early modern era, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters. Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2015, p. 30. For an important, recent essay exploring 'common practices in many different kinds of political communities between 1400 and 1800 that helped to structure relations across polities', see Lauren Benton and Adam Clulow, 'Legal Encounters and the Origins of Global Law', in Jerry H. Bentley, Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Merry E. Wiesner Hanks (eds), *The Cambridge World History. Volume 6: The Construction of a Global World 1400–1800 CE. Part 2, Patterns of Change*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015, pp. 80–100.

after falling out with the high-handed Company governor at Surat, John Child.¹⁶ Threatened with imprisonment by the Mughal governor of Surat, who had allegedly been bribed by Child, Boucher decided to make his appeal to the very top. Thus, he travelled to Aurangzeb's peripatetic court and tried to petition the emperor for a *farman* or imperial order granting imperial protection. From Hamilton we learn that Boucher spent 14 fruitless months in addressing the great emperor but his 'Petitions to the Secretary had no effect'. But then Boucher, in Hamilton's telling, had a lucky break. His English assistant and interpreter, one Mr Swan, a man apparently uncommonly 'fond of arrack', used the occasion of Aurangzeb's moving camp to approach 'pretty near the King, holding his Petition or Rocca [Arabic *ruq'a* or writing] above his head and cried with a loud voice in the Persian language, that his master wanted Justice done him'. According to Hamilton, Aurangzeb's eye was attracted to the enterprising Swan by his 'European garb' and the emperor was 'startled at the bold expressions'. The emperor therefore considered Boucher's petition and ordered the requested *farman* to be drawn up.¹⁷

It is not clear in this case whether the agent Swan was in fact emulating practices of petitioning the emperor (holding the writing over his head, and crying out for justice) that he had seen around the Mughal court.¹⁸ We do know that Mughal political theory often emphasized the virtue of emperors in hearing the petitions of subjects in person, and also that petitioners often approached emperors when

¹⁶ For George Boucher or Bowcher's numerous conflicts in the 1680s with East India Company authorities, who regarded him as an 'interloper', see Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State. Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, 2011, p. 45, 51, 65–68.

¹⁷ Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies, being the observations and remarks of Captain Alexander Hamilton, who spent his time there between 1688 and 1723*, Edinburgh, 1727, Vol. 1, pp. 196–98.

¹⁸ According to the famous nineteenth-century Anglo-Indian dictionary, *Hobson-Jobson*, in the entry for 'Doai, Dwyé', 'Every Englishman in Upper India has often been saluted by the calls of "Dohāi khudāvand kī! Dohāi Mahārāj! Dohāi Kompanī Bahādūr!" Justice, my Lord! Justice, O King, Justice, O Company'. Yule and Burnell disputed the derivation of *dohai* or *duhai* from a Persian sense of 'two times, alas', instead tracing it to a Sanskrit root, *droha*, meaning 'injury' or 'wrong'. They point out that Ibn Batuta, in his fourteenth-century travel account, reported Indian creditors crying out 'Darōhai' in the presence of rulers to shame debtors. They also note that in some nineteenth-century princely states a false cry of *dohai* was regarded as a serious offence; see Henry Yule, A. C. Burnell, and William Crooke, *Hobson-Jobson. A Dictionary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian words and phrases*, John Murray, London, 1903, p. 321.

they were moving around, for example on hunting trips.¹⁹ Whatever the case, Hamilton seemed to imply that it was in part the strangeness of Swan's European clothes and 'bold' words that did the trick on this occasion. Yet for our purposes, it is important to note that for Alexander Hamilton and his eighteenth-century European readership, though the particular forms and courtly etiquette associated with approaching the Mughal emperor may have appeared alien, the act of appealing to the person of the emperor and presenting a written petition was an easily recognizable practice common to many early modern monarchies.²⁰ Hamilton's story also signals other important aspects of petitioning, which has often involved the intermingling of written and oral forms of address, as well as a complex relationship between petitioning as an interpersonal mode of communication and petitioning as a ritualized kind of 'public' performance. As many of the articles in this volume emphasize, the texts of written petitions should be seen only as one part of a process of address and response that was often an extremely long-drawn-out process, as in the case of Boucher's petition to Aurangzeb. The complexity of petitioning as a process is another reason why historicizing petitions can richly illuminate the changing structures of power with which petitioners (and rulers) have had to contend.

Several broad themes connect the different studies of petitioning presented below. The first is the role of petitioning as a mechanism of state-centralization, institution-building, and the bureaucratization of state power in South Asia from the early modern era through to the present. The emergence of new venues for receiving and hearing petitions, or changes in the language and rhetoric of petitions, has often been a prominent marker of the expanding ambition of centralizing states to intervene more intensively in local society. A second, related theme is the work of petitioning as an instrument not only of centralization, but also of the standardization and routinization of political relations. Petitioning has always had a strongly pedagogical aspect, by which petitioning subjects have been both incorporated and

¹⁹ See the discussion of petitioning in the Mughal court in Kaicker's article in this special issue; and for princes hearing petitions during hunting expeditions, see Munis D. Faruqi, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire 1504–1719*, University of California, Berkeley, 2015, p. 119.

²⁰ For a study emphasizing the work of petitioning as a form of 'trans-imperial' politics in the early modern Mediterranean, see Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empire. Trans-imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2012.

at the same time acculturated into sanctioned modes of rhetorical address and bodily comportment—certain norms, in short, of political conduct. This collection of articles especially emphasizes how this pedagogical and disciplinary aspect of petitioning as a mediated form of political conduct was a prominent feature of colonial rule in South Asia. The British colonial state drew on powerful new technologies for remaking practices of petitioning in South Asia, including an expanded system of centralized legislation (with printed rules governing petitioners) and more centralized, bureaucratized, and homogenized systems of judicial redress through colonial law courts. But the colonial state also operated by consciously reworking older idioms of hierarchical and monarchical address, casting ‘native’ petitioners as humble supplicants of imperial favour, rather than politically engaged citizens representing the will of the people.

In some tension with the mediated character of petitions as state-sanctioned forms of address, a third major theme of the articles is the role of petitioning as a potent vehicle for unpredictably creative forms of protest, dissent, and political agency, and for the forging of new political communities. As the articles by Kaicker and O’Hanlon suggest, petitioning functioned as a catalyst for new forms of ‘public’, and practices of popular political engagement, in an early modern era of rapid political and social transformations. Colonial strategies for limiting the political reach and impact of ‘native’ petitions thus confronted a dynamic petitionary culture in early modern South Asia which included collective and corporate forms of petitioning, for example, from merchants, communities of urban labourers, or by peasants.²¹ Meanwhile, in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain, petitioning was increasingly becoming an instrument of mass political mobilization, especially for anti-slavery activists, which was tied to emergent notions of popular sovereignty, public

²¹ In an influential essay on pre-colonial South Asian and Southeast Asian polities, Michael Adas coined the term ‘contest state’ for political systems in which central powers made expansive claims to sovereignty that were ‘severely restricted in practice’. In such a fluid system, he argued, peasants used petitions to high powers to manoeuvre between different strata of contending lordships. Michael Adas, ‘From Avoidance to Confrontation: Peasant Protest in Precolonial and Colonial South East Asia’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 23, 2, 1981, pp. 217–47. For a study of artisan petitions that draws on Adas’s model of a ‘contest state’, see Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest*. For a recent study of merchant petitions from early colonial western India, see Lakshmi Subramanian, *The Sovereign and the Prince. Ordering Maritime Subjects in India’s Western Littoral*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2016, especially pp. 61–102.

opinion, and the right of 'the people' to be heard.²² By the 1820s and 1830s, reform-minded political activists were mobilizing emergent Anglo-Indian publics in colonial port towns by petitioning the East India Company and parliament on issues such as freedom of the press, trade liberalization, and Indian representation on juries.²³ One of these reformers, Leicester Stanhope, linked his campaign for freedom of the press in British India to the way Mughal emperors had encouraged petitioners to come forward with complaints. 'Persons are apt to make a boastful contrast between British rule and the system of anarchy that preceded it. Let them,' Stanhope wrote, 'rather compare the noble administration of Akbar with that even of a Cornwallis or a Hastings', adding that 'there was greater liberty indulged in petitioning, in education, and in writing, than was enjoyed at that period in England'.²⁴

The links between petitioning and popular mobilization became more evident with the rise of mass politics and representative or democratic institutions in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Majid Siddiqi has emphasized, the growth in the number and circulation of petitions, including collective petitions, in late nineteenth-century India was linked to new ideas of popular politics and national consciousness.²⁵ Bhavani Raman's article in this volume notes how anti-colonial nationalists in late colonial India, including Gandhi, consciously sought to rework the idea of the petition, from a loyalist idiom of hierarchical address into a powerful form of non-violent moral coercion, an aspect of Gandhi's language of truth-force or *satyagraha*. Meanwhile, as Aparna Balachandran and Prashant Kidambi's articles, especially, highlight, petitioning also formed part of a broader repertoire of more subaltern political actions designed

²² Knights, 'Participation and representation', pp. 41–42; De Costa, 'Identity and authority', pp. 671–72.

²³ Lynn Zastoupil, *Rammohun Roy and the Making of Victorian Britain*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010, pp. 62–65, 101–05, 118; C. A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties. Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012. For Indians travelling to Britain as political agents and petitioners in the nineteenth century, see Michael H. Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism. Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain 1600–1857*, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2004, especially pp. 82–100 and 243–98.

²⁴ Leicester Stanhope, *Sketch of the History and Influence of the Press in British India*, London, 1823, pp. 4–5. Stanhope also praised the Marquis of Hastings (governor-general from 1813–23) for 'adopting the practice of the ancient sovereigns, by receiving in his walks and rides the petitions of the meanest natives'. *Ibid.* p. 2.

²⁵ Siddiqi, *The British Historical Context*, pp. 30–37.

to bring pressure to bear on colonial authorities, including forming crowds, processions, and other kinds of assemblies; desertion and flight, as well as strikes and riots. The growth of limited representative legislative institutions in the late colonial era also created new incentives for collective mobilization around particular issues. As De points out in his article, attempts to settle the question of cow protection by petitions to the legislatures and courts in independent India occurred alongside orchestrated violence and everyday extra-legal policing.

The end of empire and the inauguration of new post-colonial republics marked, in some ways, an important break with aspects of the old colonial culture of petitioning. The desires of the people were now to be ascertained through elections. Political parties were expected to petition people for their support. At the same time, the post-colonial period also witnessed the growth of new forms of individual and collective petitioning, related to the expansion of newly ambitious legislatures and administrative states, and to new legal avenues for collective political mobilization, for example, writ petitions to the Supreme Court of India.²⁶ In recent times, in India, the election of the Modi-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in 2014 and the narrowing of space for political opposition have seen the rise of open letters and public petitions that are drafted not with the expectation of getting a result, but as a way to demonstrate dissent.²⁷ These petitions seek to be demonstrative, marking the signatories out as individuals who refuse to be complicit in the current state of affairs. As the arrest and blacklisting of academic signatories of similar petitions in Turkey shows, the act of public signing can be viewed as a disruptive act by an authoritarian state.²⁸

²⁶ Rohit De, 'Rebellion, Dacoity, and Equality: The Emergence of the Constitutional Field in Postcolonial India', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 34, 2, 2014, pp. 260–78. William Gould, *Bureaucracy, Community and Influence in India: Society and State 1930s–1960s*, Routledge, Basingstoke, 2011.

²⁷ See, for instance, 'Open Letter by Retired Senior Bureaucrats Demanding that the Prime Minister Take Action against Hate Crimes', 16 April 2018, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/full-text-of-open-letter-from-retired-civil-servants-to-pm-modi-on-unnao-kathua-rape-cases/article23553651.ece>, [accessed 17 October 2018]. 'Open Letter by Academics and Scholars Criticising Inaction on the Kathua and Unnao Rape Cases', 21 April 2018, <https://thewire.in/gender/over-600-academics-scholars-write-to-pm-on-kathua-unnao-rapes>, [accessed 17 October 2018].

²⁸ Bahar Baser, Samim Akgönül and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "'Academics for Peace" in Turkey: A Case of Criminalising Dissent and Critical Thought via Counterterrorism Policy', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 10, 2, 2017, pp. 274–96.

A fourth and final connective theme, most explicitly addressed in the articles by Julia Stephens and Nayanika Mathur (but present to varying degrees throughout the volume), is the powerful symbolic and affective dimensions of petitioning as a political practice. For political historians, a focus on petitioning can open up new questions about the theatrical and performative aspects of the 'everyday state'.²⁹ Both the form and content of written petitions, even as they were reworked by the professedly impersonal and rule-bound bureaucracies of modern states, conserved powerful traces of an older patrimonial notion of rulership as a personal, face-to-face relationship between a just ruler and a needy supplicant. For example, procedures for presenting petitions in person, or in crowded public spaces, to the present day retain an echo of earlier monarchical or sacred rituals of petition, a trace of the 'courtly' in the modern courthouse and collectorate.³⁰ This strongly personal aspect of petitioning can be a potential source of solace or relief and a way of attempting to 'humanize' as well as 'sanctify' power, but this sense of personal encounter also heightens the stakes, and the riskiness, of the act of petitioning both for the giver and receiver of a petition. Petitioning is thus an ordinary, ubiquitous, and bureaucratic act that can also become freighted with a potent ethical charge, an accumulated moral force derived in part from the dauntingly broad and deep history of petitioning as a practice.

The articles below proceed in a broadly chronological organization. Given the depth and diversity of the history of petitioning in South Asia, this volume can only offer an episodic series of soundings in a rich seam of historical inquiry, rather than a comprehensive survey.³¹

²⁹ C. J. Fuller and Veronique Bénéti (eds), *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*, Hurst, London, 2001; Taylor Sherman, William Gould and Sarah Ansari (eds), *From Subjects to Citizens. Society and the Everyday State in India and Pakistan, 1947–1970*, Cambridge University Press, Delhi, 2014.

³⁰ See, for example, the evocative case of rural Dalit women petitioning the district Collector in contemporary Pudukkottai, Tamil Nadu. Francis Cody described how the women hoped to 'make an affective claim' on the Collector 'through eye contact', though when they arrived at the Collector's office he had already left for the day. Cody writes: 'Any governmental claims to rationalized and disenchanting Weberian bureaucracy remain particularly vexed in this context, because the collector does in fact sit in the erstwhile king's seat, in his palace. In fact, he collects petitions in the old darbar hall where the king of Pudukkottai would have met with the court and those who had come to plead before royalty.' Cody, 'Inscribing Subjects to Citizenship', pp. 368–69.

³¹ For another recent collection, which is also centrally concerned with petitioning as an aspect of modern legal regimes, see Balachandran, Pant and Raman (eds), *Iterations of Law*.

Each article offers a snapshot of petitioning at particular moments, and particular regions, and also suggests some possible ways of reading petitions to analyse broader constellations of social and political power. We hope that the articles will stimulate further research on similar materials and will help to develop new ways of analysing the particular forms of petitions and ‘petition-like’ documents across time and space.³² Further historical study of petitions can generate fruitful new connections between South Asia and other regional histories, as well as encouraging new conversations among scholars working on different periods of South Asian history.

Outline of articles

During the early modern era (from *circa* 1500–1800) in South Asia, as in other parts of the world, the spread of money and paper, and the consolidation of larger state systems, created a new impetus towards the presentation and archiving of written petitions as a key genre within expansive, if still decentred, processes of bureaucratization. Abhishek Kaicker’s article explores the potent symbolism of petitioning in the Mughal empire as a marker of just kingship, alongside the more mundane, practical work of written petitions in connecting local and central officials, in everyday forms of appeal to legal authorities and in the ‘popular practice of politics’. In what Kaicker terms the ‘administrative imagination’ of the Mughal empire, expressed in classic texts like the late sixteenth-century *A’in-i Akbari*, ‘all manner of local disputes were smoothly resolved by the state’s apparatus—at least in theory’. In practice, however, political power remained fluid and diffuse in a pervasive early modern pattern of layered lordships. Kaicker’s article uses close readings of solitary documents, fragmentary records of lengthy political and legal disputes, to explore ‘processes of local politics which operated in excess of the administrative logic of the Mughal state’. Petitioning, in his article, appears less as an event than as ongoing practice and process. In particular, through a detailed contextualization of one Persian testimony produced by Muslim elites in Kol (Aligarh) from 1741, Kaicker shows how collective forms of written address were

³² For the concept of ‘petition-like’, see Tarangini Sriraman, ‘A Petition-Like Application: Rhetoric and Rationing Documents in Wartime Delhi, 1941–45’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 51, 3, 2014, pp. 353–82.

symptomatic of the pervasive imbrication of imperial administration and local arenas of politics. In this case, he suggests, ‘the contingent activation of a particular identity [the ‘community’ of Muslims in Kol] to generate a solidarity in a moment of local conflict’ was perhaps also exacerbated by power-struggles attendant on central imperial decline.

Rosalind O’Hanlon’s article on early modern western India similarly traces the complex political effects of early modern petitioning and the way in which ‘judicial’ procedures could become an important arena for expressions of collective forms of solidarity and agency. By reconstructing numerous disputes over ‘property or an office and its perquisites’ between 1600 and 1820, O’Hanlon argues that practices of claims-making over particular rights were also embedded in, and constitutive of, ‘local publics’ situated between the space of ‘the official and the familial’. These publics were connected within highly formalized adjudicatory mechanisms involving communities of kinsmen (*gota*) and also larger assemblies of local notables or religious scholars—*majalis* and *dharmasabha*. O’Hanlon shows how this constellation of localized publics was increasingly absorbed into a more centralized form of the Maratha state in the eighteenth century, signalled by the growing importance of smaller, more state-oriented tribunals (*panchayats*). Here the changing forms of petitionary culture indexed the centralization of state power, linked to long-term processes of commercialization and centralized revenue extraction. ‘However,’ she writes, ‘the panchayat did not snuff out these local publics’, but rather ‘connected them’ especially through expanding flows of documentary testimony supplied by claimants and communities during judicial disputes. O’Hanlon’s article situates these emergent forms of South Asian ‘publics’ within a wider comparative analysis of ‘Eurasian “early modernities”’. Further, she suggests how later colonial attempts ‘to narrow the channels through which suits, petitions and complaints reached its courts and judges’ intersected with earlier Maratha strategies of judicial centralization.

Robert Travers’ article suggests how the vibrant petitionary culture of early modern South Asia was an important context for the rapid consolidation of a new East India Company government in Bengal and Bihar in the later eighteenth century. Mughal and *nawabi* rule had fostered practices of petitioning local, provincial, and central authorities for remissions of revenue, claims to rights, and state patronage. Travers’ article shows how the East India Company, in styling itself as Mughal *diwan*, also worked to appropriate and redirect

earlier modes of petitioning and centripetal claims-making. By creating new venues for receiving petitions in the Company's *'adalats'* or law courts, and by co-opting old venues (for example, the *'khalsa'* or central revenue office of the *nawabs*), the Company government was able to draw on a dynamic (and Persianized) infrastructure of scribal mediation and political agents (*wakils*) that linked large cities to agrarian hinterlands. Travers also points to the political tensions produced by British encounters with regional practices of petitioning rulers. A contemporary Mughal author compared the Company's inaccessible, authoritarian system of centralized legislation and judicial determination unfavourably with the more flexible, give-and-take of public audiences in the Mughal *darbar*. By contrast, British reformers (especially Lord Cornwallis) sought to restrict what they saw as unruly and politically threatening modes of Indian petitioning, redirecting petitioners away from the Company's council chambers and into the highly regulated spaces of a new colonial judiciary.

Bhavani Raman, building on her earlier work on the early colonial 'document Raj' in South India, further explores the colonial recasting of Indian petitioning as a highly regulated domain of state-sanctioned juridical and political address, but also highlights the 'polyvalent' meanings of petitioning. Raman's article engages critically with historical theories of petitioning that have presumed a connection between the petition as a form and the growth of liberal notions of 'public opinion' or a consenting 'demos'. Instead, she situates practices of petitioning colonial authorities in South India within a British imperial tradition of 'appeals in equity', which was layered onto earlier 'Persianate' idioms of redress, arguing that petitions functioned as a technology of rule through which 'a paternalist government sought to shape a consenting subject'. Petitions to the colonial government in Madras, she argues, combined 'hierarchical notions of equity' with 'a tone of redress or compensation evocative of corporate shareholding rather than the idioms of liberal political representation'. Raman's article suggests therefore how iterative and 'quintessentially hierarchical' practices of petitioning permeated the Company government with down-flowing notions of justice as equity, limiting the force of the petition as a potential vehicle for dissent or protest. Raman's intervention poses a challenge to views that see the ubiquity of petitioning as inevitably arising from liberal constitutionalism. She further suggests how later nationalist thinkers like Gandhi wrestled with this contained and 'lawyerly' mode of colonial petitioning, and themselves recast the petition as a site

for contesting the legitimacy of colonial rule by foregrounding the (withdrawable) consent of the governed—‘not only the petition as an artefact of law, but its efficacy as a type of relational address’.

Aparna Balachandran’s article also focuses on early colonial South India, showing how communities of low caste and outcaste (‘Pariah’) labourers in Madras used petitions to narrativize new forms of community identity, making ethical as well as legal claims on government patronage. Directly addressing the vexed question of the ‘authorship’ of petitions, in a context of dense mediations by official agencies and petition writers, Balachandran reads labouring petitions as evidence of an emergent ‘legal self-understanding’ among urban workers. Petitions claiming the right to occupy residential settlements (*paracheris*) invoked ‘communal solidarities’ (sometimes ‘trans local’ in form), a legalistic concept of custom as precedent, and ‘an incipient language of . . . rights’ which was ‘severed from the context of agrestic servitude’. Yet these petitions also indexed new threats to urban workers and outcaste communities in an era of imperial consolidation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with the increasing ‘gentrification’ of urban space and the growing ‘dissociation of urban communities from governance’. Balachandran’s work suggests the existence of a literate mentality—and sophisticated forms of ‘legal self-understanding’, even outside the strictly policed, bureaucratic world of petition-writers and scribes, and shows how petitions can be a valuable source for understanding the political effects of empire on poor and marginalized communities.

In the ‘administrative imagination’ of the British Indian empire from the late eighteenth century onwards, most claims on the state from individuals were supposed to be handled in colonial law courts, and judgment given on the basis of written codes of regulations or of officially sanctioned versions of community law. Yet Julia Stephens’ article reveals how a socially diverse group of Indian petitioners continued also to make ‘personal pleas’, outside the normal legal channels, to governors of the different presidencies and even to the home authorities and parliament, in search of special favour or the redress of particular grievances. Focusing on Bombay (Mumbai) and its presidency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Stephens links the form of the personal plea to the model of indirect rule through the monarchical households of princely states, as well as to gendered conceptions of female dependence. At the same time, notions of ‘imperial guardianship’ were also a common feature of petitions from the poor. Stephens describes a growing ‘bureaucracy

of rejection', in which British Indian authorities created avenues for such personal pleas, but then routinely rejected them on the basis of upholding judicial norms or because the petitioners broke the formal 'petitioning rules' issued by government. Stephens' article opens up a fascinating and little-explored archive of personal pleas, while using it to think beyond a narrowly functionalist or instrumentalist reading of petitions. Rather, in a context where petitions were rarely directly efficacious, she argues that petitioning fulfilled an 'emotive' function, by airing 'the contradictions and tensions of empire'. For both rulers and ruled, she suggests, personal petitions became a site for 'pushing back against the distancing logic of the abstract state' and for foregrounding 'needs over legal rights', even if the desires of petitioners and the self-image of colonial rulers as benevolent patriarchs were both (much more often than not) wishful fantasies.

Prashant Kidambi also focuses on Bombay, but on a different strata and mode of petitioning related to the consolidation of new forms of urban governance and politicized social identities in an era of rapid industrialization and urbanization. Kidambi shows how a surge of petitioning was, in part, a response by Bombay's inhabitants to the rise of a more 'intrusive state' from the 1890s, including a new plague administration and the 'Bombay Improvement Trust'. Petitions against the state's violations of rights, or for new urban amenities, encompassed a 'complex set of orientations towards the colonial state', which was often viewed in the language of petitions not as a remote superstructure but as 'embedded in local structures and networks of power'. Kidambi especially emphasizes how petitioning urban authorities 'was both a routine reinscription of power relations and also a potential "event" that could unsettle them'; a petition, he writes, 'could exceed its documentary confines and generate new communities of action'. Kidambi therefore connects the growth of petitioning to 'the consolidation of urban civil society' in Bombay and also to new forms of popular politics and protest. Petitioning by diverse subaltern groups, including industrial labourers, was often accompanied by public meetings and strikes, and thus became 'exercises in the public performance of the "political"'.

The early twentieth century offers a rich archive of petitioning in South Asia, not only because of the rapid spread of print technology and the proliferation of newspapers, but also because of the rapid growth of community and political organizations that sought to impress their case upon the colonial state. With limited representative institutions, petitioners moved towards law courts, particularly in

cases that involved conflicts between communities. Studying over a hundred years of competitive petitioning over cow slaughter, Rohit De's article traces how, instead of disciplining popular politics, petitioning provided channels of mobilization and disruption, and complemented violence and street politics. By the early twentieth century, mass petitioning over cow slaughter gave way to competitive litigation between communities before the provincial high courts, where what were effectively public petitions about community rights were framed in the language of the civil procedure code. Concerns over cow protection created two different orders of democratic practice in the colonial period. While activists in the cow protection movement generated massive petitions with thousands of signatures, ostensibly addressed to state officials but aimed at communicating with a larger Indian public and demonstrating the size of a community, Muslims turned to courts, focusing on the rights to property and religion. Independence disrupted both narratives, with cow protectionists faced with a representative government that was reluctant to have an absolute ban on cow slaughter, while Indian Muslims faced a constitutional system where their rights to property and religion were subservient to 'national development'.

Nayanika Mathur's concluding article brings this volume up to the present day in India, in a discussion of petitions to government authorities 'to capture or kill big cats', especially leopards, in the Himalayan regions of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Practices of urban and rural complaining about big cats in these mountainous spaces have become sites for debating the responsibility of the state to humans and to animals, for disputing the ethics of conservationist regulations protecting big cats, and for imagining the 'agency' of the cats themselves. Like several other contributors, Mathur draws attention to the 'whole range of other actions around' the act of submitting petitions, including processions, assemblies, and more mundane acts of '*chakkar marna*' or 'going round and round'. These 'other actions' now extend into new digital technologies, such as the use of WhatsApp and text messages to circulate grievances and demands, a rapid acceleration of the process of mobilizing publics around petitions, which Mathur calls 'a radically new form of making appeals'. Mathur emphasizes especially how the 'theatrics' and performativity around the act of petitioning can be crucial to the efficacy of particular petitions, especially for less privileged or well-connected petitioners; a canny staging of the petition can work to mobilize local communities and publics, and generate a potent political stir.

Mathur's article highlights again how, as she writes, 'arzees [or petitions] 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'. This multi-dimensional aspect of petitioning also challenges scholars to continue probing the boundaries of their own concepts—including such critical concepts as sovereignty, the state, legality, justice, and the political. As these articles together make clear, the *Indian Express* headline 'No more petitioners: no more petitioners' is only one more moment in a long historical process of debating the role and character of petitions and petitioners in the political cultures of South Asia and beyond. Judging from the continuing vibrancy and diversity of petitioning as practice, and of scholarship about petitioning, scholars in the future may well respond: 'No. More petitioners'.

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