

JAN BREMAN

*Interview*

A FOOTLOOSE SCHOLAR

*Could you tell us about your family background, and how you came to study the conditions of labour in the Third World?*

I WAS BORN IN Amsterdam in 1936. My father was a postman; my mother was a maid until she married. On both sides, their families had been bargees for generations, working the waterways of Holland. My father, born in 1895, was the youngest of fifteen children, though nine of them had died in infancy—infant-mortality levels were high for bargees; hygiene was poor and medical care hard to get. The Breman family originally came from the north-west corner of Overijssel, bordering on Friesland, an area abounding in water. My grandfather had been a self-employed barge owner but moved into waged employment with a shipping company when he got older, shuttling a steam barge between Amsterdam and Utrecht, with the whole family on board. As a result, my father was able to go to school—to two schools, in fact, as the vessel was loaded and unloaded during the day, and sailed at night. When they reached Utrecht in the morning, my father would go to school there; the same when they reached Amsterdam the next day. When he finished primary school—workers' education went no further—he got two certificates.

My mother's upbringing was much harder. Her father had a traditional sailing barge, a *tjalk*, that carried mainly agricultural cargo, building materials—gravel and sand—or peat, which was used for domestic fuel. Her family came from southern Friesland, in the north of the Netherlands; though bargees led a footloose existence, they did belong somewhere. Lolkje was one of fourteen children, though again, not all

came of age. Life on the barge was one of abject poverty. If the wind was blowing the wrong way the sail would be lowered and the barge towed along; if there was no money to rent a horse, the bargee and his wife and children had to shoulder the ropes themselves. When the waterways froze during severe winters, traffic came to a halt; no cargo meant no income until the ice melted. Food was scarce and had to be shared; clothes were passed down from child to child. The only schooling Lolkje got was when the barge was requisitioned by the government for food storage, during the First World War; she spent part of a year in fourth grade and learned to read and write a little, though her classmates were way ahead of her.

When she was eleven, she was sent ashore to work; an older sister who'd already gone ashore helped her find a job as a maid. She had to struggle with loneliness and—brought up speaking Friesian—with the standard Dutch spoken in Amsterdam. Housework was quite unfamiliar to her, as it was all so different to life on board the barge. On her days off she would go to the locks on the city's outskirts and ask passing bargees if they had seen her parents, and to greet them for her next time they met. Things improved when she and an older sister managed to rent a room together; they earned a living working at home, sewing and mending clothes. Then they'd go out—'looking for a beau!', as she told me. They were handsome girls. She met my father on a bridge, in 1923, when she was just seventeen; it must have helped that they could speak Friesian together. They were married within a few months, after getting permission from her parents. Willem was already working for the postal service. When he came ashore he'd tried to get an electrician's apprenticeship, but then he was called up for the duration of the First World War—even though the Netherlands stayed neutral, there was a general mobilization—and by 1918 he was too old to be an apprentice. With the Great Depression his pay was cut, though he was lucky to keep his job. I grew up in a small, first-floor apartment on the Vrolikstraat. Some of my earliest memories were of the German occupation. Food was scarce, and the municipality opened soup kitchens in working-class neighbourhoods. I was sent there with a pan, to queue up for soup or cabbage. Fuel was even harder to come by than food. We would go looking for coal scraps near the shunting yard.

*What do you recall of the political atmosphere under the Nazis?*

When war broke out, my oldest sister was seeing a butcher's son, but ended the relationship because his family supported the NSB, the Dutch National Socialist Movement. The difference between good and bad was clear, and defined the distinction between collaboration and resistance. But there was an intentionally shadowy area around the dividing line. Choosing one side or the other too explicitly was risky. The authorities were now from beyond our borders and sabotaging their instructions might be met with appreciation by 'good' compatriots, rather than reproach for being disloyal, as would have been the case in the pre-war period. In one sense there was a continuation of the regime of adversity, deficiency and insecurity that had characterized the lives of the masses in the working-class neighbourhoods. But there was also a widely shared view that, under foreign domination, the gap could be seen, even more than previously, as a stark contrast between 'us' and 'them'. While 'they' meant the German occupiers, the 'us' had more the sense of 'our kind of people', rather than the Dutch population as a whole. There was a lot that had to be kept secret from the enemy. We were hiding my sister's new boyfriend, who'd been called up to go and work in Germany. During the *razzias*, when the Germans closed off the neighbourhood and sent patrols through the streets to search houses at random—for Jews, draftees, members of the underground resistance—he would hide in a secret space behind the fake back wall of a cupboard, stuffed with clothes and junk. He was never caught and made a good living, distilling illegal liquor in our kitchen and selling it on the black market.

*What about school?*

It was almost by chance that I got put on track for higher education. Most of my early classmates were shunted off to elementary technical school. I was left-handed and would get rapped on the knuckles with a ruler by the teacher if I used the 'wrong' hand to write—so handwriting, an important element in the curriculum, was not my strong point. But a teacher suggested a vocational test, which opened the door to advanced elementary school; there I discovered that I enjoyed learning and started doing well. I was one of a handful of students there who scraped through

the exam into higher secondary education, while the rest went on to start their working lives. A vital experience for me, it turned out, was going with my father on rainy days to the Colonial Museum, quite near our flat. There you could watch *wayang* dancing and listen to gamelan music. I first became acquainted with tropical Indonesian landscapes by pressing my eye to the small holes in the peep boxes, to see how rice was grown on *sawahs* or what a Javanese bazaar looked like; you could press buttons on a large-scale model of a plantation to light up storehouses, workplaces and coolie lines. It was a different world, complete with the smell of cloves, cinnamon and other spices, laid out in an aromatic cabinet. I used to go the Children's Library at the Museum to leaf through magazines and read stories about native life in the far-off colony.

There was some tension around my going to university, as my teachers proposed. This was a path that lay far beyond the horizons of my own milieu and it met with little approval. My sisters accused me of being selfish, saying that my mother was the victim of my refusal to go out and earn a living—she was still working as a cleaning lady, partly to pay for my upkeep. I felt guilty about it and promised that, whatever happened, I would pay my own way. The Post Office was offering scholarships for their employees' children, so I applied—this was in the summer of 1955. I was interviewed by a panel of officials who asked me my motives for wanting to study; apparently it was the first time that the son of a postman had applied for a scholarship. My application was turned down, not because of my ability, but because the officials thought that such a radical move up the social ladder would lead to estrangement from my family. So when I started at the University of Amsterdam I had to support myself by working evening shifts before finally getting a state scholarship.

*And what did you study?*

Social sciences. It was a new faculty that had only been in existence for a few years, pioneered by prominent left-wing scholars; both the staff and students were recruited from a wider social pool than most other disciplines. I knew from the start that I would be interested in studying labour issues. My great good luck was to be taught by Wim Wertheim, branded as a Marxist and author of *Indonesian Society in Transition*. He had been

a colonial civil servant in the Dutch East Indies and, when appointed to a chair in the Law School in Batavia, he met young Indonesian scholars and students who were, of course, nationalists, and talked to them about their views. Together with all the Dutch he was interned under Japanese occupation in the Second World War and when he came out, he sided with the independence movement. He was hated for that in the Netherlands. Indonesian independence was a huge issue in Dutch politics for long after 1949. I became his research assistant.

*What were your own politics at this time?*

I was a leftist; my stance was anti-colonial and in favour of working-class emancipation, but it was not party-based. You could say I was a *heimatlose Linke*. I was critical of development studies, and of the Third Worldism which became so popular in the 1960s and 70s. I fully shared Wertheim's scepticism concerning the gospel of developmentalism during the Cold War epoch.<sup>1</sup>

I was planning to do research in Indonesia—I had done the background research and prepared myself for language training. But in 1961, when I was due to go, a political dispute erupted between the two countries over Irian Jaya, which the Netherlands were still holding on to. By chance the Indian sociologist M. N. Srinivas met Wertheim at a conference and said, 'Why don't you send him to us?' And so I went to India—and in those days that meant 'village India': 85 per cent of the population was rural, mostly living in villages of between 500 and 1,500 souls. In the ensuing decades, though, I continued to study the control of land and labour in West Java in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as doing fieldwork in India, and contextualizing my findings there in a historical framework. As soon as I'd completed the first round of village fieldwork, I applied to the India Office Library to do archival research, to understand how the present experience had emerged from past generations' realities, in the two villages where I was doing my research. So with these two tracks of Asian labour studies, Indian and Indonesian, it was impossible not to take a comparative approach.

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<sup>1</sup> Wertheim's perspective can be found in *Evolution and Revolution: The Rising Waves of Emancipation*, London 1974.

*When you set out for India in 1962, did you know any of the Indian languages?*

Yes, I had done a course in Gujarati at SOAS, taught by Miss Lambert, an Irish Presbyterian. While I was there I read all the available literature on Indian village field work—Adrian Mayer, Fred Bailey, David Pocock and, of course, the work of Indian scholars who were part of the freedom movement. And I had further language training when I got to India. I spent a month or so in Baroda, reading settlement and census reports and all the material on British India in the university library—there was a lot. There I came across the issue of bonded labour, which gave me a sense of what to be looking out for. The two villages I studied first, Chikhligam and Gandevigam, were in southern Gujarat, a few hundred miles north of Bombay. I've been returning there for over fifty years now, tracking how things have changed.

*What were your first impressions?*

I had some experience of hardship in European conditions, but the poverty in rural Gujarat came as a shock. The village space was starkly divided by caste. The Anavil Brahmin landowners lived in the village centre, usually in two-storey brick houses. The tribal Halpati caste of agricultural labourers, a much larger population, lived in self-built mud huts on the outskirts, without tap water or sanitation. They were known as Dublas, a very rough, derogatory word. A generation earlier they had been bonded labour: living close by, at the landowners' beck and call to work the fields—handling the plough, or *hal*, is considered defiling for the higher castes, so it's menial work that low-ranking castes or tribals are supposed to perform for them—and receiving at least a minimal degree of security and a semblance of patronage in return: a meal on the days they worked, a grain ration during the slack season and loans to see them through household crises such as ill health. Their wives did domestic work for the landowners, and likewise got some left-over food or perhaps cast-off clothing in return. The children too: the cowherd boy, the *govalio*. After Independence bonded labour was abolished: officially there were no more *halis*, only free day labourers; the Dublas were moved out of sight, to the edge of the village. But the attitudes were deeply marked: the offensiveness of the Anavils—they would say,

‘The Dublas used to be our devoted servants, but now no longer honour their superiors’—and the evasiveness of the Halpatis, who felt they were worse treated than their parents had been during the era of ‘patronage’.

*What were the origins of the bonded-labour regime, and how was it ended?*

The conventional view, propounded both by the Indian National Congress and by the Marxists, was that pre-colonial village India had been a harmonious, self-regulated community, in which peasant, artisan and serving castes had enjoyed relations of reciprocal collaboration. Colonial rule was held responsible for destroying the social and economic fabric, creating a layer of landless labourers; and also for undermining the village subsistence economy by imposing a cash land tax. With the monetization of the economy and the stagnation of agriculture, peasants were forced to sell their land, swelling the ranks of the landless. It’s true, of course, that British rule saw growing indebtedness and the subdivision of land. But already in the early nineteenth century, between a quarter and a third of the agricultural population in these regions was landless. I thought it highly doubtful that the *halis*, of tribal origin, had once been landed peasants; rather, it’s more likely that caste Hindus from the plains penetrated the *adivasi* regions and imposed sedentary agriculture. Land ownership underlay the relations of dependence and permanent, hereditary attachment for bonded servants, the *halis*. Bondage is also structured by lack of employment choice—the weak seeking security and protection from the landlord.

But *hali* bondage wasn’t just economic, it was structured by broader inter-caste relationships, sanctioning the status of *jajmans*, those who received goods and services, and *kamins*, who provided them.<sup>2</sup> The Gandhian plea for a return to a formerly idyllic village harmony and democracy through the panchayat system was based on a myth that was itself a colonial construction. The nationalists were wont to portray the village as a kind of fortress against colonial rule, where people lived in blissful interdependence with each other. I thought that was total nonsense; it was denying the inequality of the village and the various classes in it. The British

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<sup>2</sup> For a full account, see *Patronage and Exploitation: Changing Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat, India*, Berkeley 1974.

themselves helped to institutionalize the village community, as a cheap form of government. They didn't have to pay for the way authority was administered there. The community's division of power was backed up by the colonial rulers.

*So to what extent had bonded labour disappeared?*

The *hali* system was eroded slowly, by capitalism and monetization. As late as the early sixties, some wages were still being paid in kind: the labourers were given rations of food in a bamboo container; it was cheap, because they had grown the food themselves. But with marketized crops, that changed. And the personal bond was broken—although debt bondage is still extremely widespread. Even then, many Dublas would go to work in the brick kilns outside Bombay from November to May each year, taking their whole family with them—desperately hard work and dreadful conditions—because they'd been trapped into working off their debt.

*After fifteen years of Congress government, what improvements had there been in terms of social security and economic development at the point when you first arrived in India?*

Not much. In the fifties, after the very modest Congress Tenancy Act, land was supposed to revert to some extent to the tillers. In these villages the lower-caste Kolis lost their land, but the Anavils kept theirs, with average holdings of 10–20 acres, including most of the richest soil. These weren't *zamindar* landowners—huge, latifundia-style holdings, as you have in Pakistan, Bengal or Tamil Nadu. But they were substantial farmers, dominant in terms of economic holdings but also in political power and in the caste hierarchy. They ran the local Credit Cooperative and the panchayats, the village councils. The Dublas had numerical strength but no real political power. In theory there was a universal right to education, but the states didn't implement it; the village schools were still the preserve of the upper-caste children; the young Dublas were mostly illiterate. But the two villages had quite distinct characters. Chikhligam was more isolated; though it was not far from the main Bombay–Ahmedabad highway, there was no electricity or running water. The crops depended on the rains, so labour was seasonal. Gandevigam, on the banks of the



Ambika river, had irrigation facilities and better soil; the crops were more varied and cultivated throughout the year.

*What difference did Independence make?*

Independence actually solidified the power of the landowners. They became more dominant than they had been before. Universal suffrage was a very important and courageous step, given the entrenched system of social and economic inequality. But political democracy never became operational at the village level. There the power remained as it had been, so the panchayat was the preserve of the dominant caste, as it is still today. In fact, devolution of governance to village level has hardened the hegemony of the upper-caste landowners. In Gandevigam, for instance, the nominal village head, the *sarpanch*, is now a Halpati woman, as a result of positive discrimination for tribal castes, in areas where they are a majority of the population. But she can neither read nor write. Both here and in Bardoligam, another village I've got to know well, the tribal *sarpanch* is really just a puppet for the vice-*sarpanch*, who is an Anavil Brahmin in Gandevigam and a Kanbi Patidar in Bardoligam—the latter well-known for his brutal treatment of Halpatis who come to him with complaints; one of them died from his beatings.

The moment Independence came, everyone was eligible to cast his or her vote. But the ballot box was basically captured at the local level by the dominant castes. They were still the main employers and they wanted to see to it that the votes would go to the candidates they supported. Before Independence, Mahatma Gandhi had started a social movement—he was from Gujarat, and had ashrams all around. But the Gandhian activists—'constructive workers', they were called—never insisted on higher wages or better conditions of employment. The idea was that this would happen after Independence; before then, the dominant castes should be allowed to rule, as they had done before. The Congress constructive workers endeavoured to Hinduize the tribal people, to civilize the underdogs; they did not act as a trade union. They thought that when the tribals were left alone, they would drink a lot of liquor, which they distil themselves, and eat meat—vices that for a Gandhian should not be tolerated, of course. So they tried to Hinduize them, and the tribals gave in to that, to a certain extent. This was a huge vote bank for Congress.

*What about the Muslim population?*

There was a Muslim population—segregated, living in their own quarters. But there were also Muslim landlords. It's not that they were always at the bottom of the pile. Some were big landowners, and they had *halis*, too.

*And were they Muslims, the halis?*

No, they were tribals, though they were looked down upon because they served Muslims. To return to the patronage function: if you were the farm servant of a big man, you also gloried in some of his power and prominence.

*In Patronage and Exploitation, you describe very vividly the caste contempt of the Brahmins for the halis, and a real answering hatred from below.*

Absolutely. I remember standing with a landowner on his paddy fields and he said, 'I could grow summer paddy here—generally paddy is grown during the monsoon and harvested at Diwali, but with irrigation you can grow a crop between February and June—but I won't, because then I would be giving employment to the labourers and I don't want to do that.' More than inequality, there was class hatred. You still find it now. A couple of years ago I interviewed a high-level bureaucrat about his opposition to the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. He said: 'These people can't work. Genetically they are inferior, they have defects.' He added that it was understandable: from generation to generation, they had lived in starvation: 'They are weak; it's a weak race.' That kind of social-Darwinist jargon. There is resistance at village level, but the repression is very brutal. I wrote up the story of one agricultural labourer, Manu, who was a bit assertive, and was killed—not just killed, but tortured and viciously murdered by the landowners, just because he did not toe the line. This was in a nearby village, and there was a big strike there; it's not that there is a silent acceptance of the situation. But it had no repercussions for the agricultural workers in my village; they didn't join the strike. There are many quarrels, many conflicts, many strikes. But they are localized and spontaneous—they erupt for a short while only. Congress only ever steps in to pacify the situation; the 'constructive workers' would immediately rush to the spot to try to calm things down.

*How did things change in the seventies and eighties?*

Through to the mid-seventies, very little. The Green Revolution, strongly pushed by the Ford Foundation, brought more fertilizers and pesticides as well as more mechanized equipment, but it mainly benefited the large farmers. It actually widened the gap between the landowners and the labourers—and between the two villages. But it also intensified the problem of surplus agricultural labour.

*So the Green Revolution was one of the causes of the agrarian crisis?*

Yes, but I wouldn't give it too much weight. The underlying patterns of labour relations were much more important. For example, when it came to the sugar cane harvest, the main landowners preferred to bring in Maharashtrian labourers, under a gang-master; there was plenty of labour on the spot, but they hated having anything to do with the Halpatis, once the personal ties were loosened. Agricultural wages actually fell between 1963 and 1971, partly as the result of using outside labour, while the agricultural labour force was increasing, through population growth and falling mortality. The birth-control campaign created quite a bit of tension, being aimed at the lower castes—they were given 80 rupees for a sterilization. Another development that intensified the agrarian crisis was dispossession, but this again operated through social relations. From about this time, the children of the landowners were no longer interested in agriculture; they wanted to get out of the village and they had a head start, because they had better education, more money and a fund of social capital that provided connectivity to the world outside the village. Quite a few have gone to Britain or the US, as Non-Resident Indians—they are now Modi followers in their new country. The accumulation process has changed; they invest elsewhere, it is no longer focused on agriculture. But they have hung on to their land, which is still in the hands of the dominant caste. You also see a process of dispossession at the lower end of the scale, where smallholdings have become so diminished by division and inheritance that there's no point in splitting them further. The barely landed become land-poor, and then, because of indebtedness, the land-poor tend to become landless.

In the late seventies and early eighties there did seem to be some real if modest improvements. There were more non-agrarian opportunities, mainly due to a big infrastructural build-out in Gujarat, which was

quite labour intensive; a small forward section of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes was incorporated into an expanding public sector through positive-discrimination programmes. More people had bicycles, which freed them up and meant they could travel farther looking for work. But in the nineties, with Singh's turn to neoliberalism, much of this disappeared. What was left was a new regime of footloose labour, which had been slowly emerging since the seventies.

*What does this involve?*

It is characterized firstly by circulatory labour migration, rather than a one-way departure to the city. It can be intra-rural—a jobber may recruit a gang of labourers for a harvest or a brick kiln hundreds of miles away, in another state. Or they may be recruited to work on an urban construction site, but they can't afford city living costs once the job comes to an end—they can never get a secure footing, so they drift back to the countryside, but there's no longer any work for them there. These are labour regimes that blur the distinction between rural and urban: the role of the workers in the rural economy is downsized, but they have no settled place in the city either.

*This is a feature of the regime of informality?*

The idea of the informal economy is probably unavoidable, but in my view it raises as many questions as it answers. For a start, it's usually defined as an urban phenomenon. The seminal article was Keith Hart's 1971 study of Ghana, when he noted down all the types of livelihood to be found in the streets of Accra: food and drink vendors, stall-holders, porters, shoe-shine boys, navvies, scavengers, petty thieves, pimps, etc. Then the ILO commissioned anthropologists' studies of Dakar, Abidjan, Calcutta, Jakarta, São Paulo—the informal 'sector' came to be seen as a feature of Third World cities. But the rural economy shares many 'informal' features, and there's a complex interaction between the two. Then there's a notion that the informal economy is characterized by self-employment, which again partly goes back to Hart, though it's been most widely promulgated by Hernando de Soto and the World Bank: so many 'micro-entrepreneurs', who just need a boost from micro-finance to become full-blown mini-capitalists. But that sort of 'own-account'

work is usually just a disguised form of wage labour. Street vendors get their wares early in the morning on credit or commission from a wholesaler or middleman, and return the unsold remainder in the evening, when they find out how much they've 'earned'. Homeworkers get their materials from middlemen, who then collect the finished products and pay a minimal rate.

Another myth is that the informal sector is an infinitely expandable safety net—that it can absorb any amount of labour. In fact, little is known about unemployment and underemployment among the foot-loose workforce. But there are limits to how many can enter it, if a city is already flooded with construction workers, street-based artisans and vendors, scavengers, beggars, porters. Newcomers can't just establish themselves without difficulty on street corners; there are structures, hierarchies of control, with slumlords and gangs patrolling the landscape of informal business. There are indications that Indian employment in the total economy, formal and informal, has been stagnant since around 2004, though the population has been expanding. I found in 2011 that both intra-rural and rural-urban migration was slowing down, as seasonal migrants were crowded out of the job markets they knew.<sup>3</sup>

We need to understand the total fabric of the economy, comprising both formal and informal segments. The formal features would be large-scale, capital-intensive operations, with advanced technology, modern management structures, a complex labour hierarchy, government regulation and taxation. The informal activity is characterized by low capital intensity, low productivity, quick returns, little skill formation, the exploitation of family labour and property, a small, poor clientele—and, most importantly, cheap labour. But the two interpenetrate. There are formal enclaves within the rural economy—a paper mill, a sugar mill, some sort of agro-industrial complex—that make use of informal labour for processing the harvested commodities—grass, sugar cane—or for construction and road-building. A vast number of workers are employed in informal conditions within the formal economy, through outsourcing and subcontracting. 'Informality' here is simply a way to

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<sup>3</sup> See *At Work in the Informal Economy of India: A Perspective from the Bottom Up*, Oxford 2013, p. 42 ff.

cheapen the price of labour, to reduce it to a pure commodity, with no provisions for security or sustainable working conditions, let alone for protection against adversity. You buy labour but only for as long as you need it; then you get rid of it again. That is very much the way of the informal economy. Another important reason why the informal economy is so popular among the employers and owners of capital—to mention the IMF and World Bank—is because it makes collective action very difficult: the workforce is floating, so it's very hard to organize. If you sell your labour power standing in the morning market for the day, how can you engage in collective action with those around you, with your competitors?

*How have the cities been affected by these labour processes?*

I've witnessed two complementary developments in western Gujarat. The first relates to the closure of the textile mills in Ahmedabad, with some 125,000 formally employed industrial workers thrown into the informal economy. The second is the rise of Surat, one of the fastest growing cities in India—a boom created by tax breaks, black money, 'easy' labour laws and the like. Its population tripled in the 1970s and 80s, and it's doubled again since the 90s, to 4.5 million. It's a mixture of luxurious skyscrapers and jerry-built industrial workshops—the noise is deafening—mixed with slums and workers' dormitories. The workers are almost all migrants, from Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh; young males, aged 15–25, living far from home, paid piece-work wages for diamond cutting or working in the textile power looms, and fired if their productivity falls when they are 40 to 45 years old. They work 12-hour shifts in miserable conditions, living in crowded sheds—the day shift go to sleep in beds still warm from the bodies of their mates on the night shift. It's like a vast labour transit camp. Such a skewed age and gender balance makes for a heavily macho environment: a lot of violence, heavy drinking and hetero- and homosexual harassment; any woman is a target for rape, but boys are, too. There was an orgy of anti-Muslim violence here in 1992, after the demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya. Most of the hunters came from the hordes of labour migrants. The survivors identified them: Kathiawadi diamond cutters, Uttar Pradesh *bhaiyas*, Oriya *malis*, who operate the power looms. They live in dehumanized conditions.

*How does the deindustrialization of Ahmedabad fit into this pattern? There seems to be little research on the rustbelts of the developing world.*

The closure of the Ahmedabad composite textile mills was a longer-term process. The Gujarati mill owners were basically merchants rather than industrialists. They didn't invest in the mills, they just took the profits and started using them for land speculation, while the machinery had become obsolete; some of it went back to the nineteenth century. The whole workforce was heavily communalized. The higher castes were at the end of the production line. The scheduled castes were in the blowing room, where there was a high incidence of lung disease, pneumoconiosis. The trade union was communalized as well: there was a union for the blowing room, a union for the weavers, who were intermediate castes—Patels, but also Muslims. The Muslims had their own trade union, which was more militant. I began research there in the late 90s, meeting activists, many of them Dalits, in the locality where they were housed. I was in the mill area when the pogrom happened in 2002—urban carnage on a greater scale than I'd ever witnessed before, mainly because the state apparatus, government agencies as well as the ruling party, condoned and even facilitated the killings

Many commentators have pointed to the growth of the *Hindutva* movement as the cause of anti-Muslim violence, and this was certainly crucial. The Sangh Parivar organizations have broadened their base over the past few decades by mobilizing low and intermediate castes in their activities. The price these previously denigrated layers have to pay for inclusion in the *Hindutva* fold is to demonstrate their antagonism to their Muslim neighbours. But this explanation also has to be contextualized within the changing political economy of Gujarat. The factories of Ahmedabad had started to close their gates in the 1980s. The former mill workers in Ahmedabad had been pauperized, driven into casual labour from which they earned a pittance, and forced to bring their family dependents, even young children, into the labour process. It was certainly no coincidence that the orgy of violence in the city reached its peak in former mill districts. When communal tensions had flared up in the past, the Majoor Mahajan Sangh—a Gandhian trade union, formed in the 1920s—had tried to contain the violence. Now the union, having lost nine-tenths of its membership, was helpless. I went to see the general secretary in his office;

he was 88 years old, and in poor health. He told me with anguish how he had tried to contact the police commissioner and local politicians, before realizing that they were determined to let the pogrom take its course.

Traditionally the mill workers had lived in crowded quarters around the mills and along the river. In recent years their *bastis* were demolished and they were dumped on the outskirts, in ready-built slum apartment blocks. This was not just poverty, but pauperization, because the tie between work and residence has been broken. In the old inner-city slums, work was nearby. In the informal economy, most people have to be instantly available—it's a beck-and-call relationship, just like that of landowners and Halpatis in the village; if you're not on hand, you don't get the employment. The women used to work as domestic servants in middle-class houses near the slums. Where they live now is 18 kilometres away from those neighbourhoods and they don't dare go out, because it is too costly—the price of transport—and too risky, if it means leaving young girls behind. The municipality of Ahmedabad has built hundreds of these apartment blocks, crammed together on what was empty land, with no other facilities. Each apartment has two rooms, based on the myth of the two-child nuclear family, but in reality they house around seven people. Home-based work is impossible there—there's no room to store any goods.

*How are they surviving?*

Barely. They get work for one or two days and then nothing. There are all kinds of underhand transactions, things you are not allowed to do, which are never covered in economic statistics because what is illegal cannot be put on official record. But they are suffering. The lack of work means going hungry, not paying the rent and other bills, so not getting electricity and, in general, being cut off from mainstream society. This is the next step in immiseration. They've been dumped on the outskirts of the city, just as the *halis* were dumped on the edge of the village. The formal term for this would be pauperization, as defined by the English Poor Laws—it cropped up in France in the early nineteenth century, but Tocqueville says it is of English vintage. Paupers are those who have no steady means of livelihood at all. Pauperism is the kind of debility which you cannot survive without outside support. The shame about the study of poverty in India is that it's largely done by economists, who are



only interested in fixing a line, a number, and discussing how many can get above it. But poverty involves social relationships, between you and others in society.<sup>4</sup>

*How representative is Gujarat, or the Hindu Cowbelt in general, given the violence of communal and caste relations there?*

It is not representative. You cannot generalize about all of India just by looking at Gujarat. In Kerala, for instance, conditions are more advanced, but not because the caste system is less vicious there—it is vicious in the south. But the social struggle arose earlier in South India, both in Tamil Nadu and in Kerala. There have been fewer and also less sustained social struggles like that in most parts of the north, and certainly not in Gujarat. So while I would not say that Gujarat exemplifies India, I would also say that it is not so exceptional; you will find some of the same patterns in much of the Subcontinent, and pauperism is a widespread phenomenon in today's globalized economy.

*What is the explanation for the greater degree of social struggles in the south of India?*

That is very difficult to say. There were some great leaders, but great men are also produced; there is a system that produces them. It is very paradoxical, because there may have been more exploitation in the South, and that triggered off the social movement much earlier on, with the anti-Brahmin movement, starting at the end of the nineteenth century. There are higher literacy levels there, but they are also the product of social struggle. Travelling round Kerala in the 1970s and 1980s, I met agricultural labourers who had read Lenin and would quote him, very aptly. It was very impressive.

*The Kerala Communist Party was quite salient within Indian communism as a whole, from early on. But that raises the question again—why was that?*

Exactly. There is more agency, more resilience from below in the South than there is in the North. This is true of Tamil Nadu and also to a certain extent of Andhra. Consequently, politics got a more populist bent

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<sup>4</sup> See *On Pauperism in Present and Past*, OUP forthcoming.

in these states. It tapers off; it is less prevalent in Maharashtra, or in Karnataka or Odisha, for that matter.

*And in Bengal?*

Babus dominated there. The Communist Party in West Bengal did not do much for the labouring poor. The fight against the coming of the Tata Company, which would lead to the dispossession of the small peasantry, was justified. Many of the local-level CP frontmen were not radical or leftist, they had their own parochial interests; they exploited the people, took away their land and sought bribes for distributing state-provided favours. The plight of Muslims in Bengal is terrible. The CP did nothing for them, or for agricultural labour. Wages are much lower in Bengal than they are in Kerala. I am much more impressed by the social struggle in Kerala and Tamil Nadu than by the one in Bengal where the cadre of the leftist party got lumpenized. It is of longer standing, and it has touched more people than in Bengal. The first time I went to Kerala was in 1971: you turned a corner of the street and there was a demonstration, shouting and claiming rights. That scene in Kerala was totally absent in Gujarat.

*But in Bengal you could have seen that in the 1970s; there was a massive labour presence.*

Yes, but it was mainly in the city, whereas in Kerala it was rural, too. Also the urban–rural dichotomy is much less pronounced in Kerala than it is in Bengal. I remember that from that first trip to Kerala, seeing village libraries where the agricultural labourers sat down. I saw a woman on the threshold of her hut reading a newspaper. That was fascinating.

*What about the Maoist insurgency in the tribal areas?*

I don't know if it is Maoist. I doubt that that is where the revolution will begin. There are more tribes living in the plains under high-caste domination, out of the forest and the hills. They are like the Dublas, somewhat Hinduized, but now thrown back on their own separate low-caste identity. There are many more such people, not only in the countryside but also in the city. And I have seen no impact of Maoism there.

*As you've said, at the same time as researching labour regimes in India, you were also studying Indonesia. How would you compare the Dutch and British colonial regimes?*

The first difference was that the Dutch went to Java to get commodities from the colony to bring to the world market—first spices and other high-value commodities, then sugar cane, indigo, tobacco and, above all, coffee. That system was more ruthless. The British basically wanted India to buy the industrial goods Britain was producing—Lancashire textiles, of course, but also crockery, metalware and other low-priced durable commodities. It is not that the British or their administrators were better people than the Dutch were; they simply had different objectives. They didn't alter the Indian social system much because they had no interest in doing so. By contrast, the Dutch imposed a harsh labour regime for the cultivation of Javanese cash crops for the world market. The peasantry was kept captive in order to produce at low cost for the world market—they hardly got any wages—while the profits for the Dutch East India Company (at first) and then the Dutch state were very high. So the principles of colonial administration, the objectives, were different, and so was the impact of the different colonial mode of production. It was closer to what the British did in the Caribbean, and plantation slavery was part of that.

Coffee was introduced from India in the late seventeenth century, when the Dutch colonists were still largely confined to harbour enclaves along the north Javanese coast and were operating through the myriad native aristocracy, whom they selectively elevated into 'princes' and regents. As European demand grew in the eighteenth century, the Dutch East India Company imposed a trade monopoly and began demanding the use of coerced peasant labour, mobilized by village headmen, to work the coffee plantations in the Priangan highlands of West Java and transport the beans to its warehouses, closer to the coast. The system was continued by the Dutch state in the nineteenth century. During the two-month harvest, entire populations, including the elderly, would be driven up to the mountain plantations, in what was known as 'the round-up'. Between 1830 and 1870 the model was generalized across much of Java in what was known as the 'cultivation system', the *cultuurstelsel*—competing on world commodity markets with the slave plantations of the New World.

The Dutch colonial authorities portrayed the forced labour regime in the Priangan highlands as a continuation of traditional Javanese *corvée* levies, to which the peasants uncomplainingly consented, and as raising their living standards by introducing them to regular and disciplined work, in place of their habitual ‘idleness’. Not true: they were paid a pittance, and only when the coffee beans had been delivered—the peasant economy remained barely monetized.<sup>5</sup> The continual resistance—land-flight, sabotage, strikes, conflicts with local headmen, confrontations with colonial officials—demonstrated the extent to which the labour regime had been imposed by force. By 1870, the system was reproducing a land-poor to landless mass which was only able to do coolie work; it was a straightforward outcome of colonial rule. They were then recruited to the plantations that were being established in the outer provinces—in Sumatra and Kalimantan, for instance. Again there was sustained resistance, including burning down the drying sheds on the Sumatran tobacco plantations, where the indentured labour regimes for Chinese and Javanese coolies alike were particularly brutal. From 1871, colonial policy switched to encouraging private capital investment, much of it British, but also Dutch and German. The colonial state declared ownership of all uncultivated land, which it leased on favourable terms to foreign capital. Land pressure started to swell the ranks of the proletarianized underclass—footloose coolie labour, confined to the bottom of the new economic order, qualified only for low-level employment like land clearance for setting up private estates or road-building, irrigating canals and other public works.

The persistence to this day of some of these colonial patterns of control of land and labour can be very striking. For example, on the Javanese coastal plain the Dutch colonists imposed the compulsory cession of land to the sugar mills in the early nineteenth century. For three years a village would have to cede most of its land and the peasants would be forced to plant and cultivate sugar cane, under plantation conditions. After the three-year period was up the land would be returned, and sugar cane production would shift on to other fields and villages. The same pattern persisted after the opening up to foreign capital in 1871: there

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<sup>5</sup> See *Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market: Profits from an Unfree Work Regime in Colonial Java*, Amsterdam 2015.

was no longer a legal compulsion, but the sugar mills still sequestered a huge proportion of agricultural land through their hold over the village administrations. That carried on after Independence in 1949, with official pressure still operating in their favour.

*What about the Sukarno government—was there no land reform in the early 1960s?*

No. One of the reasons why the 1965 coup and the mass killings of Communist supporters happened was because the PKI had begun agitating for real land reform—or at least for the implementation of the mildly progressive legislation that had been passed in 1960, but sabotaged by the established local notables and landowners. Outside the Sumatran plantation belt and Bali, the main bases for the Communist Peasant League and the People's Youth were in rural central and eastern Java. In fact, in the villages it was often the schoolmasters, the rank-and-file of trade unions and what the Dutch called 'semi-intellectuals' who were PKI and who wanted the land reforms. Under the Suharto regime, farmers were forced to surrender their land as required by the sugar mills, for a set rent—this was under a Presidential decree of 1975. In the 1990s, the two mills that had long dominated a Javanese village where I did my fieldwork were still monopolizing most of the agricultural land, including the fields of the village administrators, who needed the money to 'win' the local elections—not just buying votes, but paying off the high-ups. The mills, which had now been privatized again, were still determining which fields should be planted with sugar cane. By this time land pressure was intense; Java is densely populated, with nearly 60 per cent of Indonesia's total population.

*Did this process leave the land exhausted, after years of intensive cultivation?*

Java is a volcanic island and the land on the plains is very fertile. Fields that have been growing sugar cane since the 1830s are still productive today. The mountains, where they now grow tea—yes, that has been eroded. Around a third of the village workforce was looking for casual work some 200 miles away, in the greater Jakarta region—Jabotabek, as it's called—working on building sites, as street traders, as domestic servants or prostitutes. Many tens of thousands of young men

and women are sent abroad on a three-year contract. They work as factory hands in Taiwan, South Korea, on plantations, in maintenance work and construction in Malaysia and elsewhere—but particularly in the Gulf countries as domestic servants, drivers, gardeners, security guards and caretakers of elderly people, small children and the handicapped. They constitute a new class of coolie labour, redundant at home but in high—though time-bound—demand elsewhere.

*What was the impact of the 1997–98 East Asian crisis in Indonesia?*

There'd been a huge build-out in Java in the 1990s; Jabotabek seemed like one vast building site—infrastructure, factories, offices and commercial establishments, residential areas. All of a sudden, it came to a standstill. The day after the rupiah crashed in October 1997 I went to the neighbourhood on the outskirts of Jakarta where the workers from my fieldwork villages lived in *pondoks*—dormitory-style boarding houses. They were deserted. The food-stall owners told me that all the workers had been dismissed on the spot and told not to come back until further notice. The municipality had issued free one-way tickets on public transport, to get them out of the city and back to their home villages—the authorities didn't want this mass of unemployed labour on their doorstep. The official line, propagated by the World Bank, was that these labour migrants could go back to being peasants once again, that rural communities offered a social-security net and that the elastic informal economy would absorb them. Those were myths, as I found out when I went back to the localities of my fieldwork.<sup>6</sup> The construction workers, around a third of the village heads of households, were simply hanging around the house, stunned by the dismissal. Around half the peddlers and hawkers had come back; the rest were surviving on severely reduced incomes in the city. Very few of these people could be re-absorbed into the agricultural economy; they had left the village in the first place because they constituted a redundant part of the rural labour force. They had no farming skills—and the farmers preferred real agricultural labour. Nor were they unaffected by the *krismon*, the

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<sup>6</sup> *Good Times and Bad Times in Rural Java: Socio-Economic Dynamics in Two Villages towards the End of the Twentieth Century*, Leiden 2002 (co-authored with Gunawan Wiradi).

monetary crisis: prices of fertilizer, pesticides and seeds went up with the devaluation of the rupiah.

As the crisis deepened—food prices soared in early 1998, as subsidies were cut on IMF instructions, leading to the political turmoil that brought the overthrow of Suharto in May—the poor turned to whatever survival strategies they could find. First, consuming any small savings and exhausting all possible sources of credit—shopkeepers, moneylenders, kinsmen and neighbours. Then pawning or selling any possessions—earrings and bangles first, followed by bicycles, TV sets, radios, furniture, crockery—and cutting down on food consumption: doing without *lauk pauk*, the accompaniments to the main dish of rice; skipping a meal altogether. State support was minimal, and mediated through the formal and informal networks of Suharto's New Order: rice was distributed, supposedly for families below the poverty line, but the process was chaotic and barely announced; the rice was of poor quality and was given mainly to the better-off, who sold it to shopkeepers, who in turn sold it on to the poorest at a profit.

*What's become of those people now?*

The whole of Indonesia is basically becoming a plantation. This is one of the differences between India and Indonesia: India is a state power in its own right, whereas Indonesia is just up for grabs. All sorts of foreign interests—first American, now Chinese or Singaporean—have taken over the national wealth, assisted by local compradors. The forests in Sumatra and Kalimantan have largely been burned down. They're planted with oil palms, in particular, alongside other commercial crops. The people in the villages are not starving—in that sense, the exploitation is less stark and visible than in India—but they've been left behind, without anything. The differences were already signalled in the independence movements. Nehru presided over a planning committee from the 1940s; in Indonesia, they had no idea of a design for the future. Sukarno's concept was that everybody was a peasant; they did not understand the social-class division, which had existed for a very long time in the countryside. So the people below did not get the space and agency they should have had, with Independence. Nor did they in India, of course, for other reasons. In Indonesia, social relations are more

polished—more *halus*, as they say. You don't offend the other openly and bluntly; you may be cruel but there is a façade of smoothness in interaction—which is very different from India. For this reason it is less painful doing research in Indonesia than in India.

*Because of the caste system?*

In Java there is no caste system, but there are other terms which make it very clear where you belong—either at the top or down below. The class stratification is very comparable, especially in terms of landholding and dispossession. Colonialism played a major role in cementing social stratification there. But in India, I'm among many friends and colleagues who share the same outlook as me. There are not so many of those in Indonesia.

*Recently you've extended your research to China. How does the new labour regime there compare with those of India and Indonesia?*

What I like in China is the resilience from below: there is more assertion. That is not a product of communism; it was already there. That's why communism did better in China than in Indonesia or the Subcontinent. There's a diary entry by a Chinese-speaking Dutch colonial official, who was sent to investigate the Chinese labour force on a plantation in Sumatra, at the beginning of the twentieth century. He describes going into one of the Chinese coolie houses on the plantation, and a Chinese worker commenting, 'Ha! Here we have another one who has come to hear about what we are up to and why we are not working better.' It was the hidden script of the class war. You find much more of that in China. I've only made three visits there, first in the early 90s, then in 2001–02, and again in 2009–10. I went to Xiamen, in Fujian province, invited by a former student who is now an academic there. I wanted to find out about the migrants who come to the cities. My sense was that this was quite different to the circulatory migration that has taken hold in the Subcontinent and Indonesia. There seemed to be better opportunities for the Chinese workers in the cities. Even though their *hukou*, their civic registration, was still in their place of origin, they were trying to establish a kind of bridgehead for their children. I wouldn't have been able to get permission to go into a factory, so I went to the urban villages where they live, on the outskirts of the city. Xiamen has a population of 3 million, 60 per cent of whom are migrants, either from Fujian or from further away.



They come to work in the factories or are self-employed in petty trade and hire a room in one of these urban villages.

*You say 'urban villages', but these are new-built clusters of apartment blocks?*

Yes. There aren't any shanty towns, as in India or South Asia at large. The land of the peasants at the outskirts of the city was nationalized, that is to say municipalized, but they were compensated by being given loans to build mostly one-room apartment blocks, of thirty or forty apartments each, which they rent out to the migrants. They collect much more as rentiers than they ever would have earned as farmers. That is where I did my fieldwork, talking to the workers away from the boss. It is not representative, because a sizeable segment of the labour migrants live in factory dormitories, but most are in the urban villages. I was very struck by their assertiveness; they would speak out, even though they had little reason to trust me. One evening I was having a meal with them outside an eating house, with a group of other customers, and the police came along. They told us to go inside, that it was not proper to eat outside in the street—what is 'proper' is very important, of course. So we went inside but the workers were grumbling loudly: 'We're always being bothered by these people, there's too much security around.' There was far more outspokenness among the working classes than I've ever seen in India. Also, those who come to the city are not totally dispossessed. Very often they belong to households with a piece of land—not enough for the whole family, of course; that is why they are migrating—and they have gone to school, frequently to middle school. I didn't meet young people in the city who were illiterate, like in India, where labourers who can't read or write are more easily cheated out of their wages and among them there are no children at work. Those differences in social capital give the Chinese workers more of a fall-back position. To that extent, I come back less pessimistic from China than from Java or India.

*A great deal has been written recently about the emergence of a new middle class in the developing world—on some accounts, the basis for a vibrant new age of liberal-capitalist democracy in the global South. What's your view of this?*

You do see some people moving up in the informal economy, accruing wealth as petty capitalists; it is quite elastic in that respect. In India, the OBCs—Other Backward Castes—have also benefited socially from that.

But the point is that the wealth and profits made above the poverty line, to use that phrase, are being extracted from the people underneath it. That relationship is very important and it is exploitative. For instance, the owner of a brick kiln is a small capitalist and may be quite successful. But as a worksite, his brick kiln will be a terrible place, because of the dust and grime, from the lack of basic amenities, the manuality of it all, with small children and pregnant women shifting the filthy bricks. It is they who are making him a member of the new middle class.

As for a thriving civic democracy, that requires an operational tax system and a degree of commitment to public agency and distributional outlays. But I was told by bankers and industrialists in Surat that 60 per cent of the total money in circulation is black money; that's now been confirmed in official reports. That isn't taken into account for the growth rate of the economy; there's a huge underestimation of turnover and profits made. The basis for taxation could be much wider than it is—much more healthcare, education and social security, allowing much greater dignity and decency, could be financed. We have an incorrect, incomplete notion of how the economy operates, because we rely on official statistics and what is illegal cannot be reported. That informality, or corruption, penetrates all through the economy and the government administration. The official buys his job; that is also the 'new middle class'. If you are a policeman, standing on the road stopping traffic, or a teacher with a classroom of children, you buy your job: you hand your salary to the police inspector or the school principal and you collect your money from the drivers or from the parents for their children's tuition.

*Has all this increased?*

Yes, it's become institutionalized. It's not something that you are ashamed of, that you should not do because it's not part of your job. That has gone. For instance, labour inspection. Some years ago I went around with a labour inspector on his motorbike. We would stop by a field and he would call to labourers working there: 'Who are you working for? How much are you getting?' It would be less than the minimum wage. So the labour inspector drove to the farmer's house, where the farmer would be sitting at home—because farmers don't farm, they relax—and told him that some of his labourers weren't getting the minimum wage. Then the farmer would look at me, and the labour inspector

would look at me, and I would go outside, and the farmer would pay so he wasn't prosecuted.

*And of course these jobs—teacher, traffic cop, labour inspector—are all in the formal economy.*

Quite. Informality goes much further than just employment and labour relations; it has reached and now dominates also the circuits of politics and governance. The upshot of that trend—the sell-out not only of a sizeable public economy but also of public space, agency and institutions—is that capital gets away scot-free instead of being held accountable for the state of labour worldwide, which ranges from vulnerable to miserable.

*You've criticized a story of a straightforward shift from rural to urban. Nevertheless that has taken place to a certain extent in India. It is now one-third urban, whereas it used to be 15 per cent.*

Yes, to that extent. But the point is that much labour migration does not become consolidated as lasting urbanization. There is seasonal migration, which is very important, because a lot of the informal economy is played out in the open air. It stops during monsoon. There are no brick kilns operating, salt-panning comes to a halt. Transport and construction do not quite come to a standstill, but the activity is a fraction of what it is in the busier season. Seasonal migrants to the cities are an important segment of the total footloose workforce, but they don't become permanent city dwellers; it's largely a male migration, and they don't earn enough to be able to settle in the city with a family. When they are worn out due to old age or debilitating illness, they tend to drift back to the village. Mobility in India, but also in Brazil and Africa, is in the lower echelons of the economy—rotation and circulation rather than migration. There is a direct relationship between informality—the lack of a proper job, but being hired off and on—and this type of ongoing mobility.

*But China could be an exception?*

The strategy of the migrants there seems to be to stay in the city and open the gate for their children. The women in particular say they don't want to go back. Life in the city is more attractive than in a small town or in a village. Conditions of employment are better, wages are higher.

Consumerism among migrants in China is totally different to that in India; and in India it is difficult to escape that relationship with the locality they are coming from. But the key relationship is between informality and circulation; that is why you see less of it in China. Upward mobility seems more attainable in China. Waiters in the eating-houses can dream of opening an eating-house themselves. Employees in barber shops want to open a shop of their own. You see that less in India—or in Indonesia, where those at the bottom stay at the bottom.

*In political terms, your work is a standing indictment of the social record produced by nearly half a century of Congress rule—endemic poverty, illiteracy, dispossession, domination. What's your estimate of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, passed by the Singh government in 2005, under pressure from civil rights activists and intellectuals such as Jean Drèze?*

NREGA is supposed to offer the rural unemployed a hundred days' work a year for a household at the minimum wage, on projects organized by the village panchayats.<sup>7</sup> The worst thing about it, in my view, is the type of work on offer: digging hard earth with blunt shovels, or hammering stones into pieces. It is 'work of last resort'. There is a straightforward line of descent from the colonial system's use of public works in times of famine—road construction, land levelling, small-scale irrigation projects. They had a similar model for the unemployed in the Netherlands during the Great Depression: making people who had never done any such work before dig ditches, rather than putting their skills to creative use, for the public good. There is so much useful work that this pauperized proletariat could be doing under NREGA: simple housing construction, sanitation—nearly half the population are forced to defecate in the open air—or care for the elderly and handicapped in the villages, which is a huge problem, or helping out in health provision. Another problem is the assumption that the panchayats operate in an uncomplicated, democratic fashion when they decide on what works to undertake, which is not the case. What actually happens in the panchayat is domination by the established interests. In the Gujarati villages that I know best, the dominant caste won't have NREGA. They say there are no projects that need doing and that their labourers have enough

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<sup>7</sup> For more detail, see the essays in *The Long Road to Social Security: Assessing the Implementation of National Social Security Initiatives for the Working Poor in India*, Oxford 2013 (co-edited with K. P. Kannan).

work to do, which is simply not true. They don't want NREGA because it means the minimum wage, which is very low, but higher than the going wage rate in Gujarat at the moment. In Kerala, where local wages are higher than the minimum wage—unlike in Bihar, Gujarat, Odisha, Rajasthan—NREGA has become a domain of female participation and assertion. A common complaint is the corruption: that the number of people who should be working on a project are simply not there. And those who are often don't get the full wage, nor do they receive it in time. Moreover, the number of days worked is usually much lower than promised, and the clause stipulating that people should still be paid the regular wage on days when no work is available remains a dead letter. Putting that clause into effect would amount to a form of unemployment benefit, which is deemed politically unacceptable. Certainly a lot of the money spent on public works gets swallowed up by the administrators, but the sums involved are actually quite small, around \$5 billion a year, in a country of 1.2 billion people.

*Do you think the current BJP government will be different from the last one?*

Some of the left reactions to the 2014 elections were ill-founded. The main reason for the success of Modi was the fiasco of Congress. More than that, the kind of policies on offer are not so different. Both Modi and Singh opted for neoliberalism at the expense of labour, not spending money on social care or sectors like health and education. Too much has been made of the progressive posture of Congress and the reactionary image of Modi; the latter is true but not the former. They are both stalwarts of neoliberalism.

*You've touched on the complicit character of the trade unions, where they exist. Are any forms of collective resistance practicable in these conditions?*

When the workers were dismissed from the Ahmedabad factories—and one factory after another, all were dismissed—they lost their trade-union membership, too. When I asked him, the secretary-general of the Majoor Mahajan Sangh replied, 'It's simple. If they don't have a job, why should they be organized?' I said, 'They need collective action more now than ever before.' But the fact was—and this goes also for many trade unions in the West—their membership fees were deducted from their wages at source by the employers and went straight to the trade union. It was a straightforward collusion between the company and the union big shots.

The unions weren't interested in organizing informal labour; no one was going to pay them to do so. But some attempts are made. There's a young labour activist who organizes workers in the *nakas*, the early-morning street-corner labour markets which were the sites of my last round of fieldwork in Ahmedabad. If a worker has sold his or her labour power in this way for more than three months, they are entitled to some benefits from funds that the construction employers have to pay the municipality, under a national scheme. The Gujarati government has been raking in the money because there have been a lot of construction projects but not more than a single *paisa* has ever gone to the workers. They say, 'How can we check that these workers are standing in the morning market? How can we know they've been there for three months?' So this young man goes to the labour market and gets the signatures of the people there, on a daily basis. Last year there was a march to the government office in the city, submitting a petition for these people to be paid their dues. There is no lack of good people like this. A number of labour activists and NGOs have recently come together to formulate a workers' charter for employment in the informal economy. There is no dearth of initiatives from below.

But to organize a labour force which is by definition mobile and short-term employed—that is a hell of a job. There are those that say there is no point in organizing anymore on the basis of the work place, which is the very basis of trade unionism; that it should be residential, based on where they live, because that is where they come back to on a regular basis. There's a tendency to fall back on the weapons of the weak. Migration—circulation—can also be a protest; not to be captured, but to move on. Some of the workers say this openly—for example the labourer interviewed in Aman Sethi's *A Free Man*: 'Don't let yourself be tied down. Don't rely on the jobber. Don't accept the promise that he will pay, if not today, then tomorrow.'<sup>8</sup> So there is a sense of resistance. The owner of a brick kiln once told me, 'I don't understand these people; one day they are there and suddenly, in the night, they are gone'. That was because of a wage dispute. But it's not that people are totally compliant and have surrendered their autonomy.

I remember when I first arrived in India and was shaken by the poverty, I wrote home and got a letter back from my mother, one of the

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<sup>8</sup> Sethi, *A Free Man: A True Story of Life and Death in Delhi*, London 2012.

few she ever sent in her life. She described how as a young girl she'd travelled by barge through the peat-cutters' colonies in the east of the Netherlands. The cutters lived in huts built from peat, without doors or windows; their children had hair matted with dirt and went around barefoot, without socks or clogs; they were a shy people and avoided contact with outsiders. In a few sentences, she described her memories of that time, adding that people everywhere have to fight to escape such misery. Sometimes the situation of those in the lowest ranks of the labour force seems hopeless—or worse than hopeless. But they do rebel.