Journal of Documentation

Navigating the state from the margins: understanding the material and affective aspects of women's engagement with identity documents in rural India

Received 23 May 2025
Revised 12 August 2025
Accepted 15 August 2025

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores the significance of identity documents (IDs) (paper-based and digital data) in state-citizen interactions from the point of view of rural and marginalized women in India, specifically in the southern state of Karnataka. Citizens obtain, hold on to, carry and produce IDs as receipts of their presence in the state's population registries and proofs of their citizenship. This paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how women in rural areas – marginalized along the lines of gender, class, caste and rural-urban gap – manage and navigate the state's documentary requirements to access social welfare.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employs a social constructionist framework comprising guided tours (Thomson, 2018) with 14 women selected using purposive sampling across 3 villages in Mysuru district, Karnataka, India. The data were analyzed using the qualitative research software ATLAS.ti.

Findings – The study shows that women's engagement with documents and consequently their interaction with the state is shaped by their caste, class, gender and geographical location. Women found acquiring IDs exhausting as they incur immense financial, logistical and emotional costs. At home, they take up the majority of the responsibility of maintaining IDs of the family and find it burdensome. Women also expressed feeling obligated to provide paper-based IDs as well as biometric data to the state. The affective states prompt them to configure careful and elaborate document classification and storing practices. They also regularly forge formal and informal networks with each other, the government functionaries and local non-governmental organizations to help them navigate the state's documentary requirements.

Originality/value – This paper focuses on rural and marginalized women's practices around IDs, a population that is often not centered within the literature around information practices, personal information management and personal record-keeping. Furthermore, the paper makes a theoretical contribution by drawing upon the concept of emotion as "contact zones" (Ahmed, 2014) and developing it for Information Science. Specifically, the paper frames identity documents as "contact zones" wherein women encounter and negotiate with the state. By emphasizing the complexity and imperfectness that characterizes women's engagement with IDs, the paper challenges the Indian state's rhetoric of "seamless," "paperless" and "contactless" welfare delivery.

Keywords Identity documents, Digital data, Documentation, Gender, Caste, State, Bureaucracy, Materiality, Affect

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Ranju [1], a homemaker residing in a village in Mysuru district [2] in southern India, is meticulous about organizing her and her family's identity documents (IDs). Each member of the family has a plastic folder of their own. She keeps these folders in a bag, which is then safely locked inside a drawer in a cupboard. Regarding her sorting methods, she said, "Caste [3] and income certificates [4] are not asked for very frequently but are very important, so I have kept them separate. On the other hand, Aadhaar cards [5], ID cards [a colloquial term for voter IDs], ration cards [6], etc., need to be produced again and again. So they are kept separately in a plastic bag." When I asked her why she felt the need to keep these documents so safely and well-organized, she replied immediately, "What if someone suddenly asks for the

Disclosure statement: No potential conflict of interest is reported by the author(s)

Journal of Documentation

e-ISSN: 1758-7379
p-ISSN: 0022-0418
DOI 10.1108/JD-05-2025-0145

papers tomorrow? I should be able to produce them. I don't want to be in a position where I am frantically looking for the folders." Ranju's associations of documents and files with experiences of anxiety and uncertainty stood contrary to what these artifacts were intended to do. Documents, as technologies for recording, and files, as technologies for gathering documents, were introduced to reduce anxiety and uncertainty over loss of information, particularly at workplaces and among bureaucrats (Robertson, 2021b). By the 20th century, needing to maintain papers such as drivers' license and tax documents became a concern at home. Organizing tools such as folders then became "practical solutions" for efficient "time-and-worry-saving" management and retrieval of papers (Robertson, 2021b). How, then, did these artifacts continue to elicit emotions so starkly different from the intended objective? In this paper, I look at rural and marginalized women's everyday engagement with IDs – particularly the material implications and the affective states that undergird them – to underscore how IDs, as information technologies, elicit feelings of exhaustion, burden and obligation. Drawing upon literature from Information Science, Affective Studies and Science and Technology Studies (STS), this paper explores how women in rural areas of Mysuru – marginalized along the lines of gender, caste, class and the rural-urban gap – interact with the Indian state through their IDs (both paper-based and digital IDs).

2. Identity documentation and welfare in India

The process of creation of written records of citizens, also known as registration or identification, has been used by the modern state (Szreter and Breckenridge, 2012) to track and manage information about its citizens, verify their eligibility for state welfare and articulate the boundaries and social composition of nationhood. Rights-based claim-making infrastructure related to land, welfare, education and health often relies on an established documentation and registration system (Hunter, 2019). Documents continue to be relevant in state-citizen relationships, more so because of their role in marking citizens' subjecthood and determining their access to welfare (Kosciejew, 2015). India – one of the biggest democracies in the world – runs several social welfare and protection programs that cater to the poor and vulnerable groups such as women and children. This includes safety nets such as rights-based guarantees for work, subsidized food grains, cash transfers and scholarships for students (Drèze and Khera, 2013; Kruks-Wisner, 2018; Rahman and Pingali, 2024). Given that these welfare programs have a wide scope in terms of the populations they cover and the benefits they provide, the Indian government and technology entrepreneurs have pushed toward building an identification and registration infrastructure that is "comparably powerful" (Nilekani, 2009).

In the last 2 decades, the Indian state, in collaboration with private technology companies, has integrated digital data into its identification and registration processes (Chaudhuri, 2019; Khera, 2011; Gurumurthy *et al.*, 2016). Under this Digital India initiative, the national identification project, Aadhaar, provides each citizen with a unique ID that is synced across national databases (such as those related to taxes and voting registries) to facilitate welfare delivery. Nilekani (2009) referred to the technological components (e.g. linked databases and electronic documents) as basic building blocks of the state's information infrastructure. Since Digital India's roll-out, the government has insisted that the linked databases are an "efficient," "seamless," "contactless" and "paperless" (Government of India, *n.d.*) way to deliver benefits (see Figure 1). It is amidst such celebratory narratives around the Digital India initiative that this research shows how the significance of papers in state-citizen interaction has not diminished. If anything, the digital and paper-based IDs imbricate onto each other. By highlighting experiences of women in rural Mysuru, this paper shows how navigating such a complex techno-social system can be an emotionally charged and materially significant experience. The research questions that guide this study are:

RQ 1. How do rural and marginalized women in Mysuru obtain, store and manage their identity documents?

Figure 1. Digital India promotion campaign for paperless welfare delivery. Source(s): Official Facebook Page of Digital India Initiative - https://www.facebook.com/OfficialDigitalIndia

RQ 2. How do the affective and material aspects of rural and marginalized women's engagement with identity documents shape their relationship with the state?

In this paper, I draw upon and contribute to the field of Information Science, Affective Studies and Science and Technology Studies to frame the information artifact of IDs as "contact zones" (Ahmed, 2014) wherein the state and citizens interact. These interactions are characterized by both affective and material dimensions that provide a helpful window into understanding state-citizen relationships. In particular, I focus on the everyday documentation practices of rural and marginalized women in India to illustrate how documents and documentation are frictional sites where women meet and negotiate with the state.

3. Review of literature

Within the field of Information Science, the making, circulation and usage of documents have received close attention as scholars have argued that documents mediate knowledge production and stabilize cultural meanings by giving information a concrete form. Paul Otlet (1934 cited in Buckland, 1991), conceptualizes a document as any object that has the potential to inform upon observation; this includes things like papers, artifacts, maps and monuments. Briet (2006) links documents to the idea of proof and writes that "[a] document is evidence in support of a fact." Ranganathan (1963), on the other hand, limits documents to two-dimensional surfaces that capture or embody a micro-thought and can be handled and transported as needed. What is common in all these definitions is that documents are material in nature and are "socially constructed to bear evidence" (Mokros, 2021, p. 413) of some kind. In this paper, I, too, use the term document to refer to the various proofs (both paper-based as well as their digital manifestations, data) that people need to transact with various welfare delivery agencies, such as the state and financial institutions, to seek benefits. Paper-based documents and electronic data as formats of identification are, as Krajewski (2021) and Koopman (2019) say, standardized carriers of information and knowledge. Additionally, drawing upon Shankar *et al.* (2017), I treat IDs, whether paper-based or digital data, as inseparable from the practices of documentation, such as obtaining, managing and producing them.

3.1 Documents as prerequisites for welfare

By examining society's engagement with documents, one of the strands of literature has demonstrated how documents construct, shape and enforce identities (Szreter and Breckenridge, 2012). Frohmann (2008) describes documents and the process of documentation as self-constitutive, i.e. "it brings its own subject into being." Similarly, Koopman (2019) explains that we are not just mediated by our data but are constituted by it. What this means is that documents,

in the form of birth certificates, school transcripts and even death certificates, in many ways, make up our existence. Such an insight is especially relevant in the context of state-citizen relationships, as governments worldwide and throughout history have found mechanisms to document people as taxpayers, property owners, students and state welfare beneficiaries. Szreter and Breckenridge (2012) refer to the modern state as a "registering machine" with the act of being documented as people's most common encounter with the state. Bureaucratic paperwork is at the heart of what they call the "infrastructure of personhood" that not only records, tracks and regulates but even brings into existence the subjects of the state or its citizens. As such, documents can be viewed as "boundary objects" (Star and Griesemer, 1989) or "translation devices" that span boundaries between the state and the people (Huvila *et al.*, 2017, p. 1808) to facilitate, often imperfectly, interactions between the state and the citizen community.

Scott (1998) discusses how the creation, standardization and codification of bureaucratic procedures, such as documents, is a mechanism that the state draws upon to simplify complex lives and practices of people into manageable entities that can be "recorded and monitored" (p. 2). He submits that written and official documents such as identity cards, registers, censuses, tax records and land records were "necessary to the successful conduct of any administrative exercise involving large numbers of people who had to be individually identified (p. 67)." These documents, however, are inherently incomplete as they never capture full reality and remain mere "simplified approximations" of it (p.76). Despite being incomplete representations, the state declares these IDs as prerequisites for receiving benefits and expects the citizenry to cooperate with the state by carrying them and producing them on demand. These practices are particularly visible at the local level. These include spaces such as government offices and banks – the most "immediate context[s] for encountering the state" (Gupta, 1995, p. 378). Such techniques of statecraft vest documents with disciplining power that shapes people's lives, thus further reproducing the state's authority.

These material and textual objects function as surrogates of power for the state. Such extraction of power through the creation and dissemination of documents is known as documentary authority (Mokros, 2021). Documentary authority assumes that documents are not neutral but political manifestations through which the state exercises power over its citizenry. If, for whatever reason, a citizen fails to produce all the required documents while applying for a welfare scheme, the bureaucratic protocol of the state will deny them the benefits, irrespective of their need. Abrams (1988) emphasizes this dual nature of the state when he argues that it is a system as well as an idea. For him, the state-system aspect comprises the institutions, practices and structures of governance and bureaucracy, and the state-idea refers to the symbolic and ideological nature which is articulated, projected and believed by the citizens. The ideology performs the function of legitimizing and reiterating its authority over the citizenry.

Another way to frame this state's authority in relation to documents is to view them as technologies of visibility. The presence of documents (or lack thereof) either renders people visible (or invisible) in the eyes of the state. In the context of digital manifestations of IDs or digital data that exists in state databases, Singh and Jackson (2021) discuss how data, actively classify, include and exclude citizens, producing tensions or "torque" between reality and its representation (in the state's records). The degree to which a citizen is visible or invisible to the state puts them on a spectrum of what they call "resolution." Citizens who do not have accurate or adequate data have the problem of the state "not-knowing-enough" about them; this often leads to exclusions from state welfare.

As we will see in the rest of the paper, the state's infrastructure of personhood, in this case, IDs, organizes people on a spectrum depending on what and how much the state knows about the citizens.

3.2 Everyday documentation practices

Literature within Information Science has examined how people manage different kinds of documents in everyday life in various contexts including organizations (Pardo *et al.*, 2006),

keeping track of tasks within a household (McKenzie and Davies, 2012), leisurely activities (Hartel, 2010; McKenzie and Davies, 2022; Prigoda and McKenzie, 2007), inter-personal messaging applications such as WhatsApp (Adavi and Acker, 2023) and during events such as migration and displacement (Krtalic and Ihejirika, 2023).

Studying everyday information and documentation practices provides a useful window into understanding how day-to-day routines and rhythms act as sites of friction and negotiations between people and the establishments they interact with. Pink (2012) argues that everyday life is a space of human creativity, innovation and transformation, offering opportunities for people to negotiate and contest social and economic institutions such as housing, healthcare, education, labor and bureaucracy. Framing the everyday as our site of study allows us to look at human activity as characterized by established norms as well as adaptation and negotiation. For instance, the key focus of scholarship at the intersection of practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977; de Certeau, 2013) and information behavior (Savolainen and Thomson, 2022; Savolainen, 2009) inquires how individuals or collectives obtain, collect, curate, retain and interact with documents. How do they sort, store and organize their documents? What social, cultural and political contexts are these practices embedded in? After all, contexts influence the norms and rules that determine how documentation practices are performed, who participates in them and how these norms and rules navigated and contested. Such lines of inquiry emphasize the socially and culturally situated meanings and practices of document creation, sharing, management and use.

Robertson (2021a) demonstrates the significance of social contexts when he shows how documentation within personal and organizational spaces are tethered to broader political and socio-economic contexts. For instance, several of our everyday information management practices and technologies such as index tabs and filing cabinets have a colonial and gendered history. Manila folders – as the name suggests – were made from hemp that was imported from the Philippines (a US colony until 1946) to support bureaucratic systems and administrative tasks of the colony. These technologies and practices also entered and evolved in modern-day workplaces to support capitalist notions of efficiency, address anxiety over information loss and break down the problem of documentation into discrete, observable and manageable parts. In the workplace, these document management systems were also driven by gendered labor; women were assigned the physical tasks of organizing and storing information, while men were assigned the intellectual task of interpreting it. The act of handling papers, sorting them into tabbed folders, became linked to feminine labor – routine, mechanical and requiring dexterity. The gendered logic of maintenance labor also manifests at home – a space that is already considered a "woman's responsibility" (Oakley, 2019; Pink, 2012; Treas and Drobnič, 2010). By presenting vignettes of how women in rural Mysuru sort and store their IDs, this paper attempts to foreground the socio-political and cultural motivations and constraints that guide their documentation practices.

3.3 Informing nature of affect and the material

Given the mediating and constitutive role of documents and its centrality in accessing welfare, it is useful to understand how they shape state-citizen interactions from an affective and material lens. Over the last few decades, scholarship in several disciplines, such as literary studies, political theory and social psychology, has been engaged in attending to not just narratives and discourses to understand the society we live in but also "non-linguistic effects" such as mood, atmosphere and feelings (Hsu, 2019). This marked the affective turn as one strand of literature heavily drawing upon literature within psychology and the other bringing in critical theory and Marxist thought to analyze how emotions – individual and collective – are useful windows into understanding human culture. Scholars within the latter strand of literature argue that emotions should not be regarded as psychological states alone, but also as social and cultural practices.

Focusing on the role of affect within documents departs from the Weberian approach that portrays bureaucracies as an efficient, emotionless system driven by legal-rational authority

(Sriraman, 2018). If anything, as Merton (1940) argued – and Hull (2012) and Sriraman (2018) showed in the context of Pakistan and India, respectively – bureaucratic structures are driven by sentiments such as anxiety, mistrust, fear and even nationalist devotion of citizens and bureaucrats. Such evidence points to the "very public nature of emotions, and the emotive nature of publics" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 14), as they relate to interactions with the state.

Analogously, a material analysis allows us to attend to the physical aspects of people's engagement with documents. As Lievrouw (2014) explains, materiality is multi-faceted and accounts for both macro and micro aspects of things – what they're made of, how they exist in the world, and how their physical form shapes how we understand and use them. A material analysis attends to artifacts, practices around them and the social arrangements that co-constitute them (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2010).

Materiality explores the physical character of artifacts that make them "useful and useable for certain purposes under particular conditions" (Lievrouw, 2014, p. 25). Such a lens to analyze documents is helpful as it brings to light how people use and appropriate materials in documents' production, storage and management; the sizes, shapes, formats and weights of records and the physical interactions between the documents and their users (Østerlund *et al.*, 2015; Rekrut, 2014). Alongside, it also helps us synthesize the social and economic relations that guide their use. Put differently, a material analysis pays closer attention to infrastructures comprising networks of technologies (here IDs as carriers of information) and "low-level decisions" (such as obtaining and managing documents) that make state authority and its distribution among state apparatus visible for scrutiny (Pelizza, 2015).

Analyzing affective and material aspects of documents can be productive as it helps us bring forth how women, given the marginalities they occupy, actively participate in the state's welfare making and unmaking. In particular, their feelings and practices around documentation reflect the ways in which they see, evaluate and navigate the state's workings. In her ethnographic work in northern India, Mathur (2015) argues that India's development state can be viewed as a *Kaghazi Raj* (translates to paper state) – a culture that revolves around documentation as a result of not just the colonial history but also the more recent interest in projecting itself as a transparent state. As bureaucratic routines come into existence and get codified, she argues that the interactions between the state functionaries, citizens and the paperwork tend to be affectively charged. The government officials and contractors that were responsible for implementing a guaranteed employment program referred to documents as a "headache, a pain in the neck, dastardly, ridiculous, and, even, like an elephant that has gone mad" (p. 94).

4. Method

The goal of this study is to understand women's articulations of engaging with IDs. My methodological choices, therefore, were focused on women's locally situated everyday rhythms of engaging with documents and aimed to provide a window into the affective and material aspects that underpinned them. Toward this, I conducted guided tours (Thomson, 2018) with 14 women in three villages of Mysuru district. Thomson (2018), while exploring the method in detail writes that a guided tour is a research technique "that hybridizes aspects of observation and less-structured interviews" wherein "a participant is asked to lead the researcher through [a] location while describing and explaining its features, thinking-aloud the ideas and feelings to which it gives rise, and responding to a researcher's gentle prompts and conversational inquiries" (Thomson, 2018, p. 515). The method is uniquely suited for this study as it centers spatial and material aspects of information practices. This technique of data collection goes by other names as well, for example, the "go-along" or "walk-along" interview, wherein researchers accompany participants for a given time or in particular locations. The participants are observed and nudged with questions to trigger a stream of reflections that becomes the core corpus for analysis.

Aligning with the interpretivist epistemic paradigm and social constructionist theory (Given *et al.*, 2023), the guided tour technique's application within Information Science frames information engagement as a practice (Talja *et al.*, 2005) where "routinized" actions are

foregrounded. In line with this, the questions that formed the guided tour focused on situated sets of actions and vocabularies, including the physical and mental activities, conversations, understandings and emotions associated with documents. By foregrounding the participants' cognitive articulations, affective responses and spatial and temporal contexts, the guided tours allowed me to understand women's documentation practices and actions *in situ*.

The study complies with the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) in that it follows appropriate data collection, data management and data security protocols (Study ID Pro2024000823).

4.1 Preliminary data and recruitment of participants

The preliminary data for this research included ethnographic fieldwork conducted when I was engaged in research and development projects with the women in rural Mysuru between January 2021 and June 2023. This was done as part of my work with an India-based non-profit organization, IT for Change [7] and its Mysuru-based field center, Prakriye, which works toward the socio-political empowerment of rural and marginalized women. The insights gained during this field work, along with an initial review of the literature I conducted back then, informed the focus, research questions, methodology, sampling and interview prompts of this study. My familiarity with the context of rural Mysuru and an already-established rapport with the women in the villages enabled the recruitment process. Upon consultation with the Prakriye team and the women community leaders, I sampled 3 villages from the Mysuru district where I recruited my participants. To ensure the marginalities of gender, caste, class and space are reflected, the villages that were selected for the study were remote, meaning that they were at least six miles away from the block-level government offices – places where people have to frequent to seek welfare. Poor public transportation, restrictions on women's mobility and time poverty among women make these distances difficult to travel and, hence, are not easily accessible. Second, the villages selected were regions where a significant share of the population belonged to oppressed castes such as the Dalits (the most marginalized caste group, formerly known as untouchables) and lower middle castes and indigenous or tribal communities. This was to ensure that the documentation practices of the marginalized women – who also rely the most on state social welfare for sustenance – were included in the study.

The next step was to recruit the participants. From the selected three villages, I consulted the Prakriye team and the community leaders to select a total of 14 women aged between 18 and 64 years. This age bracket was chosen as it covered most of the public welfare programs women are entitled to. If the participant owned a mobile phone, I called them directly for recruitment. If they did not own a phone, I sought the community leader's help, who used her phone to connect me with the participant.

During the selection and recruitment process, I paid careful attention to ensure that the majority of the women participants belonged to lower caste groups and tribal communities within the village. I also ensured that the sample reflected a good mix of participants with differing access to digital devices such as mobile phones: some who own a device of their own, some who share a device with their family and some who do not own one at all. I also included women with varying levels of literacy and digital literacy to get a nuanced picture of whether and how participants relate to documents and digitally-enabled welfare delivery differently. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of all participants.

4.2 Data collection and analysis

For each guided tour, I met the participant in-person at their home. Although I had already provided a detailed overview of the project during the recruitment phone call, I reiterated the project's objectives and sought their verbal consent before beginning. Having worked with the women for over two and a half years through my role at the non-governmental organization (NGO), I had established a strong rapport, which contributed to their comfort in welcoming me into their homes and engaging with my questions.

Table 1. Sociodemographic details of participants

Sr. No.	Pseudonym	Age	Work	Place (names changed)
1	Mansi	35	Homemaker	Chikkahosur (village)
2	Sukanya	35	Homemaker	Chikkahosur (village)
3	Ranju	34	Homemaker	Chikkahosur (village)
4	Shalini	27	Homemaker	Chikkahosur (village)
5	Chandni	25	Homemaker	Dhoddahalli (village)
6	Indu	55	Farmer	Dhoddahalli (village)
7	Rashmi	24	Homemaker	Dhoddahalli (village)
8	Gangamma	Unsure of her age (Approx. 60)	Wage laborer	Magupur Haadi (tribal hamlet)
9	Kamalamma	Unsure of her age (Approx. 63)	Wage laborer	Magupur Haadi (tribal hamlet)
10	Ujwala	35	Wage laborer	Magupur Haadi (tribal hamlet)
11	Varsha	36	Tailor	Dhoddahalli (village)
12	Sakamma	44	Homemaker	Dhoddahalli (village)
13	Madhulata	33	Wage laborer	Magupur Haadi (tribal hamlet)
14	Kanchan	27	Homemaker	Magupur Haadi (tribal hamlet)

Source(s): Author's own work

The equipment used for the guided tours included an audio recorder, a phone camera, a notebook and a pen. During the tours, I posed prompts and guiding questions that encouraged participants to reflect on their activities, understandings and feelings related to IDs. I asked them to show (and tell) where they stored their documents and how they managed them. As they revealed the spatial aspects of their documentation practices (e.g. showed me the locked drawer that contains the documents), I gently nudged them to reflect on the rationale behind their practice: "How did you come up with this document-sorting technique?" "How does sorting them in this way help you?" "What made you keep the documents in such a manner – locked, covered in plastic bags, or stored in bags?" Their responses provided insight into the various experiences, thoughts and feelings that shaped their documentation practices.

I also prompted them to narrate incidents and describe how they acquired their documents. I asked where and how they seek and share information about documents and welfare programs, what spaces in the village they visit and how they take help from others. For these questions, participants often took me outside their homes – to the front yard, nearby streets, or pointed to the Panchayat buildings and shops where they had been for documentation work. As we walked, I asked how they navigated the resources required to obtain documents and how they felt about the various demands and requirements of the state.

As participants walked me through their homes and streets in the villages, I photographed their information and documentation practices – the ways they sort and store their papers, sites where they exchange information with others, etc. In the interest of protecting their confidentiality, the pictures did not contain any identifiable information. Each of the guided tours was audio-recorded and on an average, lasted 35 min. During the tour, I took handwritten field notes of my observations that supplemented my analysis. All my conversations with the women were in Kannada – the local language in the region and my native tongue. After gathering the data, I translated (into English) and transcribed the audio recordings and memoed them to document preliminary reflections. Then, along with photographs, the transcripts were coded on ATLAS.ti, a qualitative analysis software, using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2022). After reviewing and revising codes, I consolidated them into themes and synthesized them into the following findings.

5. Findings

The women participants in the study described their engagement with the documents as a collection of activities that can be broadly classified into three categories: obtaining

documents, maintaining documents and presenting the documents to the state and its functionaries. In this section, I discuss each of these activities and the affective associations and material dimensions they articulated while showing me and describing their engagement with documents.

5.1 Obtaining documents: exhausting!

All the participants of the study reported that applying for and acquiring IDs such as voter IDs, Aadhaar cards and ration cards was an arduous process that takes up financial, emotional and social resources. Mansi, a 35-year-old wage laborer, exclaimed that the process was sheer "hard work" that involves various components: seeking information about the welfare programs and required documents to apply for them, dealing with relevant stakeholders such as local government officials and photocopy shop owners and making logistical arrangements to complete the process of acquiring documents.

Some of the most common sources of information that women rely on to acquire IDs are the local governing body (the Panchayat), neighbors, village self-help groups [8] and NGOs operational in the area. Women often reached out to the local government offices with questions regarding the procedures to apply for documents – what supporting documents are needed and whether they have to submit the application form online or offline. While they sought information from government offices, most women said that advice from other networks is most helpful. When women run into each other on the streets or gather outside one of the houses in the evenings for a chat, information about and experiential knowledge of documents flow among them. "Someone else would have gone through the process and if that is the case, I ask them how did they get the documents made and where they went. I usually ask for any contacts I can reach out to who can help me," said Indu.

The information flows in the village, however, do not preclude patriarchal and caste-based restrictions that characterize women's mobility and access to spaces. For instance, women's spatial access in the village of Dhoddahalli (name changed) is separated by caste. As seen in Figure 2, the main street divides the village roughly into two, where, on the left side, are Dalit households, and on the right side are locally dominant households (primarily the Vokkaliga [a caste] community). Sakamma, a Dalit woman and a resident of the village, pointed to her side of the street and said, "I only visit a few houses that are around here and seek information from women who live here. I do not go to the other side and my husband does not allow me to go to the Panchayat or any other buildings. It is just how it is. I don't really go anywhere." These constraints suggest how acquiring documents is preceded by women's access to information that is itself shaped by their social status within the village.

Apart from accessing information, the process of obtaining documents involves making logistical arrangements that women find to be a costly affair. They are required to travel either to printing or photocopy shops that are at least two miles away or government offices that are four to eight miles away to apply for documents. When women, often chaperoned by a male member of the family, visit these places to meet the bureaucratic requirements, they incur travel costs and lose valuable time. Gangamma, a 65-year-old woman from a tribal community, explained irritatedly:

> The government told me to get my ration card, Aadhaar card, and income certificate prepared to get my house sanctioned under the government's housing program. They tell me! That's all! But to get these documents prepared, I have to pay fees for application forms . . . I spent the money I earned as a wage laborer to get these documents done. Each time I visited the office or the shop, I lost the day's wages. To make matters worse, I had to pay people, usually the middle-persons, to speed up the process.

Upon asking how much money the participants had spent, they reported a number within the range of INR 3,000 and INR 8,000. To put this amount in perspective, women's wages in the region are INR 250 per day. The amount spent on the documents, for some women, totaled up to 75–80% of their monthly income. Madhulata, a 33-year-old daily-wage laborer, resisted

Figure 2. Image of the village with caste-based spatial segregation. The left side of the street is Dalit households, whereas the houses on the right are locally dominant caste (such as the Vokkaligas) households. Source(s): Author's own work

answering the question and asserted that it is impossible to calculate how much money is spent on acquiring documents, for one has to keep providing different kinds of proofs to keep up with ever-changing bureaucratic requirements. This is further complicated by the recent digitization of welfare delivery, which demands that each citizen provide the Aadhaar database with a working mobile number in order to receive benefits as direct deposits in their bank accounts. This recent mandate has raised barriers, as 12 of 14 participants did not have a mobile phone of their own. They all relied on other members of the family for phone numbers that could be linked to their Aadhaar ID and bank account.

Despite spending a significant amount of money and sourcing mobile devices for database-seeding, the women complained that there was no guarantee that documents would get prepared in time. To obtain a document, one needs to submit several others as proof and pay visits to photocopy shops and government offices multiple times. As Mansi exclaimed, "*Tirig beku ond yeradu dina. Saulabhya beku andre tirigbeku!* [You have to walk in circles for a couple of days. If you want the benefits, you have to!]."

Even though women have an understanding of how much labor and money go into obtaining the documents, it is not always that they do the bureaucratic work themselves. Almost all women shared that the male members of their family – their husbands, fathers-in-law or sons – to step out of the village and get bureaucratic work done. Due to their inability to read or write and lack of experience in going out of the house by themselves, women felt they were not entirely capable of carrying out bureaucratic work. Despite having a fair sense of bureaucratic processes, they expressed self-doubt and deferred bureaucratic work to male members of their families. For instance, while Rashmi initially stated that she was not too knowledgeable and her husband handled bureaucratic work, her detailed response about the required documents and procedures to apply for a welfare program suggested otherwise – she had more than a functional understanding of the local bureaucratic system. She knew that she needed to seek information from a local government service center, fill out the application

forms and provide proof of her identity, address and income. But when asked if she could meet these requirements by herself, she declined.

From these vignettes, we can infer that when women come in contact with the state through IDs, their interaction is characterized by material and social constraints. Women must travel long distances – often with male chaperons – to government offices and printing shops, incurring travel costs and losing wages in the process. In addition, the government requires women to obtain multiple proofs of identity, forcing them into a cycle of document-dependency where one document is needed to obtain another. The process is expensive, involving both formal fees to government offices and informal payments to middle-persons who carry out the work. This is further complicated by caste and gender-based restrictions on women's mobility, as they have to rely on male family members and their caste networks for support in obtaining necessary documents. These realities make the process exhausting, never-ending and stressful. To navigate, however, women also intervene by building and leveraging informal networks – neighbors, their self-help groups, local NGOs and casual conversations with others; demonstrating both resourcefulness and negotiations within and with their environment despite the systemic barriers.

5.2 Managing documents: a burden!

Managing IDs in households is critical and the women in the villages of Mysuru have developed routinized documentation practices, including classification and storage mechanisms. All the women mentioned that they have designated spots in their house where they store their IDs, usually in locked-in drawers, upper shelves and safes inside an iron cupboard referred to as *beeru* in Kannada (see Figure 3), in under-bed storage and trunk chests (see Figure 4). Gangamma stored all the documents in the *beeru* that her sons bought for the house. The logic behind keeping them all together in a cupboard in the living room, she explained, was that she could not read the documents and relied on other members of the family, mostly her sons, to secure them for her when needed. Sukanya (35) also keeps all the documents in the same place but sorts them in different plastic folders based on the document type. She has a two-tier locking system: her documents are locked in a safe inside the *beeru*, and the safe's keys are locked in a different desk drawer. Varsha, on the other hand, avoids keeping documents in her *beeru* entirely. "I keep the most frequently needed documents together in a drawer in the living room. These include bank passbooks, ration cards, and Aadhaar cards. Documents related to the property such as land and house, are locked inside another drawer. Nothing is kept in the *beeru* because children tend to take things out for play and may inadvertently misplace or tear the documents," she elaborated.

The women used various materials to organize documents, including plastic folders, photo albums, plastic bags and zipped duffel bags to protect them from damage caused by weather, water or spills from other items in the drawer or cupboard. "Documents include not just IDs but there are other related small pieces of paper such as receipts that need to be kept intact. I keep them all in a photo album so they don't get misplaced. Since there are medicines and syrups in the cupboard, I keep the documents in a zipped bag," elaborated Shalini.

Most women said that they were responsible for managing the documents in their respective households. Toward this, they used at least one of the following classification logics to sort the documents: (1) based on the members of the family; (2) frequency of use; and (3) criticality or the significance of the document(s) itself. While discussing how they designed the classification mechanism, Sukanya mentioned that her husband came up with it, and that she follows, whereas others said that it is solely their responsibility to classify and manage them all. Manjula, while describing her documentation practices, said, "Each person has a file (folder) of their own and there is another one dedicated to documents related to our house. I take the responsibility of everyone's folders. When the kids or my husband come and ask for particular papers, I hand them out. And I make sure they bring it back and give it to me." Since most of the women I spoke to did not read, they relied on various physical characteristics such

Figure 3. Iron cupboards commonly called almirah or beeru, where documents are locked in. Source(s): Author's own work

as size, shape, font and color to tell them apart. "I recognize the documents by colors and the symbols and number of fields in the document. I know that Aadhaar has the colors orange and green. I have memorized what each document looks like. So when my husband or children ask for it, I know what to give them," explained Sakamma. Varsha said that both she and her husband manage the documents at home. "I manage the more frequently used documents whereas my husband manages the documents related to property and our house. These are more important and losing them will make things difficult for us. They cannot be replaced. Moreover, I am a forgetful person and I am scared that I will lose these, so my husband takes care of them," she explained. Upon asking women why they put so much thought into their documentation practices, almost all women's responses indicated similar anxieties: these documents are proofs of their identities as citizens, as people. Without these, they would have no access to any welfare benefits. Women expressed feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of documents that they were expected to maintain. If anything, their articulations of what IDs are itself expansive. It not only included proofs of personal information and categories such as their name, age, sex and contact information, but also documents that recorded their transactions with institutions such as banks, local government offices, non-profit organizations, micro-credit organizations and their self-help groups that need to be organized and reorganized (see Figure 5). As Ranju remarked,

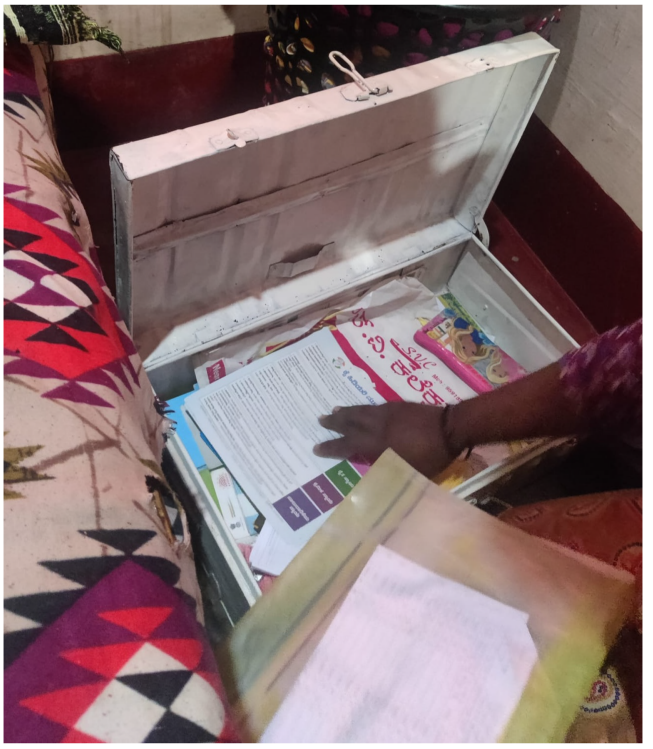

Figure 4. Documents sorted and stored in plastic bags and folders in a trunk chest. Source(s): Author's own work

Figure 5. Documents laid out to be reorganized. Source(s): Author's own work

It is not like there is just one ID or one kind of document. Not just Aadhaar, even though these days everyone says that this is all that is needed. But we need all kinds of documents. They [government functionaries] ask for a ration card and voter ID; they sometimes ask for a Pan Card (ID for taxation) and sometimes they don't. It is a lot of documents. And all of them have to be linked to a mobile number. Even if one is missing, it is a problem. Each scheme requires us to provide specific documents. And it is not just IDs, right? There are small pieces of paper and receipts of the loans I have taken. Everything is important!

JD

All the women expressed anxiety about losing a document. This is captured in Shalini's story, which she narrated as she was showing me where she kept the IDs: "We (her family) needed to urgently take a loan for something from a local micro-finance bank. But when they came, I could not find my Aadhaar card. Since these loans were to be taken in the woman's name, and I could not find my ID, we could not avail it. My husband scolded me because I lost my ID. But a few days later I found it, I had kept it safely under my *sarees* in the *beeru*."

Along with anxieties, women also expressed feelings of anger, frustration and confusion with regard to the government's insistence on documents as modes of verification of their identity. "Often there are deadlines for applications to schemes which find out at the last moment. If we are not able to find the correct documents and their copies to submit in time, then we lose the opportunity. This makes me anxious and I worry if I even have the documents, did my son keep them somewhere? It also makes me angry and frustrated. It makes me wonder if I should have been more careful with them," lamented Rashmi.

The sense of confusion and frustration gets compounded as women spoke about how their management of documents now accounted for the presence and accuracy of digital data. During Kanchan's initial enrollment process in the Aadhaar database, the system automatically populated the field of date of birth using its default setting – January 1st – and to make matters worse, the year was also recorded incorrectly. When she applied for a government welfare program, her application was rejected because the date of birth listed in the Aadhaar database did not align with the other records. To resolve the discrepancy, Kanchan visited a public bank in the town that is 15.5 miles away to submit her school transcripts as proof of her correct date of birth. This shows how ensuring accuracy and consistency across digital databases added another layer to managing documents and subsequently, to maintaining their eligibility for welfare.

Such a documentary relationship with the state is marked by anxiety, anger, frustration and self-doubt. The criticality of these documents manifests in women's articulations of being overwhelmed by the sheer number of documents they must manage, from Aadhaar and ration cards to bank receipts and loan papers, all of which serve as records of their interactions with institutions. Analyzing from material perspectives, we see how women's interaction with the state is characterized by a network of documents that are dependent on each other to have their citizen identity validated. These documents span physical objects that remain in citizens' possession but also their records that are located in state databases. To manage this network of documents, the women use a range of storage, classification and data-maintenance activities. Marginalities influence these practices, as seen in cases like Gangamma, who relies on her sons to manage documents because she cannot read or Varsha, who manages everyday documents but has her husband manage property-related paperwork due to the fear of losing "very important" documents. The use of physical characteristics of documents – color, size and symbols – is key for the women who manage documents in their households but are not literate. These paper-based documents are further safeguarded to align their digital records as well.

5.3 Producing documents: an obligation!

While all documents were referred to as important informational materials, depending on the social and economic context, the women gave primacy to some documents over others. These IDs were tightly linked to the government's rules and expectations. All participants from Dalit and tribal communities mentioned that for them, the caste certificate was one of the most important documents. Mansi expressed, "*Naavu ond mansha ivi, jeevna maadtidivi antha, idu yella idre ne jeevna maadak aagadu* [The documents are necessary to prove that I am a human being and I live here; only then can I survive]. Without a caste certificate, the government will not recognize us as beneficiaries." The caste certificate, while a tool to claim affirmative action and equal rights, illustrates how caste becomes an informational construct. It is brought into bureaucratic existence through state documentation, thus making it a category that people have to prove and get verified while transacting with the state. These historical, socio-political and

economic entanglements make producing documents for the state an extensive and involved process.

The state's reliance on documents also manifested in women's experiences of not just providing physical documents and their photocopies but also ensuring that their data aligns with the requirements of digital databases. While showing me the documents she has to produce to acquire subsidized food grains, Gangamma explained, "First, on one of the days, I or someone in the family have to go with the ration card to the village ration distributor (or fair price shop) and give our thumb (biometric). And once the biometric gets authenticated, the distributor enters our name and then they ask us to come another day to collect foodgrains. It is usually within a week or two. We have to take our ration card then as well."

While the state boasts such an automated system of authentication, this process is far from seamless for several of the women I spoke to. Gangamma, for instance, said that her biometric often fails to get authenticated at the fair price shop. The ration distributors told her that the failure in authentication was because of her old age, and there was not enough blood in her body. She added, "On days that my biometric does not get recognized, they look at my Aadhaar and send some number to my son's phone because I don't have one. The number is called . . . [pauses to recollect] OTP [One-time-password] or something like that. I am not sure. If my son is not available that day, then I have to go some other day or lose that month's ration. There have been times when I have asked other people to give me some food grains because I did not have anything to eat."

A centralized system of identification has raised barriers to access a host of other welfare benefits, including the right to shelter. Ujwala, a resident of one of the tribal hamlets, broke down while showing me her current house, which has a leaking roof; they have not been assigned a new house because, according to the local government body, they do not have adequate documentation. "For everything, people ask for IDs like our Aadhaar card and no one in my family, except me, have one. I migrated to this hamlet after getting married and realized that my husband did not have any of the documents required to get his Aadhaar card. The house we live in is on the verge of falling apart. I just need a house," she lamented. Her story made it abundantly clear that she was tired and did not know how to resolve the problem without forgoing more time and money.

With the integration of digital data and biometric data into identity data, citizens are not only responsible for providing physical documents and photocopies but also for ensuring that their data aligns with the requirements of digital databases that run throughout the welfare infrastructure. Any discrepancy – whether in biometric data, name spellings or linkage across databases – can result in exclusion from welfare benefits, making documentation a critical task layered with precarity. Sakamma opined that the accelerated use of technology, in the form of digital and biometric identification, seems inevitable. "The biometric acts as proof that the person is alive. For example, when my mother died and she could not go give her biometrics, the pension that she received in her bank was retracted."

Both Gangamma and Sakkamma's stories foreground how documents today do not manifest just as artifacts that are outside the body. The document is the body itself – in this case, the biometric data such as thumbprints that are required to be produced again and again, such that continued access to welfare is possible. The very infrastructure designed to facilitate welfare delivery produces socio-technical forms of documentation that integrate bodies as data. If citizens cannot produce any of the required documents, they are threatened with exclusion from securing their welfare benefits. Varsha captured the obligatory nature of documents when she said, "the government needs documents to verify and because the government needs them, we need them, too."

Amidst the sense of inevitability, women found creative ways to make sense and critique the workings of the documentary infrastructure. In their day-to-day conversations, for instance, women used a mix of sarcasm, humor, rants and complaints to express their confusion about, dissatisfaction with and acceptance of the data infrastructure. Everyday language, slangs and tones of speech become sites that allow women to evaluate and share insights about the datafied state. For instance, on the surveilling nature of the state, Shalini exclaimed launghingly, "I have frequently wondered how this Aadhaar knows I have not paid

my installment toward the loan I had taken. How does it appear on the screen of the microfinance company agent's phone? It [Aadhaar] seems to scan my entire life! Similarly, while explaining how she imagines these databases, Varsha dryly remarked, "If you type the number [her national ID] anywhere, my list [her record] will show up." By laughing and commenting on the absurdities they articulated, women use language to give their emotions a form. The sentiments that are expressed in these discussions include sharp criticisms, pragmatic defense of, alternate imaginaries of the state. While most feel that such an infrastructure is the best option available, a few women shared alternate visions for how welfare delivery should be. Gangamma said that if she were one of the decision-makers in the government, she would provide welfare benefits regardless of their documentation status. Shalini, on the other hand, said that she would enable people to skip queues entirely and provide door-to-door benefits.

Keeping the practical challenges to such visions aside, what is insightful from these articulations is how women leverage conversations to individually and collectively make sense and navigate documentary necessities prescribed by the state. It is through colloquial humor and criticism that they make space for a reflexive evaluation of and knowledge-sharing about the state, thus building the collective resilience required to navigate it. Such critique underscores that women are not passive subjects of the state but active stakeholders involved in constructing and assembling resources – material, social and linguistic – to navigate precarity of welfare and claim rights to citizenship.

6. Discussion

In the findings, we see that women's engagement with the state is characterized by a range of social relations and practices that are materially and affectively significant. Women struggle to obtain IDs, take the burden of managing them and feel like they have no choice but to provide them to the state's accord to seek welfare. Their techniques of navigating the state also involve the use of language – in the form of humor, criticism and pragmatism – to collectively make sense of its workings. Women combine these affective practices with documentation practices as a way to navigate and negotiate with the state. These include obtaining, sorting, classifying, storing of and producing IDs as well as maintaining consistency among IDs and their digital mirrors. These practices also involve forging formal and informal networks within the village to seek support in carrying out bureaucratic work done. These findings have several implications for Information Science research and practice.

First, the common notion is that paper-based documents are tangible as opposed to digital data that is supposedly intangible and abstract; however, the women's experiences suggest otherwise. Integral to obtaining, managing and producing documents is shuttling to relevant offices, sourcing and handling of digital data, including phone numbers and biometrics. In the process of navigating the state process, their marginalities of gender, caste, class and geography intersect at various points – be it with information flows, applying for and receiving IDs, engaging with government functionaries, managing IDs at home, maintaining consistency within digital databases. Put differently, digital data and its materiality "reconfigure[s]" and "remediate[s]" (Lievrouw, 2014) women's relationships with the state in specific ways that reinforce marginalization, elicit certain kinds of affective states that further trigger negotiation techniques among them.

Second, it is helpful to situate the findings within Affective Studies to note how emotions perform social and cultural functions. While referring to affect as "contact zone," Ahmed (2014) writes:

> In my model of sociality of emotions, I suggest that emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place. So emotions are not simply something "I" or "we" have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the "I" and the "we" are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others (p. 10).

Women's engagement with and articulations around IDs perform a social and cultural function. For one, they reveal how gender, caste and class hierarchies and the rural–urban divide are operationalized in bureaucratic settings. Additionally, they help create and circulate local and vernacular resources that enable women to make sense of, critique and accept the datafied, digitized and automated aspects of welfare delivery. Drawing upon the understanding of the "female complaint" (Ahmed, 2021; Berlant, 2008), we can think of women's articulations around IDs and documentation as ways in which they turn their individual experiences into "evidence of failure" that is collected and circulated for others to build on.

Third, documents – analogous to affect – are surfaces of contact between the individual and their environment. Given that they are boundary objects, they, as information technologies, already perform a mediating role. Drawing upon Ahmed (2014), I posit an analytical framework that views documents not as mere objects but as "contact zones" or sites where citizens and the state come in contact. From the findings, it can be gathered that IDs are manifestations of different kinds of contact: institutional forms of contact (with the government, legal system, etc.) and everyday forms of contact (with government officials, family members, bank officials, etc.). Such a framework thus allows us to delve deeper into women's active acts of negotiations with the state and their environment.

Framing documents as contact zones also enables us to focus not just on the objects, but also on the activities that constitute them. Such framing echoes the notion that documents are indeed inseparable from the documentation practices. It allows us to visibilize the various forms of contact that are not only textually and digitally recorded (birth certificates, receipts, biometrics and data fields) but also other forms of contact that include practices shaped by relations of gender, caste, class and rural-urban gap. Put differently, I argue that IDs (and associated documentation practices) can be viewed as "contact zones" (between state and citizens) wherein the state's bureaucratic authority and citizens' marginalities get expressed and actively negotiated (see Figure 6). As such, by focusing on documents and documentation practices as sites of frictions and contestations present in state-citizen interactions, this paper builds upon and goes beyond Gupta's (1995) mode of studying citizens' place-based encounters with the state. Rather, the study argues how documents and documentation, while not being a fixed place, are indeed important portable sites where women meet and negotiate with the state.

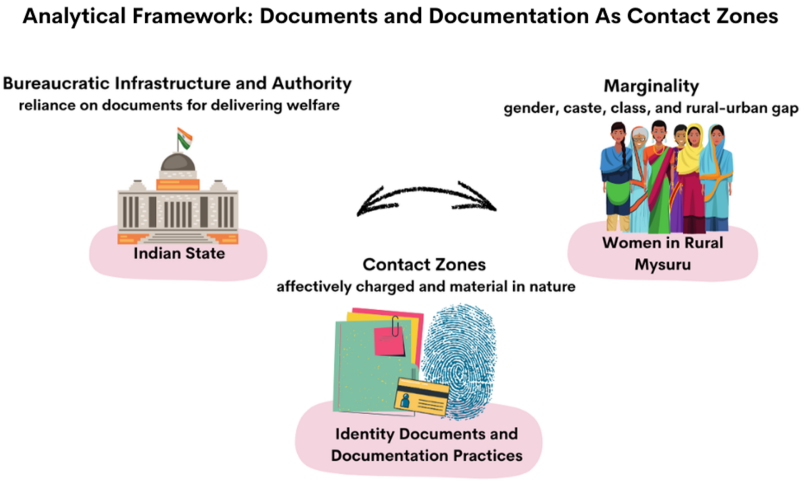

Figure 6. Documents and documentation as contact zones. Source(s): Author's own work

Framing documents as contact zones also helps address the concerns raised by Abrams (1988), as it allows us to examine the system or infrastructural components (here, documentation) of the state and the re-inscription and diffusion of the ideology of documentary authority in the public milieu. The framework insists that state-citizen interactions need not be located externally, but can occur on surfaces of documents in people's homes and people's fingers and bodies.

With the initiative of Digital India, the state, as both a system and an ideology, espouses drastically complex, if not new, characteristics. The Digital India narrative combines the technocratic logic of digitized and datafied governance with the rhetoric of efficiency and transparency that portrays welfare delivery as "disembedded space" (Gurumurthy *et al.*, 2016) that is automated and seamless, requiring no further examination of "messy questions of social and gender power within the capitalist market" (p. 390). It also further invisibilizes the inherent frictions present in women's interaction with the state – one that is textured by continuous negotiation, contestation, dissatisfaction and acceptance. The analytical framework of the contact zone allows sharper evaluation of such flattened narratives of the state-citizen interactions. In other words, studying documents as contact zones brings into question the "seamless," "paperless," and "contactless" welfare delivery. If anything, as we see in the case of rural Mysuru, state-citizen interactions continue to be full of friction, paper and contact.

Lastly, the policy implications here are complex and require careful, nuanced assessment – one that resists the pull of technosolutionism or simple reconfigurations of welfare infrastructure that further the rapid consolidation of state-corporate power as they relate to deploying data-driven tools for governance. The key takeaway, then, is to focus on women's marginalities as enduring realities onto which the welfare system becomes imbricated. These forms of exclusion are not anomalies to be corrected by better design, but structural conditions along the lines of gender, caste, class and rural-urban gap. Any meaningful response must start from recognizing, understanding and dismantling these axes of marginalization.

7. Conclusion

This paper examines identity documents and documentation practices as "contact zones" between the state and its citizens to offer a window into understanding the dynamics of the state's bureaucratic power and marginalities manifest. Drawing upon literature within information studies, affective studies and STS, the paper reveals how women in rural Mysuru engage with documents. The paper found that documents and documentation have material dimensions and affective surfaces that don't just mediate but (re)constitute the state and its citizenry. By focusing on the interplay of affect and materiality, the paper provides information scholars with a framework to analyze state-citizen interactions. Furthermore, by attending to how women's varied marginalities and the document (paper-based and digital) infrastructure, this paper argues that welfare delivery and state-citizen interactions are full of friction, paper and contact as opposed to the popular narrative of rhetoric of "seamless," "paperless" and "contactless" welfare delivery.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the members of IT for Change, their field center – Prakriye, the community leaders in the villages and the participants for sharing their time and knowledge. I thank Britt Paris and Kaitlin L. Costello for their guidance throughout this project and Lisa Mitchell and Krishna Akhil Kumar Adavi for providing comments on the drafts of this paper. I also thank the reviewers for giving productive feedback on this paper.

Notes

1. Names of people and villages have been changed to protect participants' identities.
2. Mysuru district is located in the southern part of the state of Karnataka, India.

3. Caste is a complex system of social classification and stratification characterized by hereditary status and endogamy that renders those at the top of the hierarchy unearned privileges, while those who occupy the bottom rungs of the hierarchy are marginalized socially, economically and culturally.
4. Caste certificate and Income certificate are Government documents that indicate a person's membership in certain caste groups specified by the state and income levels, respectively.
5. A 12-digit unique identity number assigned to citizens of India after obtaining their biometrics and demographic data.
6. Ration card is the ID required to prove eligibility for subsidized food grains.
7. IT for Change aims to harness digital technologies for human rights, social justice and equity. See https://itforchange.net/index.php/
8. Self-Help Groups (SHG) are small, formal or informal associations of individuals who come together to raise mutual and collective socio-economic support.

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