Special articles

Making Social Science Matter – I

How the Local State Works in Rural Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal

The state in its efforts to meet the needs of the poor has four major functions of governance – developmental, empowermental, protective and disciplinary. This paper, based on fieldwork across the rural areas in three states, probes the Employment Assurance Scheme to understand the state's performance on these parameters as well as aspects of participation, governance and political society. What is revealed is the complexity and divergence of state action – conflicts within and between different agencies of the state, as also the challenges posed to these agencies by civil and political society groups. Also clear is that the participation of the poor in development programmes cannot easily be stepped up in the absence of supporting actors in political society. Part I of the paper presents the initial findings as they relate to the development and empowerment functions of the state. Part II, to be published next week, will develop the argument further through discussion of an 'action research' project that followed on from the authors' 'academic' research.

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I
Introduction

This paper, published in two parts, reports on an extensive programme of social scientific and action research in Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal. In this the first part we present some of the main findings of a research project that was concerned with questions of state performance in those three states, particularly as this performance affected and was experienced by different groups within the rural poor. In Section II we situate the research project in terms of an established literature on state performance in different states in India (the latter referring to a geographical unit of governance), and we outline the major hypotheses that guided our work. Section III discusses the methods adopted by the research team in the field, and the choice of study locales. Sections IV, V and VI present the research findings as they relate to what we call the 'developmental' and 'empowerment' functions of the state, here studied with reference to the Employment Assurance Scheme. The empirical findings are discussed in terms of three linked themes: the question of participation, the nature of political society, and the workings of what has been called 'the everyday state' [Benei and Fuller 2001]. Some broader implications of our work are discussed in Section VII, which concludes the paper. In terms of public policy, however, these implications are considered further in the second part of the paper which reports on an 'action research' project that the team carried out in 2000-2001 in Bhojpur district, Bihar and Malda district, West Bengal. This project, which was funded by the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID), and which had the support of the State Institute for Panchayats and Rural Development in West Bengal, used a variety of participatory research techniques to engage villagers and other stakeholders around an agenda of 'enhancing pro-poor governance'. This agenda was informed by the academic research project. In addition to discussing the findings of the various workshops that structured the action research programme, we also reflect on our experiences of carrying out participatory research of this sort – research that Bent Flyvbjerg, in another context, has commended for 'making social science matter' [Flyvbjerg 2001].

I
Issues and Hypotheses

The research project that we report on here was first defined in 1998, although its aims and ambitions were considerably refined during 1999 and the first quarter of 2000 when the team was active in the field.[1] The project took shape with reference to three literatures on the state in India that are linked in key respects, but which can be distinguished from the more obviously 'macro' perspectives on the political economy of the state developed by Pranab Bardhan (1998), for example, or by Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (1997) or Achin Vanaik (1990). The first of these literatures deals with questions of state performance at the provincial or state level. A second body of work is concerned with the functions and spatialities of the state, and a third presents an ethnographic understanding of the ways

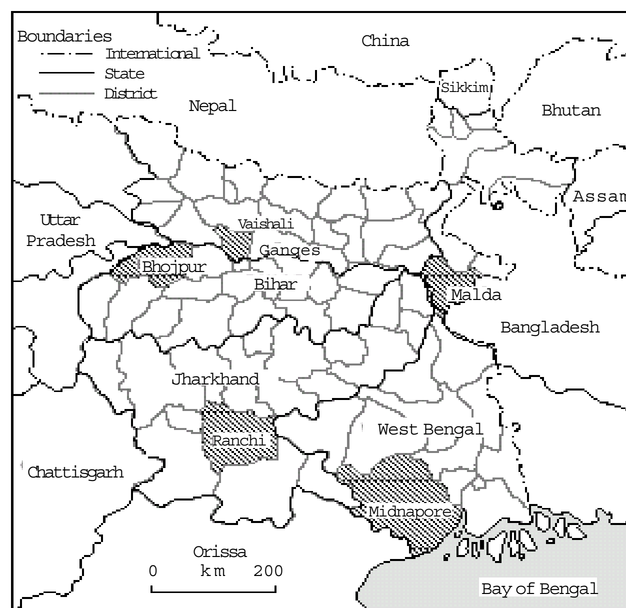
in which the local state works in practice. This last body of work is also informed by the work of Sudipta Kaviraj on the discourses and self-understandings of elite and subaltern government officials (those educated in English or vernacular languages, respectively).

A starting point for the project was Atul Kohli's work on the state and poverty in three states of India. Writing in the mid-1980s, Kohli argued that three decades of economic growth had failed to improve the lot of the poor across India [Kohli 1987]. The poor, furthermore, according to the more empirical parts of his study, had not been empowered by the Janata Party in Uttar Pradesh in the late-1970s/early-1980s, or indeed by the Congress Party in Karnataka under Devraj Urs. Only in West Bengal, Kohli concluded, had the poor been able to improve their position during this period. The Left Front government that came to power in West Bengal in 1977 had empowered the poor by land reform measures, as well as by its campaigns to politicise local self-government (the idea of the red panchayats) and to register sharecroppers. The Left Front regime was able to do this because it was led by a strong left-of-centre political party, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), which was able to isolate its opponents and at the same time draw on the efforts of a committed group of cadres.[2] It was thus the character of the political 'regime type' that determined the possibility for and scale of poverty reductions, rather than the rate of economic growth as was more normally assumed.

More recent work has served both to confirm and to question Kohli's findings. Datt and Ravallion (1998) have suggested that the record of the major states in reducing poverty can largely be explained with reference to the systems of education and health care, and of agricultural infrastructure, that were inherited from the British raj. They do concede, however, and John Harriss (1999) has underlined this conclusion in his own survey of the performance of different states, that once economic growth rates are controlled, the poor are most likely to be empowered in those provinces where the lower castes or classes are strongly represented in ruling political regimes, as they are in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. At the same time, Harriss (1993) has acknowledged that much of the observed reduction in rural poverty in West Bengal through the 1980s and early-1990s was triggered by an extension in the double and even triple-cropping of rice. It is possible that the government of West Bengal was more efficient than some other governments in sponsoring improvements in water management systems, but politics alone cannot explain the successful diffusion of 'green revolution' technologies in the state. It has also been suggested that a first wave of successes for the Left Front government was not followed up by actions to improve the position of the scheduled castes or the labouring poor. According to Ross Mallick (1990, 1992), the well educated and often 'well bred' leadership of the CPI-M has little in common with the scheduled castes they claim to serve, and in his view the rhetorical outpourings of the party should be treated with caution.

Mallick's viewpoint is overstated, but it does suggest one area where Kohli's thesis might usefully be tested. Kohli's account of the successes of the Left Front regime was mainly derived from interviews with party workers and senior officials; it was not extensively 'ground tested' in the sense of tracing through the effects of particular policies on the livelihoods and experiences of different households within rural West Bengal. Our research project, in contrast, adopted its first hypothesis from

Figure 1: Location of the Field Districts: Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal



Kohli – that the government would perform better from the point of view of the rural poor in West Bengal than in neighbouring Bihar (a state widely assumed to be caste-ridden, mismanaged and prone to rent-seeking and even looting: Das 1992) – but the emphasis was laid on the field testing of particular government policies. Rather more important than this first hypothesis, however, was a set of hypotheses that followed from our reading of another literature on the functions and spatialities of the state. Kohli's work paid surprisingly little attention to the performance of the Left Front regime across the districts of West Bengal, and his accounts of poverty reduction were mainly confined to conventional indicators like wages and incomes earned, and calories consumed. Our reading of the work of Paul Brass (1997) and the World Bank (2000, 2001), among others, encouraged us to think of the needs of the poor in broader terms and with regard to four major functions of governance: what we have called the developmental, empowerment, protective and disciplinary functions of the state.

A second and more specific hypothesis, then, is that the state should perform better in West Bengal than in Bihar in terms of its ability: (i) to deliver and fairly administer a centrally funded anti-poverty programme (we selected the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) as a proxy for the 'developmental function', for reasons we explain below); (ii) to manage an effective system of primary education provision (the empowerment function: also illuminated by our study of the EAS); (iii) to ensure that poorer people are able to effectively utilise the law and the courts to enforce their rights to a minimum wage, say, or access to a common property resource (the protective function); and (iv) to take steps to control the often negative encounters that poorer people experience in their dealings with the police, border security personnel, revenue officials, forest guards and so on (the disciplinary function). This hypothesis is linked to a third that derives from the work of Joel Migdal (1993) and Michael Lipton (1989) on the spatialities of the state. It is misleading to imagine that 'the state' acts in a uniform manner across the territories that are under its control. Not only are there conflicts within and

between different agencies of the state, but the capacity of those agencies is challenged in different ways by groups within civil and political society. We thus hypothesised that the capacity of the state to work effectively on behalf of the rural poor in West Bengal would be quite different in a district, block or panchayat where the CPI-M or some other party was actively mobilising the poor (as in Midnapore) than it would be in a geographical area where political society was dominated by patron-client links and/or by a lack of awareness or engagement on the part of the poor (as in Malda, see next section). We likewise supposed that the four functions of the state that we had identified would be discharged differently in the various regions of erstwhile Bihar (since November 2000, Bihar and Jharkhand). Specifically, we hypothesised that government would work better in an area where an organised left-of-centre movement or party was well developed (as in Bhojpur), or even perhaps in an area where a mainly adivasi (scheduled tribe) population could be expected to keep the state at a distance and place few pressures on bureaucrats (as in Ranchi), than in a district where political competition could be expected to be severe, confrontational and dominated by the forward and backward castes (as in Vaishali).

Our last set of hypotheses came from an emerging body of work on the 'anthropology of the everyday state'. Rather than seeing bureaucrats as faceless automatons in the Weberian mould, scholars working in this field have insisted that government officials are also members of civil and sometimes political society, as well as of particular faiths and communities.[3] The workings of local government can be expected to reflect these multiple positionalities and the understandings of governance to which they give rise. Following the work of Sudipta Kaviraj (1991), we might also suppose that many of the programmes for 'development' or 'empowerment' which are designed in New Delhi or the state capitals, are reinterpreted at the district, block and panchayat-levels by poorly paid officials who are unable or unwilling to recognise the discourses of their English-educated superiors. To the extent that this hypothesis is confirmed, of course, at least in West Bengal, it would call into question the idea that the workings of 'the state' can be read off from the policy statements or public pronouncements of senior bureaucrats or party members.

I
Methods and Locales

Turning these research hypotheses into field questions required us to combine "the depth of ethnographic fieldwork with the breadth of a regional (here district) perspective", if we might cite for a moment the recent and parallel work of Ben Rogaly and his co-workers [Rogaly et al 2001: 4547]. Having first discussed the choice of field districts with activists and scholars in Bihar and West Bengal, the research team sought to locate blocks and gram panchayats that would not be untypical of the political regime types that characterised the districts more broadly. This was no easy task: in the case of Vaishali district in north Bihar we worked extensively in three blocks before choosing Bidupur on the banks of the Ganges, and the village we selected was the eleventh where we held discussions. By the end of February 1999, however, the team had selected Bidupur, Sahar (Bhojpur) and Murhu (Ranchi) blocks in Bihar, and Debra (Midnapore) and Old Malda (Malda) blocks in West Bengal, and had recruited and trained a team of seven field assistants to work full-time in the villages or wards where we had negotiated access (Figure 1).[4] By the end of March 1999 the field assistants had helped the team to carry out an initial census of the 1,700+ households that resided in the five field sites. The census provided us with baseline information on household and community composition, on livelihoods and assets, and on patterns of receipt of government benefits. We used this data, along with government and local accounts of poverty and vulnerability, to select 80 poor households in each village for further and more intensive work around the main themes of the research. Twenty non-poor households were also selected for study in each village, again on a random basis and with the consent of the respondents. Female-headed households were also asked to take part in the survey that we planned to begin in late-May 1999.

The questionnaire survey that we administered ran to 82 major questions, with many more sub-questions. After first asking villagers about their receipt (or otherwise) of certificates to confirm them as members of the scheduled communities, or of the Below Poverty Line (BPL) population, the survey moved on to questions about the people they turned to when they needed health care, or a loan, or employment, or help in solving a dispute. We asked these questions to get a sense of the dependence of different groups of people on state and non-state agencies, and of the extent of their social, economic and political networks. Most of the survey was taken up, however, with a mixture of closed and open-ended questions on people's experiences of the four functions of the state, beginning with a detailed account of their understandings of the Employment Assurance Scheme. The answers that we received to these questions were supplemented by insights that the wider research team gained from informal conversations and focus groups. These exchanges were particularly important in providing us with information on the protective and disciplinary functions of the state. Instead of relying only on quantitative data, we asked the field assistants to collect up to five 'stories' in each village that would illuminate these relationships. Most of these stories emerged in late 1999 or early-2000, by which time the villagers had grown accustomed to the research team.

In addition to this village-based work the team worked extensively at the block- and district-, and even state-levels. We developed a strategy of spoking in and out of villages that sought to mirror many of the issues we were researching. In the case of the Employment Assurance Scheme, for example, we recognised the need to collect data on the sanctioning and funding of schemes from the time of the inception of the EAS in the early-mid 1990s, and across all of the panchayats in the blocks where we were working. This would guard us against the danger of making false inferences from limited data sets. We also tried to schedule open-ended interviews with all those individuals who we identified as key players in the selection, sanctioning, execution and inspection of schemes, including the block development officer (BDO), the district development commissioner (DDC), the sub-divisional officer (SDO), additional district magistrates (ADMs), junior engineers, clerks and accountants, members of parliament (MPs) and members of the legislative assembly (MLAs), party workers, panchayat officials, contractors and labourers. Figure 2 provides a template for the issues that we thought we should research in the field, as well as lists of the people we identified as key respondents and the basic indicators of scheme performance that would allow us to compare the EAS across districts. We adopted a similar strategy when researching the question of

Figure 2: The EAS and the Developmental Function of the State: A Logical Framework for Analysis

Issues	Questions	Respondents	Indicators
Intentions and Goals	1 How do officials at different levels and in different departments of the state interpret the intentions and goals of the EAS? 2 To what degree are these interpretations different and/or contradictory?	Questions to be directed to all interviewees	1/2 Qualitative description of the different interpretations at different spatial scales and between different departments
Spread	1 What is the total spending on EAS by block and year? 2 What is the total number of schemes by block and year? 3 What is the geography of the EAS within a block? 4 How is the spread/ concentration of schemes justified? (Look for the balance of technical, political and grass roots pressures) 5 How does our block and panchayat compare with the district as a whole?	Data from Development Scheme Census and from secondary sources In Bihar: BDO and DDC In West Bengal: BDO and ADM (Dvt.) In Midnapore: check the relative importance of ADM (Dvt) and SDO.	1 Spending on EAS at block and district levels as percentage of total government spending on development 2/3 Concentration Index to measure EAS active villages as percentage of total villages in block or district.
Generation of Scheme Ideas	1 What is the degree of grass roots participation in the scheme design? – was a village meeting held? – was the meeting closed or open? – did the meeting contribute significantly to the choice of scheme(s)? 2 Which political and administrative personnel and/or contractors were involved? – how is their interaction justified? – what are the alliances, linkages and conflicts between these people? – how were conflicts managed?	B D O Mukhiya/ GP member and pradhan Contractor 2-3 village respondents (including one from a weaker section). Observation of meetings: who is invited, who attends, who decides?	1a Date of meeting(s) and rough level of attendance 1b Geographical site of key decisions 1c The names of schemes that were considered at any length, and/or finally put forward 2 The names and official functions of key decision-makers
Shortlisting and Selection of Schemes	1 How many schemes were put forward at the selected panchayat and at the block? 2 How were the successful schemes chosen at the block and district levels? – Who decided? – Conflicts between administrative layers? 3 How far are the choices driven by developmental needs, bureaucratic imperatives, networks of political patronage, and/or grass roots pressure? 4 How are such choices publicly justified by the persons involved? Who makes the decisions?	In Bihar: BDO; DDC; MLA and/or MP; 1-2 technical officers; possibly a social activist or journalist In West Bengal: BDO; ADM (Dvt); MLA and/or MP; 1 or 2 technical officers; pradhan; standing committee chairman Opposition political party's district chairperson	1 Total number of schemes put forward 2a The percentage of all proposed schemes that were finally chosen and funded 2b The percentage of villages by block or district that were involved in a given year in proposing a scheme
Execution-Leakage	1 Within the block: How were the executive agents chosen? – Are the same people frequently chosen, if so what are their backgrounds and connections? – Are the EAS books being used properly, and if not why/how not? Who checks? 2 Within the village: – When did the work begin, for how long is it funded, and for what purpose? – How many labour days of work have been created? – Is there evidence to suggest that non-locals are employed by the scheme? Who facilitates or obstructs their involvement? 3 Block and village: Is there clear evidence of money being siphoned off, and if so how and to whom?	Contractor(s) B D O Junior Engineer Block Cashier 2 beneficaries of the scheme (one male and one female, perhaps), and 1 person who has not gained employment from the scheme but who may have wished for it.	1 Description of selection of agent 2a Rough percentage of EAS registered labourers who got work (as compared to others) 2b Gender make-up of scheme employees 3 Stories of key respondents
Outcomes	1 Was the work completed on time? 2 Was the standard of the work satisfactory? (mainly at the village level, but extra context required from BDO)	B D O Junior Engineer 2-3 villagers	1 Yes/no 2 Photographs

primary education provision and uptake. The 'logical frameworks' we used in these contexts emerged from a meeting of the research team held in Patna in April 1999, one of many group meetings that helped us to shape a detailed field agenda.

Fieldwork on the academic side of the project was completed by February 2000, just a few weeks behind schedule. The data sets that the project came up with will be archived with the Economic and Social Research Council in England and will be available to academic and non-academic user groups from within and without the UK. In the rest of this paper we present our initial findings as they relate to the developmental and empowerment functions of the state. Restricting ourselves to the EAS will allow us to develop our commentaries on participation, governance and political society in greater depth. Subsequent papers will comment more extensively on education issues, and on the protective and disciplinary functions of the state.

IV
Participation: Information, Employment and Power

The Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS): At the time of our fieldwork, the Employment Assurance Scheme was the largest employment provision programme in India, and a major component of the country's anti-poverty agenda. The EAS aims to provide employment to the rural poor through rural infrastructure projects that have a high labour input, such as minor irrigation works, soil conservation, afforestation, or the building and repair of rural roads and primary school buildings. Research has suggested that earlier programmes in this mould – including the Employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharashtra – were relatively well targeted towards or by the poor.[5] Unlike schemes distributing cheap credit or housing, the principal benefit of the EAS is manual labour paid at the rate of the government's minimum wage. This work entails no financial risk or long-term commitment from the participants, and should be unattractive to middle or upper class households. Beneficiaries are thus to a degree self-selecting, and 'leakage' rates can be expected to be low relative to many other anti-poverty programmes. In eastern India, especially, where seasonal unemployment is high and rural infrastructure poorly developed, public works schemes could be expected to suit the needs of poor people rather well.

If the EAS is a good vehicle through which to explore the distribution of government funds to poorer men and women, it also offers a window on the empowerment function of the state. The EAS was designed as a participatory development programme in which one or two unemployed labourers per (registered) household were invited to make demands on the state to provide them with up to a maximum of 100 days of paid labour per year. The workdays received were to be recorded on special EAS cards that should be distributed to eligible households. At the time of our study, this assurance was backed up by an unlimited central budget (see Section VI). As long as there were work schemes to be undertaken and labourers unemployed, New Delhi would send additional allotments of funding once existing projects were completed. State governments would then provide 20 per cent matching funds. In addition, grass roots participation was built into the planning, implementation and monitoring of the projects undertaken. The EAS guidelines require that public meetings be held to identify and prioritise projects that the public deems to be important within its own area. Once money for a scheme arrives, the guidelines also stipulate that a beneficiary committee and a job worker are selected in a public meeting to ensure that the work is conducted properly. The job worker acts as a foreman responsible for hiring labourers for the scheme and directing their work. The job worker and the labourers should be registered as unemployed and come from the area in which the project takes place. The beneficiary committee acts to oversee the work: it checks on the conduct of the job worker and labourers, verifies the quality of the physical assets produced, and ensures that wages are properly paid and materials properly purchased. Throughout, the money sanctioned for individual projects should be made public at the time of implementation, and project accounts should be signed off by a combination of government servants (job assistants, sub-assistant engineers), elected members of the local council, and lay participants (job workers and members of the beneficiary committee).

Thus described, the EAS guidelines propose a change in the relationship between the local state and the public in the monitoring of development. Instead of relying on top-down bureaucratic surveillance, the EAS provides spaces for public participation and improved opportunities for public accountability. These spaces, however, will vary from state to state depending upon prevailing institutional arrangements. Within West Bengal, the EAS was meant to run through the state's system of panchayats. The public proposal of schemes and the presentation of scheme accounts were to be accommodated within the format of gram sansads, or the statutory bi-annual ward-level meetings that had been established in the mid-1990s and which are open to all voters in the area. Gram panchayats and the block-level panchayat samitis had the responsibility for collating scheme proposals from the cluster of villages under their jurisdiction and for forming these into EAS plans. These would then be voted on in the annual gram sabhas which are open to those persons living within the gram panchayat area, and passed upwards to block and district councils for approval, with technical input from civil service staff where appropriate. Within Bihar, an established system of local public meetings had not been in place prior to the inception of the EAS, and in 1997 the state's panchayats (which had last been elected in 1978) were finally suspended. This meant that the framework of institutions responsible for implementing the EAS was less established than in West Bengal. The participatory elements of the EAS were to be carried out in Bihar by block officers who would organise the scheme's village-level open meetings themselves. Particularly in Bihar, then, the EAS required a significant degree of changed behaviour from state personnel, and provided the public with the opportunity to experience directly any changes from a 'monitoring' to a 'facilitating' bureaucracy that occurred as a result.[6]

Table 1: Awareness of the Existence and Objectives of the Employment Assurance Scheme

(Percentage of sample households)

District		Vaishali	Bhojpur	Ranchi	Midnapore	Malda
Heard of the employment assurance scheme	Poor	6	8	14	30	1
	Non-Poor	25	25	15	45	25
Aware of the major (employment) provisions of the EAS	Poor	3	5	5	23	1
	Non-Poor	5	10	0	35	25

Source: Village sample surveys, 1999.

Patterns of Participation: We shall see later on that these changes have been slow to occur. For the moment, though, let us consider the patterns of participation that we observed in the study villages. As Table 1 makes clear, the rhetoric of participation that surrounds the EAS is belied by low levels of public awareness about the scheme, particularly among the poor. The one exception to this is Debra block in Midnapore, much as we had hypothesised, where 30 percent of the poor in our ward, and 45 per cent of non-poor sample households, had heard of the EAS, even if only 23 per cent of the poor (and 35 per cent of the non-poor) could properly identify its demand-led features. In Old Malda block, in contrast, as in the Bihar (or Bihar and Jharkhand) field sites, only a small minority of poorer households was aware of the existence of the EAS, and a more detailed understanding of its major provisions was confined to a handful of households from among the non-poor communities. In these field sites there was little in the way of an organised flow of information to the poor, either by government officials or by active party workers (as was the case in the CPI-M-dominated ward of Debra block: see Section V). Although poorer households were keen to find employment in the off-season, their social networks were not generally oriented to the state. In Murhu block, in Ranchi district, poorer households pursued the 'exit option' (migration), and if the state was engaged at all it was mainly through the office of the 'mukhiya' (elected panchayat head). Some of these households had benefited from the 'developmental' arm of the state, for example, through the acquisition of Indira Awas housing or access to a standpipe, but for the most part they were unaware of the demands that they might legitimately make of government.

Information, of course, is only one way of measuring participation, and it is significant that about one-fifth of poorer male respondents in the Murhu, Sahar and Old Malda field sites did receive work from the EAS (even if they were unaware that it was EAS work and despite the fact that only a handful of them had received EAS cards: see Table 2). It is also significant that not one poorer household from among the sample population in Bidupur (Vaishali) received even one day of employment under the EAS, despite the fact that EAS work was going on in the field area (as we explain in Section V). Matters were much better in Midnapore where we found that 90 per cent of destitute households, and 69 per cent of other poor households, had received at least some EAS work, as compared to 35 per cent of non-poor households.[7] In 26 per cent of poor households both males and females had access to EAS work; only males received work in 34 per cent of poor households, and only females in 14 per cent of households. Even here, though, it bears saying that each poor household benefiting from the EAS in the years 1995-99 received an average total of 12.8 workdays, which works out at an average of 9.6 days for all poor households. (The corresponding figures for Malda district are 5.7 and 1.4 days respectively). The EAS provides cash incomes at a crisis point within the seasonal calendar, but a few days work per year at the minimum wage cannot be said to be either an assurance of employment, or in itself a mechanism to lift households out of poverty.

The apparent success of participatory development in Midnapore should also be qualified in one further respect. For most people in Debra, the EAS, for all its participatory intent, was 'just another scheme'. This is reflected in the form of ordinary villagers' participation, and in the limitations in terms of real control that they could exercise over scheme selection and implementation. Our observations of one of the key points at which participation was supposed to occur, the gram sansad, highlight some of the contradictions within the processes of formal participation. Attendance at these meetings was high: around 80 people attended the ward-level meetings we saw, and panchayat members stated that here (unlike in other parts of West Bengal) there were no difficulties in ensuring that the meetings were quorate. Of those attending, women made up around a fifth of the participants, and poorer households were if anything over-represented relative to their richer counterparts. For many poorer villagers, however, attendance at meetings was quite often 'passive'. Some said that they were attending the meetings primarily because party activists had told them to do so. Far more came independently but felt unable to speak up, even where they had previously participated in a more informal 'gram baithak' (see below). Furthermore, a number of key decisions regarding the EAS, including the prioritisation of schemes, the selection of the job worker, and the election of a beneficiary committee, were taken out of the control of the gram sansad. The public perception was that the gram sansad was mainly for proposing schemes and hearing about other developmental activities within the area: panchayat members, or 'the party' (the CPI-M), would make the final decisions.

These public perceptions fit closely with what elected members of the gram panchayat considered 'good participation'. They thought that a good gram sansad was one in which the people suggested a range of different development schemes that could be undertaken. Their justification for deciding the final prioritisation and short-listing of these schemes was that this avoided the conflict and tension that would result from attempting this during a public meeting (see Section V). In the Bihar districts, in contrast, many of the conflicts glossed over or avoided within Midnapore were very much out in the open. Here, in the absence of an elected local council, the EAS was being implemented through the civil service, with public meetings for the selection of schemes and of job workers being organised by block-level civil servants. For these individuals, such a task was an onerous or even frightening activity: lower-level officials do not generally command the respect or authority that an elected councillor enjoys amongst his/her own constituents, and in no cases had they been trained in how to manage large public events. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that many EAS meetings existed only on paper. When public meetings were held, our ethnographic evidence suggests that conflicts over development projects were closely tied to other power struggles in the villages. In Bhojpur, rival candidates were pushed forward for the job of implementing EAS work. This rapidly turned into an argument between caste blocs: large farmers had their 'own' harijan candidate, and he was opposed by the candidate put forward with the support of the informal leaders

Table 2: Percentage of Male and Female Members of Sample Households Gaining One or More Paid Labour Days from the Employment Assurance Scheme

	Vaishali		Bhojpur		Ranchi		Midnapore		Malda	
	Poor	Non-Poor	Poor	Non-Poor	Poor	Non-Poor	Poor	Non-Poor	Poor	Non-Poor
Males	0	0	25	0	20	15	60	30	21	0
Females	0	0	3	0	3	0	41	20	14	0

Source: Village sample surveys, 1999.

of the scheduled castes themselves. A scheduled caste leader was clearly using this occasion as an opportunity to demonstrate the strength of his following, and forced a vote to be held on the decision. In Ranchi district, there were reports of several thousand people attending meetings for the selection of executing agents, and of meetings being cancelled due to the threat of widespread public disorder between competing factions.

V
Political Society and Structuring of Participation

What are we to make of such contrasts? Is the restricted access of poor people to 'real' power over the EAS in Midnapore evidence of participation's pervasive effects as a Foucauldian act of subjection?[8] Are open conflicts in Bihar a sign of healthy competition? We believe that matters are not so simple. To understand what is going on here, we need to consider the ways in which formal acts of participation in the EAS are connected with poor people's maintenance of their broader social networks, and how both are affected by the actions of local power holders in political society.

In Midnapore the partial success of formal participation within the EAS must be understood alongside a consideration of other informal spaces of public action open to the poor. Here, the CPI-M's gram baithaks played a vitally important role. Participation within the baithaks was not universal – those openly identified with rival political parties were not encouraged to attend, and richer villagers also stayed away – but these subtle acts of exclusion actually improved the representation of the poor in our locality. As select gatherings in which the poor were numerically dominant, and sheltered from any chance of ego-clashes between rival 'big men', the baithaks provided an informal space in which many poorer individuals felt able to express their opinions. They also enabled the 'stage management' and rehearsal of participation that was to occur in subsequent official open meetings: for example, the baithak would decide which individuals would propose EAS schemes in forthcoming gram sansads. This gave poorer participants greater confidence to play an active role in formal meetings, and, importantly for the CPI-M, ensured that schemes were not always proposed by party activists.

Alongside their role in ensuring the participation of the poor, the actions of local party workers have also played an important role in containing popular expectations of the EAS. The party did not use the scheme's theoretical provision of 100 days' work to organise mass-mobilisation, or to connect this scheme to a wider political agenda of the labourers' right to employment. Given the extensive roles played by local party activists this cannot be blamed on a lack of political capacity. Rather, poor households' lack of awareness about the distinctive features of the EAS appears to be the result of a conscious strategy by the party to deal with the difficulties of the scheme's implementation.[9] The rate of absorption of EAS resources was limited, and in this situation the local party made the decision not to raise workers' expectations beyond the panchayat's abilities to create employment. This suggests that the success of party members as intermediaries depended in part on the CPI-M's ability to deliver immediate and concrete benefits to its supporters, and that this was seen as more important than playing a wider conscientisation role.

These aspects of the CPI-M's activities within the locality are important in understanding the limited mobilisation of poorer households over the EAS. Given the importance of political intermediaries within the public sphere of the village, it would be unrealistic to expect that formalised participation within the EAS would dramatically challenge this delicate set of social networks. For the poor, there is limited value in antagonising such intermediaries over a few days of paid labour. They have other opportunities to place their views – including any dissatisfaction that they might have with the party's actions – away from formal EAS meetings. 'Good participation' in Midnapore therefore seems to go hand-in-hand with the routinisation of power. EAS projects are proposed publicly and there is a fair degree of satisfaction with the programme, but mass participation in no way challenges existing power structures or brings 'alternative' interpretations of the scheme to bear.

In the other field sites there was little even in the way of mass participation. The character of political society – the political institutions and actors that mediate between higher-level government authorities and the population – in each case is 'vertical' rather than 'horizontal'. The research village in Old Malda block is typical of its region in that it suffers from low levels of literacy and social cohesion. At the time of our research the CPI-M dominated the block council but had to share power with the Indian National Congress (INC) in the village-cluster council. Although the level of political competition here – as measured by the balance of votes in recent elections – is not significantly higher than in Midnapore, the conduct of local politics is often aggressive and disruptive. Politics is based around personalised networks of patronage and violence, and not on strong party organisations. The CPI-M is relatively weak, and its leadership lacks deep roots in the locality. Agriculturally, the area is not as rich as the central parts of Midnapore, and many poor households rely on non-agricultural day labour in Malda town.

In the research village, there was practically no dissemination of information about the EAS to poor households. The only respondent who had heard of the scheme received the information by chance on a visit to the gram panchayat office. Despite the efforts of the Block Development Officer, gram sansad meetings were often conducted 'on paper' or with a minimum of publicity, and they were never used to inform people about the aims of the EAS. The mandatory public meetings that should have taken place at the inception of each project were either not held or not held properly. And the EAS cards had not been distributed at all. The villagers only got to know about an EAS project – or a 'government project' – when they saw that work was already in hand in their neighbourhood.

In Old Malda block, key elements in political society withheld information from villagers and brought pressures to bear on those bureaucrats who were minded to advertise the EAS. We discovered that the job assistant was unable to distribute EAS cards to the intended beneficiaries because the 'sabhapati' (block-council chairperson) had refused to finalise the EAS register. The EAS cards lay unused and locked away in a cupboard in the gram panchayat office. Block-level officers also told us that councillors of both political parties hindered their efforts to disseminate information on development schemes. Rather than mediating between the bureaucracy and the local community, local councillors and political leaders were deliberately obstructing the flow of information to the grass roots.

Politicians were motivated to act in this manner by greed. Villagers who are unaware of their rights are poorly placed to prevent councillors from diverting money into their own pockets.

With people more or less unaware of the scheme, and EAS cards safely hidden in cupboards, the scope for directing schemes to private contractors is considerable, as is the opportunity for skimming-off funds. A district-level officer told us that: "If EAS cards had to be shown, this practice (of employing private contractors) would be revealed. EAS cards would also reveal that payments were made long after the completion of the works – a strategy that is applied here to cover up the diversion of funds. In fact, the distribution of cards may be a good indicator of whether contractors are involved behind the scene or not. If there are no EAS cards, it is likely that corruption is higher. EAS cards make the 'hide-and-seek policy' more difficult".

We found that both smaller, labour-intensive, and bigger, more material-intensive EAS projects were mainly employing contract labourers from other blocks or districts. The contract labourers, who were mostly healthy young men, accepted work on a piece rate basis. When they were employed at all, local labourers were paid 20 per cent below the statutory rate (of which, in turn, they were unaware, just as they were unaware that they were working on an EAS scheme). Villagers told us that councillors liked to employ outside labourers because they showed little concern for the quality of the work performed, and didn't care about the accuracy of the accounts. Claims about corruption are always difficult to substantiate, but a comparison of the official records with our own observations of a small pond-digging project suggested that as much as 60-80 per cent of earmarked funds were being skimmed off by the over-reporting and underpaying of contract labourers – a rate of 'leakage' that was significantly higher than we found in Bihar.

The mere fact, then, of political competition between the CPI-M and the INC did not prevent local councillors in Old Malda from practicing rent-seeking on a grand scale. Competition on its own means little when political relationships are conducted on the basis of clientelism, or where this is little in the way of accountability. In Old Malda block the residents of a para – a hamlet or neighbourhood that is more or less homogeneous in terms of caste and class – tend to vote en bloc for one political party. Poorer members of a para are dependent on one key political broker and have few political alternatives. These brokers are crucial for making contact with more influential politicians and councillors, including the people who control state benefits. The poor thought it too risky to jeopardise this relationship by challenging the corruption that dogged the EAS and other development schemes. They told us that they would not do so because they needed the services of these people in order to access the more crucial government services of disaster relief and police protection. Government relief is particularly important in Malda because of perennial floods in the months of September and October. The police also play an important role in mediating the frequent intra-village conflicts between different caste groups, or between older settlers (mostly tribals and lower castes) and recent immigrants from Bangladesh (mostly better-off Hindu middle castes). Demand for police protection is also high because of frequent and often violent cross-border cattle thefts.

Politics in Malda district – unlike in Midnapore – is conducted with little sustained reference to 'development', and in this respect it resembles parts of Bihar. It is rather characterised by an emphasis upon the power of the individual patron, an emphasis that is reinforced by the practice of vote buying at election time. The prospective councillor is expected to distribute gifts at election time, but thereafter there are few expectations of him or her. And when the elected local councillor is from a party other than the one for which a person voted, he or she will have no expectations at all. The dominant perception is that all politicians and councillors are dishonest. Although the poor disapprove of corruption, knowing they are its major victims, they also know they have to play the game and pick up what spoils they can.[10] When the better-informed villagers see their councillor employing non-local contract labourers, illegally, in government schemes that should be employing them or their fellow villagers, they generally allow themselves to be bought off with a few days of paid employment.

Decentralised rent seeking is endemic in our research area because of the absence of checks within or upon political society. The two main political parties are only weakly organised and are not well connected to the grass roots. The CPI-M leadership did not emerge from the peasant and land reform movement as it did in many other parts of West Bengal, and it is obliged, just like the INC, to make use of local strongmen at election time.

Figure 3b: EAS Spending by Panchayat and Village, Bidupur Block, Vaishali District, 1996-97 – 1998-99

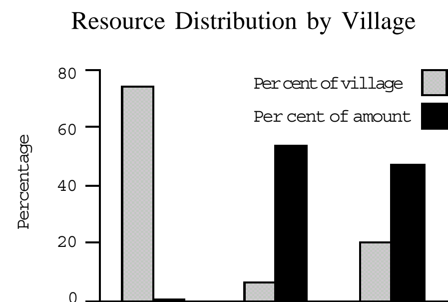
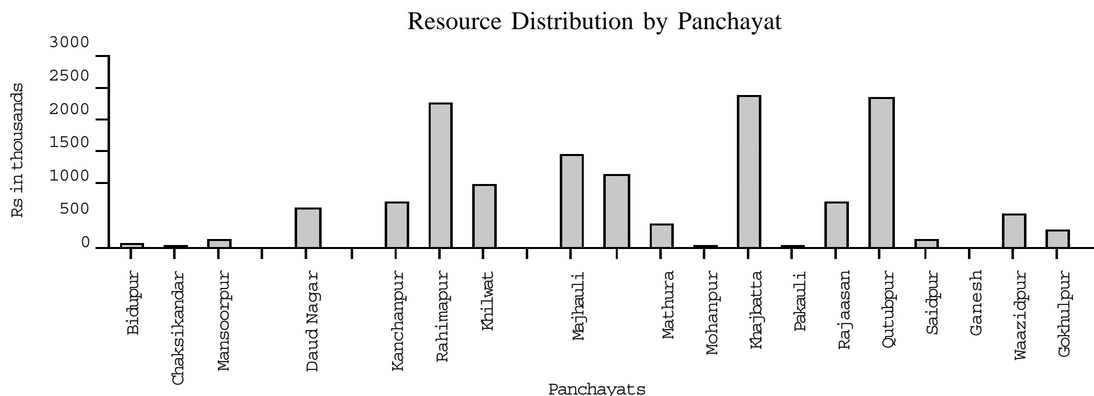


Figure 3a: EAS Spending by Panchayat and Village, Bidupur Block, Vaishali District, 1996-97- 1998-99



It might be argued, indeed, that the decentralisation of funds and decision-making powers to the gram panchayats has encouraged the major political parties to rely upon or even 'invent' those local political bosses (now councillors) who are described as 'feudal' or as 'feudal relics'. As a consequence, and in sharp contrast to the CPI-M in Midnapore, political parties in Malda have little control over the ways in which local councillors spend government monies, including the 50 per cent of EAS funds that are now allocated directly to the gram panchayats in Malda district. Bureaucratic checks on corruption are often ineffective, and honest officers are met with violence if they investigate a possible misuse of government funds. One block development officer, who we knew quite well, had her windows broken when she tried to introduce a less corruption-prone system of funds disbursement for a house-building scheme. This was just a warning shot, but the message was clear. The domination of political society by criminal elements was sufficiently complete that there could be no question of allowing the poor to participate effectively in targeted anti-poverty schemes like the EAS.

The nature of political society is different again in Bidupur block in Vaishali district, north Bihar. The southern part of Bidupur has been turned into a banana plantation, and even in the northern part of the block, where we worked, the demand for off-season work is perhaps less than in some other parts of the state because of the proximity of Hajipur town or the state capital, Patna. Nevertheless, our survey showed that there was a hunger for work on government schemes among some members of the labouring classes, and particularly among the most disadvantaged communities like the Musahars and the Paswans. These communities, however, although they are increasingly being mobilised as supporters of Ram Vilas Paswan and the Lok Jan Shakti Party, have to contend with the fact that politics in Bidupur is dominated by 'Babu-ji' (BJ), the local member of the legislative council (MLC) and de facto member of the legislative assembly (MLA). BJ is a leading light in the ruling party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), and an ally of the de facto chief minister of Bihar (and husband of the de jure CM), Laloo Prasad Yadav. He is widely seen as a protagonist for the Yadav farmers of the area. For his part, BJ has to negotiate with different village leaders to secure his continued pre-eminence. These negotiations often centre on use of government funds. While BJ is able to control these funds more effectively than his 'counterparts' in Malda or Midnapore, he is attentive to the demands that arise in the dense and competitive political society of Bidupur. BJ is not a 'pro-poor' politician, but he is keenly aware of the need to maintain his support across the block that he dominates.

Given the nature of caste and class tensions in Vaishali district we were not surprised to discover that only 6 per cent of our sample poor households had heard of the EAS, or that just 2.5 per cent were aware of its demand-led provisions. Nor did it come as a great surprise to find that not a single villager had found employment on the EAS schemes that had been sanctioned in the research village over a period of three years. (Some harijans had obtained work on a non-EAS road scheme to connect the village school to the western-most Yadav tola, but they had been promptly dismissed in favour of outside skilled labourers when it came time for black-topping the road). This was consistent with our understanding of the nature of politics in Vaishali district where, we had hypothesised, the local state had been more or less captured by agencies of the dominant castes, in this locality by the Yadavs, and where there were no countervailing institutions at the panchayat level. In Bihar, unlike in West Bengal, power was concentrated in the hands of the BDO and the DM, as well as with the MLAs and MPs. And in Bidupur, at least, the bureaucrats found it convenient to leave most decisions about the disbursement of funds to BJ. Given the intense nature of the competition for funds between locally dominant groups and their brokers, government officers worried about the backlash they would face from disappointed groups. Far better, one recent BDO confessed, to handover effective decision-making powers to BJ, and let him take any credit or blame.

But if political society in Bidupur is dominated by BJ, not all of the outcomes of the EAS were as we expected. Unlike in Sahar block in central Bihar, where the sitting MLA (a member of the Communist Party of India-Marxist-Leninist) was poorly informed about the EAS, and where scheme selection was more or less in the hands of the district magistrate and district development officer, BJ was extremely well informed about the EAS. His knowledge of the guidelines extended not only to the 'proper balance' of unskilled labour and materials in different schemes,[11] but also to a critique of their prescriptive nature. It would be an absurdity, he said, to make afforestation or water management schemes a priority in Bidupur, given its location on the north bank of the Ganges. What Bidupur needed was all-weather roads, and if their construction required the importation of skilled labour, that was how it must be. In his view, the rural poor would benefit more in the long run from improved roads and market access, than from a few worthless labour-intensive schemes that might be washed away in the rains.

This view was clearly self-serving, for BJ knew that it was the Yadav farmers who stood to gain most from this reshaping of the objectives of the EAS. But there could be no doubting the power that BJ and his allies exercised in the political society of Bidupur. An ex-DM of Vaishali told us that during his long tenure in the district he had adopted a quota system wherein local MPs and MLAs were asked to recommend and decide upon the schemes that would operate in their constituencies. His formula was simple, if quite at odds with the instructions he received from Patna or New Delhi. All programme resources that came to his district were to be divided up on a 70:30 basis between the MLAs and the MP. If a block fell between two constituencies, the resources would be divided in proportion to the number of panchayats in each constituency. The representatives could then use the money as they saw fit. In the case of Bidupur block the records show that resources have been distributed almost exactly on a 19:6 basis, reflecting the fact that BJ represents 19 of the 25 panchayats. But they also show that BJ has been active in making sure that schemes are set up – or are about to be set up (Figure 3a) – in all of the panchayats where he has supporters. From his perspective, the building of all-weather roads not only makes sense in developmental terms, but also ensures that resources will follow a road map through his constituency, in the process dampening down inter-village rivalries.

Naturally, his key supporters become the executing agents of these schemes. The DM, meanwhile, having ceded power to the MLAs in recognition of their local dominance – a labour contractor exaggerated the power of the mukhiyas when he told us that: "JRY is mukhiya's scheme and EAS is BJ's scheme" – still made an effort to ensure that some funds went to those 'tolas' or villages that were ignored by BJ or another RJD politician, RR. "For those areas, and also areas that are of interest to important political leaders from opposition, I used the interest

money accrued to the development funds. If any MLA or ruling party leader questioned as to why I was sanctioning projects in areas of their political rivals, I would say that that was being done out of the discretionary DM's funds and did not encroach upon their quotas, hence they could not have any grievance nor any locus standi to object to this".

In Bidupur, then, as in Old Malda and Midnapore blocks for quite different reasons, a combination of political forces came together to redefine the aims and objectives of the EAS. These forces also helped to determine the outcomes that could be associated with the EAS. Although it is not our purpose here to evaluate the EAS in 'developmental' terms, it is possible that the EAS will have its longest lasting effects in Bidupur (among our research sites), much as BJ has claimed. The poorest households might yet benefit from the trickle-down effects of a concerted programme of road-building. But we need to treat this argument with scepticism, just as we should exercise caution when listening to the ex-DM of Vaishali talking about his use of discretionary funds to help the poor. We have already noted that the poorest households in our research village failed to gain work from a local EAS scheme. In addition, as Figure 3b starkly confirms, the determination of BJ to make sure that all of Bidupur's panchayats would benefit from EAS spending was not matched by a similar concern for individual villages or tolas. The truth is that 70 per cent of Bidupur's villages, including almost all of those villages or hamlets where poorer people are in a majority, failed to receive any EAS funds. The poorest communities, for their part, including the Musahars and Paswans, were left either to seek work out of the district, or to campaign more openly for Ram Vilas Paswan.

VI
Trust, Rent-Seeking and Vernacular Society

BJ was not the only member of political society in Bihar (or Jharkhand) who was keen to convert the EAS into a scheme for the building of 'pucca' assets. A quick look back to Tables 1 and 2 will show that the EAS failed to meet its objectives in equal degree in Bhojpur and Ranchi districts, despite our expectation that demand for work would be high among the organised rural poor in Bhojpur. By the same token, as Table 3 makes clear, in each of these districts the schemes that were run under the EAS (from 1993-94 in Ranchi, from 1996-97 in Bhojpur and Vaishali) were mainly designed to run as material-intensive projects. In Murhu block (Ranchi) 156 schemes were sanctioned in the years 1993-94 to 1998, and of these schemes only 17 could be described as labour-intensive (the pond or 'ahar' schemes). A further 90 schemes worth Rs 18.5 million generated a demand for unskilled labour that cannot have amounted to more than 30-35 per cent of spending, and this percentage declined over time as individual road-building schemes became more expensive. In Bidupur block just 57 schemes were sanctioned in a three-year period, and 90 per cent of the funds were spent on road projects that were often all-weather and black-topped. This did not deter the relevant officials from declaring that 58 per cent of the budget had been spent on the wages of unskilled labour. (In Sahar block the figures were shown to be exactly 60:40; a district-level officer in Vaishali told us that he favoured a 58:42 split on the ground that it "appeared more credible").

What accounts for this bias towards 'big projects'? It might be thought that it reflects a lack of understanding among block-level workers. None of the BDOs in Bihar who we talked to had a good understanding of the EAS, despite the fact that they had the assumed responsibilities of the pramukh (the elected head of the panchayat samiti) in the wake of the dissolution of the panchayats in Bihar in 1998. The BDOs knew that the EAS was about employment provision, but they were poorly informed about the demand-led or guaranteed nature of that provision. The BDOs rather understood the EAS to be a sister programme to the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY) programme, with the former taking up 'big schemes' and the latter 'small schemes' (interview with BDO, Murhu). Levels of understanding were still less clear lower down the government ladder, and we were assured by a block agricultural officer in Sahar that, 'EAS mein sunishchit samay per scheme ko poora ker dena hota hai' (EAS means that we have to complete the scheme in the assured time frame).

But such misunderstandings cannot explain the preference for 'big schemes' that is evident at the district level. The block and village-level workers, after all, were receiving their information from their superiors at the district-level. They didn't have access to the same manuals as their bosses. So why did district-level officers act as they did when sanctioning material-intensive schemes? Part of the answer is to be found in the 'technical imperatives' of the EAS. The district-level officers who we spoke to in Bihar were well aware that the block was the main implementing agency for the EAS. They also knew that many block offices were overburdened. In the 1970s the block office was required to deal with relatively few poverty-reduction schemes. In the 1980s and 1990s these schemes were significantly expanded, and were supposed to be run on a decentralised basis. By 1999 a typical block was receiving 6-8 times the funds flow it would have received in 1979, and the block office might be asked to run 100-130 schemes under JRY and EAS, as well as providing 1,000 houses under the Indira Awas scheme and 500 wells under the Million Wells scheme. In a block like Sahar these schemes were supposed to be spread out across 55 villages in 12 panchayats, many of which are very difficult to access. The block office in Murhu is responsible for 141 villages in 24

Table 3: Sectorwise Breakdown of EAS Schemes Actually Implemented by the Blocks, Bihar

Block	SB	CH	PHS	ICDS	Road	Checkdam	Bridge/Culvert	Pond/Ahar	Other	Total
Murhu (1993-94 until 1998)	20 schemes	8	3	2	62	24	9	17	11	156
	34.16 lakh rupees	12.52	8.10	1.66	90.01	87.23	41.58	22.32	12.86	310.44
Percentage of total spent	11.0	4.03	2.71	0.53	29.00	28.10	13.49	7.49	4.15	
Sahar (1996-97 until 99-00	29	2	0	0	23	3	2	3	6	68
	60.45	1.80	0	0	52.81	6.95	3.06	6.95	9.83	141.85
Percentage of total spent	42.60	1.27	0	0	37.20	4.90	2.16	4.92	6.95	
Bidupur (1996-97 until 98-99)	12	0	0	0	42	2	0	0	1	57
	13.06	0	0	0	36.09	1.88	0	0	0.34	151.37
Percentage of total spent	8.62	0	0	0	89.87	1.27	0	0	0.24	

Notes: SB = school building; CH = community hall; PHC = primary health centre; ICDS = integrated community development.
Source: District and Block statistics.

panchayats, while in Vaishali there are 133 villages to serve in 24 panchayats. Despite repeated and sometimes justified claims about government overstaffing in India, these workloads had to be shouldered by about the same number of workers as would be found in a block in 1980. In Murhu, for example, the complement of civil staff in the block office ran to the head assistant, the 'nazir' (accountant), and two assistants. On the technical side there were four junior engineers and one assistant engineer (who also worked for the neighbouring Khunti block), while the complement of field staff ran to 24 panchayat sewaks and 9 village-level workers. The BDO of Murhu despaired of the situation. He told us that the better able and connected of his workers were trying to find work in urban areas, and that his accountant was not up to the task of handling cash transactions in the sum of Rs 3-4 crore.

The situation was not much different in Bidupur or Sahar. In Sahar there were only 2 junior engineers to deal with between 300 and 400 schemes. These men were expected: (a) to prepare estimates for proposed schemes (prior to any approval being granted at the district level); (b) to prepare the layout for a scheme and to work with the chosen contractor; (c) to supervise in person the most crucial stages of construction, which might include foundation casting, the fixing of a lintel, and roof casting; (d) to inspect and measure the progress of a scheme (in part to secure future fund flows to the executing agent); and (e) to assist senior engineers (including the assistant engineer) in their inspection visits. Naturally, these tasks could not be completed properly, even where the junior engineer was working to the best of his or her ability. If there is state failure, and a significant leakage of funds, it is because the local state is underdeveloped in relation to the tasks set for it. And this will be true even when supervisory staff from the non-technical side are deployed to help the process of scheme inspection.

But it is not just technical or capacity problems that incline district-level officials against the sanctioning of a large number of labour-intensive (and 'kuccha') schemes. A block-level officer in Murhu told us that: "We tried to include proposals of (morum) roads and irrigation ponds in our proposal as they generate maximum employment. But, during the scrutiny at the level of the District Development Commissioner (DDC), those were struck off the list. In fact, in 1997, DDC gave an oral instruction that henceforth no earthwork schemes should even be proposed". When pressed on why he thought this was, the officer replied that: "They (district-level officials) worry about misuse of money if more kuccha works are executed…(This was) not simply because they want to save skins (but because) they genuinely believe that kuccha works will always be subject to siphoning off of government money, and they wish to safeguard against that".

This understanding of the motives of a (senior) district-level officer proved to be extremely accurate. In our conversations with district magistrates and district development officers we found that political considerations loomed large in their decision-making. Contrary to the assertions of some neo-liberals, it is a mistake to assume that government officers in India are intent on maximising the rents they can extract from the misuse of a public office. It is clear that a scheme like the employment assurance scheme does lend itself to a system of institutionalised cuts and commissions, much as Robert Wade has described in the case of a south Indian Irrigation Department [Wade 1982], and junior engineers regularly mark-up the costs of a scheme in order to inflate their wages. We describe the precise nature of this corruption elsewhere [Srivastava et al 2002]. Here, it will suffice to say that we estimated the magnitude of fund leakage from EAS schemes in Bihar to be of the order of 30-35 per cent of the total flow of funds, and that (or rather 'but that', given received views about Bihar) we found no cases of outright looting where a scheme existed only on paper. Even corrupt officials find themselves in a more complex set of relationships than is acknowledged in a simple theory of rent-seeking. Perhaps especially in Bihar, given the publicity that has been given to the cattle fodder scam, government servants are mindful that they might be found out if they engage in corrupt behaviour, or that they might be informed upon by one of their colleagues. This cautions them against excessively predatory forms of behaviour. In the case of district-level officers, moreover, there are strong pressures not just to exact rents (which might be needed to maintain close links with sympathetic politicians, or to help secure better postings), but also to clamp down on the corrupt activities of their subordinates. Thus, while it is clearly the case that some bribes ('ghus') are channelled up the hierarchy of Bihar Administrative Service and Indian Administrative Service officers to the district and state-levels, it was equally clear to us that district-level officials were pressing for pucca EAS schemes as a way of guarding against what they saw as the twin evils of kuccha projects: the fact that they provide so much scope for corruption (on account of being difficult to inspect), and the fact that some of these schemes will be built to fail (or to fall down), thus denying any visible evidence of 'development'.

What we observed here was a lack of trust in block-level officials by their district-level bosses. But this lack of trust also extends upwards from the district to the governments sitting in Patna and New Delhi. When we pressed district-level officers on their efforts to reshape the aims and objectives of the EAS – efforts they freely acknowledged – they focused on what they saw as the lack of credibility that surrounds the issue of fund flows. All of our respondents challenged the idea that New Delhi or Patna could ever hope to fund sufficient schemes to employ two adult household members for up to 100 days each year throughout India, and then mainly in the lean season. The DDC of Ranchi was adamant that the centre simply didn't have the resources to direct more than two instalments of funds to any district of Bihar in a given year, a view based, no doubt, on his difficulties in acquiring a third tranche of funds for Ranchi district. When we put it to him that some districts in Andhra Pradesh were reputed to have received five or six instalments, he countered by saying that he had visited New Delhi to press for a fresh round of funding, and had been told by the secretary of the ministry of rural development that this was so much rhetoric: no district had received more than three instalments of EAS funds in a year.

Whether or not this is true is not our main concern. The point is that DMs and DDCs in Bihar don't trust the authorities in New Delhi or Patna to provide sufficient funds to "check the out-migration and exploitation of 'akushal mazdoor' (unskilled labour)" – which is how, in 1995, the government of Bihar described the main purposes of a programme that would be "demand-driven and (with) no financial limit" (Government of Bihar, secretary – rural development, Letter No 3248, June 17, 1995, sent to all DMs and DDCs, Bihar). They also doubted whether their own blocks and districts, or indeed the government of Bihar, had the means or the drive to make demands of New Delhi at the right time. The DM of Bhojpur told us that even

if the EAS could draw down unlimited funds from the centre, those funds were still budgeted on an annual basis and would be taken up on a first-come, first-served basis. In his view, Bihar was too slow in making its demands for further instalments of funds. By the time it was ready to claim a third round of funds it was too late in the financial year: other states had got in ahead. Whatever the truth of the matter – and the fact that some blocks are always in surplus suggests that local capacity is key – the fact remains that district-level officers are wary about advertising the EAS too widely. In their view, it is better to plan for a small number of well-costed and at least partly monitored pucca developments, than to plan for a large number of kuccha schemes that will generate kickbacks and local conflict, and which cannot hope to soak up the local demand for paid labour. As the DM of Vaishali summed up: "The fund that we get now, two instalments, can hardly generate 100 days employment. In fact, with this limited resources available under EAS, the approximate labour days generated are around 2,00,000 man-days, and, the surveyed number of labourers being close to this figure, approximately one man-day for each labourer has been created in this district. If one looked at the man-days generated in entire state, and the figure of the statewide registered labourers, then by and large the same ratio would be observed".

Conclusion

The evident lack of success of the EAS in its own terms has been a recurrent theme in this paper, and is something we will comment on in a later article. Our concern here, however, has been less with the developmental ambitions of the EAS than with the lessons that a close analysis of the scheme might offer for the study of state-society relations in rural eastern India. In this respect the paper takes a cue from the recent work of James Scott on what he calls 'high modernism' [Scott 1998]. In Scott's view, high modernist states come 'to see' the populations for which they are responsible in terms of a bloated regard for ends over means, and of the rights of developmental states over those of weakly developed civil societies.

India has not yet suffered from the worst ills of high modernism, at least not in the sense that China did at the time of the (grotesquely misnamed) Great Leap Forward, or that rural areas of the Soviet Union did at the time of forced collectivisation. But if the state in India has been kept in check by a free press and democratic institutions, its developmental ambitions have been tinged by scientism and even authoritarianism, and poorer men and women have been forced to behave as supplicants to the individuals who are meant to serve them. All too often 'sarkar' has presented itself to ordinary people as it did in British days (from which time many of its practices derive), and the people have developed mechanisms for dealing with government that keep it at arm's length. And when less fortunate families are obliged to deal with government agents they are often required to wait for hours outside the office of the BDO or some other functionary, or to enlist the support of a local fixer or 'dalaal' to gain entry to the one official who can help them with a certificate or a pension or some other matter. If the state 'sees' these people, at least officially, in terms of various fixed categories (scheduled caste or tribe, below poverty line, registered unemployed), the people 'see the state' only dimly and after much wasting of time and money. Unless poorer women and men have access to important figures in political society they can have little expectation that they will be dealt with courteously, or that they will be invited to contribute significantly to the design of programmes that are meant to improve their welfare. It is more likely that they will be spoken to roughly or even abusively, and that few efforts will be made by government servants to make them aware of their rights or entitlements. The almost complete lack of awareness of the EAS that we uncovered in Malda block and the Bihar field sites is evidence of this, and is not untypical. If people show little loyalty to the idea of a dispassionate state (preferring often to capture it), or are given few opportunities to voice their concerns about such matters as accountability or the rule of law, it can be of no surprise that the favoured option is the exit option. In Ranchi district we found that poorer families did keep the state at a distance, much as we had hypothesised, but for reasons relating less to ethnicity ('tribalness') than to the need to construct sustainable livelihoods, in which venture the government often seemed to be irrelevant. We came across similar stories in Malda district, West Bengal.

None of this means that the local state is a monolith. Our work has demonstrated that an understanding of the state must have regard for the pressures that act upon named bureaucrats as well as the pressures that define the state as a social relation. In Bihar, in particular, where the local state was not balanced by functioning panchayati institutions at the time of our fieldwork, the conversion of the EAS into a scheme for the building of pucca assets had a great deal to do with conflicts of interest between district-level personnel and those working below them. The fact that it was more senior officers who pressed for the reworking of the EAS, however, calls into question the suggestion that state initiatives are mainly reshaped by officers within 'vernacular society'. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, the fact that they acted to restrict opportunities for rent-seeking suggests that social movements taking the part of the poor might yet be able to exploit possibilities for state reform, much as the MKSS has sought to do in Rajasthan.

It needs to be said, though, in conclusion, that just as the pro-information and accountability movement in Rajasthan has depended on the support of outside activists and ex-IAS officers (and most notably on the leadership of Aruna Roy: see Jenkins and Goetz 1999: 620), so poorer men and women in eastern India will need the support of key actors in political society. Notwithstanding the comforting fictions of the World Bank, poorer people in India do not expect to be "centre-stage in designing, implementing, and monitoring anti-poverty strategies" [World Bank 2001: 12], even where they aspire to a more symmetrical relationship with richer people and the state. In eastern India, at least, the major demands that we encountered were for greater information about state programmes and statutory rights. People also voiced their concerns about corruption and sometimes capricious and often abusive behaviour of government personnel. It was only in Midnapore district, however, as we had supposed, that there was some evidence of the state working on behalf of poorer people, or at least those people who had not presented themselves as opponents of the ruling CPI-M. Even though 'the party' often took a paternalistic view of the people, and restricted the number and sorts of schemes that they could present under the EAS, the fact remains that the developmental function of the state was discharged more effectively in Midnapore than in Malda district or in the Bihar field sites.

Just where this leaves the issue of state reform outside Midnapore is a moot point. If one major finding of this paper is that the

'participation' of the poor in development programmes cannot easily be increased in the absence of supporting actors in political society, it would be premature to conclude that there are no options for improving pro-poor governance in districts like Malda or Bhojpur. In a companion paper to this one we develop this argument and its practical implications in the light of an extended period of 'action research' that we carried out with villagers and other stakeholders in Malda and Bhojpur districts. The paper reports on an attempt to engage these stakeholders around the themes of our academic research, and on our efforts to effect a process of dialogue around an agenda of 'pro-poor governance'. It also reports on the limitations that are built into this sort of 'participatory research', and which must affect our efforts to make a social science that matters. EPW

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Notes

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2 Kohli refers to the virtues of: "a coherent leadership; an ideological and organisational commitment to exclude the propertied interests from direct participation in the process of governance; a pragmatic attitude toward facilitating a non-threatening as well as a predictable political atmosphere for the propertied, entrepreneurial classes; and an organisational arrangement that is simultaneously centralised and decentralised" (1987: 10).

3 See, for example, Gupta (1995); Harriss-White (1997); Ruud (2001); Williams (2001).

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5 See Echeverri-Gent (1988, 1993) and Herring and Edwards (1983). See also Joshi and Moore (2000).

6 Panchayat elections were finally held in Bihar in 2001. The research team plans to return to the Bihar field sites, in due course, to examine the effects and effectiveness of the reintroduction of local democratic institutions.

7 Where destitute households are defined as those unable to secure two decent meals per day for all household members through the year.

8 On this, see Henkel and Stirrat 2001: 178. See also Kothari (2001) and Kumar and Corbridge (2002).

9 This argument is expanded in Veron et al (2002).

10 For a broader discussion, see Bardhan (1997), Corbridge and Kumar (2002), Jeffrey (2001) and Parry (1999).

11 The official EAS Guidelines state that: "All works started under EAS should be labour-intensive works only. Labour-intensive works are defined as those which have a ratio of unskilled labour to equipment, material, and other skilled work of not less than 60:40. Works requiring a larger component of materials like cement, steel, etc, should not be sanctioned under the EAS unless the excess cost on material components is provided from other sectoral programme funds" [Government of India 1993: 5]. The Guidelines further state that this ratio of 60:40 can be met if new works under the EAS are distributed as follows: 40 per cent on water and soil conservation measures, including afforestation, agro-horticulture and silvipasture; 20 per cent on minor irrigation works; 20 per cent on link roads (as per the district's master plan guidelines), and 20 per cent on primary school and anganwadi (child welfare) buildings.

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