1

Introduction: poverty and the poor

It has been argued that the analysis of poverty in contemporary development studies has been abstracted both from class and other power relationships, and from processes of accumulation in capitalism (Harriss 2007a:9). Debates on poverty reduction seem to ignore the link 'between the enrichment of some and the impoverishment of others, as if the rich and poor somehow inhabit different social worlds with no economic interdependence at all, and that the rich do not rely upon the labour of the poor' (Ghosh 2011a:854). Instead, poverty is reduced to household characteristics, and technical solutions are offered in a manner that serves the status quo and offers no threat to 'the elites who benefit from the existing structures and relationships' (Harriss 2007a:9). The very term 'poverty', by this reckoning, reduces multi-faceted relations to surface phenomena, and the underlying causes of material deprivation to obscurity.

Neoliberalism's renewed focus on poverty has been operationalised since the 1990s through a range of tools including poverty reduction strategy papers, decentralisation, community-based organisations (CBOs) and microfinance. Critics argue that it has been primarily intended to reform 'social and governmental relations and institutions in order to facilitate capitalist exploitation and accumulation on a world scale, building capitalist hegemony through the promotion of tightly controlled forms of "participation" and "ownership" ' (Cammack 2003:1).

Instead of structural adjustment programmes that imposed state spending cuts on many developing countries, poverty reduction strategy papers included governments and civil society organisations (CSOs) in 'participatory' decision-making processes, while maintaining the fundamentals of the neoliberal policy agenda (Ruckert 2006). Decentralised forms of government, meanwhile, induced 'people to experience tightly controlled forms of pro-market activity as empowerment', while exerting pressure on the state to deliver resources efficiently and encouraging 'beneficiaries' to contribute to the costs of such services (Cammack

2003:1). The proliferation of local institutions was seen as helping to generate 'political space', while participatory bottom-up approaches, the building of social capital and the development of capabilities would 'drive' poor people's agency (Chambers 1983; Putnam 1993; Sen 1999).

In promoting participation, empowerment and democratisation (World Bank 2001), the 'new poverty agenda' reshaped the state–society interface. In many developing countries, local government's budgets and responsibilities grew substantially alongside a dramatic rise in the number of CBOs (Heller *et al.* 2007; Lange 2008; Nordholt 2004; Pattenden 2011a; Sidel 2004). In India, several million CBOs were formed in the first six years of the millennium alone, while a growing share of government activities was outsourced to an expanding array of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Neoliberal approaches to civil society and social capital have been critiqued for eschewing analysis of the distribution of power and resources for a theory that explains uneven development in terms of varying densities of low-cost 'inherently capable' civic associations (Harriss 2001:2, 45). Rather than a move away from the neoliberal orthodoxy of the 1980s, through which the state was to be scaled back, markets liberalised and the space for the private sector expanded, the growth of 'empowerment' and 'participation' in the 1990s and 2000s ensured the extension of the neoliberal project not only by submerging the 'social and political causes of poverty' beneath its characteristics, but by providing cheap self-help-oriented forms of poverty reduction that foregrounded the individual as an entrepreneurial subject (Harriss 2001:2; Herring and Agarwala 2006:329; Kamat 2004:169). By placing the onus for poverty reduction on the poor themselves, such an approach amounted to a 'strongly normalising and moralising set of proposals that effectively blames the poor for their predicament' (Gledhill 2001:123). In Foucauldian terms, it might be said that neoliberalism had become more biopolitical, while in those of Gramsci it could be seen as having become more hegemonic.

While residual approaches view poverty as being 'a consequence of being "left out" of processes of development' (Bernstein 1992:24), the class-relational approach used in this book locates the causes of poverty among the social relations of production, and specific forms of exploitation and domination, in an attempt to shed light both on how it is produced and reproduced by capitalism (Harriss-White 2005), and on how the economic and political conditions of the poor might be improved. Building on a considerable literature that has deployed a class-relational approach in India and beyond, this takes the analysis beyond phenomena such as incomes and institutional arrangements to the underlying processes of dispossession, accumulation and exploitation.[1] The purpose of doing so is to better understand how, where and when pro-labouring

class change can be realised – questions asked in this book in relation to a largely informalised and segmented labour force, which is based in the Indian countryside and works in both rural and urban locations.

A class-relational approach, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2, understands people's conditions as the outcome of multiple intersecting social relations. Classes are understood in terms of social relations rather than structural locations, while class in more general terms is understood as a plural identity inflected by other forms of difference such as gender and caste. In other words, although it emphasises the process of exploitation, its engagement with the diverse concrete forms of class relations reflects an open-ended and dialectical approach rather than a linear, teleological one (Banaji 2010; Bernstein 2006). The book's class-relational approach to labour, state and society will be expanded upon in the next chapter. In the remainder of this introductory chapter, the book's argument is outlined, along with the levels and trajectories of poverty in India and the fieldwork state of Karnataka. The fieldwork districts will also be introduced, along with the methods used.

Labour, state and society

Drawing on long-term fieldwork in the South Indian state of Karnataka, this book analyses class relations between and among the dominant and labouring classes in rural India. While recognising that the boundaries between the rural and the urban have become blurred, it focuses primarily on 'rural-based labour' who are (i) those who work and live in villages; (ii) those who live in villages but commute into nearby towns and cities; and (iii) those who migrate out of their villages to cities (or other rural areas) for a number of weeks or years, but who keep a house in their home village and return there periodically. The book shows how the forms of domination and exploitation change over time, and assesses the implications for pro-labouring-class change. It does so through a focus on three interrelated areas of analysis: labour relations (and the labour process), collective action and the mediation of class relations by the state.

Analysis of labour relations shows that rural-based labour in India has a number of clear characteristics. It is underemployed, which reflects the presence of a surplus labour force that weakens its bargaining position. It tends to be informally employed, which means that it is usually unprotected by state regulations and unable to access basic forms of social security. It is also highly fragmented due to factors such as caste, but also due to its increased spatial diffusion across multiple worksites. In the terms of Wright (2000:962), it is a workforce with relatively little 'structural power" (which 'results directly from tight labour markets' and

'from the strategic location of a particular group of workers within a key industrial sector").

While the processes of change discussed in this book tend to reproduce the position of the dominant, they are contested in a variety of ways. Sources of weakness, though, can also be sources of strength. Where caste and class overlap to a significant degree, caste ties can strengthen the basis for mobilisation. Meanwhile, the growth of non-agricultural employment and circular migration can improve labour's economic and socio-political position and increase the possibilities for collective action. This has arguably been the primary basis of pro-labouring class change in the Indian countryside over recent decades.

If the institutional changes wrought by the post-Washington Consensus among the class relations of rural India are one of this book's primary frames, another is the relative 'invisibility' of the labourers whose experiences are central to it. They are located at the margins of global production networks as agricultural labourers scattered across the countryside, as informal workers in formal sector industries, and as construction workers who disappear before prominent international companies move in and begin to accumulate from the office-blocks whose foundations they built. Their 'invisibility' reflects forms of control, domination and exploitation operating at multiple levels, while its unevenness reflects, among other things, the agency of labour. The book analyses labour relations in agriculture, in the construction sector and to some degree in industry as well. It compares villages where labour commutes to nearby cities and others where it migrates to more distant ones. It shows how relations between labourers and employers in their home villages vary depending on how they are incorporated into non-agricultural labour relations. It also shows how they vary according to the predominant patterns of accumulation among their employers.

While in some of the fieldwork villages accumulation remains primarily focused on agriculture, in others it has diversified into agribusiness, formal employment and state-related business. There are echoes here of Epstein's (1973) classic account of agrarian change in southern Karnataka in the decades after independence, which showed how variations in levels of irrigation relate to patterns of accumulation, forms of class relations and the patterns of relationships with the state. This book traces similar variations between irrigated and dryland villages.

The second area of analysis, collective action, starts from the premise that rural-based labour in contemporary India is relatively weakly organised. There have long been socially embedded labouring class movements in eastern parts of the country (Kunnath 2009; Wilson 1999), and there are labouring class organisations in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy (Agarwala 2013). There are also signs of a recent upturn in union activity following a long-running decline since

the 1970s (see below). Nevertheless, rural organisations actively seeking pro-labouring-class change tend to be relatively small-scale and focused on accessing state resources rather than directly challenging capital (Agarwala 2013; Lerche 2010). This, though, does not mean that they cannot (or do not) play a significant role in attempts to improve the economic and political conditions of the labouring class, or provide one of a number of avenues to more fundamental change. Given the degree of labour's fragmentation and the often weak bargaining position of casual labourers in the informal economy, small-scale organisation and indirect strategies of struggle are often the most pragmatic option – at least in the short term. At the same time, the book argues that the mass of recently formed CSOs are not organisations of the labouring class, but cross-class CBOs that are inclined to reproduce rather than challenge the status quo, and undermine possibilities for pro-labouring-class collective action.

It is argued that although the state (and the book's third area of analysis concerns how the state mediates class relations) is broadly (and increasingly) pro-capital (see also Kohli 2011),[2] it currently represents the most viable terrain for pro-labouring-class action. This argument is made with the following provisos in mind. First, as well as distributing resources to classes of labour through poverty reduction programmes,[3] the state also undermines labour by failing to implement legislation that would improve its position in workplaces. Second, poverty reduction programmes cannot be understood simply as transfers of resources to the poor, but as part of a broader process of the reproduction of state and society. To be more explicit, poverty reduction programmes also help to reproduce stable conditions for capitalist accumulation by preventing social unrest (which may otherwise arise from the particularly harsh labour regime that prevents much of India's labouring class from reproducing itself materially). Poverty reduction programmes also boost the competitiveness of Indian capital by subsidising the low wages that they pay. In other words, the state's mediation of class relations in rural India is located in broader dynamics of accumulation and exploitation on a world scale.

High levels of fiscal decentralisation to local government institutions (LGIs), along with the proliferation of CSOs, have 'thickened' the state–society interface in recent years. They have also made local government a more significant site of class-based antagonism. Although state poverty programmes are as likely to reproduce the status quo as to challenge it, some programmes (notably the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS)) can modify socio-economic and socio-political dynamics in favour of labour. They do so, as has been argued in analysis of European welfare states (Esping-Andersen 1990), primarily by removing part of the process of labouring class reproduction

from the sphere of direct relations between capital and labour. As a result of this reduced dependence, labourers' room for political manoeuvre increases.

Increased levels of pro-labouring-class organisation may be resisted by capital directly (through lock-outs, for example), or less directly through the state. Examples include the erstwhile United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's watering-down of legislation to provide forms of social security for informal sector workers in 2008 (which fell well short of calls for a 'social floor' made up of a national minimum wage, minimum working conditions and minimum levels of social security; NCEUS 2007; ILO n.d.);[4] or its decision to allow NREGS wages to fall (relative to prevailing casual rural wages) at the end of its period in office (see Chapter 6); or the new BJP government's ongoing weakening of labour regulations.[5] Any concessions extracted by labour from the state are subject to roll-back, and are moments in a much longer process that may or may not lead to substantive broad-based pro-labouring-class change.

The UPA, which was more dependent on labouring class votes than its rivals,[6] was pressed into passing the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) by a coalition of CSOs and left-of-centre political parties, but it did so while leaving workplaces largely unregulated, and remaining pro-capital in a broader sense (see Chapter 4). Nevertheless, the UPA's 2004 election pledges to 'ensure the welfare and wellbeing of all workers, particularly those in the unorganised sector who constitute ninety-three per cent of our workforce' and to expand 'social security, health insurance and other schemes for such workers' have translated into some material gains for labour (cited in Kannan and Jain 2013a:81).

Several recent longitudinal analyses of agrarian change (one of which stretches back ninety-two years) show that while labour relations have become 'increasingly atomised and diversified' (Rodgers and Rodgers 2011:46), social policy and the growth of non-agricultural employment have been the most significant 'drivers of pro-labour change' (Djurfelt *et al*. 2008:50; Harriss *et al*. 2010; Rodgers and Rodgers 2011). These findings relate to those of this book as it moves across different villages and districts, tracing class relations and forms of impoverishment and the ways in which they are shaped by, the state and broader structural change.

The mediation of class relations by the state tends to favour capital, but also throws up possibilities for pro-labouring-class change. How, when and why it does so is particularly important given that rural-based labour in India remains weakly organised, and continues to endure relative political marginalisation (Harriss 2013), harsh working conditions, low pay and a raft of material deprivations. The book agrees with Selwyn (2014:186) that development studies should be 'labour-centred', and

emphasises the significance of labouring class organisation in improving labour's conditions and making more fundamental change possible. It argues that in much of contemporary rural India, this depends for now mostly on organising labour around the extraction of concessions from the state – both regulatory concessions and the expansion of labour's share of public resources (which are ultimately based on labour-power) through the expansion of poverty reduction programmes. The combination of these can, in time, make more broad-based labouring class action possible and reduce the extent of material deprivation (poverty) that is endured along the way. Under the recently elected more right-wing government, such a strategy becomes more focused on preventing the erosion of the minor gains made to date, while expanding labour's organisational base in preparation for a more concerted pro-labour offensive after the current government's inevitable demise.

A class-relational analysis primarily understands the conditions of the poor in terms of the relations through which they are dominated and exploited. It operates both at the broader societal level and through detailed analysis of concrete class situations, and their complex and uneven dynamics and trajectories of change across hamlets, villages and districts, thereby helping to inform how labouring class organisation can be strengthened and its share of public resources increased.

The conditions of labour: poverty in India and Karnataka

Before elaborating on what a class-relational approach is, and then applying it to concrete social settings in rural India, the remainder of this introduction outlines the economic conditions of the poor in India and Karnataka and introduces the fieldwork region.

India's economy is one of the ten largest in the world. It is also one of the 'BRICS', an informal grouping of ascendant national economies (encompassing Brazil, Russia, China and South Africa, along with India) that formed its own development bank in July 2014.[7] India's growth rate has been unusually high since the turn of the century, peaking at over 10 per cent in 2010. From 1994 to 2004 its economy grew at 6.3 per cent per annum, and from 2005 to 2010 it grew at a rate of 8.7 per cent.[8] Although the rate has since declined, it remains relatively high.

While India's growth rates have outpaced those of most developing countries in recent years, its rate of poverty reduction has been slower than most (Drèze and Sen 2013:32), and more sluggish than it had been for much of the 1970s and 1980s (Himanshu 2007:499). From 1993–94 to 2004–05, rural poverty fell by just 8.3 per cent to 41.8 per cent of the population (see Table 1.1).[9] In absolute terms the speed of decline has been remarkably slow: between 1993–94 and 2004–05, the total number

Table 1.1 Rural poverty levels

	1993–94	2004–05	2009–10	2011–12
Tendulkar Method (rural)	50.1	41.8	33.8	25.7
Tendulkar Method (combined rural and urban)	45.3	37.2	29.8	**21.9****
Rangarajan Method (rural)	n/a	n/a	39.6	30.9
Rangarajan Method (combined rural and urban)	n/a	n/a	38.2	29.5
NCEUS (poor *and* vulnerable)	n/a	77	69* (2010)	n/a

Sources: GoI MoF (2014:237), GoI PC (2009:14; 2014b:69), NCEUS (2007:i).

Notes: * Estimated projection by NCEUS member K.P. Kannan (2012); ** Currently used by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.

of those living in poverty fell by less than four million to 413.3 million, meaning that one in three of those categorised as poor worldwide lived in India.[10] In the second half of the 2000s, though, the rate of poverty's decline doubled, and then more than doubled again in the following two years before falling away again.

While rural poverty is concentrated among landless labourers and marginal farmers (Corbridge *et al.* 2013:67, 88; Gooptu and Harriss-White 2001),[11] it is also significantly more common among the 'scheduled castes' (SCs, or *dalits*) and 'scheduled tribes' (STs, or *adivasis*).[12] There are also marked intra-household variations. There is evidence, for example, that women and girls consume less within the household (Harriss-White 1990). Patriarchy reproduces gender-based inequalities in a variety of ways. For example, brides generally settle in grooms' households, which may put them in a weak position, and their households tend to pay more for marriages, which contributes to widespread ongoing female foeticide (Drèze and Sen 2013:60–62).

Real wage levels have followed a similar trajectory to poverty. Real wage growth for male agricultural wages accelerated to 7.6 per cent from 1983 to 1990, then slowed to 2.4 per cent in 1993–2000 (Srivastava and Singh 2005:409–412),[13] before almost grinding to a halt in the first half of the 2000s (Drèze and Sen 2013:27, 29; Thomas 2012:42; Usami 2011). With growth accelerating and real wages static, inequality rose between 1993–94 and 2004–05, having fallen in the previous decade (Himanshu 2007:499). It did so both within and across states (Herring and Agarwala

Table 1.2 Rural and urban casual wages and consumer price indices for agricultural labourers, 1993–94 to 2011–12

	Combined (male and female) rural casual wages (male/female wages in brackets)	Combined (male and female) urban casual labour wages	All India CPI-AL, 86/7 = 100 (average of all months)
1993–94	20.5 (23.2/15.3)	28.8	
1999–2000	40.2 (45.5/29.4)	58.0	306
2004–05	48.9 (55.0/34.9)	68.7	340
2009–10	93.1 (101.5/68.9)	121.8	513
2011–12	138.6 (149.3/103.3)	170.1	611

Sources: GoI NSS (2014:121), GoI MoF (2013:Statistical Appendix, 55).

2006:324), thereby further exacerbating existing spatial inequalities, as well as those between social classes. The poorest households' share of growth had been 'sharply diminished' (Corbridge *et al.* 2013:49; see also Drèze and Sen 2013; Walker 2008), and while the living standards of India's middle classes rose sharply, those of unskilled informal sector workers stagnated (Drèze and Sen 2013:29).

There was then a marked upturn in real wages at the end of the 2000s, with rural casual wages almost trebling in the six years to 2011–12 (see Table 1.2). This has been corroborated by case studies from different parts of the country, and linked by some to the implementation since 2006–07 of the NREGS, which provides all households with a right to 100 days of employment on public works (Carswell and De Neve 2014; Rodgers and Rodgers 2011:45). More generally, evidence suggests that occupational diversification has been the most significant source of upward pressure on wages in the post-reform period (Srivastava and Singh 2005:420–421). The growth of non-farm employment and circulation has been unable to absorb the labour surplus, but it has broadened dependence on wage-labour beyond relations with local farmers, and modified the socio-political dynamics in labourers' home villages (Basole and Basu 2011:52; Breman 1999; Djurfeldt *et al.* 2008; Gooptu and Harriss-White 2001; Harriss 2013:358; Harriss *et al.* 2010; Heyer 2012; Lerche 1999; Pattenden 2012; Rodgers and Rodgers 2011).

Given that the poor spend much of their income on food,[14] it is unsurprising that nutrition indicators were flat-lining while real wages stagnated. The key nutrition indicator (mean body mass index) rose very marginally for women from 20.3 to 20.5 between 1998–99 and 2005–06, while the prevalence of anaemia among women increased from 51.8 per

cent to 55.3 per cent over the same period (IIPC 2000:246, 252, 2007:308, 311). The percentage of children under the age of three who were underweight had fallen marginally over the same period from 42.7 to 40.4, while the percentage below an accepted height threshold had fallen from 51 to 44.9. On the other hand, the percentage of acutely (rather than chronically) malnourished had risen from 19.7 to 22.9 per cent (IIPC 2007:274).

As well as relatively high poverty levels, India has relatively low levels of expenditure on social services: 7.2 per cent of GDP in 2013–14, up from 6.8 per cent in 2008–09 (GoI MoF 2014:232). In 2013–14, spending on health stood at 1.4 per cent of GDP (up marginally from 1.3 per cent in 2008–09), while education spending stood at 3.3 per cent (up from 2.9 in 2008–09) – both significantly below the levels promised by the first Congress-led UPA government's Common Minimum Programme in the mid-2000s, and considerably less than other developing countries such as Brazil, China and Vietnam (GoI MoF 2014:232).[15]

From the 1980s, the state increased its support for private sector healthcare relative to the public sector, providing the former with tax exemptions and government land in urban centres (Iyer 2005:1). Recent research in Karnataka indicates growing health inequalities across gender, caste and class lines, and underscores the prominence of health expenditures in pushing or holding households below the poverty line (Iyer, 2005:x, 37). The UNDP's 2013 Human Development Indicators, which relate to income, health and education, placed India well down the table in 135th position – slightly ahead of Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan, but well adrift of Sri Lanka, Brazil and China.

There are significant disparities between and across states. In the late 2000s, life expectancy ranged from seventy-four years in Kerala to sixty-two in Madhya Pradesh. The infant mortality rate in the latter was almost five times greater than in the former. In the fieldwork state of Karnataka, human development indicators in its most south-westerly district are comparable to neighbouring Kerala, while at the other end of the state they match those of India's poorest states (UNDP 2005).

Poverty in Karnataka

Rural poverty levels in the fieldwork state of Karnataka fell by just 1.6 per cent between 2009–10 and 2011–12, which was the slowest rate of decline of poverty of all major states (see Table 1.3). Over the period 2004–05 to 2011–12, its rate of decline only exceeded those of Uttar Pradesh and Kerala.

Karnataka's rural poverty level is slightly lower than the national average, while its net per capita income in 2012/13 was somewhat higher – Rs. 77,309 as opposed to Rs. 67,839 (GoI MoF 2014:236–237). For three

Table 1.3 Rural poverty and rates of decline of poverty in selected states and at all-India level (Tendulkar Method)

	2004–05 Rural	2009–10	2011–12 Rural	Decline in rural poverty 2004/05–2011/12	Decline in rural poverty 2009/10–2011/12
Odisha	60.8	39.2	35.7	**25.1**	3.5
Maharashtra	47.9	29.5	24.2	**23.7**	5.3
Tamil Nadu	37.5	21.2	15.8	**21.7**	5.4
Bihar	55.7	55.3	34.1	**21.6**	21.2
Andhra Pradesh	32.3	22.8	11	**21.3**	11.8
Rajasthan	35.8	26.4	16.1	**19.7**	10.4
Madhya Pradesh	53.6	42	35.7	**17.9**	6.3
Gujarat	39.1	26.7	21.5	**17.6**	5.2
West Bengal	38.2	28.8	22.5	**15.7**	6.3
Punjab	22.1	13.6	7.7	**14.4**	5.9
Karnataka	**37.5**	**26.1**	**24.5**	**13**	**1.6**
Uttar Pradesh	42.7	39.4	30.4	**12.3**	9
Kerala	20.2	12	9.1	**11.1**	2.9
India	**41.8**	**33.8**	**25.7**	**16.1**	**8.1**

Sources: GoI PC (2012, 2013).

particular social development indicators (life expectancy, infant mortality and literacy), it is ranked equal sixth of thirteen major states (see Table 1.4).

While a number of its economic and social indicators fall around the national average, Karnataka has performed relatively poorly at implementing NREGS. A recent national-level study of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which compares National Sample Survey data (based on door-to-door surveys) and Ministry for Rural Development data (reported upwards from local-level officials), indicates an elevenfold discrepancy between officially recorded workdays and actual workdays (Usami and Rawal 2012:88). This is comfortably the highest discrepancy for any state, and the implication (which is elaborated upon below) is that the share of NREGS funds reaching classes of

Table 1.4 Social development indicators in selected states and at all-India level

	Life expectancy (2006–10, male + female)	Infant mortality (2012)	Literacy (2011)	Composite rank for three indicators (out of 13)
India	66.1	42	73	
Kerala	74.2	12	94	1
Maharashtra	69.9	25	82.3	2
Tamil Nadu	68.9	21	80.1	3
Punjab	69.3	28	75.8	4
West Bengal	69	32	76.3	5
Gujarat	66.8	38	78	6=
Karnataka	67.2	32	75.4	6=
Andhra Pradesh	65.8	41	67	8
Rajasthan	66.5	49	66.1	9
Odisha	63	53	72.9	10
Bihar	65.8	43	61.8	11
Uttar Pradesh	62.7	53	67.7	12=
Madhya Pradesh	62.4	56	69.3	12=

Source: GoI MoF (2014:110, 113) (original data from Sample Registration System, Office of the Registrar General of India, Ministry of Home Affairs).

labour in the form of wages is significantly lower than it is in other states (see Chapter 6).

A recent report on the performance of the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (a health insurance scheme that is linked to the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act of 2008) shows that although 45.8 per cent of below poverty line households in Karnataka had been registered by November 2012, only 1.2 per cent had used their cards in hospitals (Aiyar *et al.* 2013:20–21). The rate was highest in the more developed coastal districts of Dakshin Kannada and Udupi (6.2 and 5.1 per cent respectively), and slightly higher in the fieldwork district of Dharwad (2.5 per cent).

With somewhat fewer marginal landholdings and slightly greater numbers of large landholdings, Karnataka's distribution of landholdings is slightly less equitable than the national average (see Table 1.5), which has implications for the distribution of power in rural society (discussed

Table 1.5 Distribution of land (%) by size of landholdings possessed (acres) for selected states (and all India), 2009–10

Ranking according to preponderance of marginal landholdings	State	0	0–1	1–2.5	2.5–5	5–10	>10
1	Tamil Nadu	2.3	78.5	10.7	5.2	2.6	0.7
2	Andhra Pradesh	7.2	62.3	14.7	7.7	6	2.1
3	Uttar Pradesh	5	56.4	22.1	10.3	4.9	1.3
4	Karnataka	8.2	50.5	17.2	12.6	8.2	3.4
5	Rajasthan	3.4	32.5	17	19.1	15.9	12
	All India	8.3	56.5	16.1	9.7	6.5	3

Source: GoI NSS (2012:73).

in Chapters 5 and 6; see also Kohli 1987). It had 706,332 industrial workers (in factories with more than ten workers) in 2011–12, above average for India (just over ten million in total), but less than half of Tamil Nadu, and well behind Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat (GoI CSO 2014:S7–8).

District-level variations

Karnataka's 'average' indicators obscure wide disparities within the state. The two main fieldwork districts fall in two historically distinct regions of North Karnataka (see Figure 1). Dharwad lies in 'Bombay Karnataka', most of which was directly administered by the British colonialists as part of the Bombay Presidency, while Raichur lies in 'Hyderabad Karnataka', which was ruled by the Nizam of Hyderabad until 1956.[16]. Dharwad has a relatively dynamic economy centred on the twin cities of Hubli and Dharwad, which lie on the main Mumbai–Bengaluru highway and draw in daily commuters from the surrounding villages. Raichur city is smaller, less industrialised and less well connected to export markets. The district is home to a relatively high number of circular migrants, many of whom migrate for several months or years to work on remote building sites.

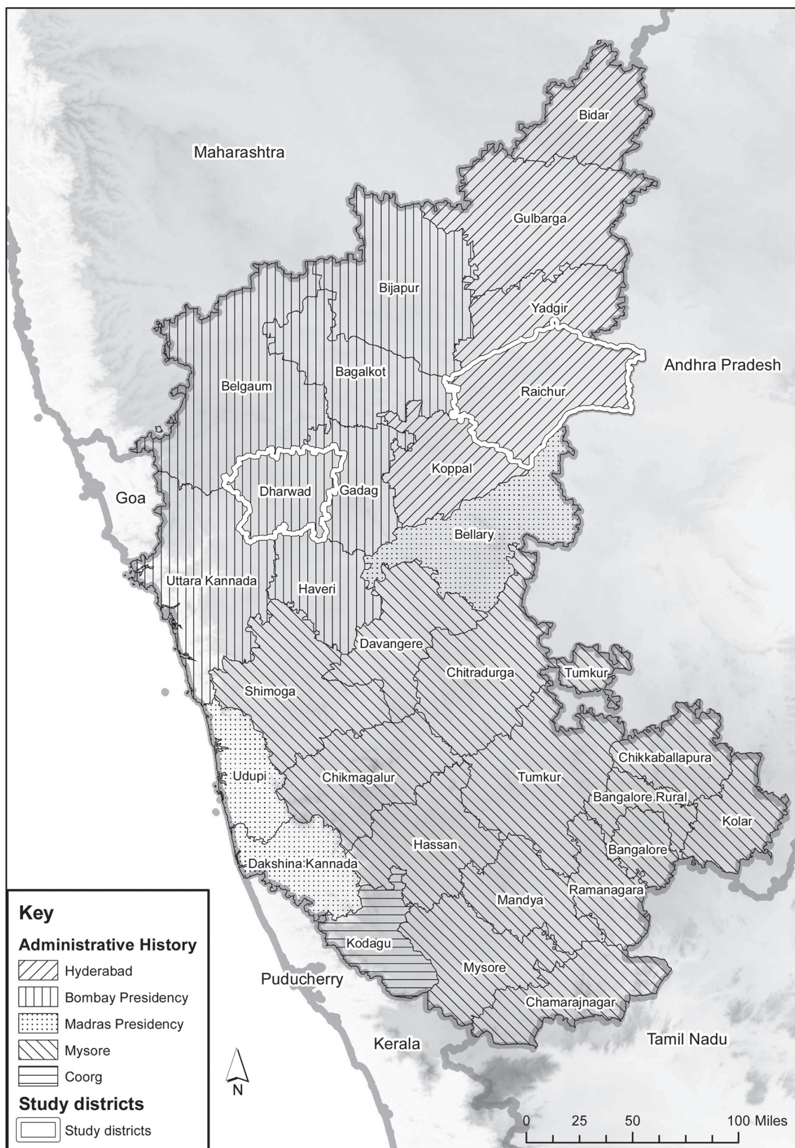

Figure 1 Map of Karnataka showing fieldwork districts and historical administrative divisions. (Courtesy of Oliver Springate-Baginski)

Table 1.6 Human Development Indicators of select states and districts of Karnataka, 2001

State/district	HDI in 2001	Rank out of 15 large states
Kerala	0.746	1
Dakshin Kannada District, South-West Karnataka	0.722	
Tamil Nadu	0.687	3
Karnataka	0.650	7
Dharwad District, North-West Karnataka	0.642	
Madhya Pradesh	0.572	12
Orissa	0.569	13
Raichur District, North-East Karnataka	0.547	
Uttar Pradesh	0.535	14
Bihar	0.495	15

Source: UNDP (2005:15, 29).

Dharwad (one of the two main fieldwork districts) has human development indicators that are close to the state average and higher than those of Raichur (the other main fieldwork district), which has the lowest in the state and the highest poverty headcount (see Table 1.6; UNDP 2005). The human development indicators of the interior south (formerly Mysore, a third distinct historical region) are higher than Dharwad's (one of the two main fieldwork districts), but the highest in the state are to be found in the coastal district of Dakshin Kannada (almost as high as those of Kerala). Its human development indicators are comparable to India's poorest states (lower than Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, but higher than Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) (UNDP 2005:15, 29).

The interplay in Dakshin Kannada of higher levels of social development, greater levels of political equity (in caste and class terms), more labouring class organisation and lower poverty levels is striking (Kohli 1987; see also Damle 1993). Land reform was implemented more effectively there due to its more equitable distribution of power and its major landowning castes' weaker influence over state politics. It had higher levels of landlord absenteeism (as landlords moved to cities) and more organised tenant farmers. Conversely, in the state's interior, major landowners often belonged to the state's two most politically influential castes (Lingayats and Vokkaligas) who had greater leverage over state

institutions and weaker opposition. Land reforms were less effectively implemented in these regions (Kohli 1987).

There are also socio-political and socio-economic differences within districts due to land distribution, levels of irrigation, proximity to urban markets and balances of caste power.[17] Class relations and forms of domination and exploitation of labour vary along with levels of class-based organisation and the outcomes of state mediation.

This is where the book's contribution lies. Although it sits in a broader literature that takes a class-relational approach to processes of development, it applies a class-relational approach across hamlets, villages and districts through detailed fieldwork data collected over more than a decade on the three areas of labour relations, state policy and LGIs, and civil society. By doing so, it draws out the uneven dynamics of class relations at different levels and in different social settings, and sheds some light on the impediments to, as well as possibilities for, pro-labouring-class change.

Fieldwork locations and methods

Karnataka is the least researched of India's southern states. Research for this book began in Dharwad district in 2002 in the village of Panchnagaram.[18] It expanded outwards first to the surrounding villages and then to a second cluster of villages around 30 kilometres to the east, and finally to the Raichur villages around 300 kilometres further to the east.

Fieldwork stretched over 12 years (2002–14) and across 39 villages in three Karnataka districts (23 in Dharwad, 15 in Raichur and one in Mandya), a variety of government offices (from *gram panchayats* (GPs or village councils) to state government departments via district and sub-district councils and a range of line departments), a couple of dozen NGOs and two social movements (one small-scale labouring class movement and one state-level movement of dominant class farmers). Methods used ranged from ethnography, census surveys, interviews, interactions with key informants and the collection of official government data (from GP records to large National Sample Survey Organisation datasets). Methods varied across the villages – from ethnography, census surveys and multiple rounds of interviews in 'core' fieldwork villages (and some LGIs), to multiple and single rounds of interviews in 'intermediate' villages, and one-off group and key informant interviews in 'peripheral' villages. Respondents included agricultural labourers, labourers who commuted and migrated to work in construction and industry, farmers of different sizes, NGO workers CBO members, social movement activists and government officials with varying levels of responsibility. Some respondents were interviewed once; others on numerous occasions.

Table 1.7 Fieldwork villages

Key variables	Raichur villages	Dharwad villages
Distance from district headquarters (km)	70–90	6–18
Distance from main road (km)	0–12	3–15
Main bases of labouring class reproduction	Agriculture, construction	Agriculture, construction, industry
Main source of non-agricultural work	Long-distance circular migration to the construction sector	Daily commuting to nearby city
Levels and type of irrigation	Canal-irrigation: 33–95%	Dryland – borewell irrigation: 10–33%
Significant bases of accumulation	Agriculture, agribusiness, city-based formal employment	Agriculture, local state

Source: fieldwork data.

Discussions took place in people's homes and farms, and in village tea shops and government offices.

Fieldwork in Dharwad focused on eight villages in two GPs within commutable distance of nearby cities. Fieldwork in Raichur focused on a larger cluster of villages spanning the sub-districts of Manvi and Sindhanur, and beyond commutable range of any cities. The seven main fieldwork villages spanned five different GPs. The fieldwork-based chapters are not strictly a comparison of different districts. Different groups of villages are analysed in the different chapters. Sometimes the focus is on Dharwad, sometimes on Raichur, and sometimes on both.

Fieldwork villages varied in terms of levels of irrigation, soil types, proximity to urban labour markets, caste distributions, patterns of accumulation and labouring class reproduction, and forms of class relations (see Table 1.7; see also Chapter 4). The Dharwad villages were dryland villages, while those in Raichur had varying levels of canal-irrigation. Scheduled castes were around twice as numerous in the Raichur villages,[19] while the dominant caste in Dharwad had a stronger grip on local politics than was the case in Raichur. Even within districts, there were marked differences between GPs. For example, Panchamsali Lingayats (a farming sub-caste) dominated one of the two Dharwad GPs, while in the other they shared power with Muslims and 'Other Backward Castes'. These differences have a bearing on the forms of class relations and the outcomes of social policy.

Outline of the book

The next chapter outlines what is meant by a class-relational approach to labour, state and society in rural India, and contrasts it to 'semi-relational' analysis. It defines key terms such as Bernstein's 'classes of labour', and distinguishes between class understood as a form of social stratification, and class understood as a social relation. It also defines class as being a multi-faceted rather than a singular identity, and in doing so counters reified approaches to the term. The chapter discusses what is meant by exploitation, and argues that the relations through which it is concretised and labour is impoverished tend to be given insufficient attention in the literature on poverty. It suggests, moreover, that this relative inattention to exploitation is derived in part from Weberian approaches to class, which have been prominent in recent literature on poverty and development.

Drawing on secondary literature, Chapter 3 contextualises the ensuing fieldwork chapters, and begins the process of operationalising a class-relational approach. It does so by outlining some of the key changes in class relations in rural India over recent decades, addressing, in turn, processes of informalisation and segmentation in labour relations (forms of domination and exploitation), state-based mediations of class relations through LGIs and social policy, and neoliberal and class-based forms of organisation.

Chapter 4 is the first of the fieldwork-based chapters, which are all based on analysis of class relations across a variety of rural settings. Chapter 4 focuses on labour relations and how labour is controlled across the agriculture and construction sectors (within the labour process and beyond it). As well as discussing concrete forms of exploitation and increasingly multi-sited patterns of labouring class reproduction, it also assesses the extent to which increased access to non-agricultural employment improves labour's socio-economic and socio-political position. It compares villages where commuting is more common with those where long-distance circular migration is more common. Variations in class relations are also linked to the degree to which accumulation is focused on agriculture, and comparisons are made between wet and dryland villages. As well as agrarian capital, classes of labour in both fieldwork areas have direct interactions with international capital – in the Dharwad villages through factories that they commute to, and in the Raichur villages through the buildings that they construct for international companies in Bengaluru.

Chapter 5 focuses on how the dominant class uses Local Government Institutions (LGIs) to and strengthen its economic and political position. It uses the term 'gatekeeper' to represent how the state–society interface assumes concrete forms among class relations. It is found both here and in Chapter 6 that the influence of gatekeeping on state mediation of class relations is greater where the dominant caste/class is relatively united,

and where there are restraints on accumulation in agriculture. Unlike Chapter 4, which analyses class relations primarily in villages where accumulation was primarily based on agriculture, agribusiness or formal employment, Chapter 5 focuses on villages where accumulation is linked more centrally to the state. This has a bearing on the forms of control exercised over labour. More broadly, Chapter 5 also shows how the state comes to be 'constituted' by capital – not least through the fact that the vast majority of individuals in the fieldwork state's elected assembly are capitalists. It also outlines how different regions of the state have clusters of capitalists from different sectors of the economy (such as agriculture, real estate and mining). It does so not because such a finding is particularly surprising but in order to link processes of accumulation, domination and exploitation at village level to the broader workings of the state.

Although LGIs and CSOs are primarily shown to reproduce existing inequalities, they can also play a role in pro-labouring-class change, particularly where labour is well organised and the balance of power more even, and when poverty reduction programmes are universal (available to all). In this regard, Chapter 6 focuses on NREGS. It shows contrasting trajectories of implementation in the different fieldwork villages. In some the scheme initially provided benefits to both the dominant and labouring class. Over time, though, a united dominant class increasingly took control of the scheme and shaped it to suit its interests. In other villages, an initial wholesale subversion of the scheme by dominant-class men who saw it as a threat to their interests, and had sufficient leverage over LGIs to derail it, was subsequently countered by an organisation of labouring class women (with varying degrees of success). Despite its uneven performance, the chapter underlines the potential that NREGS has to strengthen the material and socio-political position of the labouring class.

Chapter 7 argues that the local NGOs, CBOs and self-help groups that have proliferated in recent years represent a neoliberalisation of civil society, which tends to reproduce rather than contest the status quo. In contrast, Chapter 8 analyses a movement of labouring class scheduled caste women. Focusing on associations in three villages, it analyses varying levels of social movement activity and its uneven outcomes. It also assesses different forms of mobilisation, and considers whether small-scale labouring class organisations can be scaled up. A short conclusion follows.

Notes

1 For example, Breman (1974, 1985, 1996, 2007a, 2007b), Guérin (2013), Guérin *et al.* (2009a, 2012), Harriss (1982, 1992, 2001, 2013), Harriss-White (1996, 2003, 2008), Kannan and Breman (2013), Lerche (1999, 2007, 2013), Lieten and Srivastava (1999), Mezzadri 2014, Srivastava (1989, 2011) in relation to India, and Selwyn (2014) more broadly.

2 This varies between state-level governments, with the governments of Kerala and (to a lesser degree) Tamil Nadu being more pro-labour than many other states (Heller 1999; Heyer 2012).
3 The term classes of labour is taken from Bernstein (2006) (see discussion of the term in Chapter 2).
4 http://ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/decent-work-agenda/lang-en/index.htm (accessed 12 October 2013).
5 Given that these are routinely flouted, this to some degree represents a symbolic gesture intended to please international capital.
6 Voting is certainly more free than it was when labour relations were highly personalised and agricultural workers generally voted according to their patrons' instructions (Robinson 1988).
7 Some of these countries have seen a downturn in their economic position in recent months, but can still be seen as 'ascendant' in the current period.
8 Figures computed from data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG (accessed 12 September 2014).
9 Long critiqued for underestimating poverty, official estimates of poverty levels rose following the Tendulkar Report of 2009. Its higher minimum per capita consumption expenditure (in part by taking greater account of the costs of healthcare and education) increased rural poverty estimates from 28.7 to 41.8 per cent for 2004/05 (GoI PC 2009:22–23). Estimates for 2011–12 were based on a per capita monthly consumption expenditure of Rs. 816 for rural areas, and 1,000 for urban areas (GoI PC 2009:2), which amounted to $0.51 per day without taking purchasing power parity into account (based on the exchange rate for 31 January 2011). The Rangarajan Committee, which submitted its report in June 2014, has recommended increasing the poverty line by a further 19 per cent for rural India and 41 per cent for urban areas, thereby increasing the numbers classified as poor by 93.2 million (GoI PC 2014:60, 69). A major difference with the Tendulkar methodology lies in the increased weighting of non-food items. Housing rents act as a major contributor to the heightened discrepancy between rural and urban areas (GoI PC 2014:2). Adjusted for purchasing power parity (where $1 = Rs. 15.11), the suggested Rangarajan poverty lines amount to $2.14 for rural areas and $2.44 overall (GoI PC 2014:60). Other estimations of poverty include those of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector, which included those who were vulnerable to poverty, thereby producing a figure of 69 per cent for 2010 (see Table 1.1), while a recent multidimensional analysis estimated India's poverty levels at over 50 per cent (Alkire *et al.* 2013:3, 24). Although figures based on the Tendulkar methodology are now widely used and are seen as an improvement, official estimates of poverty are still widely regarded as being too low. The real level of poverty probably lies somewhere between the Rangarajan and NCEUS estimates (see Table 1.1).
10 This figure, and the figures in the following paragraph, are all based on official poverty estimates reached by the Tendulkar method.
11 Marginal farmers are primarily wage-labourers given the limited size of their land holdings. They are seen here as part of the labouring class as they are net sellers of labour-power. See Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion.

12 Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are formal administrative terms with colonial roots. The SCs are also the 'former untouchables' who were (to some degree still are) seen as being at the bottom of, or outside, the Hindu caste hierarchy and who are subject to various forms of discrimination. SCs have generally had fewer assets and been more likely to work as labourers – hence the significant overlap between caste and class (see Lerche 1995, for example). SCs are also known as *dalits* (the oppressed), while STs are also known as *adivasis* (indigenous peoples).

13 The data are based on the Government of India's Rural Labour Enquiry (various years).

14 Over 60 per cent according to one estimate (Himanshu 2008a:31).

15 Additional data drawn from World Health Organisation data on health expenditure (http://apps.who.int/nha/database, accessed 4 August 2014).

16 Althougth the differences between the *zamindari* and *ryotwari* colonial taxation systems (the former exercised through powerful local intermediaries and the latter more directly) are sometimes overplayed (Moore 1966), it is worth pointing out that the taxation system in Hyderabad Karnataka has tended to be closer to the zamindari system while that of Bombay Karnataka has tended to be closer to the ryotwari system (a picture complicated, among other things, by a smattering of small princely states across North-West Karnataka). This is not unrelated to the former's lower levels of development, but there is no space to discuss this here. Mysore (the interior southern half of Karnataka) had somewhat more equal land distribution and a somewhat less oppressive taxation system (see, for example, Government of Karnataka 1989).

17 In some, notably the southern states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, dominant class/caste power has been significantly dented (see Djurfeldt *et al.* 2008; Harriss 1999, 2003; Harriss *et al.* 2010; Harriss-White 2008; Heller 1999; Heyer 2012; Kohli 1987; Veron *et al.* 2006), and attempts to provide rights and social security for informal sector workers have been significantly more successful (Nair 2004). In parts of West Bengal, meanwhile, state investment in irrigation infrastructure reduced the size of the reserve army of labour. Coupled with party political interventions that were sympathetic to labour, the conditions of migrant labourers circulating through its rice fields had greater bargaining power and were better off, for example, than migrant cane cutters moving through southern Gujarat (see Rogaly *et al.* 2001 for the West Bengal example, and Breman 1990 for the Gujarat example).

18 The names of all places and individuals referred to in this book have been changed to protect anonymity.

19 The Madigas (known as Madars in Dharwad) were the most numerous scheduled caste in the fieldwork area in Raichur. Chalwadis were the second most numerous, followed by Woddars.