

Power and the durability of poverty: a
critical exploration of the links between
culture, marginality and chronic poverty

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Abstract

Building on approaches that adopt what might be called a 'relational' approach to poverty, and using recurring case-studies from India, this paper examines poverty as an outcome of the historical and contemporary dynamics of capitalism — including processes of accumulation, dispossession, differentiation and exploitation; but equally, considers the social mechanisms, categories and identities which perpetuate inequality and facilitate relations of exploitation. The paper adopts an approach (drawing on Charles Tilly) that combines an examination of exploitation with Weberian ideas of social closure. In this way, the paper aims to show that 'adverse incorporation' and 'social exclusion' are not alternative or competing frameworks: the excluded are simultaneously dominated and excluded.

A second aim is to integrate a multi-dimensional understanding of power — as domination, patronage, and political representation — into the analysis of poverty, drawing on the work of Steven Lukes, Pierre Bourdieu, and Arjun Appadurai; and a third aim is to see how incorporating power can help analyse different approaches to poverty reduction ranging from anti-poverty programmes and political decentralisation to mainstream party political processes.

In developing the argument the paper focuses on the interlocking circumstances of chronically poor cultivators living in deforested uplands, indebted migrant casual labourers on the urban fringes, and the social identities of *adivasis* and *dalits* ('tribals' and 'untouchables') subordinated in Indian society. This both highlights particular spatial and social inequalities in India, and reflects on the cultural construction of power; its effects on material well-being and agency, and on the opportunities and constraints in struggles for political representation.

Keywords: India, labour markets, patronage, power, capitalism, identity, social exclusion, adverse incorporation.

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1. Introduction

Persistent poverty on a large scale is as central and as intractable a problem as ever. Its elimination or reduction is now the defining problem and core *raison d'être* of the world's major development agencies. Considerable resources have been put into the monitoring and analysis of world poverty, but as debate intensifies, and methods and data for poverty research compete, the problem of poverty seems ever more difficult to grasp. Of course, a considerable amount is now known about the conditions under which poor people live, and the varied strategies that have developed for survival under conditions of extreme constraint. The complexity of making do with very little, and the diverse factors that make people vulnerable, insecure and exposed has pushed researchers into ever-more complex frameworks to describe and understand the characteristics of poverty. As its economic, social and political dimensions have been subject to research, an aspiration to interdisciplinarity has come to characterise the field of poverty research. Nonetheless, some fundamental explanatory problems remain; none are more basic than the question, what are the causes of chronic poverty, and through what social mechanisms does it persist?

This is the question that runs through this paper. I build on approaches that adopt what might be called a 'relational' approach to poverty. This means two separate things: first, an approach which understands persistent poverty as the consequence of historically developed economic and political relations, as opposed to 'residual' approaches which might regard poverty as the result of being marginal to these same relations (Bernstein 1992); and second, an approach that rejects methodological individualism and neo-liberal rational choice models, emphasising the importance of social processes and relations of power.¹

The paper begins with the examination of poverty as an outcome of the historical and contemporary dynamics of capitalism, drawing attention to relations of accumulation, dispossession, differentiation and exploitation. But equally important is an understanding of the social mechanisms, categories and identities which perpetuate inequality and stabilise or facilitate relations of exploitation, making them viable. In other words, I adopt an approach (drawing on Charles Tilly) that combines an examination of exploitation (a Marxian conception) with Weberian ideas of social closure. In this way, the paper joins other attempts to show that 'adverse incorporation' and 'social exclusion' are not alternative or competing frameworks: 'the excluded are simultaneously excluded and dominated' (Silver 1994: 543, as cited in Hickey and Du Toit 2007: 5). In short, the paper takes the Marxian premise that all economic relations are social relations, without accepting the reductive notion that all social relations are economic.

Demonstrating theoretically and empirically (through recurring case-studies) how 'adverse incorporation' and 'social exclusion' (AISE) come together into a coherent and contextualised view of poverty is the first intention of the paper. The second aim is to integrate a multi-dimensional understanding of power into this analysis of poverty. At present this is something rarely done. It involves analysis of power as domination, patronage, and political representation. This takes the paper into the complex fields of politics, struggle and consent, drawing on the work of Steven Lukes, Pierre Bourdieu, and Arjun Appadurai. The final aim is to see how incorporating power can help analyse different approaches to poverty reduction including interventions ranging from anti-poverty programmes and political decentralisation to mainstream party political processes. The paper raises the difficult question of the effect of power on the agency of poor people, power as a cultural process producing consent, and the manner in which poverty becomes socially meaningful.

¹ I am grateful to Andries du Toit (pers. comm.) for clarifying this distinction

The necessity of such a relational approach to durable poverty will become clear through examining particular spatial and social inequalities in India. Without presenting detailed case studies, I draw on field research in two separate settings. The first, is that of the lives and livelihoods of Bhil tribal (adivasi) cultivators and seasonal labour migrants from the adjoining border districts of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. The poverty of this region and its population is conventionally linked to declining subsistence agriculture on degraded and fragmented farm plots, remoteness from markets, poor education, unemployment, indebtedness and out-migration (see Mosse 2005a). Solutions (for which I have also worked) have included the introduction of improved cultivars and livestock, soil and water conservation, minor irrigation, farm forestry, forest protection, and micro-finance (*ibid*). The paper provides a perspective of poverty in Bhil communities that goes beyond such localised technical views in order to highlight historical processes of dispossession and exploitation, which continue to be experienced especially among those indebted Bhils who spend as much of each year working as casual migrant labour on construction sites and living in makeshift encampments in the industrial cities of Ahmedabad, Vadodara or Surat, as farming in their villages. The second setting, introduced in the context of a discussion of representation and the politics of poverty, is my long-term research with dalit (ex-untouchable) castes in rural southern India and their struggles for representation. So, the paper focuses on the interlocking circumstances of chronically poor cultivators living in deforested uplands, indebted migrant casual labourers on the urban fringes, and the social identities of adivasis and dalits (tribals and untouchables) subordinated in Indian society. The analysis of the social experience of tribal migrant labourers and untouchable castes brings together the cultural construction of power and its economic effects.

2. Towards a relational view of chronic poverty

Multidimensionality, severity and duration are today regarded as the key intersecting parameters of poverty, integrated into the analysis of the causes and correlates of 'chronic poverty', which include low levels of assets (or asset loss), vulnerability (including to employment loss), and unprotected risks. Such analysis shows how these factors create persisting 'poverty traps' that are transmitted *inter-generationally* with their own self-reproducing effects on self-esteem and physical and mental development, as for example, when the damaging effects of childhood poverty become irreversible (Hulme, Moore and Shepherd 2003, Shepherd 2006).

By emphasising the chronic nature of poverty, research goes beyond models that typify poverty as vulnerability to the effects of shocks, trends or external structures or processes. Geof Wood (2003), for example, argues that poor people face chronic rather than stochastic insecurity (or permanent vulnerability, Francis 2006). They face hazards not shocks. The core dilemma is that in order to cope with structural insecurity (in the context of weak state systems of social protection) poor people fall back on relationships of clientship and dependency that reduce their agency and undercut their prospects for long-term improvement. In this immediate sense, poverty is necessarily a matter of social relations.

The view that poverty has to be understood in terms of social relations is not new. It has long been pointed out that an over-emphasis on material wealth and market transactions overlooks the fact that social institutions and the status positions they create define entitlements to resources, labour or security (e.g., Berry 1989 for the African context), and developments of Amartya Sen's 'entitlement' theory of access have shifted it away from a narrow focus on market channels and formal legal property rights to examine societal rules, customary law, kinship networks and intra-household entitlements (Gore 1993, Kabeer 1994). If what counts is 'wealth in people', acquired by expanding networks through credit or marriage strategies, 'poor people' are not only those with limited exchange entitlements, but

those who fail to invest in the social institutions through which labour, cattle, credit or jobs are mobilised, who fail to gift or consume in culturally proper ways (cf., Douglas and Isherwood 1979, Bourdieu 1979). Where security or vulnerability are determined by social networks and relations of patronage, poverty is intensified by changes that casualise labour, reduce obligations, or attenuate social networks, as recent experience in the rapid shift to market economy in the former Soviet Union demonstrates (Dudwick 2003 cf Cleaver 2005).

Insights into poverty as a social relationship have been further explored by feminist and social exclusion theorists. While feminist researchers point out that entitlements (access to resources, services or the ability to sell one's labour) are embedded within relations of family and kinship so as to produce highly gendered outcomes (in the extreme, destitution arising from household collapse, abandonment and the failure of conjugal entitlements, Kabeer 1994; Razavi 1999, Harriss-White 2005), social exclusion theorists expand the analysis to the role of wider institutions in perpetuating poverty of the old, disabled, homeless or unemployed (initially in Europe, de Haan 1998). This reintroduces concern with the social effects of *relative* deprivation (Townsend 1974), self-exclusion and withdrawal through stigma and the shame of poverty. Poverty is *experienced* as a social relationship. As one of Tony Beck's respondents in West Bengal put it, 'without respect, food won't go into the stomach' (1994). In similar vein, Scarlett Epstein (2006) notes how in Karnataka, targeted public distribution systems failed because prestige concerns meant that poor people striving for dignity did not take up their entitlements.

In these and other ways poverty is seen to have a 'social dimension'. However, there are still key ways in which the contemporary analysis of chronic poverty falls short of a properly relational view, one which views the constraints on poor people as a product of relationships of unequal power. One problem is that the view of social relations in poverty analysis often brings individualistic or neoliberal assumptions. A second is that poverty is conceived in terms of marginality and exception rather than as the consequence of normal economic and political relations. Third, too little attention is given to power and the different ideas of power in the understanding of poverty.

2.1 Relations beyond social capital

Neoliberal assumptions and methodological individualism pervade poverty research today. The point is not just the obvious one that poverty research at individual and household levels fails to account for wider social and political relations, but that social networks and relations have themselves been essentialised as a form of 'capital' divorced from 'issues of history, power and institutional process' (Meagher 2005). In influential econometric work, 'the social' (i.e., relations, networks, trust, associations) is explicitly construed as a 'class of asset endowment' of individual households which can be aggregated at the local, regional or national level, and the returns of which on well-being can be measured so as to influence investment decisions (e.g., by comparing returns to investment in human or physical capital [Grootaert et al. 2003, 21, cf Cleaver 2005]). This, of course, is the problem of 'social capital', at least as developed by the World Bank, the criticism of which as an individual responsabilising, economic, depoliticising concept, neglectful of the structural factors of disadvantage, is too well known to be repeated here (Harriss 2001, Fine 1999).²

² There are serious methodological problems with social capital questionnaires, and uncertainty about the causal processes that might explain regressions (Harriss 2001, 91), but also an irredeemable vagueness about what constitutes a social influence on individual behaviour. Durlauf (2002) suggests that this is a question that is better addressed through social psychology or descriptive histories than by econometric analysis (Mosse 2006: 713).

These individualist and neoliberal assumptions are also found within sustainable livelihood frameworks so central to current poverty analysis. On the one hand, 'the micro-dynamics of household-level livelihood components [are] at the expense of macro-economic and political processes and the reality of conflict, antagonism and social struggle' (Du Toit 2005:23, citing Murray 2001, Bracking 2003). On the other hand, the livelihoods framework begins with 'poor people' as possessors of potentially productive assets or 'capital' (human, social, natural etc. — almost any resource can be called a 'capital', 2005:23) with which to help themselves out of poverty. This chimes with a neoliberal perspective in which poor people are not a problem but the solution; their progress is assured through enlightened self-interest, hard work, frugal lifestyles and small business through which their meagre capital will become productive (Soto 2000, and critique in Breman 2003). Beyond this, in her book *Markets of Dispossession*, Julia Elayachar (2005) suggests that the cultural possessions of poor people, conceptualised as social *capital* — that is the 'capital' of social networks built around trust that are part of 'the ability of poor people to survive without help from the state' — become valued/discovered as the 'informal economy', providing a means to invest in the economy and to 'incorporate the social practices of poor people into the free market' as a source of profit (through development loans, micro-enterprise NGOs, 'financing [their] social networks through relations of debt'). This is a process Elayachar regards as *dispossession* through the simultaneous effect of undermining those same cultural possessions of 'relational value', through selfish pursuit of short-term accumulation, which is paralleled in the local discourse and agents of the 'evil eye' (2005: 7-8, 10-11, 186, 213).

A neoliberal conception of social relations as capital and associated methodological individualism have the effect, in Charles Tilly's terms, of constantly returning analysis to social essences rather than bonds (1998). And this deprives the idea of social capital of the dynamic of power. Thus social capital (or its lack) is conceived in terms of connectivity rather than in terms of the power inequalities (Meagher 2005). Of course much is at stake in *how* (and for who) networks operate and the political-institutional context that influences this. Diversifying networks may, in fact, promote opportunism and uncertainty rather than economic success (Berry 1993, in Meagher 2005:230), or indicate the collapse of stable common resource management (Mosse 2006). Moreover, as a determinant of economic success, 'wealth in people' usually means *power over* people (kin, affines, dependents, clients, employees). To be poor is not individually to lack social networks (though they are under-resourced³), but to be part of *others'* social capital, and to engage in social life on adverse terms (Cleaver 2005). As will become clear below, complex webs of dependency grow around poor people. Precisely because engagement in social and institutional life on adverse terms is a cause of poverty (Cleaver 2005, Bourdieu 1977), autonomy and independence from binding relations of dependence is a common aspiration among poor people, and a key measure of poverty reduction (cf. Jodha 1988, Beck 1994).

It is the *terms* of participation in social networks that is important. These, of course, can change adversely as a result of wider institutional effects, perhaps through the erosion of the 'moral economy', shrinkage in obligations from patrons, increased consumerism, exclusionary lifestyle norms including inflationary dowry/brideprice, or other such factors recorded in a wide variety of contexts. And similarly, within individual households, new patterns of income accrual, for instance from seasonal labour migration, can erode the basis of entitlement of vulnerable members such as the aged or disabled who are not able to produce goods which have a market value for exchange, shrinking the space for legitimate dependency (cf. Green 2006). The destitute are those not able to be dependent, considered 'unworthy of existing social claims' or 'activity socially *expelled*' (Harriss-White 2005:884). Destitution is an individual experience (*ibid*: 883), but it is also the effect of *social* (re-)

³ Du Toit (2005:14) makes the further point that social conflict is a characteristic of under-resourced networks.

categorisation. It is the loss of moral worth, entitlement and enfranchisement where rules are rigid, perhaps through the 'transgressions' of HIV, leprosy, disability, deformity, childlessness, as well as social processes of dispute, desertion, divorce, or death (of carers) that deprive individuals of dependent status, and the stigma that reproduces that exclusion (*ibid*:884, cf. Green 2006).⁴

2.2 Poverty: from condition to relation

A relational view, then, understands poverty as the effect of social relations, understood not narrowly in terms of connectivity or networks, but in terms of inequalities of power. Poverty is not a *condition* interrupted through key interventions, a negative attribute, or a 'trap' into which people fall or from which 'exit routes' can be designed (Harriss 2006:5). Rather it is the consequence of social relations, perhaps of exclusion, the withdrawal of protection, 'adverse incorporation' or exploitation — or 'the categories through which people classify and act upon the social world' (Harriss 2006:5, Green and Hulme 2005).⁵

Put simply, to adopt a *relational view* of poverty is to recognise that, as Geof Wood puts it, '[p]eople are poor because of others.' '[They are] unable to control events because others have more control over them' (Wood 2003: 456). The success of some is linked to the failure of others. What needs to be examined is the system of relationships (at different levels) that produce poverty, so as to introduce a 'sense of political economy [that] is essential to understanding the constrained options of poor people' (*ibid*). Among other things, this directs attention to broader issues such as 'macro-economic strategy, labour market regulation, commodity chain restructuring, global-local contestation and [...] cultural traditions and racial ideologies about employment and work' (Du Toit 2005: 24). It turns to the historical relationships that reproduce inequality in the distribution of power, wealth and opportunity (*ibid*:22). In consequence, 'studying poverty is not to be equated with studying poor people' (Harriss 2006:18, citing O'Connor 2001), and, when the purpose is to understand broader processes reproducing poverty, there is less value in distinguishing the characteristics of 'poor people', the 'transitory poor' or the 'chronic poor' (Hulme and Shepherd 2003).⁶ Certainly, research that treats poverty as a discrete and describable condition, or relies on econometric approaches, is not able to build an understanding of the historical specificity and variable dynamics of poverty. Even the livelihoods framework, Du Toit suggests, offers little idea as to *how* the dynamics of the connections within the model (relations between capitals, vulnerability context etc.) are to be analysed (2005).

A relational approach means treating poverty as arising from the operation of existing social relations and the adverse terms of inclusion in socio-economic systems, rather than as the

⁴ Witchcraft is a form of recategorisation (e.g., of kin as 'other') which has long interested anthropologists. It is one that can lead to the denial of rights, extreme forms of abuse and violence (Macdonald 2004). At the same time, in a recent study in tribal Orissa (India), Desai (2007) shows how the desire for protection from such mystical attack serves to limit, weaken, and break-up kinship connections, especially agnatic ones. Protection from witchcraft requires restricting and changing sociality, including withdrawal from certain social obligations of caste-kinship while emphasising non-kin friendships.

⁵ In this context, Green criticizes the conception of 'vulnerability' as a shared category or risk — an actuarial calculation of becoming poor — that lumps together very different circumstances (2006:6).

⁶ Especially if some arbitrary number of years (e.g., five years) is taken to define chronic poverty. The chronicity of poverty is important, but is not the same as the separation of a category or 'chronic poverty' (Du Toit 2005:23)

product of abnormal and pathological processes.⁷ People who are poor are not just those who have been left out and need to be integrated (into markets) but those disadvantaged by relations of production, property and power (Hickey and Du Toit 2007:7). Poverty is easily *exteriorised*, and those affected located *apart from* normal society. This tendency converges, Paul Farmer argues, with a “mode of perceiving and objectifying alien societies” (Asad 1975:17) which ‘conflat[es] poverty and inequality, the end results of long processes of impoverishment, with “otherness” and cultural difference’ (2005:48). (Herein lie problems with incorporating an idea of culture or cultural specificity into explanations of poverty, human suffering or human rights abuse, Farmer 2005:47-8).

The exteriorisation of poverty is evident in familiar dualisms such as the formal vs informal sector, or South Africa’s ‘two economies’ (Du Toit 2005). It may be institutionalised, for example in the Bantustan strategy of the South African government, which tried to create nation states out of black labour reserves (Ferguson 2006). In these ‘nations’, poverty could be constructed as endogenous and a feature of poor national resources (as Ferguson [1990 demonstrated for Lesotho) when, in reality, it was the consequence of ‘South African state policy, enforced low wages, influx control, or apartheid’ (Ferguson 2006: 60).⁸ Equally, the existence and working of the ‘informal sector’ can only ever be ‘understood by tracing the lines that connect it to the formal sector’ (Bremner 2003: 215).

As Farmer reminds us, people do not die in “lands of famine” outside ‘the “modern world system,” but in the very process of being forcibly incorporated into its economic and political structures’ (2005:274, citing Mike Davis on the mass death of tropical humanity in the 19th century). Emphasising the marginality of poor people, and their separation from institutions, only isolates poverty from its socio-political context and leaves the non-poor and elite unimplicated (Green and Hulme 2005). By contrast, Farmer, closing the distance between personal experience and human-made structural causes, describes international relations of poverty as a *structural violence*. He insists that suffering be understood through ethnographic analysis that is *geographically broad* and *historically deep* enough to discover connections, that allow it to be seen that ‘the world that is satisfying to us is the same world that is utterly devastating to them’⁹... ‘that modern day Haitians are the descendants of a people kidnapped from Africa in order to provide our forebears with sugar, coffee and cotton’ (2005: 157-8).¹⁰

⁷ The theoretical view of poverty and suffering as abnormal disjuncture in the social order has also marginalised poverty from anthropology as a science of society (Hastrup 1982, also cited in Green 2006).

⁸ Ferguson goes on to explore the contrast between the depoliticisation of poverty in sovereign Lesotho and the politicisation of poverty in ‘pseudo-state’ Transkei. He asks the question: what are the conditions under which poverty becomes depoliticised and seen as a consequence of internal deficiencies rather than regional political-economic relations. He considers then the effect of stable national sovereignty (of Lesotho) in isolating analysis of poverty from questions of ‘South African state policy, enforced low wages, influx control, or apartheid’, which have been prominent in the politicised critique of those leaders of Transkei’s resistance to ‘enclave independence (2006:50-68). The idea of a national economy, therefore, ‘works to localise and depoliticise perceptions of poverty’ (66)

⁹ Robert McAfee Brown (2001) paraphrasing the Uruguayan Jesuit Juan Segundo.

¹⁰ Another way of avoiding ‘othering’ discourses and reconnecting global wealth and poverty is to focus on valued lifestyles and how they are produced. The driving forces of *high* consumption in ‘the West’ can then be considered within the same frame as poverty in the ‘South’ (Mosse 2005a: 282-3).

Today, poverty is also exceptionalised by an unquestioned *neoliberal 'common sense'* (Bernstein 2006:57).¹¹ Maia Green (2006) suggests that it is the 'normativity of economic engagement' that gives 'chronic poverty' its distinction as exceptional poverty, impervious to the beneficial effects of growth, unerased (as ordinary poverty would be) by integration into global markets. The defining concern of chronic poverty research is with those people who, for various reasons (not least limited and unproductive assets such as land, education, finance, but also institutional barriers), are excluded from the escape routes from poverty promised by economic growth, which remains the main instrument of poverty reduction (du Toit 2005). And this directs attention to interventions in human development and security, and to finding an 'exit' from poverty traps; affordable access to education and health care, social protection, and targeted welfare, among them (Shepherd 2006:9). But this excludes from analysis the broader question of how (in what circumstances) growth itself, and the social and economic relations of capitalism, *create* poverty (Harriss-White 2006). John Harriss develops a similar argument about the depoliticising effect of separating poverty from 'the processes of the accumulation and distribution of wealth [...in which] the wealth of some is causally linked to the crushing poverty of others' (2006: 5,21) (see below). Bernstein regards this as part of a broader development studies 'antipathy to properly historical explanation' that overlooks earlier work on the effects of capitalist accumulation (2006:57, Du Toit 2005:21). The neoliberal developmental view, Farmer suggests, 'erases the historical creation of poverty...' and allows the continuation of relationships that produce poverty and inequality (2005:155-6). It is for this reason that, for Farmer, 'liberation' (from the present order) rather than 'development' more succinctly captures the hopes of poor people (2005:156).

2.3 Views of power

If a relational view is one that is centred on the importance of power in the reproduction of poverty and inequality, what notion of power is involved? Power has rarely been the explicit focus of attention in debates on poverty and poverty reduction (with recent exceptions, Alsop 2005, IDS 2006). Power of course is subject to many different meanings ranging from Weber's (1964) pluralistic notion of the command of force to Foucault's (1980) discourses of truth and knowledge; from the powers of formal institutions, to the informal, dispersed or, in Foucault's terms, 'capillary' power. This is not the place for a review of different concepts of power in the abstract,¹² and my approach is rather to illustrate the significance of different dimensions of power within a contextualised analysis of poverty.

Nonetheless, it is worth indicating that a relational view of poverty implies a relational view of power. Power in this sense is a relationship between groups or individuals rather than an *attribute*; it is 'power over' others (Spinoza's *potentas*), rather than simply 'power to' act (*potentia*) or the capacity to do things.¹³ Powerlessness, then, is not a lack of power, but subjection to the domination of others (which may be benevolent or exploitative). In its relational sense, power is not additive but subtractive. It is a scarce resource over which groups compete in zero-sum games. A relational understanding of power draws attention to

¹¹ Du Toit refers to 'unquestioned analytical liberalism' and the use of notion such as labour market inefficiency which separate markets and economies from 'the social conditions of their possibility' (2005:4,21).

¹² Elsewhere (Mosse 2005b), I have indicated some key distinctions in ideas of power that are relevant to poverty analysis.

¹³ I draw this and the following distinctions and references from Lukes 2005 and Gledhill 2000. Of course, other (Foucauldian) conceptions of power as the property of neither individuals nor classes, but dispersed and inseparable from society itself, make it difficult to conceive of differences between 'power to' and 'power over', or to imagine conflicts of interest, or even domination as a constraint on the freedom of autonomous agents (Lukes 2005:84-5).

the systematic nature of social behaviour, and so to structural views in which it is the constraints of the system (e.g. 'the distribution of agents into classes and the contradiction between these', Poulantzas [1969;70] or 'laws of arrangement' [Althusser and Balibar 1968]) that are ultimately important (both cited in Lukes 2005:54-55).

Such a view of power is compatible with the long tradition of class analysis and political economy. But its well-known weakness is a tendency towards determinism, economic reductionism and a static view that defines people by their position in the socio-economic order (Gledhill 2000). So, while the background to the poverty of indebted Indian *adivasi* farmers and migrant labourers, will be understood in structural terms, that is as the power of class-based alliances (colonial and post-colonial) which allow state-supported interests of the owners of industry and urban consumers to be asserted over the interests of poor forest-dependent communities, I want to argue for the need of a more *actor-oriented* view of power to understand *how* exploitation occurs, the strategies, interests and complicity involved. Power here is neither purely economic, nor free from economic constraints. The power of brokers, gang leaders, even labourers — to assert or resist control — appears at times as a non-economic resource that individuals seek to maximise (see Bailey 1969). There are strategies, tactics and trade-offs here, and interests and identities (of gender, ethnicity or caste) that overlap and confuse class analysis. But while drawing attention to the transactions of power, individuals and their motives, a voluntaristic, rational choice view of power has, in the end, to take cognisance of the inequalities of the wider (political-economic system) within which they are set. This is necessary so as to avoid non-relational view of poverty (and powerlessness) as a matter of the capacity of 'the poor', which (as will become clear) is a common limitation in poverty reduction programmes. Like most analysts nowadays, I find it more important to study the relationship between structural and voluntaristic expressions of power than to see these as *alternatives* (Lukes 2005:56-7, Giddens 1979, Bourdieu 1977), and to trace the connections of power from broad political systems to individual subjectivities that make poverty durable.

Of course there is more complexity to power in poverty than these distinctions of agency and scale. Section 4.3 draws attention to the importance to the durability of poverty of non-manifest 'agenda setting' power which silences and leads to political exclusion, while section 4.4 turns to power as a cultural process and the forms of 'recognitional domination' or consent that systems of exploitation involve, and that contribute to the durability of poverty.

So, there is an urgent need to reconnect research on poverty to knowledge of the way in which socio-economic, political and cultural systems work (power being this working), and therefore to understand how poverty is socially produced, how unequal power relations (dependence, servitude, racialised hierarchies) are reproduced, and the cultural discourses of power and exclusion involved. These approaches are 'structural' in the sense that unequal power is grounded in and perpetuates unequal distribution of wealth and access to resources. In the rest of this paper I examine the implications of taking such a broad view of poverty, drawing on examples, mostly from India, to illustrate the processes involved. I begin with approaches in political economy which analyse poverty as an outcome of capitalism as a mode of production. Second, I turn to an analysis of the social mechanisms of exploitation that account for the persistence of poverty and inequality. Third, I turn to chronic poverty as a matter of power; the power of some over others. This involves exploring in some depth the concept of power and its implications for understanding the agency of poor themselves and the meaning of 'powerlessness'. In the final part, I examine the implication of these conceptions of power and poverty for approaches to poverty reduction.

3. Capitalism and the political economy of poverty

Economic growth remains at the heart of strategies of poverty reduction (notwithstanding the preconditions of macro-economic and political/state stability, peace and security, which have taken centre stage in accounts of chronic poverty in Africa). But growing numbers of 'growth sceptics' show how poverty persists along with economic expansion, and that 'trickle down' does not work (Du Toit 2005:5). While growth (GNI) is strongly correlated with key human development indicators, it does not deliver short term improvements to these, and the chronically poor are the least likely to benefit (Global Chronic Poverty [GCP] 2004-5:37). Conclusions that growth increases inequality, giving rise to higher income poverty for a given average GNI per capita, or that high levels of inequality reduce the effectiveness of poverty reduction are now mainstream (*ibid*). When it comes to trade liberalisation, even the general poverty reducing effects continue to be debated (Bardhan 2006, for a recent overview).¹⁴ Free trade is associated with sharp increases in relative deprivation and distributional conflict, which are only intensified by reduced state protection (Chua 2003; Storm and Rao 2004: 573–74; see Nissanke and Thorbecke 2006 for recent evidence).

Rarely, however, do poverty analyses focus on the ways in which the pursuit of growth as a policy (and accumulation which it supports) actually produce or perpetuate chronic poverty.¹⁵ Indeed, by defining poverty reduction as the *goal* of development, and economic growth (markets or business) as its *means*, contemporary policy discourse obscures and simplifies the relationship between the two. Of course, a conception of capitalism as the partner of poverty reduction (as the conditions necessary to escape from poverty rather than a contributing cause of it) is attractive since it allows development 'without supranational or intra-national redistribution of the sources of wealth and prosperity' (Breman 2003: 205), while the policy idea of 'globalisation' further denies the political economy of capitalism as a 'system of power and conflict' (Fine 2004: 586, 588). But, Harriss-White suggests, this has also robbed [capitalism] of its logic, its institutional framework and its dynamic' (2006: 1241). The contribution of a political-economic perspective on chronic poverty is, then, to bring this logic back into focus by indicating the ways in which, as well as generating wealth, capitalist relationships create or perpetuate poverty.

A broad political-economic perspective would place capitalist processes in the context of international power and contemporary forms of imperialism (Harvey 2003). It would examine 'the processes that result in global inequality; in metropolitan 'concentration zones' of global production/ trading (investment, trade, finance, production and technology), 'feeder zones' (of labour or raw materials) and 'marginalised zones' (Robinson 2002: 1064–67; cf. Duffield 2002: 1054)'. This is a logic of concentration and exclusion that is social rather than geographical, and operates as powerfully within as across regions (Castells 1996; Robinson 2002); something that is evident in the patterns of stratification, inclusion/exclusion that have also brought ethnic hatred and violence to many parts of the world (Chua 2003)

¹⁴ So, Bardhan reports a study showing trade liberalisation benefiting Bangladeshi farmers through increased availability of farm inputs (and poverty reduced through the benefits of the international spread of Green Revolution technology), but another across Indian districts showing liberalisation (agricultural tariff reduction) significantly slowing poverty reduction (2006:4 online). At the very least, economists conclude that the 'supply response to price incentives' is constrained by poorer households limited access to capital, insurance, poor infrastructure and governance, 'venal inspectors and land rights' (Bardhan 2006).

¹⁵ The effect of growth on poverty will, of course, depend considerably on the sectoral composition of growth, whether broad-base agricultural growth offering unskilled employment, or growth that is narrowly-based on extractive industry with elite domination and social exclusion (Global Chronic Poverty 2004-5:37; Nissanke and Thorbecke 2006).

demonstrating the 'social irrationality' of a neoliberal logic [that] brings suffering to millions (Robinson 2002: 1057, 1062) (Mosse 2005c: 12).

Poverty research needs to go beyond such a broad view to focus on the key poverty-creating processes of capitalism. Harriss-White (2006) identifies eight of these: (1) the dispossession that occurs with 'primitive accumulation' as the precondition for productive investment; (2) the reproduction of pauperising petty commodity production; (3) the creation of pools of unemployment; (4) the commodification and commercialising of services provided for oneself meeting physical and emotional needs; (5) the production of pauperising and socially harmful commodities and waste (e.g., weapons, alcohol and tobacco, pesticide residues, and contaminating waste); (6) the 'new poor' created by the effects of economic crisis and the devastation caused to fragile debt-burdened economies by the 'billions of dollars of volatile short term capital stampeding around the globe in herd-like movements' (Bardhan 2006); (7) the (global) environmental destruction and poverty-producing disaster events arising from the need for more energy and the production of more waste generated by the drive to increase productivity; and (8) capitalism's determination of 'what kinds of bodies are eligible to enter the workforce' (Harriss-White 2005: 884) and its rejection of some as the unproductive, 'undeserving' poor (disabled, diseased, destitute migrants), and the criminalisation of others as social enemies (refugees, asylum seekers).

In order to examine these mechanisms of impoverishment it is not necessary to accept capitalism 'as a unique and universal form ... propelled forward by the power of its own interior logic' (Mitchell 2002: 271).¹⁶ In reality, free market capitalism depends upon complex relations and a 'stitching together' of a range of different practices (Mitchell 2002: 279) including the continuing importance and economic role of the state (colonial or contemporary), exercising power over both markets and institutions (trade, knowledge, environment), which allows capitalistic development to concentrate power and centralise decision making (Frank 2004: 609; Storm and Rao 2004: 574). With this in mind, I turn now to the first three of Harriss-White's effects of capitalism: dispossessing 'primitive accumulation', pauperising 'petty commodity production', and persistent unemployment, in relation to chronic poverty in India. This allows explanatory attention to focus on the largest concentrations of the persistently poor in India, 'tribal' inhabitants of remote forested areas, casual wage labourers and non-workers (Shepherd and Mehta 2006).

3.1. 'Primitive accumulation', dispossession, and tribal 'marginality'

There is renewed interest in the effects of what Marx in the first volume of *Capital* referred to as 'primitive accumulation', that is the use of state force to evict peasants from their land in creating the conditions necessary for capitalist production in England and a landless proletariat 'free' to sell their labour (Elyachar 2005:25-7). The concentration of capital for productive investment required not just the dispossession of labour, but also the destruction of pre-capitalist forms of production (such as craft production) and non-market exchange, and the reallocation of property rights including the privatisation of the commons (water, trees, lands) for new infrastructure, industrial plant and the supply of raw material for

¹⁶ An extensive literature questions a universalist notion of capitalism, whether driven by the growth of individual economic freedom, or the power of international capital driven by the need to accumulate (Mitchell 2002:271). Above all, market capitalism is a powerful structure of representation, an authorised interpretation of events, with the capacity to displace or conceal other logics. It 'produc[es] the impression that we know what capitalism is and that its unfolding determines our history' (Mitchell 2002: 266-67), where capitalism ends, civilised society ends, such that violence and the new wars mark 'the end of capitalism as a geographically expansive and economically inclusive world system' (Duffield 2002: 1053-54) (Mosse 2005c: 26-7).

industry, and intensified production of food for an industrial labour force (Harriss-White 2006:1242).

In their seminal *Ecological history of India*, Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha (1992) describe such dispossession brought by colonial rule as a primary cause of impoverishment of regions and social groups that remain among India's poorest, namely *adivasi* populations having forest-related livelihoods.¹⁷ In a challenge to neo-Malthusian orthodoxy, Gadgil and Guha describe the effects of the colonial state's assertion of proprietary rights over forest resources and the supply of these to those in power at subsidised rates. The British government sectioned off Reserve Forests primarily to enable control of teak for railways and shipbuilding, portraying as conservation what was in fact confiscation. Just as damaging as the extraction of forest resources, was the consequent erosion of existing social systems of resources use. This had the effect of transforming *common property* into *open access* resources, bringing a destructive pressure on common lands and forests. This, Gadgil and Guha argue, occurred before any change in local communities' subsistence demands and before any rapid growth in population. Subsequent population growth, the increase in marginal agricultural holdings, and landlessness have greatly increased destructive pressure on forests.

In India, particularly large concentrations of persistently poor people are found in tribal, forested (or deforested) regions (Shepherd and Mehta 2006) and there is a broad historical consensus that in significant measure chronic poverty in these *adivasi* districts of India has its historical basis in colonial forest regimes and the erosion of livelihoods that followed forest demarcation for commercial extraction under state monopoly (e.g., Skaria 1999, Hardiman 1987a,1994, Baviskar 1995). In the Bhil tribal region of western India (in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan), for example, Skaria shows how the colonial state set about the civilising of tribes *and* forests by keeping both apart. The forests were disciplined into ordered high-value teak timber producing Reserve Forests and Bhils were excluded to prevent damage from shifting cultivation, hunting, or *mahua* collection through forcible settlement and restrictions on mobility (1999:205-6). Bhils lost the forest by stealth as colonial knowledge ('scientific forestry') created Bhil ignorance (*ibid*: 206-7). Commercial extraction and deforestation intensified in the run up to Independence (Sjoblom 1999). As Bhils sought waged work with logging companies and contractors, they became instruments for the destruction of their own livelihoods, in a now familiar pattern.¹⁸

Gadgil and Guha's (1992, 1995) argument is that the exploitation and export of rural resources continued after Independence (now to urban centres of consumption rather than abroad). Indeed, 'primitive extraction' intensified under Nehru's programme of rapid state controlled industrial growth. Industry and commercial agriculture were supplied with hugely subsidised raw materials — electricity, roads and transport, fertilisers, and cheap labour from the displaced and landless. Demand from wood-based industries (paper, plywood, polyfibre yarn) led to 'sequential exhaustion' of forest resources, and pressure on resources from other industrial consumers undercut the livelihoods of forest-dependent *adivasis*, as well as those of artisanal fishing communities, or dryland farmers, intensifying pockets of poverty and producing increasing numbers of 'ecological refugees' (migrants, urban shanty dwellers) (Gadgil and Guha 1995).

¹⁷ *Adivasi* is a term now stripped of its literal meaning of 'original inhabitants', which has become an adopted identity of people with a shared historical experience of the loss of forests and the alienation of land, an identity which 'both points to subalterneity and refuses to accept that subalterneity' (Skaria 1999: 281, cf. Hardiman 1987a: 12–17).

¹⁸ For example, by the 1990s logging work had become a critical part of the livelihood of more accessible communities of the Penan in Borneo (Bending and Rosendo 2006:218).

'Primitive accumulation' is not just originary (as Marx suggested) but central and on-going to the reproduction of capitalism (Harvey 2003, Elyachar 2005:29); and clearly the state is not the only agent of dispossession.¹⁹ As Harriss-White points out, primitive and advanced forms of capitalist accumulation now co-exist within the same firm, and maybe the same region, as when multinational corporations displace tribal villages or evict pastoralists in one site and operate under conditions of regulated market exchange in another (2006:1242). The dynamics of dispossession persist in India, Gadgil and Guha (1995) argue, because of powerful mutually supporting alliances such as between (1) urban consumers, industry and large farmers; (2) politicians (decision makers); and (3) administrators (implementing bureaucrats).²⁰ These alliances result from political choices made 60 years ago (*ibid*). In this view, state actors operate in support of class interests that benefit from the exploitation of tribal areas, which constitute a sort of 'internal colonial frontier' and suffer from systematic extraction of resources (forests, minerals or cheap labour), huge displacements from dams, industries and other big public projects which divert benefits elsewhere, and a systematic bias in the allocation of development resources towards the high-potential plains and urban industrial areas (Corbridge and Harriss 2001, Gadgil and Guha 1995, Jones 1978).

While durable alliances reduce accountability and encourage a routine system of scams and kickbacks in resource using contracts, dispossession has also always met resistance resulting in violent struggles over resources essential to the livelihoods of poor adivasis and reminding us that not only the wealthy have power. Indeed, colonial forest policy threatened livelihoods in a way that prompted a long series of rebellions, uprisings, and protests against the forest department (including setting fire to the forest, see Hardiman 1987a, 1994, Guha 1983). Powerful movements continue against displacements for mining, dams or infrastructure, and over industrial pollution in the resource (mineral) rich adivasi regions 'placing the issue of development and dispossession at the heart of political debates in India today' (Ghosh 2006:525-6, Fernandes and Thukral 1989).²¹ Struggles that are triggered by livelihood issues bring state violence and coercion into evidence, and are then not just conflicts over resources but also protests against the state and the failures of democracy (Corbridge and Harriss 2001: 205-8). They also connect to the transnational sphere and anti-globalisation movements against accumulation and dispossession. However, because of the complex and mediated forms of representation involved, these may in fact undermine local struggles over resources (Ghosh 2006). (I return to issues of representation below). But more significant to chronic poverty than the eye-catching history of protest is the silent way in which dispossession is turned into durable exploitation through the production of cultural marginality among those poor people in India such as the Bhils, who have the identity of 'tribals', indicative not so much of marginality as of political subordination [Box 1].

¹⁹ 'Primitive accumulation' takes a variety of forms. For example, the transition to the market economy in the former Soviet Union, involved massive dispossession from property and work entitlements (Humphrey 1996-7, in Elyachar p30). Indeed, Elyachar argues that 'primitive accumulation "entails appropriation and co-optation of pre-existing cultural and social achievements" (Harvey 2003:146) as well as overt forms of suppression and displacement' (2006:29).

²⁰ Or between capitalist merchants and industrialists, the technical and administrative bureaucracy and rich farmers.

²¹ e.g., activist and adivasi groups are involved in resisting displacement from the Narmada dam project in Madhya Pradesh, and against dams and mines in the tribal regions of Uttarakhand, Jharkand, and Orissa (e.g., Ghosh 2006, Padel and Samanendra 2006).

1. Production of tribal 'marginality'

In a remarkable historical study, *Hybrid histories*, Ajay Skaria (1999) show how 'wildness', which began in western India as a mode of kingship and dominance (of forest kings) as distinctive as those of Kshatrya (warrior kingship) or Brahman (priesthood), was transformed from a discourse of power into a discourse of marginality; and the relationship between plains and hills from one of structured interdependence (between Bhil chiefs and Rajput rulers) to one of antagonism. With the destruction of forests Bhil cultivators were incorporated into colonial modes of land tenure and tax regimes which brought growing dependence upon traders and usurious money lenders (*sahukars*) who controlled Bhil labour through exploitative relationships of debt-bondage. These survived post-Independence legislation designed to protect tenants and tribals (Hardiman 1987b). As forest livelihoods were replaced by precarious *sahukar*-financed cultivation, debt and dependence, Bhil and *jangli* (wildness) were transformed into negative identities which people then began themselves to reject in what Skaria refers to as a 'deep malaise among forest communities'. This was manifest in 19th and 20th century religious reform and conversion movements or rebellions (1999:255, Hardiman 1987a). 'Even if they did not "awaken" Bhils themselves, these pre-independence movements awakened political organisations to the need to mobilise adivasis in order to capture political power (Sharma 1990, in Weisgrau 1997:41). Recent political inroads into adivasi cultural identity forged by Hindu nationalist organisations to make political capital out of cultural marginality, show how manipulative political penetration continues to precede or replace the penetration of 'development' resources (Breman 1985).

3.2. Pauperising petty commodity production and rural differentiation

Second among the poverty effects of capitalism that Harriss-White points to, are the increasingly large spaces allowed for pauperising forms of 'petty commodity production' in the self-exploiting 'informal sector' — wrongly characterised as a persisting pre-capitalist form or even as a sphere of anti-capitalist resistance (Harriss-White 2006: 1242-3; Bernstein 2003). Producers in tiny firms and farms are incorporated into relations of capitalism, tied into markets through poverty and money advances, and exist in niches that outsource risk, overhead costs and exploit low/unpaid family labour (often that of women and children) well beyond the reach of official regulation and welfare (Harriss-White 2006: 1242).

Small farmers are a special case in which petty producers carry the particular risks of uncertain natural environments, seasonality and the burden of ground-rent which capital is unwilling to take on (Bernstein 2003).²² These agricultural producers face a constant squeeze and survive under conditions of extreme constraint. High risk, delayed return (seasonal scarcity) and diminishing assets characterise the conditions of India's poorest farmers. Poor farmers have been affected in complex sometimes adverse ways by the dominance of capitalism as the mode of production in agriculture, which is itself the result of a process of long-term transformation rooted in colonial rule (Breman 2003:2; Harriss 1982).

²² Bernstein explains the uneven capitalist transformation of forms of production in agriculture thus: while manufacturing transforms materials already appropriated under controlled industrial conditions; agriculture transforms "through the very activity of appropriation from nature". This leaves it subject to the risks and uncertainty of the natural environments (2003:8). Capital is inhibited from direct investment in farming, (a) because of this risk, (b) because of 'non-identity of labour time and production time': i.e., seasonality and delayed realisation of value, and (c) 'the burden of ground rent' (ibid). Leaving these risks and burdens to family farms, which compete through low labour price. Risk, low wages, delayed return/seasonality are key aspects of rural poverty.

In general terms, in India and elsewhere, the inroads that capital makes into peasant farming raise the cost of production. Largely this is through 'increasing integration of farming by capital concentrated upstream and downstream of production' (Bernstein 2003:9). 'Upstream' large corporations dominate seed and agro-chemical development and production; 'downstream' corporations play an increasingly role in food processing and manufacture. Monopolies are underlined by international quality standards (safety and sanitary) regulations (Bernstein 2003, Bardhan 2006). Inserting farming into the markets and commodity chains of an 'international food regime' raises the costs of agricultural reproduction (entry costs and the risks from volatile market prices²³) so that, while many farmers with adequate landholdings benefit (poverty is reduced), some are simply unable to adapt to the 'comparative advantage' (Bardhan 2006).²⁴ This accelerates the process of economic differentiation, and contributed to the massive increase in rural poverty in the early years of Indian reform (1991-3) (Corbridge and Harriss 2000:165).²⁵ As cultivation costs rise, along with other things such as the costs of medical care or marriages, the need to replace bullocks, deepen wells, pay bribes or service old debts, debt deepens, pushing small farmers further into poverty and out of agriculture.²⁶

Generalisations are, of course, dangerous. Patterns of economic change, differentiation and impoverishment are locally specific, extremely complex and demand long-term and intensive study. Jan Breman has provided such an analysis of processes of long-term regional economic differentiation in western India (1974, 1985), while Scarlett Epstein's work in rural Karnataka over half a century throws light on localised patterns of rural change in different ecologies [Box 2]. With exemplary care she maps out a trajectory of persisting inequality of opportunity (patterned by class inequality and caste identity) with economic expansion that finds parallels across the globe.

2. Rural change and differentiation in Karnataka

In *Economic Development and Social Change in South India* (1962) Epstein presents research begun in the mid-1950s to show how intensified irrigated agriculture amplified existing caste/class inequalities and underscored the social and ritualised interdependence between dominant Vokkaliga cultivator caste patrons and their Scheduled Caste (SC) labouring clients. In a process that Epstein labels 'village-introversion,' agrarian development increased inequality and social subordination (a pattern recorded in several 1970s 'green revolution' studies). Economic opportunities in a second 'dry' (unirrigated) village were also starkly differentiated along caste/class lines, but this time through a contrasting process of 'village-extroversion'. While water scarcity limited agriculture, economic opportunities emerged from the services required by surrounding irrigated villages (e.g., cattle trading, sugar cane carting, work in the sugar factory) and investment in irrigated land outside the village. However, access to such work was through caste-links that excluded SC households. Meanwhile the diversification of economic activities beyond the village and the shift to hiring contract labour eroded the economic security SCs had from patron-client relations even as they were expected to continue providing ignominious ritual services. Refusal of the latter added conflict to growing economic

²³ Notwithstanding the fact that trade liberalisation can sometimes stabilise prices (Bardhan 2006)

²⁴ And, of course, petty producers who *do* profit are still constrained by restricted terms of trade and persisting agricultural subsidies in Europe and the USA. The cost of developed country protectionism in agriculture (tariffs and subsidies) is estimated to be about \$45 billion (from a static CGE model and the GATP trade and protection database, Cline 2004, cited in Bardhan 2006: 5 online). 'Protection' under the name of safety and sanitary regulations adds considerably to this (ibid).

²⁵ After 1993, accelerated economic growth reduced the proportion of below the income poverty line, but inequality continued to rise.

²⁶ Increasing costs and rising debt have also been held responsible for an outbreak of farmer suicides in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh (Johnson et al 2006, citing Christian Aid 2005).

polarisation, social fragmentation, and near destitution (indicated, for example, by debt-bonded child labour) as the 'moral economy' of the village was eroded.

Epstein's 1970s re-study (1973) confirmed the trajectories of village 'introversion' and 'extroversion' as parallel mechanisms of socio-economic differentiation and exclusion. While access to expanding economic opportunities was shaped by caste, there was growing political awareness and resentment among lower castes, whose poverty was deepened by new unaffordable prestige models, especially of dowry-giving or withdrawing women from agricultural labour. A second re-study in 1996 (Epstein *et al.* 1998) and follow-on research on migration from the villages in 2000 (Epstein 2006) confirmed a pattern of economic diversification — internal in the wet village, external in the dry one — producing livelihood chances (including urban/industrial employment) that were still strongly caste-differentiated, and which pushed the Scheduled Caste poor into the urban slums of Bangalore.

Other impoverishing effects occur with the *defensive* integration into markets of small producers forced to sell subsistence grain to cover debts, as are many *adivasi* cultivators in the uplands of western India (Bremans 1974) [Box 3].

3. Defensive integration into markets

Today poorer Bhil *adivasi* families are forced to cultivate diminishing plots of land on already degraded hillsides with less and less of the forest/grazing land essential to sustaining agriculture. Each generation further fragments landholdings, pushes cultivation further up the hillside (onto untitled forest department land), reduces grazing, meaning fewer cattle, less manure and less crop diversity, on land which is riskier and harder to work. Since their produce is sufficient for no more than 3-4 months, these farmers are forced to borrow at high-cost and high interest for survival when grain prices are high; and compelled to sell at harvest when prices are at their lowest. Poor farmers are thus tied into a cycle involving the advanced sale of crops, seasonal and long-term borrowing for consumption that ensures the continuing importance of relationships with *sahukars* (moneylenders/traders) who take on the multiple roles of credit, input supply, marketing of produce, and now labour contracting since many survive only through the advance sale of their own labour to gang leaders and labour contractors for work on distant urban construction sites. Borrowing from one source to repay another, poor Bhils are involved in an expanding network of credit-dependency. In extreme circumstances poorer families resort to one or other form of attached labour or 'bondage', the marriage of daughters in return for brideprice or the sale of their remaining land assets (Mosse 2005a:68).

As Harriss (2006) notes, using further examples, 'compulsive involvement' in markets ensures that a certain class (sometimes landholders, sometimes traders, occasionally both) control the produce (and labour) of a region through usury or share-cropping rents, and have a strong interest in perpetuating the poverty and dependence of small producers; their strategies of accumulation being directly linked to the impoverishment of others. Growing disparities have led to greater conflict, and polarising rural caste/class structures have occasionally provided the matrix or radical and violent caste politics and Maoist movements.²⁷ Those who fail to retain a hold on their productive assets are pushed into the 'reserve army' of workers feeding new rural labour markets (in India) and increasing circular flows of migrants within and between sectors (Bremans 1985, 2003, Bernstein 2003:5, 1977, 1990). As Corbridge and Harriss (among others) conclude, 'the rural poor in Indian are

²⁷ The shifting relationship between Maoists and poor people is a complex matter which cannot be elaborated here. (see *Economic and Political Weekly* 22 July 2006 for recent coverage Maoist movement across central and eastern India; also Kunnath 2006).

mainly the labouring poor',²⁸ which makes the availability of work, local wages, and the price of cereals the key variables of rural poverty (2000: 148,165).

Global processes of change in agriculture have pushed growing numbers out of the village economy, not into urban-industrial work, but into complex patterns of labour circulation through the 'barrios and favelas of the world system' (Breman 2003:5). Some survive and accumulate, but many are adversely incorporated for the long-term into insecure low skill, low paid casual employment by the demand for a highly flexible labour supply in the 'informal urban economy', which is not 'a waiting room' for higher qualified, better paid, more secure formal sector employment (*ibid*). In India (and elsewhere), the process is exacerbated by slow growth or decline in the agricultural sector, stagnation in real agricultural wages and a fall in food grain production ('by about 3 percent per year', Drèze 2001). By any reckoning, for India's rural poor this is a 'phase of extreme vulnerability, when traditional livelihoods have collapsed and alternative economic activities are yet to develop' (*ibid*). This focuses attention on the important link between chronic poverty the operation of labour markets, a third general effect of capitalism.

3.3. Labour markets and unemployment

In the western Indian adivasi border region of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, in any year half of the adult population will be absent for half of the year, most often working intermittently as casual seasonal labourers in urban construction sites, leaving only the old, the ill or the injured; in some villages there will be almost nobody. A highly segmented casual labour market in the major destination cities of Ahmedabad, Baroda or Surat means that despite a growing construction industry and a shortage of skilled labour, Bhil migrants are excluded from skilled work as masons, carpenters or textile workers, and ensures that they are absorbed almost entirely as the lowest-paid, least-secure, unskilled casual labour. In particular, it is recruitment through a multi-tier system of labour gang leaders, jobbing recruiter-supervisors and labour contractors that reproduces this segmentation (as well as freeing the owners of capital from the obligations of employer, Breman 1996: 157–61) and ensures that Bhil migrants follow well-defined and repeated routes from particular villages to particular urban work sites.' (Mosse 2005a:69). The experience and outcome of migration is highly differentiated (*ibid*). Successful migrants invest surplus in agriculture or repay debts (cf. Rogaly 2002), but for many migration does not offer an exit from poverty and debt. After three months 'slab work' in Surat a young couple from a Madhya Pradesh village were able to contribute only Rs 4,000 towards the Rs 7,500 interest due on a Rs 15,000 family loan taken to cover marriage expenses. In the meantime fresh debts are routinely incurred to meet subsistence needs, crop failure or illness (Mosse *et al.* 2002:86).

Incorporation into labour markets is adverse to different degrees. In *adivasi* western India (and elsewhere) those who are most exploited and have least power to protect their interests are families for whom migration is a defensive survival strategy; people who in the lean season trade their labour in distant urban sites for cash to meet the urgent need for food, and who are most fully tied into relations of dependence and exploitation; men women and children who migrate furthest, for longest, under the worst conditions of deprivation with least reward. At work sites migrants experience long hours, hard work, harsh conditions, injuries

²⁸ The question of 'de-peasantisation' in adivasi India is in fact more complex than this suggests. In my own research in western India the poorest are defensively integrated into markets, face diminishing returns and rising debt. Debt-bound labour migration is a central survival strategy, but is it also the (only) means to reproduce valued agrarian lifestyles. Even the very poorest go to extreme lengths to retain their identity as cultivators, although for some, the village becomes 'a receding point of reference' (see Mosse 2005a:72-4).

(with inadequate medical help or compensation), and social isolation and humiliation (see Mosse *et al.* 2005). These migrant labourers are recruited in their own villages by gang leaders/brokers (*mukkadams*, often former Bhil labourers) who negotiate with contractors/employers, arrange cash advances and long-term work. Being tied to *mukkadams* is a price paid for the relatively greater security of work, for protection (including shelter at work sites) and patronage offered by ties to *mukkadams*. But if this is a 'Faustian bargain' (Wood 2003), often it neither involves choice nor promises economic security, but rather perpetuates or worsens insecurity (cf. Du Toit 2005:14).²⁹ Even when paid in full, migrant wages fall well below the legal minimum (especially for piece-rate jobs), but more importantly work is irregular, and payment often late or withheld, especially towards 'the end of the season when the balance of power has firmly shifted from employee (coaxed with advances) to the employer, and when migrants are under pressure to return home for the cultivation season' (Mosse *et al.* 2002: 75). Unpaid workers have no power of redress. And it is precisely because of this uncertainty that poor Bhil migrants place great store on the reputation of their most intimate exploiters, *mukkadams* and contractors. Long absence and dependence on distant patrons reduces their status, erodes social capital, makes poor people marginal to the networks through which credit (or marriages), or benefits from development projects are obtained.

For contractors and brokers, advances are a mechanism to cement control over a fluid labour force, and debt is 'an instrument of coercion' involving a kind of 'neo-bondage' which only differs from the older agrarian type of clientship in the absence of compensating security (Breman 1996). In other words, the dependence relationship that historically Bhils had with their moneylending *sahukars* has developed and diversified in ways that weaken or eliminate elements of patronage and protection. In the rapidly expanding urban-industrial corridor extending from Ahmedabad to Mumbai, capitalist development encouraged by macro-economic policy, is oiled by large scale flows of easily exploitable labour. Indeed larger established builders and contractors, including those working under contract for state housing or telecommunication schemes, most often opt for the dependably compliant, vulnerable and hard-working migrant labour force recruited through brokerage and debt-dependence (in preference to the more independent labour available through urban daily labour markets) (Mosse *et al.* 2005). Here the poverty of migrant labourers interlocks with that of ex-formal sector workers who lost jobs with the closure of industries in the western region (textile mills, screen printing units and chemical factories) as a result of policies of restructuring, externalisation and downsizing and with whom they are in competition in informal casual job markets; each group significantly weakening the position of the other (Breman 2002:202; cf. Du Toit 2005:17).

Let me emphasise, here, that this is not a case against labour migration. Many better-off adivasi farmers are able to use migrant incomes to improved agriculture, and to invest in essential social networks, and for the poorest migration alone allows survival at the margins. In fact, in Bhil western India labour migration is not an indication of de-peasantisation; rather it has become the only means by which valued agrarian lifestyles and identities can be reproduced, in part at least (Mosse *et al.* 2005). It is not migration, but the *social relationships* of exploitation involved that are the cause of chronic poverty. And it is the fact that the institutions of government, NGOs and others are poorly equipped (or politically unwilling) to deal with the mobile poor that makes labour migrants a particularly invisible and exploitable section of society (Mosse *et al.* 2005).

The vulnerability of footloose unskilled labour also has an underlying structural aspect: the logic of capitalism produces unemployment. Harriss-White makes two points here: first,

²⁹ Mosse *et al.* 2005 discusses the strategies, risks and careers of *mukkadams*, some of whom are moneylenders in villages, while some have settled in towns.

technological change limits the labour absorption capacity of economic growth; second, 'the dynamic of capitalism requires there to be idle capacity' in labour [among other factors of production]. Seasonal labour, and pools of unemployed people 'are functionally useful to capital since their very existence disciplines and disempowers those in work, discouraging them politically from struggles over the distribution of wages and profits...' (2006: 1243). The unemployed are capitalism's 'waste people' (Bauman 2004). While, in principle, states balance this effect of capitalism with the threat of political instability through measures for minimum labour welfare (Harriss-White 2006), after four decades research with the labouring poor, Jan Breman is sceptical that in India poor people pose a threat to law and order such as to bring pressure for taxation to meet the need for labour welfare, social safety nets, education, healthcare or lifetime insurance (2003:7) (although the recent national employment guarantee legislation [see below] is a major step in the right direction). Instead, there is continuing concentration of surplus, increased inequality and a brutal 'denigration of the labouring poor' (2003:8); a disciplining, regulation, segregation of poor people (policing, clearing slums) that has colonial precedents (Gooptu 2001:13); a denigration reproduced through social processes of categorisation and identification. I will turn to these shortly, and later consider the way political capabilities are constrained by vote-banks segmented by identities and neoliberal ideologies that hold poor people responsible for their own upliftment.

'The true crisis of world capitalism', Breman writes, 'seems to be the stubborn and pernicious unwillingness to enable a very substantial part of mankind to qualify themselves as producers and consumers for full and fair participation in the regimen of capitalist activity' (Breman 2003:9). Ultimately, in the absence of protection offered by formalised labour, 'the improvement in the bargaining power of the labouring poor, which is a precondition for a structural rather than a conjunctural market expansion, does not materialise' (Breman 2003:9). I will return to an exploration of the possibilities and constraints of organising to enhance such bargaining power among the most exploited and insecure workers. First, let me turn to some of the largely neglected cultural processes of poverty and inequality.

4. Social mechanisms of durable inequality and poverty

4.1. Exploitation and categorical inequality

Political economic approaches largely confine the explanation of chronic poverty to the logic of economic relations of accumulation, exploitation, dispossession, or differentiation associated with capitalist transformations. These accounts do not, however, give an account of the social mechanisms which perpetuate inequality and stabilise or facilitate relations of exploitation making them viable, and which account for persisting lack of mobility. Poverty analysis generally fails to examine the way in which the structural configurations of poverty are socially meaningful, shaped through and by processes of identity, culture and agency (Du Toit 2005).³⁰

In his book *Durable inequality* (1998) Charles Tilly is concerned precisely with mechanisms of the stable reproduction of exploitation and accumulation. He combines Marxist ideas of exploitation and Weberian ideas of social closure to provide a theory explaining social inequality and poverty (Wright 2000:464) (or in current poverty studies parlance 'adverse inclusion' 'and social exclusion', Hickey and Du Toit 2007).³¹ Tilly is concerned with inequality

³⁰ This avoids the economistic and reductive tendencies of agrarian scholarship (Harriss 1994, Hickey and Du Toit 2007).

³¹ Wright argues that Tilly is actually much closer to a Marxist class analysis, showing not only that an exploiting elite class appropriates labour effort of the exploited, but also that it 'accumulate[s] resources which they can use to buttress their power in all sorts of ways' (2000: 467).

which is intergenerational, manifest in durable economic and physical effects and embodied in reduced stature, disease and death (cf. Farmer 2003). He suggests a set of 'inequality-generating mechanisms'. The pivotal one is *exploitation*, the exclusion of some by others of the full value added by their effort (e.g., in the construction sites of Gujarat where tribal migrant labourers whose work is essential, are paid barely enough to survive). A second mechanism that Tilly calls *opportunity hoarding*, involves 'confining the use of a value-producing resource to members of an in-group' (Tilly 2000). He then suggests that *transactions* between greater and lesser beneficiaries generate boundaries and produce *unequal categories*. One of his examples is the way '19th century English textile mills distinguished sharply between men's work and women's work, women's work almost universally receiving lesser reward for similar effort' (2000). The same process on construction sites distinguishes Saurashrian bricklayers from Bhil casual labours; or non-*adivasi* drivers from *adivasi* headloaders; and in aggregate segments the casual labour market, skewing (urban) dalit occupation profiles towards menial jobs as sanitary workers or 'scavengers', and ensuring that even after 25 years work on construction sites, in stone quarries lime kilns and brick fields a Bhil labourer has no chance to get skilled or better-paid work. Importantly, Tilly argues, unequal categories work to create different opportunities in the *absence* of deliberate efforts to subordinate excluded parties. Beliefs about the inferiority of the disadvantaged group — such as the pervasive negative stereotyping of *adivasis* migrants as backward, ignorant, or dalits as ritually impure — are secondary developments.³²

The structuring of unequal opportunity takes place, Tilly argues, through two further societal mechanisms: *emulation* — 'the transfer of existing organisational forms, representations and practices from one setting to another' (e.g., the reproduction of gender, ethnic or caste segmented labour markets in diverse settings), and *adaptation* — the 'invention of procedures that ease day to day interaction, and elaboration of valued social relations around existing divisions' (2000). Through 'emulation' the transaction costs of exploitation and hoarding are reduced (hotel managers adopt a conventional division of labour by gender, education, ethnicity or age, 'thus naturalising the recruitment of cleaners from among poor immigrants and desk clerks from more educated or second generation immigrants' (2000)). When the categorical distinctions match those widely available in society (e.g., those of race, caste or gender) costs are yet further reduced. (It is to the advantage of California lettuce growers to recruit field hands entirely from non-citizen Mexican immigrants [*ibid*]). Powerful organisations make the categorical distinctions they adopt 'more pervasive and decisive in social life outside'. In this way the institutions of the colonial government in India significantly strengthened the categorical divisions of religion and caste by their use of such identities in army recruitment, and employment in hospitals, railways or domestic service; and despite affirmative action caste continues to structure employment opportunities in major institutions.³³ Categorical inequality is then stabilised by the 'adaptation' of those whose opportunity is defined by such divisions (workers in a factory or a construction site 'entwine friendship, courtship, rivalry, and daily schedules' around the routines of the workplace effectively 'reinforcing whatever distinctions are built into these routines' (Tilly 1998).

³² Given deeply entrenched caste ideologies, this might seem harder to argue for India's labouring ex-untouchable castes. However, there is evidence that only relatively recently, in the 19th century, were ideas of ritual pollution extended from a small group of specialist castes (removers of carrion, funeral specialists) to a broad category of dependent labouring people (including dispossessed tribals and pastoralists). Not only were ideas of 'impurity' adopted to assert authority over newly marginalised labourers as untouchables, but also the British colonial administrative arrangements furthered such categorisation through its caste-typed recruitment practices into the army, industrial units, as hospital menials, or domestic servants (Bayly 1999, Dirks 2001, 1996).

³³ See previous note. Tilly adds the 'quasi-Darwinian' idea that. "Because organisations adopting categorical inequality deliver greater returns to their dominant members and because a portion of those returns goes to organisational maintenance, such organisations tend to crowd out other types of organisations" (cited in Wright 2000:462-3).

Established categories, then, constrain the possibilities of personhood more profoundly (Hacking 1986).³⁴ Here, Tilly offers a way of bringing culture in, not as an explanation of variation in poverty, but to show how categorisations brought into play through interactions reproduce inequality and explain why poverty is a ‘tolerated outcome and for whom, and how this toleration [is] embedded within institutional norms and systems’ (Green and Hulme 2005:872).

Tilly’s analysis clearly emphasises the organisation of categories over the attributes of individuals (2000), even though categorical distinctions also shape the acquisition of individual skills so as to make them self-reproducing. Take the case of disability: disability is not primarily an individual physical condition, but the ‘*socially-defined* incapacity to work’; The condition of disabled people is the result of ‘tactics deployed by others to force unemployment’ (Harriss-White 2005: 882). The processes of disenfranchisement and expulsion are not individual, but arise from social definitions and shared categorisations. Moreover, inequalities of different kinds — race, gender, ethnicity, class, age, citizenship, educational levels, or (dis-)ability, Tilly insists, only *appear* to differentiate in separate ways. They are underpinned by similar social processes and are ‘to a degree organisationally interchangeable’. Tilly here emphasises *interactional* inequality and deliberately downgrades the significance of its ideological elements (whether racism, casteism, or sexism). While this can be challenged (below), it is intuitively correct to say that ‘in themselves social facts of gender, ethnicity, or caste have limited explanatory power’ (Farmer 2005:42). Tilly’s analysis is also non-reductionist in that different axes of discrimination can operate simultaneously, while always organised by wider systems of exploitation (cf. Farmer 2005:46).³⁵

Tilly offers an explanation of persisting inequality and poverty by showing how the potentially destabilising effects of exploitation and opportunity hoarding are dealt with; that is by ‘creating solidarity, trust, interlocking expectations, and reliable forms of enforcement *among those with stakes in hoarding and exploitation*’ (Wright 2000: 462, original emphasis). ‘Inadvertently or otherwise, those people [who control access to resources] set up systems of social closure, exclusion and control. Multiple parties—not all of them powerful, some of them even victims of exploitation—then acquire stakes in these solutions’ (Tilly 1998: 8).

Tilly gives an account of the capacity of power and accumulation to serve its own ends, without resort to intentionality, values, or ideas. His approach refuses to give explanatory power to belief, or ideologies of gender, caste, or racialised cultural orders, rendering them epiphenomenal. Arguably, this is a rather one-dimensional view of how people (dominant or subordinate) act (Laslett 2000, Wright 2000). Tilly’s argument is that ‘emulation and adaptation lock such categorical distinctions into place, making them habitual and sometimes even essential to exploiters and exploited alike’ (1998:11). His concern with the organisational efficiencies of categorical inequality makes his explanation functional; his conception of power as a property of the system is essentially structural. But of course, this is only one way in which power operates to produce durable poverty. For example, the same categorical inequalities that reduce transaction costs also generate ‘solidarities and networks opposed to the dominant categories’ (Wright 2000: 463) which may not be neutralised by self-interest. At least, this begs unanswered questions about the reflective consciousness (consent or dissent) of those subject to exploitation, to which I now want to turn by considering culture and power as aspects of the analysis of poverty.

³⁴ Hacking (1986) suggests that classifications and people ‘evolve hand in hand’ so that the possibilities of action and being are constrained by the existence of social categories.

³⁵ As Farmer puts it, ‘any distinguishing characteristic, whether social or biological can serve as a pretext for discrimination.’

4.2. Patronage, control and 'power over'

The logic of capitalist transformation and the operation of categories are the background engines of structural poverty. But in countless places, the foreground reveals rapacious exploitation and corruption, unscrupulous traders, usurious moneylenders, 'bootleggers, contractors and bureaucrats' (Drèze 2001). Bhil tribals in remote western Indian upland districts have endured intimidation, exploitation and violence as much as protection from agents of the state, especially the forest department and the police. Here, poverty manifests itself as powerlessness, subordination and injustice in face of intentional assertions of unaccountable power rather than complicity in categorical distinctions. The multi-tiered system of labour gang leaders, jobbing recruiter-supervisors and labour contractors that reproduces the segmentation of labour and traps a certain category of Bhil migrants in insecure, irregular, low skilled employment involves direct assertions of power (control over opportunity) of some over others [Box 4].

4. Power and injustice

Debt-bound *adivasis* have limited power to decide where they will travel and for what work. Their capacity to negotiate pay or question deductions is highly constrained; they are routinely cheated of pay and when making demands for unpaid wages from contractors they face intimidation and threats. Bhil women suffer sexual exploitation by masons, contractors, the police and others which is routine but silenced by fear and economic or marital insecurity (i.e., unreported for fear of loss of work or domestic violence). Because Bhil migrants are recruited through long-distance and discontinuous chains of intermediaries, they lack even the limited protection of agrarian patron-client relations, lack knowledge, networks or contacts in the city environment. Sleeping in the open or bivouacking under makeshift structures, migrants are vulnerable and subject to harassment, theft, and forcible eviction. The abuse of *adivasi* migrants is closely related to their lack of identity or dwellings in urban places. Here they stand out as marginal, transitional people. They are subject to injustice, prejudice, stigmatised and criminalised, falsely accused of theft or looting, and detained and beaten by police. Contractors, employers, the police and urban authorities have, and exert, every imaginable power over them. If cheated or abused, *adivasi* migrants have no power of redress cutting their losses and decamping at night is their only option (Mosse et al 2005: 3027). A parallel powerlessness allows the local agents of the state, often in alliance with local elites, richer farmers, headmen and brokers (*dala*) to 'redistribute' development funds away from poor people in *adivasi* villages producing a characteristically poor condition of public services; schools without teachers, clinics without doctors, as well as accentuating differences based on resource endowments (Breman 1974, 1985).

Power exerted by state officials, police, contractors, employers or traders to the disadvantage of poor people occurs within more encompassing systems that allocate scarce resources; that is to say political economy. Some of this has to do with the arrangement of *formal systems* of public policy, law, political parties and the alliances they produce. As noted, the decision-making power of a 'ruling elite' (Wright-Mills 1956) or the 'ruling class' (a Marxist-inspired notion) in formal structures (see Lukes 2005: 1-5) has a bearing on the prospects of the chronically poor through state policy on forestry, dam construction, anti-poverty spending or programme choices. Such power is manifest in the skewed targeting of schemes and services (e.g., education and health spending) and more immediately through the decisions of municipal authorities or police to allow/disallow settlements, or those of official committees – *panchayats*, forest committees — that control access to livelihood resources.

However, poor people's immediate experience is more likely to be of power exercised through *informal systems* of caste dominance, patronage or brokerage. In rural India power relations are partly embedded in unequal distribution of rights in land, water and other

productive resources, naturalised in caste hierarchies, determining decision-making power and constraining the economic, educational and other opportunities of poorer households. But village power has never been exercised independent of wider political forces and, with universal franchise, is no longer tied to class/caste position (Beteille 1965). Indeed power is often remarkably fluid (shifting power blocks), multi-centred and its sources varied — ownership of land, numerical strength, contacts with officials, membership of party/political networks — which brings conflicts (e.g., between the big landowner and the popular leader) and makes it difficult to treat power in structural terms (1965:182). Moreover, in general, it is possible to say that today land-based forms of patronage and dependence (the source of 'zero-sum' struggles with landlords over wages or share-crop contracts) are progressively weakening for various reasons (the decline in agriculture, land ceiling and tenancy legislation among them), and upper class/castes have switched to *brokerage*; that is to say mediating links with state and private development institutions (banks, Block offices for the provision of credit, government schemes, housing, employment, electricity connections, or public works contracts). Brokerage is an easier route to political power (through votes) and financial gain (through lucrative contracts, 'leakage', mediation fees and other forms of 'rent seeking') (Gupta 1998:146).

The urban poor, too, invariably depend upon informal rather than formal systems of governance to access public services and mitigate risk. Indeed, one recent study in Delhi found that it was the poorest, most vulnerable, most recent and socially mixed slums that had greatest dependence on intermediaries (Jha *et al.* 2007). In the Dhaka slums, brokers (*mastaans*) manage shelter and key services, charging rents for water, electricity or protection, and, like *mukkadams* in Gujarat, mediate the links to jobs for captive networks of migrants and urban poor people (Wood 2003). In this patron-client politics, positions of patronage or brokerage are themselves the outcome of competition and strategic efforts to maximise the acquisition of power as influence, or the accumulation of 'political capital', and privileged access to (and so the capacity to deliver) public resources (cf. Wade 1982). Potentially this also gives poor people themselves — at least those in more established and politically connected settlements — a degree of influence and voice albeit mediated by better-off leaders (Jha *et al.* 2007).

But the social networks that interlink different structures of power, formal and informal (Beteille 1965) can also work against weaker groups. Formal systems can be used to reproduce informal power. For example, institutions of local government, labour officers, or the police provide a means for upper castes to exercise power over scheduled castes, or non-tribals over tribals, which cripple the affirmative action policy of the state. State programmes and public services have the capacity to produce economic differentiation and social exclusion in ways that are patterned by existing categorical inequalities. Attempts by poor people to acquire resources, autonomy or 'empowerment'; through formal systems — election to local councils, membership of user association or micro-finance institutions — can be frustrated and undermined by, or provoke violent retribution from, informal systems of patronage or caste domination. Violent caste conflicts around recent *panchayat* elections are a case in point (Human Rights Watch 1999). As noted in section 6 below, it is the hope of reform agendas that formal processes (decentralisation, structures of representation) will have an impact on unequal, informal power relations (for example, democratic decentralisation on inter-caste relations in India). But new accountability instruments (citizen complaint, report cards) also have to contend with mediating patrons or build on the existing accountability strategies of clients in patronage systems (perhaps mediated through norms of hierarchy and power) (World Bank 2004, cf. Corbridge *et al.* 2005).

Contests over power and its exercise invariably take specific cultural form. In rural south India claims to power may adopt the naturalising idioms of purity, honour, or caste status. Correspondingly, those subject to power have to contend with ascriptions of pollution, with residential segregation and a range of exclusions routinely imposed on Indian dalits —

exclusion from public spaces (temples, water sources, teashops), from decision-making committees, from the services of priests, from the markers of self-respect and dignity (wearing shoes, carrying umbrellas, covering the body) — as well as hierarchical ritual incorporation through ignominious roles (as funeral servants, drummers), deferential bodily comportment, and exposure to sexual exploitation, all of which naturalise power and unequal rights to resources, still significantly underpinned by economic relations rooted in unequal control of assets, primarily land (see Deliège 1999, Mosse 1994 for details).

The freedoms and livelihood of people who are poor are variously constrained by the exercise of power over them. But power is also a force to resist, to protest and struggle against. Political capital is also necessary for poor people, whose rights have to be negotiated and whose assets have to be defended politically through countervailing power (Baumann 2000). Struggles over such power are overtly political having winners and losers. They involve conflict over resources or resistance to displacement (as in the Narmada Bachao Andolan), demands for justice, rights to information and more. Equally significant in South Asia are the histories of struggle for social dignity and against exclusion, and intense conflict over symbolic resources, which often take place at festival moments or temple centres that are the ‘founts of honour’ (Dirks 1987:283) and legitimising symbols of power.

In such conflicts, frequently the interests of those who are poor are denied, their preferences overruled, and their livelihoods undermined by the power of others to protect theirs. The concept of power in evidence here — whether in formal or informal systems, exerted or resisted — is intentional, behavioural, explicit decision-making power, arising from overt interests and preferences. Sometimes the power exercised is coercive or involves the command of force - sometimes violence. It is the notion of power that, Lukes suggests, draws on individualistic and intentional assumptions about the exercise of power that are built into our language (2005:42).³⁶ It may be strategically accumulated or competitively fought over in ‘zero-sum’ power games. Not all powerlessness is the consequence of domination (being subject to the power of others); some may be *impotence* (lacking power), although when we think of powerlessness as *injustice*, dominance and impotence merge (Lukes 2005: 68). A conception of power limited to this overt form, is what Steven Lukes called ‘*one-dimensional power*’, distinguished, in the first instance, from another form of power – ‘*two-dimensional power*’ which refers not simply to the power to prevail in decision-making, through direct control, but the power to determine what decisions are to be taken about, to shape the agenda. This idea of power shifts attention to the question of representation and the politics of poverty

4.3. Agenda setting power and failures of political representation

‘Two-dimensional’ power, is about the ‘mobilisation of bias’; how ‘some issues are organised into politics while others are organised out’ (Schattschneider 1960:71 cited in Lukes 2005:20). Power in this sense is manifest in the *non-issue*, the *non-decision* (on air pollution, or ground water contamination, or the rights of migrant labourers). It is exercised ‘from outside the range of observable political behaviour’ perhaps by groups or corporations (Crenson 1971, cited in Lukes 2005:45). The significance of non-decisions and the *suppression* of conflicts demonstrate the limitations of a (one-dimensional) behavioural view of power.

³⁶ This is a notion of individual agency that infuses ‘narratives of self-motivating action which shape the way we expect to social world to work’, against which Tilly sets his *relational* analysis of inequality (1998:37). By-products of social interaction, tacit constraints, unintended consequences, indirect effects, incremental changes, and causal chains mediated by non-human environments play little or no part in customary narratives of social life’ (*ibid*).

The interests of poor people are often excluded from the political agenda, and from the mandates or institutions of public policy. Indeed the interests of the very poor are rarely the focus of direct conflicts. Power is the reason why their diffuse discontents do not get expressed as explicit demand. Power deflects demands from becoming threatening political issues, ensuring they remain inchoate (Lukes 2005:40, Gaventa 1980). In these terms, poverty persists because the concerns of poor people are invisible and their needs unpoliticised.³⁷ Studies in the 1980s concluded that the surest protection against famine was the politicisation of hunger and the trigger of a free press (e.g., Crow 2000:63).³⁸

Chronically poor workers in India (and adivasi seasonal migrants in particular) experience persistent exploitation partly because they do not have the power to defend their rights, to press cases for wage payment or injury compensation. They are excluded from justice by procedural difficulties, informal agreements that leave no paper trail, and by the interconnected interests of more powerful actors (employers, lawyers, labour officers, even union representatives). The few labour inspectors who might have supported Bhil migrants in cases of abuse invariably ally with employers and, given engagement in various forms of rent seeking, have an interest in concealing rather than acting on information on exploitation (Breman 1996:52). Even if cases of abuse get to the labour courts, they are likely to be resolved by compromise and few further penalties for abusers. These are all matters of Luke's *first dimension* of power. But the fact that cases of abuse are extremely *unlikely* get to court, that the abundance of Indian legal protection of workers does not pick up on migrant labour vulnerability because it is not geared to their needs but biased towards formal sector employment, the fact that 91 percent of the 350 million workers who (in 2002) comprise the unorganised sector lack power to influence the rule-setting agenda and get their interests and their legal rights recognised; these are questions of power in the '*second dimension*'.

The failure to register needs on decision making agendas is a determinant of poverty and inequality that occurs at many levels, from the village PRA planning exercises that exclude the interests of subordinate groups including women (in ways that are largely invisible because dominant groups set the 'rules of the game' in their favour), to the equivalent in large-scale consultation processes of PRSPs and the like (see Mosse 1994, 2005, Crawford 2003). The route to state-wide political marginalisation of the interests of poor people is littered with consultative committees or the task forces appointed to diffuse issues (Lukes 2005:6, 40). When we identify the chronically poor as those who will say "there is no point complaining, nobody is going to listen" (an adivasi woman to Jean Drèze), the question of poverty is linked to the issue of *representation*. The point is not just that *adivasi* migrant workers, for example, lack awareness of basic legal rights, or that the risks of asserting these is too great or, even, that they lack access to institutions for the enforcement of rights (all of which is true), but that migrants fail to become a constituency for labour departments, unions, municipal authorities or political parties – they do not have votes, contribute revenue, or pay subscriptions; they are not consumers or customers.

In this case, power concerns not only people's actions and relations, but also the language, classifications, and organisations through which they are represented as interests and groups within political systems (Gledhill 1994), and which provide a means to contend with

³⁷ This reverses Scott's (1998) concern with the risks of being 'legible' to the state.

³⁸ Drèze and Sen identified India's tradition of adversarial journalism as part of the political 'triggering mechanism' effecting the government famine prevention system — employment, food distribution etc. This, they maintain, has been important in preventing famine since 1947, in contrast to China. Although the issue has been subject to historical debate, the point here is that existence of political incentives to recognise emergencies creates a state of preparedness (but see section 5.2 below).

and deploy politically the categorical aspects of exploitation that Tilly explains.³⁹ The point here is that power relations in society are always shaped by wider political systems. The power that people have (as individuals and groups) depends upon the capacity of others (for example, labour union leaders and party workers) to impose social classifications upon them and then to speak on their behalf. It is the process of classification that 'turns the group from a collection of individuals to a political force' (Gledhill 1994:139).⁴⁰ In this view, political parties or organisations do not reflect any naturally occurring classes, castes, ethnicities, and the like, but rather manufacture these categories through the process of determining who gets political representation. The party precedes the class struggle. Power can be deployed against poor people, to 'disable minorities from becoming majorities' (Lukes 2005:47-8). Mick Moore's (2001) account of the conditions of political mobilisation of poor people — effective (accountable) states to which to press demands and a strong incentive to do so — overlooks the way in which the interests and rights-bearing identities through which mobilisation can occur are, to a degree, pre-determined by the classifications of the political system.

Further, the political system is a *professionalised* field in which political capital is held in the hands of a few (Gledhill 1994:139). Put another way, poor and unorganised people do not have a chance for political representation unless their interests can become a weapon in the struggles of the professional political field (Bourdieu 1991: 188, in *ibid*). The politicisation of poverty is necessary for the empowerment of poor people. Making poverty (or the conditions of migrant labourers) a public, moral, and political issue is the basis upon which poor people gain leverage by making power work to their advantage through enrolling elite interests, through pro-poor coalitions, and from competition between elite groups (Moore and Putzel 1999). Moore and Putzel are right that this view of political representation argues against both interest group economism's zero-sum idea of structurally opposed interests dividing up the power cake (*ibid*), and voluntaristic approaches to empowerment through capacity building. However, political systems have their *own* logic, which may or may not enhance the political capabilities of people who are poor. Since votes are rarely cast simply on the basis of economic interests, the development of political capability among poor people depends upon the adoption and manipulation of identities that allow effective representation. In India, these are often caste, religious, language, or ethnic identities. The problem is that while political systems determine the identities around which people gain empowerment, interests framed in "communal" terms can become self-limiting and dangerous, especially when - as is common - they turn to violence and conflict among poor people themselves. Indeed, chronic poverty is linked to questions of political representation in often highly complex and historically specific ways, as shown in the case of caste politics and poverty [see Box 5]⁴¹

³⁹ For Tilly, as for Pierre Bourdieu, the class struggle is a 'classificatory struggle'. '[W]hat is at stake is "power over the classificatory schemes and systems which are the basis of the representations of the groups and therefore of their mobilisation and demobilisation"' (Lukes 2005:142). But for Lukes, the fact that both regard classificatory effects as occurring without deliberate intention or consciousness makes them explanatorily suspicious (*ibid*).

⁴⁰ 'The fact that the working classes are widely deemed to exist is based on their political representation by political and trade union apparatuses and party officials "who have a vital interest in believing that this class exists and in spreading this belief among those who consider themselves part of it as well as those who are excluded from it"' (Bourdieu 1991: 250 quoted in Gledhill 1994: 139).

⁴¹ There is a parallel debate here on labelling in state welfare regimes as way into understanding the exercise of state power, including the concealment of essentially political decisions on resource allocation (i.e., entitlement) behind the 'science' of targeting (Wood 1987). Revisiting his earlier argument, Wood (2007) now emphasises the political dialogue of labelling as the tension between authoritative labelling (and correlative duties), on the one hand, and mobilising voice (rights) on the other, which brings the discussion closer to the present one on political representation and constituencies while emphasising the interactive dimension of the analysis (cf. Tilly 1998). Wood also distinguishes a 'rights context' established by universalistic authoritative labelling, from a 'claims

5. Caste identity, poverty and political representation

In the case of Indian caste, the relationship between identity, categorical inequality and chronic poverty is extremely complex, although to some extent it can be unravelled with reference to a particular case. In the village of Alapuram in southern Tamil Nadu, by the end of the 18th century, the identities of discrete untouchable castes — Pallars, Paraiyars, Chakkiliyars — had become associated with exploited positions as share-crop tenants, attached labour, a variety of inferior or defiling occupations (grave-digging, funeral drumming, leatherwork, wood cutting, irrigation labour — all part of an elaborate ritualised division of labour), and interlocking social exclusions and inferior rights in resources (land, water, grain shares etc). By the end of the 19th century, the conditions for a more unified and politicised 'untouchable' identity to emerge from such 'fragmented clusters of subordinate communities' had been established largely as an (unintended) effect of the modern colonial institutions of the mission, the army, law and administration, and the links and leadership these allowed. In Alapuram, attempts at social mobility risked by those acquiring some small degree of economic autonomy by the early 20th century (e.g., through migrant labour on Ceylon tea estates or Burmese rice fields) involved laying claim to new identities that would mollify the intense inferiorisation as untouchables. Before Independence, the churches (Catholic and Protestant), and after Independence, the Indian state, opened up more universal identities ('Christian', Scheduled Caste, citizen of India) which were used by untouchables in Alapuram (as elsewhere in south India) to organise collectively and (as important) to secure protection or backing (e.g., from priests or police) in struggles over dignity, status and rights; rights of access to water sources, to sit in teashops, on decision-making committees (*panchayats*), to wear sandals, the right to local temple entry and festival 'honours', or the right of lower caste women to cover their breasts in the presence of upper-caste men, all of which were denied in modes of 'recognitional domination' [see below] that prevailed in Alapuram until the mid-20th century. However, better-off, economically mobile groups such as Alapuram Pallars who sought self-respect had to grapple with the dilemma that while they were incorporated as citizens, their access to new state resources, available through positive discrimination, required assertions of inferiority.⁴² They did so initially by elaborating self-respect identities (through in new myth-histories) that separated themselves from poorer more dependent 'inferior' untouchable castes (Paraiyars and Chakkiliyars) who in any case were too weak and dependent to mobilise for their rights (see Mosse 1994).

By the late 20th century (especially with the collapse of Congress rule and its pervasive vertical mobilisation of low caste votes through patron-client relations) caste identity had itself become intensely politicised and embedded in the logic of electoral politics, mediating access to valued resources such as housing, jobs, or education. In Alapuram, caste began to weaken (or was muted) as an idiom of internal village hierarchy, but at the same time, became more central as an idiom of equal rights or entitlement. In the past 10 years, the manipulation of caste has become a key means to access resources, press for rights, and to acquire support in conflict. When the rice crop of a group of poorer (dalit) farmers in Alapuram is threatened by the diversion of common property tank water to the dry-land cash crop by a richer farmer, they petition the local official (tahsildar) as *dalits* in the arresting language of the threat of "caste problems" (*cati piraccinai*). The reason that this works (that four jeeps arrive in the village with police and senior revenue officials and a public meeting is organised to resolve matters) is the strength of the wider (media manipulated) discourse of caste and communal tension at the level of state and nation, a discourse that promotes identities and associations locally that allow links to wider coalitions of support (movements, fronts, and political parties).⁴³

context' established by particularistic coercive patronage, brokerage i.e., informal welfare regimes (2007:13).

⁴² This is a problem faced by several political movements for self-respect among ex-untouchable castes (Isaacs 1965:114, Rudolph and Rudolph 1967:150). Meanwhile those who challenged caste subordination by converting to Christianity became ineligible for state benefits.

⁴³ While Robert Putnam (1993) argued that vibrant associations would advance democratic processes, the causal relationship is as likely to be the reverse. In India, electoral competition and party activity brings and shapes new forms of association and social networks, drawn around the politics of caste and religious identity (Jenkins 2001: 259; Rudolph 2000: 1764, Mosse 2006: 718-9). Given the wider politics of caste, in Alapuram dalit youth activists are motivated to translate a variety of individual problems, grievances and disputes (e.g., over water or loan repayment) into caste conflicts (acts of

This political logic of caste can open up spaces for political representation of subaltern groups. But it can also work against the interests of the poorest in various ways. First, weaker groups such as Paraiyars in Alapuram were prevented in 1980s-90s from laying claim to material or symbolic resources through articulating wider dalit identities by their dependence on upper caste patrons. Second, the way in which better-placed dalit castes forged identities, associations and political parties to compete for power, systematically excluded other weaker dalit castes (Pallars excluded Paraiyars, these two excluded Chakkiliyars). This then provokes the formation of separate organisations and parties. The logic of electoral politics produces subcaste-fragmented constituencies, which are then drawn into disadvantageous alliances with dominant parties, in ways that systematically weaken the capacity of subaltern groups such as dalits to influence political agendas (see Gorringer 2005).⁴⁴ Third, the politicisation of caste is associated with rising tension, polarisation and violence. Violent caste-based conflicts are not only between landlords and labourers — the violent backlashes ('caste atrocities') from dominant castes provoked by Scheduled Caste assertions of rights — but also between equally poor labouring dalits and non-dalits mobilised by separate political parties, over symbolic resources (e.g. the erecting of statues to the great untouchable leader Dr B.R. Ambedkar) (Mosse 1994, 1999, 2006, 2007).⁴⁵

So, the acquisition of political capabilities among poor people in caste-divided society can at the same time weaken and disempower. A precondition for the empowerment of low castes was the emergence of a broader politicised identity out of the dispersed subordinated groups — first as 'untouchables' or Christians within colonial politics, and later as Scheduled castes or Dalits. Laying claim to these as rights-bearing identities did prove a means to contend with inferiorisation, to organise collectively and secure state and political support as a constituency within wider coalitions. But the mobilising political identities provided to subordinated groups by the wider political system also constrains their action and work against their interests. Poor people are disempowered by fragmentation into caste constituencies. New exclusions are imposed on weaker groups by the politics of caste, where the injustices of honour provide a surer basis for mobilisation than those of economic exploitation, and which also exposes vulnerable groups to new risks of violence .

Here, then, there is a wider dilemma, often glossed as 'political manipulation.' As Kumar (2003) shows, political processes may often fail to serve the interests of poor people. Empowerment depends upon political representation, but such political capacity is gained only at the cost of conceding power to a political system with its own logic about maximising votes, retaining power and coalitions, disseminating ideology, and the like, which further concentrates political capital (Bourdieu 1991, Gledhill 1994). The politics of identity often displaces the politics of poverty (or poverty becomes a political issue only by means of constituencies framed narrowly around caste or ethnicity, cf. Kumar 2003). Of course, this does not preclude strategic manipulation by poor people from below, though often at risk of cost and compromise; and the poorest will always be those who evade the risks of direct political engagement (Hickey and Bracking 2005). At the very least we should (*pace* Harriss 2005) be sceptical about electoral politics as the means to best represent the interests of poor people. Matters may be a lot worse: majoritarian politics may produce parties directly responsible for the production of extreme poverty or violence (Hickey and Bracking 2005:

untouchability). Then political and dalit movement leaders move in the opposite direction, using dispute mediation skills to embed wider movements and parties in local (non-caste) issues.

⁴⁴ Realising that political success depends upon wider support and viable alliances (with non-dalits, Muslims) requiring the expression of broader identities, caste-based dalit movements and parties have at the same time adopted the more inclusive epithets of Tamil nationalism.

⁴⁵ In 1989 the Oxfam office in Bangalore in which I worked was contacted to support relief and rehabilitation work in dalit (Paraiyar) hamlets decimated by a non-dalit (Vanniyar) arson attack. Significantly, the request came covertly and personally from the state's top bureaucrat himself a dalit and sceptical of the state's willingness to act quickly and decisively in protection of dalit interests. Equally significantly, the perpetrators of the devastating attack were similarly poor politically mobilised non-dalit landless labourers, reacting to symbolic assertions of caste honour by their dalit neighbours.

861). This debate takes discussion well beyond the narrow confines of 'good governance' and democracy, showing some of the 'complex ways in which the politics of clientelism and citizenship are intertwined' (Hickey and Du Toit 2007:14, c. Wood 2007).

In India and elsewhere, disillusionment with party politics has fuelled a variety of extra-political social movements with the aim of increasing the capacity of poor people to organise around their interests as forest users, fishworkers, casual labourers, poor women, adivasis, dalits and the like. Responding to particular cases of discrimination or dispossession, these organisations are increasingly linked to international ones (NGOs, lobby groups, United Nations Working Groups and human rights organisations, e.g., concerned with racial discrimination, indigenous people's rights).⁴⁶ As those facing exploitation or dispossession construct their identities, needs and interests in terms of outsiders' discourses and categories, they may be successful in forging alliances, winning protection or even contending with local structures of power (Bending and Rosendo 2006). But as Ghosh (2006) shows through a study of *adivasi* struggles over displacement in Jharkand, India, transnational discourses of citizenship (and their elite brokers) can actually undermine rather than strengthen local struggles of over rights [Box 6]. In parallel, Coelho (2005) in her work on the reform of public services, shows how the terms of citizenship are shaped by neoliberal reform in ways that exclude poor people, for example through new forums of accountability in service delivery. The broader point is that, in the shift from clientelism to citizenship, the *terms of citizenship* are often given in advance in ways that may not serve the needs of the poorest; citizenship has its exclusionary dimension (Hickey and Du Toit 2007:12).⁴⁷

6. Adverse terms of citizenship

Kaushik Ghosh (2006) points out that tribal groups in India have been subject to two 'modes of governmentality' — *incorporative governmentality* and *exclusive governmentality*; alternatively put, citizen (under 'common law') and subject (under customary law) (citing Mamdani 1996). Rather than accepting a straightforward opposition between citizen (good) and subject (bad), Ghosh asks us to consider the implications of both (cf. Hickey and Du Toit 2007:12-7). Incorporative governmentality through education, rural development, banking (microfinance and cooperatives), scheduled tribal reservations, or migrant labour, coexists with exclusive aspects that emphasise the 'originary essentialism of tribal difference'. The latter 'create a spaces for adivasis themselves to act on their putative irreducible otherness: they can both define themselves in opposition to the state and a mainstream national community and devise projects of non-cooperation around such identity'; an alternate politics against state power and capitalist expansion' (2006: 509, 529 n13). There may be parallels here with aspects of contemporary dalit movements, the cultural politics of dalit identity and religious conversion.

4.4 Poverty and power in the 'third dimension' (calculative or cultural consent)

It is clear that in whatever way it occurs, exclusion from agenda setting and political representation — *political exclusion* — has to be added to adverse economic incorporation as a condition for the persistence of poverty. But this does not exhaust the significance of power for durable poverty. I turn now to one of the most difficult and debated questions, which is the contribution of the *consent* of poor people themselves, the significance of their own concessions and 'adaptations' (Tilly 1998) — the effect of power on their own agency — to relations of exploitation and the durability of poverty.

⁴⁶ E.g., UN Committee for Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP).

⁴⁷ See Hickey and Du Toit (2007) for review of debates on the relationship between citizenship and clientelism, neopatrimonial politics and the reproduction of ethnicities.

There are different ways of looking at consent. In a *materialist* view, even highly exploitative systems may secure the consent of subordinate groups because they get something in return (Lukes 2005:9): jobs, shelter, services, advances, access to markets. Such 'adaptations' (Tilly 1998) stabilise poverty and systems of exploitation. Bhil adivasi labourers in western India may indeed lack organisations to represent their interests (or awareness of their basic rights), but the principle obstacle to pursuing these rights (e.g., through the labour departments or courts) is neither the lack of legislation nor the lack of diligence of labour officers, nor even the limited reach of inventive unions and activists. It is the *self-interest* of vulnerable migrant labourers. They are acutely vulnerable to unemployment and therefore highly dependent upon their contractor-employers. They are most reluctant to take up cases against brokers or contractors, and almost bound to side with them in any externally instigated case. Like others facing chronic insecurity, Bhil migrants doggedly pursue security, not in alliance with progressive parts of the state, unions or NGOs, but through their patrons and exploiters. They prioritise the maintenance of relationships with patrons who offer social protection in the short term, even though this limits their capacity for longer term economic mobility, which is what Wood (2003) means by a 'Faustian bargain'. However, as already noted, adivasi migrants' capacity for mobility is already constrained by wider structural factors; as du Toit puts it, theirs is a 'Hobson's choice' not a Faustian bargain (pers comm.).

But further, through self-interest poor people are bound into the *interests* of their exploiters (*mukkadams*, gang leaders, foremen or labour brokers). The brokers are migrants' most crucial resource, and most immediate protection against multi-faceted insecurity *because* they are loyal to an exploitative system. Indeed, the nodes in the city that are most useful to migrant workers — brokers, watchmen, supervisors etc. — are those most faithful to the system [Box 7]. This is to say that the power and effectiveness of actors (brokers, contractors, gang leaders) derives from their ability to lend stability to the wider system — in particular to negotiate between complex informal labour markets and village networks of dependency so as to deliver labour and livelihoods: compliant workers and chronically poor livelihoods. Successful *mukkadams* are part of a chain of *self-interest* that in aggregate gives stability to a highly exploitative system generating mass chronic poverty.

7. Insecurity and consent

A *mukkadam* is the route to work; the source of information on jobs and the trustworthiness of contractors; they arrange travel, assess/estimate work, negotiate wage rates and conditions (including scarce shelter and water), mediate advances from contractors (paid in villages during the cultivation), handle wage payments, work registers, and deductions. They are guarantors and guardians whose role is continuously underlined by the stories of cheating and non-payment that accompany every gang back to the village at the end of the season. They are intermediaries with contractors and the means to communicate with kin at home. Mostly *mukkadams* are none other than the most successful migrants themselves; those from better-educated, better-connected families, who became skilled workers, watchmen or supervisors, and who win favour and reputations with contractors and employers. Mukkadam reputations come from guarding the employer's interests and securing and managing compliant gangs of workers, while their profits come out of the commissions that such compliance generates.

Paradoxically, *mukkadams* are trustworthy to chronically insecure migrants, *because* they are loyal to an exploitative system which protects the interests of employers against labour. But their own positions are never secure. They have constantly to demonstrate to contractors their capacity to recruit reliable labour gangs. Only then will they be trusted with money to be used to secure labour by tying workers with advances as they make their rounds in Bhil villages amidst the acute need of the monsoon season or family health crisis or death. But trust in *mukkadams* is not entirely blind. Even though *mukkadam* power is reproduced by keeping labourers dependent and ignorant, they do have reliably to deliver work and advances, and accurately to assess the honesty of contractors and employers. If they fail to do so, mukkadams will be deserted by their clients; labour gangs who have

not been paid may decamp at night without wages leaving the *mukkadams* reputation on both sides in tatters (see Mosse et al 2005 for cases).

Significantly, the impoverishing aspects of the system are ill-perceived because they exist alongside aspects of the same system that, because of different structural conditions (landholding, education, influence etc.), allows accumulation and upward mobility, for example from labourer to skilled worker or contractor. The two aspects intersect in figures such as the *mukkadam*. The fact that successful participants reproduce the conditions of adverse incorporation (or exploitation) of the unsuccessful, while at the same time offering models of aspiration that disguise the impoverishing effects no doubt contributes to the mistaken conclusion that what looks like poverty is in fact capital formation taking place in the 'informal sector' (Breman 2003).

There is a question of whether consent is simply a matter of calculated self-interest, or whether the effects of power perpetuate exploitation by other or deeper forms of consensus, through the diminishment of agency in *cultural* terms. Of course, at one level this is a false question, since perceptions, judgements and actions are always made within 'structures of choices' that are already constituted socially. The further notion that consent to exploitation could be produced through ideological and cultural effects as a means of class rule was captured in the idea of *egemonia* or hegemony developed in Gramsci's *Prison notebooks* (1971, Lukes 2005:7-9) it points to influencing people's desires as the exercise of power.

Wanting what others want you to have, is to be subject to Lukes' *third-dimension* of power; power that is manifest in/through subjective desires, culturally patterned behaviour and social arrangements; effected through information, mass media, socialisation, ritual and religious practice (Lukes 2005:27). Power in this sense is not marked by conflict or struggle. On the contrary, 'power is most effective when least observable' (*ibid*:1). Its effect is to restrict the agency of poor people — underlying the acquiescence of adivasi migrants to judgements about their worth or illusions of mobility.

The idea that the dominated have a false sense of their own interests, or the contrary view that acquiescence is a tactical move within a broad orientation of resistance (Scott 1985), has generated much rather fruitless debate. It makes little sense to try to choose between consent and dissent.⁴⁸ 'Dissensus within some framework of consensus' is, as it were, in the nature of culture (Appadurai 2004:61). Perhaps more relevant are the unequal 'terms of recognition' through which dominant groups withhold recognition, impose categories, judgements, labels, stereotypes, and secure deference, so as, not only to stabilise categorical inequality (Tilly 1998), but also to diminish dignity, bar access, and distort the view of themselves that members of an exploited or excluded group have, whether these are migrant adivasis, dalits, immigrants, refugees, or the homeless (Appadurai 2004). 'Symbolic violence' is the concept used to capture the way that structural inequalities of power produce self-enforcing effects on individual behaviour of subordinated people through internalisation

⁴⁸ Even Scott, concedes that where there is a chance of upward mobility and escape from inferiority, subordinated groups may 'come to accept, even legitimate, the arrangements that justify their subordination' (1990:82-5, cited in Lukes 2005:129). Perhaps the degree of consent is related the strength of external compulsion: overt coercion may coincide with dissent; weaker coercion with stronger consent; or as Scott suggests, 'the greater the external reasons compelling our action the less we have to provide satisfactory reasons for our conduct (1990:109-10, Lukes 2005:130). However, this latter point comes dangerously close to the discredited thesis that 'poverty of culture is the culture of poverty'. Apathy is not the only form of cultural 'exit'. In Alapuram village while better-off more autonomous 'untouchable' castes pursued the consensual strategy of 'Sanskritization' (adopting upper caste codes and ritual forms), poor people of a more dependent group converted to Protestant Christianity (Mosse 1999).

(or socialisation); that is Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' — 'A permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking', that give practical sense to social order and allow power inequalities to be naturalised and 'misrecognised' (Bourdieu 1990 [1980]:70, cited in Lukes 2005:141). Symbolic violence, then, offers a means 'to move beyond the forced choice between constraint (by forces) and consent (to reasons), between mechanical coercion...and calculated submission' (Bourdieu 2001 [1998]: 37, in Lukes 2005:139).

Like analyses of domination that posit that people are constrained to act against their *real interests*, Bourdieu's notions of symbolic violence and habitus appeals to unconscious strategies to explain behaviour. These are never entirely satisfactory, in that they require an external standpoint, a knowing social analyst, as well as a counter-factual autonomous agent (who being free from social constraints is not the same actor, perhaps not even a social actor at all) (Lukes 2005: 146-8). Appadurai suggests another path between calculation and cosmology (rational choice and culture) with his explanation of poverty as diminishment of a cultural resource that he terms the 'capacity to aspire'. Poverty (and the constraining power of others) works to limit this socially grounded capacity (to distort wants, produce a 'brittle horizon of aspirations', 2004:69), through denying to poor people the *experiences*, contacts, and transactions through which this *navigational* capacity is acquired and extended.⁴⁹ The better off

'have a bigger stock of available experiences of the relationship between aspirations and outcomes, ...they are in a better position to harvest diverse experiences or exploration and trial, ...to link material goods and immediate opportunities to more general and generic possibilities and options...[T]hey are more able to produce justifications, narratives, metaphors, and pathways through which bundles of goods and services are actually tied to wider social sciences and contexts and to still more abstract norms and beliefs.' (Appadurai 2004)

Further, Appadurai suggests that the limited 'capacity to aspire...compounds the ambivalent compliance of many subaltern populations with the cultural regimes that surround them'. Experimentally limited, they tend 'to oscillate between "loyalty" and "exit" (whether the latter takes the form of violent protest or total apathy)' (2004:69). While Appadurai is optimistic about the transformative possibilities of opening up experiences that can extend and generate this navigational capacity, through voice and social movements, which strengthen and test the capacity to aspire (2004), others see the poorest as stuck in a 'desperate search for security in which longer term goals or autonomous improvement have to be put on hold, maybe forever' (Wood 2003:455).

5. Power and poverty reduction

Can policy and its planned interventions change the diverse power relations in which durable poverty is embedded? There are strong claims that this is so. As 'power' has become more central to the models explaining poverty, an agenda of poverty reduction as 'empowerment' has developed which is now extremely diverse, fast changing and encompasses many levels of analysis and action (see for example, IDS 2006). In this section, I will look at some different approaches to empowerment which will illustrate different notions of power. I begin with empowerment as *community development* or 'community empowerment', which, as Moore (2001) points out, was the principal form in which the concept of 'empowering poor

⁴⁹ Looking at individual needs as grounded in collective values distinguishes this approach from the 'capability approach' of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum which emphasises *individual* freedom and capabilities, while Appadurai's emphasis on *interactions* rather than beliefs places him alongside Tilly.

people' appeared in the policy agenda and in the anti-poverty programmes of major international development agencies, including the World Bank, from around the year 2000. Approaches to community development have evolved and become more sophisticated, but in what sense have they become able to 'empower'? The debate here hangs on different understandings of power — power *to*, or power *over*; but even when empowerment is understood in the latter sense as a struggle for power over resources, questions are raised about the potential of social mobilisation, at any level, to alter the complex processes of exploitation that have been detailed above. From social movements I will turn the discussion on 'empowerment' to democratic reform and debates on the importance of politics and political systems in establishing the conditions for mobilisation and poverty reduction through the operation of agenda-setting power.

I will rapidly traverse complex terrain, not with a view to properly airing the debates, but to indicate the limitations that have been identified in relation to different approaches to empowerment. The point is not that there is one privileged approach, but that in view of the complex multi-dimensional nature of power, changing the relations and processes of exploitation that produce chronic poverty requires a *combination* of actions on different fronts, at different scales, and addressing different dimensions of powerlessness and poverty (see Gaventa 2006). This anticipates a brief discussion of recent work with *adivasi* migrant labourers that has indeed had to tackle different aspects of poverty and disempowerment in order to address the needs and support the rights of exploited and vulnerable *adivasi* migrants workers.

5.1. Empowerment: from community development to social movements

The idea of 'empowerment' within international development agencies initially brought a particular non-relational idea of power into the policy arena. Typically 'empowerment', for example as used in the World Bank, involved a voluntaristic approach to power; empowerment as capacity building for individuals and groups (training, awareness raising etc). This is the power *to* achieve ends; a pluralist, additive conception in which power expands with economic growth. This idea of empowerment is familiar within organisations or corporations, such as 'empowering administrative or managerial systems' that make the most of their staff potential (James 1999: 14). Critics point out that this sort of 'empowerment' may also be linked to restructuring, downsizing, cost-cutting, and the flattening of management structures. In this sense, it is antithetical to acquiring power through collective bargaining or union action (*ibid*), and may even strengthen the power of managers, bosses or owners (cf. Moore 2001:322-4).

This notion of capacity building 'power to' is, in fact, found widely in approaches to poverty reduction and 'empowerment' — state and NGO — that concern community development or 'community-driven development' (CDD). Such projects aim to empower from the bottom up through participatory planning, technology development, and especially the promotion of self-help groups or users' associations for improved management of resources such as water, forests, grazing land, finance, public utilities, and the like. The potential of such programmes to enhance poor people's power to achieve their ends is rarely in question. Real needs and interests are addressed through resource user associations, which are more accessible and inclusive than elite-dominated systems of local government. The need for poor people to form associations to contend with the power of the rich, or as a means to deal with injustice, formed the core of NGO strategies in South Asia from the early 1980s.

However, the capacity of such interventions to overcome rather than reproduce wider unequal power relations has been questioned, even from within donor agencies (Mansuri and Rao 2005). Development programs and their user groups can operate in ways that offer advantages to poor people, but exclude the most marginal (Thorpe *et al.* 2005). They may

have the effect of limiting poor people's potential to enhance their political capabilities or sustain political organisation, and may actually *demobilise* existing organisations (Moore and Putzel 1999, Moore 2001). Significantly, such a critical position is taken both by those who favour operating within state systems and those who favour working against the state; by those who prefer to work through formal politics as well as by those who operate through extra-political mass action. The point can be illustrated with cases from India [Box 8].

8. Community development, user associations and empowerment (India)

Numerous rural development initiatives undertaken in India in the 1990s, including DFID's rainfed farming projects and the GOI's watershed development programs and anti-poverty programs, aimed to empower poor people, especially through mobilising the grassroots for the management of key livelihood resources, or transferring resources management from state bureaucracies to user communities. Do these change oppressive power relations? One reason they may not do so is that the village-level associations promoted tend to be dominated by the more affluent and powerful members of society, especially since they are avenues to important material and political resources of outside agencies. Kumar and Corbridge (2002) argue that the effect of such programmes is not only to concentrate local power, but also to weaken existing institutions of collective action (grain banks, reciprocal labour) that offer some livelihood security to poorest of the poor. User groups in India are often regarded as undemocratic, unaccountable, and easily controlled or manipulated by the departmental bureaucracies that promote them, and as unlikely to be sustained or to foster wider forms of organisation among poor people. Typically, the powers and rights that poor people acquire through them are heavily circumscribed, especially by lower level bureaucrats (Manor 2002). This is not to say that transferring resource management from state bureaucracies does not have effects on power relations (e.g., by making new demands on officials), merely that their effects are not systematically in favour of poor people. Precisely because they threaten powerful patronage interests in the bureaucracy, user groups may be controlled or resisted. Several studies suggest that the evidence on the long-term sustainability of user groups, especially with the removal of external incentives, is equivocal—even in the case of groups supported intensively by NGOs, some for as many as seven to ten years (Saxena 2001). Of course, there are other studies that show how new user groups can be routes to empowerment, for instance, challenging the existing social exclusion of lower castes from resources. Associations may also preserve indigenous institutional arrangements (as well as erode them). One thing is clear: without longitudinal studies it is impossible to predict the longer-term effects of new associations (see Mosse 2003:276-88 for a study of the dynamics of power in south Indian water users' associations; and 2005a? for the unexpected impact of Self Help Groups in west Indian Bhil villages).

Detailed studies of NGOs and other implementing agencies show them developing clientelist relationships with their villager beneficiaries, who, as individuals or self-help groups, are willing recipients of efficiently delivered programmes (e.g., Mosse 2005a). So development interventions, even those with explicit agendas of participation, CDD, or empowerment, can re-affirm existing structures of power. My own study of NGO interventions showed them to be inherently conservative, reconstituting rather than challenging relations of power, authority, and patronage at every level—in target villages, in the project teams, or within the corporate organisation, donor, and beyond (*ibid*, cf. Harriss 2002). Of course much depends upon the details, but it is clear that project structures can themselves entail a degree of uncertainty, arbitrariness, inequality, and patronage that does not provide an environment in which collective action by poor people is encouraged. While NGO action may be essential to generating new forms of collective action, it is also true that non-state project implementing agencies — perhaps contracted to deliver state programmes — establish authorities against which rights cannot be asserted (Moore and Putzel 1999:16, Moore 2001:327).

It is now well known that unequal power relations can shape the very instruments that are intended to be empowering. Thus, in 'participatory planning' outsider expert perspectives may win over local knowledge, needs and plans being determined with reference to outsider agendas; and local organisations develop as dependent client bodies seeking patronage.

The concern with strengthening demand occurs in the context of supply. This means that despite the ideals of participation, ‘people become empowered not in themselves, but through relationships with outsiders [NGO workers, state officials, patrons etc]; and not through the validation of their existing knowledge and actions, but by seeking out and acknowledging the superiority of modern technology and lifestyles, and by aligning themselves with dominant cultural forms’ (Mosse 2005a:218). This was the experience of a major DFID programme in the Bhil region (*ibid*). The capacity of people to ally themselves with powerful external agents was itself a function of power. This meant that the least-poor were often in a better position to qualify as ‘poor’ beneficiaries (see Li 1999) while the poorest and most exploited were, by contrast, found to be unwilling participants; they lacked assets to be developed, knowledge or clarity, were pessimistic, pursued immediate benefits, or were spoken for by others. ‘Unable to navigate the links between their immediate needs and wider goals and so engage with external policy objectives, they lacked “the capacity to aspire”. Poor people would be high-risk and unrewardingly hard work’ (Mosse 2005a: 85). While such experiences are not universal — there are cases of wider mobilisation derived from externally initiated community projects — many projects possess features such as isolation from wider fields of social and political action that make this rather uncommon (see *ibid*, Green 2000, Mohan and Stokke 2000).

Exemplified by the World Bank’s programme in Indonesia, some recent CDD projects adopt a different approach, shifting from a focus on power *to*, towards strategies that aim to reshape power relations themselves, although questions remain about which aspects of power and inequality are, or are not, subject to change [Box 9].

9. Re-engineering power relations

In Indonesia, the World Bank’s flagship Kecamatan Development Program (KDP) is an anti-poverty programme with an explicit political empowerment agenda and an emphasis on *process* rather than delivery (Guggenheim 2006, Barron *et al.* 2006).⁵⁰ Here is a modified conception of ‘power to’ which is not entirely additive. Indeed, zero-sum competitive bidding between communities for resources is an adopted accountability mechanism. Interventions are political, competitive and conflictive. Enhanced capacity to manage conflict is taken as indicative of empowerment. At the centre is the idea that through key institutional processes communities can be improved through a re-engineering of institutions and state-citizen relations (and subjectivities) by changing incentive structures, and modifying rules in order to erase patrimonial elements of local politics and generate socially empowering outcomes. The strategy involves addressing power through *researching* (‘tracking power and making networks explicit’), *restructuring* relationships of power (through mechanisms of accountability, competition, or transparency), and so ‘optimising social capital’ (Li 2006). The claim is that development interventions involving rule-based, transparent and accountable competition contribute to significant changes in systems of social relationships (socialisation) and therefore power. The programme has been evaluated as successful in increasing these capacities, in significant part by enhancing on-going political and social changes (Barron *et al.* 2006).⁵¹ What is less clear is what the distributional effects of project processes are, and whether the underlying structures of power that determine patterns of conflict resolution, shaped by the distribution of productive resources, or access to land, are changed in favour of marginalised groups rather than being reaffirmed.

The point here is that programme interventions may enhance capacities for competition, conflict management and accountability without changing the political and economic

⁵⁰ KDP is “in many ways a democratization initiative masquerading as an anti-poverty project.” Its mechanisms are “aimed at empowering communities, socially and politically as well as economically” (Barron *et al.* 2006:118, manuscript).

⁵¹ A conclusion based largely on the basis of surveys of opinion rather than observations of interactions themselves (Barron *et al.* 2006).

structures within which these take place. Taking a rather different view of power — as governmentality — Tania Li (2006) comments on the programme's mechanisms as a form of what Nicholas Rose calls 'government through community' which gives power to the expert neoliberal reconceptualisation of society (rendering power technical), but leaves structural power relations intact. She points out that despite its promising title, the KDP study, *Village justice in Indonesia*, did not discuss how poor people might change the structures of inequality that surround them. It focused, instead, on procedural matters (2006). From this point of view, compliant citizens become 'empowered' by expert knowledge, or as Arun Agrawal (2005) recently argued, their subjectivities are shaped by participation in formal institutions (e.g., for forest protection), but in ways that may overlook actual political relationships. Governmental 'power over' manifests itself as people's 'power to'.⁵²

Of course the view presented above, of interventions for community empowerment as hedged in by wider structures of power or constrained by the disciplinary effects of governmental power, has to be set against equally valid accounts of the *transformative* potential of participatory processes and new institutional arrangements, especially when viewed in the longer term (Hickey and Mohan 2004, Agrawal 2005). Participatory spaces at first captured by existing elites, may involve accountability mechanisms that in time provide opportunities to challenge those elites. Initiatives that begin being instrumentally focused on resource control may later provide a basis for significant political action (see White 1996). In short, external interventions are co-opted from below as well as from above (*ibid*). This is now well known (e.g., Cornwall 2002). However, my point is that CDD/community development programmes 'designed to empower', are *in themselves* rarely able to change the unequal relations of power, exploitation and adaptation that produce durable poverty. The significant effects that they produce occur synergistically through interaction with other processes of social change.

If some analysts criticise 'community empowerment' projects as limited by a depoliticising voluntaristic conception of power; others challenge the converse view of empowerment as a struggle for power over resources within zero-sum games (where the rich and poor people, managers and workers are opponents) as equally problematic for framing effective pro-poor interventions. Moore (2001), while accepting that empowering poor people means enhancing their capacity to organise politically to assert rights or make claims, argues that external 'support' often ends up undermining this capacity. Instead, he suggests the need for a 'polity-centred' perspective which identifies the conditions for effective political action by poor people and works to create an enabling environment. Since organisations of poor people only exist where there is an effective state with authority and resources to meet demands (and incentivise mobilisation), poor people are best empowered indirectly through measures to improve the state capacities (*ibid*).

Closer to the ground, social movement activists with agendas of struggle and political mobilisation of various kinds find themselves working in contexts where poor people cannot afford to organise, and are looking for better forms of protection and patronage rather than higher risk autonomous organisation (Hickey and Bracking 2005: 856). Those movements which are successful in sustaining mass support have constantly to translate their wider political goals into an array of practical interventions in support of local needs, whether conflicts over land, water, or health delivery, as I found in the case of the pragmatic strategies of radical dalit movements in rural Tamil Nadu (Mosse 2007). In this sense, Mitlin and Bebbington (2006)'s conclusion that the political objectives of social movements mean they do not emerge with a concern to reduce or attack poverty does not always apply; to retain a mass base, movements have to be oriented to poverty reduction in various ways.

⁵² A discussion on poverty reduction programmes and as forms of governing poor people is developed in Corbridge *et al.* 2005, Bhuiyan *et al.* 2005.

Mitlin and Bebbington have a broader point, though, which is that social movements are severely limited in their capacity to alter fundamental process of exploitation (2006). However, while it is rare for social movements to effect durable changes in structures of power, their strength lies in the 'capacity to change the terms in which societies debate poverty and social change' and the policy alternatives that are legitimate (Mitlin and Bebbington 2006). Here there is a clear shift from issues of 'first dimension' power — struggles over resources, influencing decisions — to those of 'second dimension' agenda-setting power, that is the ability to influence the terms of political exclusion/inclusion. The successful exercise of such power allows political conflict to be generated around the interests of those who are normally invisible or silenced. Sustaining pro-poor agendas may in practice involve coalitions and mutual interests between rich and poor, state and citizens, industry and labour, and it is exactly these that Moore and Putzel (1999) argue are ignored by 'interest group economism' that views the interests of poor people as always defined in opposition to the non-poor. Issues of agenda setting power and political representation take us to the debate on poverty and politics, where most attention has focused on the design of representational systems rather than on the discursive forms that shape the way in which poverty and inequality are debated, contested and addressed (du Toit, pers comm).

5.2 Poverty and politics: political decentralisation and political representation

Arguably the 1990s opened up new spaces for the political participation of the poor, 'invited', through democratic decentralisation, accountability mechanisms (such as participatory budgeting, or citizen forums) and other forms of responsive, 'good governance' (Gaventa 2006, Cornwall 2002). Some, however, have criticised what they regard as a 'localization of politics' that conceals wider patterns of injustice or diverts attention from national level movements (Hickey and Bracking 2005:853), emphasising the mobilisation necessary for poor people to 'claim' political space themselves. John Harriss (2005) argues that in urban India new citizen associationalism tends to attract and meet the needs of the middle classes, while the poorest are best served by acquiring political representation through existing party political channels, including reservations for women and dalits.⁵³ The value of pursuing interests of poor people through, or apart from, party politics is a hotly debated. The view of south Indian dalit movement activists I spoke to recently was that it is only through contesting elections in *local* government that the 'feudal' relations (of caste) can be broken (Mosse 2007).

Many policy makers in India seem to agree. There has been growing support for the view that poor people will be empowered through the processes of political decentralization that devolve resources and decision-making to elected local councils, such as Panchayati raj institutions, rather than by central anti-poverty programmes. Indeed, the strongest critics of centrally controlled programs (or parallel NGO or donor-led programmes) and their users' associations and self-help groups in India are often the greatest supporters of political decentralisation and Panchayati raj as the best route to empowerment of the poor and low castes (Manor 2002). They argue that the indiscriminate promotion of well-resourced user committees and other parallel bodies undermines the processes of democratic decentralisation and diverts resources from elected bodies, which is detrimental to the long-term interests poor people.

⁵³ I've already suggested reasons to be sceptical about the capacity of electoral politics to deliver to the poorest, and the economic impact of reservations on the poorest is often dismissed as marginal. Still, from a study in Karnataka, Kanbur *et al.* (2006) conclude that 'reservations for dalits and STs work in the sense that households in GPs [gram panchayats] that have presidencies reserved for SC/STs are 7 per cent. more likely to offer targeted benefits to dalits and STs'

However, some research suggests that democratic decentralisation itself may fail to change unequal power relations in favour of poor groups, while bureaucratically managed programme delivery may actually be more effective at enhancing their political capabilities. Interesting in this regard, is the comparative study by Johnson *et al.* (2003) of the politics of governance and poverty reduction in two Indian states [Box 10].

10. Poverty reduction and the political representation: Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh

Different state governments in India have emphasised anti-poverty programmes and democratic decentralisation to different degrees. While Madhya Pradesh (MP) launched a radical programme of political decentralisation, Andhra Pradesh (AP) devolved powers to a lesser extent and adopted a populist approach to poverty reduction through line departments and parallel bodies, such as local user groups and SHGs. In their comparative study, Johnson *et al.* (2003) came to two interesting conclusions.

The first was that political decentralisation in MP was less effective in addressing the needs of the poor than expected, because of 'the failure to challenge [the] well-entrenched power of the village chiefs, the *sarpanches*' (*ibid*: vi). Village councils (*gram sabhas*) remained controlled by existing leaders, they did not increase political competition, and they were poor in resources and ineffective. In other words, the functioning of formal democratic structures (for example, reserved constituencies of women or low castes) was substantially undermined by informal power relations.⁵⁴ The second conclusion was that, despite a more limited process of political decentralization in AP (even some hostility to Panchayati raj), the government's populist approach to development (its *janmabhoomi* programme of community development through watershed rehabilitation, joint forest management, and women's credit) had empowered the poor in more effective ways. Contributing factors included the AP government's need to secure political support from key constituencies (women, Backward Castes, agricultural labourers) especially in face of painful reforms (*ibid*: 11); programme delivery arrangements that brought public officials close to the people even while weakening the *panchayats*; and the creation of incentives for political participation through populist schemes delivered to the poor, which ensured better attendance and participation in AP *gram sabhas*, even though they were bureaucratically controlled (*ibid*).

The *negative* finding (decentralization empowers local elites to capture resources from the poor) is consistent with a stream of recent research emphasising that the existence of a strong centre that is able and willing to resist the power of local elites (to earmark funds, support strong local staffing, and so on) is a necessary precondition for decentralisation (e.g. Tendler 1997).⁵⁵ It also speaks to the more general theme that democracy and poverty reduction are not necessarily mutually supportive. The *positive* finding (populist, central programs can empower) draws attention to the importance of wider political systems and electoral strategies for enhancing the political capabilities of the poor. In both states, poverty reduction programs and decentralisation were shaped by political interests of the government in power, as well as by state-wide caste/class structures (historical continuity of upper caste/class dominance in MP, and historical challenge to landowning dominant castes in AP). But while political strategies worked in favour of the poor in AP, they were less able to do so in MP.

Despite limited political decentralisation, the government of Andhra Pradesh put efforts into central anti-poverty programs (such as subsidised rice, credit for women, watershed rehabilitation) that

⁵⁴ World Bank research also shows significant variation in modes leaderships and decision making in panchayats even between adjacent south Indian states. Data (recorded transcripts of meetings) seem to show that while in Tamil Nadu (where rather limited resources are actually available) panchayats have become fora for petitioning and dispute mediation and leadership falls into an historically given personalised kingly mould, in Kerala panchayats (with more resources) democratic debate takes place at the local level and allocative decisions are made. Panchayats in Karnataka display characteristics between these two (Biju Rao, personal communication, October 2003).

⁵⁵ The Indian state of West Bengal is often cited as a case that exemplifies effective decentralization based on a strong center providing long-term support.

appeared to work for the poor because their interests had become part of the government's (ultimately unsuccessful) electoral strategy; that is to mobilise necessary electoral support from women, low castes, and labourers in face of unpopular reforms. In other words, the wider political system (the nature of political constituencies and party competition) enabled 'the poor' (as women and dalit castes) in Andhra Pradesh to develop a political capacity that they did not have in Madhya Pradesh.

However, in a follow-up study, Johnson *et al.* (2007) revealed that programmes in AP (e.g., micro-credit) that were perceived favourably, and so politically valuable, delivered relatively meagre tangible benefits (and that the large number of new 'self-help groups' outstripped the administrative capacity to finance and manage them adequately, c.f. Manor 2006). Arguably this had some part to play in the state government's electoral defeat in May 2004, although surely only as part of the wider unpopularity of the government's reform agenda (ibid, Craig Johnson, pers comm., Jan 2007).

In this case, the ineffectiveness/effectiveness of poverty reduction measures turns on, first, the *inability* of new formal institutions of governance to challenge existing informal power relations (in MP), and second, on the *ability* of certain categories of the poor to become a constituency in mainstream politics (in AP). In both cases, outcomes are historically determined by structures of caste/class and the political interests and electoral strategies of the government in power. It is important to note that the *terms* of political recognition for key groups of poor people are determined by the wider political system which politicises certain needs and identities (dalits, women in Andhra Pradesh), but not others (e.g., *adivasi* migrant labourers in Gujarat). Without question, getting the needs or rights of exploited people onto the political agenda is crucial. But those whose rights need to be protected have first to comprise a political constituency. The powerlessness of groups such as inter-state *adivasi* migrant labourers and construction site workers in India results from their failure to become a constituency for political parties, line departments, or labour unions. In consequence, they remain subject to appalling exploitation despite the existence of progressive Indian labour laws (Mosse *et al.* 2005). Rights-based approaches to poverty reduction depend upon effective politicisation.

Now, there *are* examples of politically-driven rights-based initiatives. The Indian Government's recent National Rural Employment Bill (NREP) launched in 2006 is an example. This legislation, giving chronically poor households (at least one member each) the right *by law* to a fixed number of days work at minimum wages, could have a significant impact, direct and indirect (on wage rates, bargaining power, etc) on the labouring poor, including labour migrants, although perhaps not on the most exploited who are recruited through debt and the advance sale of labour.⁵⁶ However, poor people may not always be well served by those who mobilise their votes in the short term, whether through populist programmes, bureaucratic patronage or violent identity politics. Returning to the case of Andhra Pradesh, it was sufficient for the government's programmes to be *perceived* as successful in meeting the needs of key constituencies of the poor for them to be sustained politically, at least in the short-term. Johnson *et al.*'s (2007) later study suggests that the material benefits to the poor and the political benefits to the ruling government were both illusory: poor people failed to benefit, the ruling party lost the elections.

Further, the politicisation of development programmes can often work against the poor. The sectors and schemes that attract most political attention and priority for funding are often those high-profile programmes that offer most opportunities to redistribute resources to political supporters so as to generate political capital, cashed as votes. Comparing different types of poverty reduction schemes in India, for example, Farrington (2002) drew a contrast

⁵⁶ Other beneficial changes in policy and legislation include the Social Security for Unorganised Sector Workers Bill which will propose 'a legally enforceable entitlement for all informal sector workers irrespective of occupation or duration of employment' (DFID 2006)

between the National Housing Scheme and the National Old Age Pension Scheme. The former (involving large lump sum payments) was high profile and subject to political interference and corruption, while the latter performed well in terms of poverty-reducing impacts but lacked 'political champions' and so was hardly expanded.⁵⁷

Moore and Putzel (1999) are right, then, to point out that development agencies need a far greater understanding of the different political systems and scenarios in which they intervene, in order to identify opportunities to strengthen the political capabilities of the poor; although developing an operational political analysis is complex and difficult. Poverty reduction is always political, but the way in which interventions are politicised has a significant bearing on the interests of poor people. Those who are poor and subject to exploitation can expect to gain through such politicisation only where there exist institutionalised populist policies that enable poor people's organisations to access resources or claim rights (including labour rights and land reform); and competition for the votes of the poor through relatively stable party line-ups, backed by a strong central government able to defend the interests and rights of the poor (*ibid*).⁵⁸ Special conditions apply.

Bob Currie (1998), drawing on fieldwork in Orissa describes what is perhaps the more common situation where electoral pressure *fails* to translate into effectively meeting the needs of the poor because elected governments are partisan. They have common interests with dominant groups which undermine their support of the poor. Governments are primarily concerned with the maintenance of political stability, and to this end evade public pressure (politically asserted) by employing a range of 'displacement strategies'. Currie shows how, in order to deflect public criticism or public interest litigation in relation to the existence of near starvation or chronic poverty, the government of Orissa made play on political personalities, secured support from significant groups by giving concessions (loan waivers, subsidies or contracts to dominant groups), blamed failure on previous governments or on the vulnerable groups themselves, and inflated their achievements. At best electoral politics gives the 'power to get rid, not to get right' (Currie 1998:882). Drèze and Sen's (1991) argument about the importance of democracy to famine prevention is not contradicted here, but serious questions are raised about the conditions under which public action results in effective pro-poor action. Getting onto the policy agenda is not sufficient, since existing political interests inhibit effective pro-poor action. Quite apart from political willingness, in India there is often limited administrative *capacity* to work with the poorest in the remotest (tribal) districts. These invariably attract the least skilled officials to what are regarded as 'punishment posts' (Currie 1998:883).

If the logic of electoral politics commonly diverts attention away from the poor, even in the presence of powerful public/political action, we should be cautious about the current analytical swing from concern with social relations to the benefits of *politics* in addressing poverty. Chronic poverty is itself a constraint on turning a 'fundamentally political perspective' into change. In this sense, the 'political turn' in the analysis of poverty, while welcome, has yet to examine the difficult relationship between politics and poverty, which hangs on the specific vulnerabilities and interests involved, and depends on dealing with forms of power in second and third dimensions (i.e., the chronically poor cannot or do not articulate their interests in straightforward ways); and on acknowledging the fact that the interests of people who are poor and exploited are often mediated by categories and identities provided and

⁵⁷ Farrington's general point stands even though, in fact, recent budgetary announcements in India indicate that the old age pension is to increase (<http://indiabudget.nic.in/ub2006-07/bh/bj1/pdf>). Thanks to Sam Hickey for pointing to this.

⁵⁸ The emphasis on governance and stability is crucial, and Chua (2003) offers a timely warning about the dangers of rapid democratisation in the context of free-market growth bringing disproportionate wealth to market dominant ethnic minorities.

manipulated by political systems according to a logic that may not serve their needs. Here I would endorse Mitlin and Bebbington's (2006) caution against imagining that the goals of social movements can simply be turned to the ends of poverty reduction, when these goals, like those of political parties, may be quite different.

5.3 Third dimension empowerment?

Any effort to reduce the condition of chronic poverty involves recognising the cultural/physical effects of chronic poverty on human agency,⁵⁹ which have to be addressed as a pre-requisite for challenging relationships of exploitation, acquiring a 'capacity to aspire', or conceiving of acting on common interests. Here Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* is useful because it indicates the complex subjective and objective demands of empowerment. For example, activists working to empower dalits in south India explain that their work involves changing assumed meanings and entrenched habits by initiating a process of 're-socialisation' in which individuals and groups learn through practice to modify the distinctions and schemes that produced their disempowerment, as well as to achieve economic independence (e.g., Arun 2004). This not only involves experiences that help to build a 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2004), but also activities of symbolic reversal and re-mythologising that articulate and honour an 'outcaste culture' in which the markers of untouchability — beef eating or drumming — become the focus of positive assertions of dalit culture.⁶⁰ There are parallels with work on gender relations. It is significant here that activists often see (risky) conflict, even violence, as necessary to disrupt old meanings, and education as necessary to produce new ones. Of course, unequal power relations are naturalised as habits and classifications to different degrees, so opportunities for change and reactions to it vary with cultural contexts. The violent retaliation to efforts to change unequal relations between upper castes and dalits (evident in atrocities against dalits), or to change gender relations (evident in links between domestic violence and micro-finance initiatives⁶¹) demonstrate a strongly embedded habitus.

While poor dalits in India, as inheritors of negative and subordinate social identities, struggle in a variety of ways to redefine, change or eliminate caste identities or lay claim to emancipatory religious or political ones, they do so firmly in the context of power relations. Culture and identity are by no means negotiable at will. Many remain excluded from progressive political and cultural processes through the continuation of extreme forms of subordination, especially as tied, dependent, landless rural minorities, in places where caste rank and service relations continue with force (depressing local wage rates), where caste continues to be a constraining aspect of everyday experience of exclusion and poverty.

In sum, the power relations that produce durable poverty seem to be highly resistant to the wide variety of ways in which they have sought to be changed, beginning with the interventions of community-based participatory development, or social re-engineering under large scale CDD projects. Political mobilisation is a risky strategy for the most vulnerable

⁵⁹ Ill-health is another under-recognised constraint on the capacities of the poor to act.

⁶⁰ The *parai* drum (from which Paraiyars take their name) is recovered from its negative association with inauspiciousness and death, pollution and servitude, as a sacred object, symbol of celebration, a victorious 'war drum' and paradigmatic symbol of assertive dalit identity. dalit drummers (now performing artists not village servants) participate in annual dalit cultural festivals and form professional associations (etc.) in which the drum is played with different rhythms and beats. It is a symbol of protest and 'art of the oppressed' (Clarke 1999).

⁶¹ Micro-finance initiatives can also have the opposite effect of reducing domestic violence, for example in adivasi western India by morally delegitimising existing forms of social capital mediated by alcohol (see Mosse 2005a:216-7).

groups and even successful social movements have limited ability to change the processes of exploitation that entrench poverty, even though they may contribute to raising issues or shifting the policy agenda. This concern with political representation takes us to the second dimension of power, but here the ability of exploited groups to pursue their interests through local or national democratic institutions is again constrained by the persistence of structures of caste/class and by the fact that the categories and social classifications through which they gain recognition and become constituencies are set by wider political systems, which, while mobilising their votes, may not serve their interests. Democratic decentralisation, institutionalised populist politics, and strong central government are necessary but not sufficient conditions for change in the core relations of poverty. Since chronic poverty is deeply embedded in socio-political institutions and processes of capitalist development, the insistence either that poor people will empower themselves through economic activity organised through their own social capital, or that the rearrangement of forms of political representation will resolve the persistence of poverty, are woefully inadequate as a responses to the challenge.

Is this a council of despair? Well not entirely. While none of these approaches addressed to particular elements in the complex dynamics of power that reproduce poverty is sufficient, strategies which simultaneously address several of them may offer some hope. This indeed is the conclusion of Gaventa (2006), among others, who have examined the way in which the different kinds of power, power at different levels (local to international) and different institutional and organisational arrangements ('spaces') are combined so as to bring about transforming change. An effort at bringing together different approaches — from community development, to unionisation and advocacy— is precisely what has been tried in supporting Bhil *adivasi* migrants in western India.

5.3 Organisation amidst exploitation

Work with extremely vulnerable *adivasis* migrant labourers makes it clear that their position will only improve by confronting extreme exploitation and through the realisation of basic rights and the emergence of countervailing power. And yet there is widespread failure of the existing institutions responsible for labour welfare (law, labour departments, unions NGOs) to side with and protect migrant *adivasi* workers; the work of a handful of activists notwithstanding (see Mosse *et al.* 2005). The need for wider organisation and unionisation of informal labour to defend basic rights guaranteed by law, and for 'comprehensive systems of social security based on universal entitlements and funded by redistributive taxation' are of course widely shared long-term goals rooted in the left political tradition; although as Harriss-White points out, 'both the welfare state and the income guarantee are ideas deeply out of fashion with the international funding, aid and "development" agencies responsible for tackling the MDGs under neoliberalism' (2005: 1245).

However, the goal of protecting exploited migrant labour through unionization offers limited hope in the short term, especially given the fact that the present lack of organisation, registration and protection is itself the product *both* of specific 'economic interests that benefit from the state of informality' (through the evasion of labour laws and taxation) (Bremar 2003:198) *and* of the self-interest of chronically insecure migrants who ally themselves to the beneficiaries of exploitation. There are three interrelated problems. First, for this group of chronically poor people it seems implausible to suppose that 'if high rates of economic growth are sustained in India, and demand for labour becomes more buoyant, it may become progressively easier for migrant labourers to challenge [the] "terms of exploitation"' (Shepherd 2006:20).⁶² (The reasons why *adivasi* migrant labour is not subject to the simple

⁶² A point of view wrongly attributed to our (Mosse et al 2005) study by Shepherd (*ibid*).

logic of demand and supply have been explained already.) Second, chronic poverty itself is a serious constraint on effective political representation and organisation; and third, traditional forms of trade union organisation do not work.⁶³ So it is necessary to have a range of specific initiatives to meet immediate needs, generate awareness, experiment with other styles of organisation (unionisation), and in other ways challenge the adverse 'terms of recognition' of exploited and stigmatised groups such as *adivasi* migrants, setting precedents to allow for policy innovation (Appadurai 2004:74-5). This has been the approach of a DFID-supported programme described in detail elsewhere (Mosse *et al.* 2005) [Box 11].

11. Migrant labour support programme

The 'migrant labour support programme' involves piloting welfare services while increasing rights awareness and a gradual process of unionization. It works simultaneously with NGOs, state departments (local government) and unions, both at regional urban sites of migration (e.g., Ahmedabad, Surat) and, through community development initiatives, with *adivasis* in their home villages. The latter is especially important for the most vulnerable chronically indebted *mukkadams*-recruited migrants who are wholly inaccessible in the informal labour force. The programme additionally aims to enhance the visibility of migrant workers to those agencies charged with their welfare, and to build a constituency of support (through NGO and union lobbying, campaigning, networks, research and the media, and collaboration with the construction industry) so that *adivasi* migrants are gradually enabled themselves to become a political constituency, first (and most feasibly) in their rural villages where by 2004 'sammelans' (public gatherings) of returned migrants had been held to discuss problems, and second (far more ambitiously) in the places to which they migrate.

The villages in the *adivasi* hinterland are the appropriate context, not just for addressing the needs of those made critically vulnerable by debt-forced migration — children, the disabled and the elderly facilitating (through access to state welfare schemes) —but also for legal literacy and rights awareness coordinated with urban-based informal worker unions and rights-focused NGOs. Such programmes also include gang leader/brokers (*mukkadams*). Working with *mukkadams* presents both opportunities and risks. They represent workers' interests (otherwise they have no clients) and an increase in their awareness of labour law, labour offices, insurance schemes or the ability to negotiate wages and conditions offer benefits to workers. Skilled *mukkadams* can use these skills to their advantage. But *mukkadams* also know their capacity to operate in any of these fields depends, not on their role as advocates of labour, but upon maintaining their relationship with contractors and employers. They are integral to relations of exploitation.

Since indebted *adivasis* themselves prioritise getting work over protection from exploitation, the programme has set up 'migrant information centres' (Palayan Seva Kendra, PSK) at key locations to provide information on available work, reliable contractors, a message recording service to allow communication between village and city worksites, and a system of registration (of labour, destination, advances paid, employment books etc.). These are now connected to Migrant Resource Centres at key destination locations, and both types of centre are linked to a range of governmental and NGO agencies.⁶⁴ In a system in which exploitation depends upon anonymity and concealment, such information and surveillance is potentially a weapon for the weak; and the practice of recording work has its own educational and 'empowering' effects. The same goes for the scheme for local government-authorized worker photo-identity cards (eventually to be linked to official systems of worker registration). The identity cards symbolise a person's social capital (belonging, identity, support networks) and honour (as a construction worker), and offer some counter to stigma, criminalisation, harassment, abuse and false accusation that come with the lack of identity in distant urban centres. Still, their very implication of rights and entitlement means they are likely to be concealed when looking for work. It remains to be seen how these interventions work, and to what extent they are tolerated by the existing patronage system, but an evaluation study in 2005 reported favourably on the benefits from services of the PSKs (telephone, identifying work, identity cards, action for recovery of unpaid wages) (Prasad and Deshingkar 2006, DFID 2006)

⁶³ I am grateful to Andries Du Toit for indicating this third point.

⁶⁴ See http://www.gvtindia.org/disp_pg.php?content=mlsp_int.php

Work with dispersed, dependent, semi-itinerant and highly vulnerable migrant workers *in the city* is a far harder task. It has been taken up by the Ahmedabad-based union, the Bandhkam Mazdoor Sangathan (BMS) a rights-based 'claims group' (Thorpe *et al.* 2005), but is painfully slow and interrupted. Membership of the union at any one time includes only 10 percent of adivasi migrants in the city, and only 35 per cent of membership is continuous. Work necessarily focuses on migrants' practical needs: shelter, health, information, water, childcare, rights awareness and the pursuit of serious cases of withheld wages, injury, forced labour or eviction. Otherwise, the union campaigns for state-level labour legislation (it is also affiliated an international workers federation). The union has been innovative and had important successes, but its workers are under no illusion about their ability to directly represent and mobilise the chronically poor; it necessarily focuses on accessible daily wage labour markets, but has little contact with the poorest recruited in gangs directly in their villages tied into deep relations of patronage and dependence (see Mosse *et al.* 2005, DFID 2006 for details).

This programme to support vulnerable and exploited migrant workers is trying to find out how to change the power relations of poverty in many different ways: mobilising workers to assert rights and respond to injustice, creating 'voice' and a constituency for adivasi workers, but also recognising the need of vulnerable groups for social protection and welfare. The modes of intervention (welfare, and organisation), the agencies and levels involved (local NGOs, unions, state departments, international aid donors) are mixed and not without contradictions. There are also several dimensions of power at issue, not only visible and agenda setting power, but also Lukes' third dimension of power, which concerns the way relations of power shape and limit the agency of exploited people.

6. Summary and conclusions: power, culture and the analysis of poverty

Let me draw together some of the threads from this paper's discussion. The overall aim has been to examine chronic poverty from the point of view of social relations and power and to see, in this light, how poverty reduction interventions address questions of powerlessness. This began with the need to recover social relations in poverty analysis from the neoliberal and individualistic trap which essentialises 'the social' as a productive form of 'capital' for self-improvement, and to reinstate a relational view that would challenge uncritical use of the idea of 'marginality' by seeing chronic poverty not as exception but as emerging in the midst of capitalist growth and perpetuated by quite ordinary relations of exploitation and opportunity hoarding. Research on poverty has to be reconnected to knowledge about the way in which socio-economic, political and cultural systems work.

Taking the case poor Bhil adivasis in western India, the paper set out, in the simplest terms, some of the historical relationships that reproduced inequality in the distribution of power, wealth and opportunity in this tribal region. This deployed a structural view of power, illustrated in Gadgil and Guha's ecological history which highlighted the relations of dispossession and primitive accumulation associated with colonial capitalism but extended into post-colonial times. Here resource extraction illustrated some of the poverty-generating aspects of capitalism, and the alliances and class interests involved, that have a bearing on the constrained livelihoods of poor forest-dependent tribal cultivators. Parallel cases in the tradition of agrarian scholarship showed how engagement with markets arises from and reproduces unequal power relations and how strategies of accumulation and pauperisation are interlinked.

Drawing on Tilly, however, I have insisted that the processes of impoverishment are never narrowly economic, and that inequality is perpetuated and stabilised by social mechanisms such as categorical inequality and adaptation. Tilly (1998) insists that these processes are relational but not necessarily intentional. The systems of social closure, exclusion and control are by-products of social interaction. The victims of exploitation as well as those who control

access to resources acquire stakes in the institutional solutions. While Tilly provides an opening to bring culture into explanations of durable poverty, his account remains structural (and functionalist) in a way that does not allow examination of the open-ended, tactical, and sometimes brutal practices of power. But description of the more intimate processes of exploitation does not return us to simple, reductive or deterministic views of opposed class interests. The practices of myriad intermediaries and brokers, and the interlinkage of formal and informal power, reveals how interests overlap lending stability to exploitative arrangements while creating aspirations that obscure their nature.

Opening of spaces for 'empowerment' within the complex social relations within which chronic poverty is embedded is a challenge. Existing relations co-opt or resist efforts to generate capacity or accountability, yet more confrontational approaches may present intolerable risks to vulnerable people whose chronic insecurity aligns them (and their perceived interests) to the interests of their exploiters, whether employers, contractors, or *mukkadams*. Skills training, awareness raising as well as new accountability mechanisms, or associations of poor people, perhaps federated to extend their reach and influence, are all important and effective; they can often support people's own struggles for justice, dignity and access to productive resources. However, much evidence suggests that the conditions for successful mobilisation of poor lie beyond, in state structures and political systems, and that coalitions and alliances involving the powerful are necessary to bring the interests of vulnerable groups onto the political agenda which is a precondition for pro-poor changes.

Such changes are not wrought through direct struggle and mobilisation, although this is often necessary; they are worked by revealing and challenging the hidden 'two-dimensional' power that organises the interests of the poor out of politics. The question is how does a weak group such as adivasi labour migrant, whose exploitation is perpetuated through silence and invisibility, become a constituency and a political agenda? There is no one approach and strategies range from public campaigns, lobbying, advocacy, and bureaucratic and donor influence. A combination of such processes involving NGOs, activists, officials, lawyers, donors and especially the adivasi migrant's union, is indeed currently raising the profile of the exploitation adivasi migrant labourers in parts of western India. It may contribute to bringing new protective legislation, mechanisms to raise grievances as well as new government programmes.

Changing the agenda and making constituencies out of vulnerable groups requires the politicisation of their concerns. However, when it comes to mainstream politics, the terms of political inclusion of subordinated groups are set by others within (sometimes international) political systems. The identities and categories that are salient for asserting claims or securing alliance with the powerful have their own logic which does not always serve the interests of poor people. In practice people seek political support while protecting themselves from the potential dangers of ethnicised or communalised identities that risk undermining their practical interests.⁶⁵

We have also seen how power in the third dimension operates to constrain poor people's agency though building consent. While it makes little sense to attempt to pull apart the calculative from the cultural behind consent, there can be little doubt that systems of unequal power naturalise injustice, and that the experience of poverty goes along with subjection to judgements that impinge upon poor people's self-evaluation and self-worth. The point from Bourdieu is that relational power has effects that are embodied as a structure of dispositions, a habitus. In hierarchical societies such as rural India there is an ignominy associated with

⁶⁵ In the case of certain subordinated groups in south India mobilised by radical dalit movements, this means that poor people have to develop a dual discursive competence that strategically emphasises and de-emphasises caste identity and conflict, *and* selects the appropriate contexts for each; such that real and wider social conflict is not generated (see Mosse 2007).

poverty, and an honour attached to wealth and power that means that poverty and untouchability, caste and class, have become idioms of each other. But it would be a mistake to assume some kind of 'habitus' of poverty. People who are chronically poor knowingly transact with different others in different ways (kin, patrons, bureaucrats, traders). To use Corbridge's example, a widow queuing for her pension at an Indian Block Office expects the ignominy of deference to rank and power, but fully understands her rights to the payment as a citizen, which points to the fact that even within the same political subject, 'the politics of clientelism and citizenship are entwined' (Hickey and Du Toit 2007:15).

In conclusion, chronic poverty such as that of vulnerable Bhil migrant labourers is the product of historically rooted multi-level relations of appropriation and exploitation. The strategies to address this poverty and change power relations are correspondingly multi-level and long-term. They illustrate recent calls for approaches to poverty reduction that address different *forms* of power (e.g., Lukes' visible, agenda-setting and 'third dimension' power), at different organisational *levels* (individual-local, state/national and global) and through different *means*. The latter refers to the different institutional channels or political practices which are used and which are glossed by Gaventa 2006 (and Cornwall 2002) as 'spaces' of power. These are spaces that may be 'claimed/created' through the direct assertions of subjugated groups, spaces to which people may be 'invited' as users, citizens or beneficiaries by authorities and agencies, or, finally, 'closed spaces' of decision making which need to become the object of lobbying and campaigns. Gaventa offers the three-dimensional image of a 'power cube' to visualise the intersection of forms, levels and spaces of power. This proves a useful image to demonstrate the need for multiple strategies to address chronic poverty. Certainly, the work with adivasi migrant labour can be represented in such terms. Awareness raising, legal rights education and worker registration in Bhil villages are 'invited spaces' engaging with local power which may, in time and with widening horizontal links, evolve into more direct claims such as those led by the urban based BMS union which challenges the visible power of unjust contractors (e.g., through court cases) as well as the agenda-setting power of politicians and legislators. Vertical links and coalitions involving activists, researchers, NGO networks, or international donors through campaigns aim to open up closed spaces or maybe design new 'invited spaces.'

Like all classificatory devices the 'power cube' is a useful device, but equally it might be a deceptive simplification which creates the mistaken impression, first that there are policy positions outside of power, and second that relationships of power can be 'rendered technical' and so subject to designed interventions. Not only are the structures of power within which chronic poverty is reproduced global, they are also supported by governments and international development policy. Indeed, the processes that allow some to escape from poverty traps are the same that allow the exploitation of others. To be sure, this still leaves room for political choices to shape the policy of the state — which 'is the only institution that can protect people from the forces of either market or tradition' (Hickey and Du Toit 2007: 23, citing Harriss-White) — but the democratic political process does not automatically guarantee commitment to the needs of the chronically poor.

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