Jan Breman, *The Poverty Regime in Village India*
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**LANDSCAPES OF LABOUR**

Contemporary research on poverty tends to adopt one of two approaches. The first, based in political economy, is policy-driven, in line with the latest World Bank prescriptions; it operates a closed shop of mutual references and rarely admits dissenting views. The second, rooted in anthropology, consists of micro-level village studies. While quantitative analyses—even where they are informed by a more critical outlook—convey very little about the actual people concerned, field notes, conversely, generally lack a sense of the broader social, political and—above all—historical determinants of the contexts within which their subjects operate. The sociology of Jan Breman stands out for its combination of closely specified accounts of the real conditions in which people live and work with analysis of the structural forces that shape their trajectories. Famous for his field studies in India, he has also written on Indonesia, Pakistan and now China. Breman is an unparalleled storyteller. His careful descriptions of individual lives capture a totality of human relations in a single instance: the precarity of life at the bottom of the village economy; the lucky accidents that propel one or another out of the morass of poverty, and the churning of an informal economy that inevitably causes them all to slide back down. These realities tend to disappear behind reams of numbers showing healthy GDP growth and even declining poverty in India. As Breman writes, such figures do not accord with what he has seen with his own eyes in Gujarat, one of the most ‘dynamic’ states in India. His work in the country’s lower depths tells a different story, in which vast inequalities and crushing deprivation persist.

Born in Amsterdam in 1936 to a working-class family—his father was a mailman, his mother a domestic servant; both came from families of
Breman grew up in a society savaged by the Depression and then the Second World War. The first of his family to attend college, he was initially held back from pursuing an academic career, in part by fears over its effect on his awareness of his own class origins, but also—until he won a scholarship at the end of the 1950s—by the sheer cost of studying. Childhood visits to Amsterdam’s Colonial Institute had introduced him to Java’s wajang puppetry and gamelan music, and Breman’s studies initially focused on Southeast Asia: his MA thesis, eventually published in 1963, was on Javanese demography. But tense relations between the Dutch and their former colony prevented him from pursuing fieldwork there. The Netherlands had refused to relinquish control of West New Guinea in 1949, and by 1958, Indonesia had broken off diplomatic relations; in the early sixties military conflict had become a possibility. Breman reoriented himself towards India, conducting his first fieldwork in south Gujarat in 1962, where he was immediately drawn to the ‘agrarian proletariat of tribal origin’: called Dublas, they were renamed ‘Halpatis’ or ‘people of the plough’ by Gandhi, himself a Gujarati.

The doctorate based on this research, gained in 1970, was published in English in 1974 as Of Patronage and Exploitation; several more works centred on Gujarat have followed—Beyond Patronage and Exploitation (1993), Wage Hunters and Gatherers (1994), a study of the ‘making and unmaking’ of Ahmedabad’s industrial working class (2004)—as well as more general volumes on Indian labour, such as Footloose Labour (1996), The Labouring Poor in India (2003) and, most recently, India’s Unfree Workforce (2009). He has also returned to Javanese themes, notably in Good Times and Bad Times in Rural Java (2002), and has now begun investigations into the experience of migrant workers in China.

The Poverty Regime in Village India is based on fieldwork covering four villages in south Gujarat between 2004 and 2006; a companion volume published at the same time, Labour Bondage in West India: Past and Present, covers the colonial and immediate post-Independence periods, providing the historical backdrop to the work Breman has done in the region since the 60s. In response to criticisms that his previous village studies focus on exceptional, rather than exemplary cases—and that what is true of south Gujarat does not necessarily hold for all of India, let alone for the world’s billion-strong informal proletariat—Breman has somewhat altered his methodology in The Poverty Regime: expanding his fieldwork to include more villages, located in different relations to processes of de-agrarianization and industrialization; and, after forty years of investigations, placing increased emphasis on the ‘longitudinal’ dimension. The text is perhaps odd in its rhythms of self-reference: almost every indented quotation comes from a previous work by Breman himself, and the researcher figures in his own
account at various stages; fragments of an intellectual autobiography are scattered throughout.

The body of the book consists of four case studies, framed by introductory and concluding chapters that set Breman’s findings in a wider political and social context. Scores of photographs accompany the text, depicting everyday life and labour in the villages in question, and fleshing out one’s sense of the world Breman is describing. The first case study centres on a small village by the Ambika River, some 35 miles south of Surat—its pseudonym here is Gandevigam—and looks back to some of Breman’s early work in *Of Patronage and Exploitation*. When he first arrived in south Gujarat in the 1960s, an extensive caste-based system of debt-bondage still operated, tying landless Halpatis to Anavil Brahman landowners. Halpatis often had to borrow money to pay for wedding ceremonies. To repay this debt, the *hali* would work on the master’s farm and his wife would work in the master’s house; while bonded, the *hali* would receive grain rations in the off-season. But the debt was never repaid, instead serving to ensure the continuation of the relationship: the landowners were assured of a supply of labour, and the landless provided with a minimal food security.

By the 60s, the *halipratha* debt-bondage system was disappearing, and agriculture in south Gujarat changing rapidly, with the contractualization and monetization of social relations—that is, the commodification of labour. The Brahmans themselves, especially the younger generation, began to leave the villages, no longer wanting to dirty themselves with farming. With the breakdown of patronage, Brahmans no longer felt obliged to grow labour-intensive crops, such as sugar cane, which provided work for the landless. They began to plant orchards instead, since these could be tended and harvested with minimal labour inputs—mango trees could be tended year-round by a single farm servant. There was thus progressively less work in agriculture for the local Halpatis. The landless had been excluded from Nehruite land-reform programmes in the 1950s, on the pretext that they would find work in industrializing cities. But industry failed to supply enough jobs; the result was a massive oversupply of labour.

*The Poverty Regime* retraces a Smithian story here, in which the attraction of baubles from the towns enticed landowners to rationalize production. But Breman also implies that the landless played some part in their liberation from *halipratha* bondage. After Independence, landless Halpatis were increasingly unwilling to subordinate themselves to their masters, leaving one for another without paying debts, or else choosing the insecure life of the casual day labourer over the secure but demeaning life of the farm servant. Breman has from the start been wary of any idealization of pre-capitalist relations of personal domination, which were in reality degrading and often violent. But with the decline of the bonded-labour system, the landless had
lost not only security of income, but also a range of traditional rights, such as gleaning from the master’s land. They still lived in poverty, but now, with their labour commodified, were more insecure.

Breman’s work is central to current debates on the character of the informal sector, which has grown to employ more than 90 per cent of the Indian labour force. The term originated in the early 1970s, to describe a part of the urban labour force outside the organized labour market, with its statutory regulations. The World Bank had at first maintained that this informal labour force would disappear automatically, with rising growth; migrants streaming in from the countryside simply needed time to acclimatize to the rhythms of industrial labour. In the meantime, there was no need to be concerned by abysmally low wages, since informal workers could draw on traditional networks to mitigate their insecurity. As the informal sector grew, however—boosted not least by the fiscal austerity and structural adjustments imposed by the IMF and World Bank itself—it became clear that informal workers were never going to matriculate into the relative security of formal employment. The World Bank now declared that the formal sector itself was the problem—unions had built too strong a base there—and called for further flexibilization. So was born the myth of the informal worker as entrepreneur.

Mike Davis has written an extensive critique of this myth in Planet of Slums, drawing material from Breman’s work. According to Breman, many of those in the urban informal sector do indeed work on their own account. But those familiar with the political economy of an earlier age of Western capitalism will recognize this own-account work for what it is: not entrepreneurship, but piece-work. From workshops that double as living quarters, these workers are in fact selling nothing but their labour power; they are proletarians. Piece or job work is a form of disguised wage dependency, which reduces both the direct risk to the employer and the bargaining power of the worker. Davis summarizes these points neatly in his own work. Yet in focusing on the urban slum as the dwelling place of the new informal proletariat, he misses an important aspect of Breman’s recent interventions. When Breman returned to Gujarat in the late 70s, a new labour regime was beginning to stabilize. Increasingly, the rural economy was dominated by rhythms of migration, linking villages to one another and to the growing urban economy. However, this migration was not permanent, but rather circulatory, and was not only or even predominantly rural-to-urban, but also between rural areas.

This migration pattern had been wholly ignored by research at the time, which tended to assume that when people left the village, they left for good. The same surveys overlooked the influx of labour in rural areas. In fact, local landless Halpatis left their villages to work in brickfields further south only
to return home seven months later. Migrants from deep in the hinterland of south Gujarat, and even from other states—particularly Maharashtra—arrived in the same villages to fill local labour demand, only to leave again. A purely economic interpretation of this migration is, according to Breman, woefully inadequate. It assumes that migration is an effect of supply and demand disequilibria across linked labour markets: workers leave areas of low labour demand for areas of high demand, where wages are better. This cannot be true, because there are already underemployed workers in the areas of labour influx. Why do employers choose migrant workers, when local landless are already available and for the same price? This question orients Breman’s investigations. In order to answer it, *The Poverty Regime* sets out to trace the networks that linked migrant workforces to their places of work, looking in depth at the changing experiences in two more villages: one, dubbed Chikhligam, just east of Gandevigam, and another near Bardoli, in south Gujarat’s fertile central plain.

Breman is confident that the great circular migration is a consequence rather than cause of the change in agrarian employment patterns. Migrants started streaming into the villages and cities of south Gujarat because deeper inland, and not only in Gujarat, labour relations had changed fundamentally. As across much of the global South, population growth pulverized land holdings and outpaced food production, as well as contributing to ecological destruction: deforestation and overuse of other resources has led to soil erosion in areas that already suffered from low fertility. State actions have also had a profound impact: the Ukai dam that fed the Green Revolution in south Gujarat flooded out the landless and land-poor living upstream, while the construction of surfaced roads allowed displaced labour to move into the towns and villages. Breman does not entirely neglect the draw of clothes or even basic consumer goods—modernity’s lures—which have trickled into villages as second-hand commodities, purchased on minimal credit. But again: once migrants started arriving, how did they outcompete local labour?

When Breman took his question to employers, they responded that local Halpatis were too lazy or not particularly suited to work in the fields—even though Halpatis had worked in the fields for years and were supposedly chosen for the brickfields further south because of their hard work. In the absence of any reasonable economic basis for the choice, *The Poverty Regime* suggests that employers prefer the migrants because they are easier to control: they have no home to return to, no family business to attend to, and no community on which they can depend; they tend to stay away from the local landless and often speak a different language. Caste and kin are still active bases of identification, counteracting horizontal class alliances.

*The Poverty Regime* emphasizes that the system based on circulatory migration is neither haphazard nor chaotic. Landless migrants do not
wander the countryside or cities, looking for work. On the contrary, this is a stable labour regime that, however inefficiently, allocates work among the landless. Central to this process is the mukadam, or jobber, a figure roundly ignored by institutional surveys. Mukadams appear in villages during the rainy season when there is little work and offer the landless an advance on future wages to tide them over. Then, when the time comes, the mukadams return to collect workers and lead them to a job site. Only the men and their wives are taken, as well as some older children; the young and old, except children still nursing, are left behind in the village. The migrants stop along the way, taking up work in various villages, but they have a definite trajectory. Once they arrive at the designated job site, the mukadam becomes a ‘gang boss’. He interacts with the employer, manages the workers, gives them a meagre grain ration while they are working, and pays them when they are done. The mukadams are usually from the villages themselves, though not from among the landless castes. They have to know how to read and write, keeping accounts of how much each worker owes or is owed. At the end of the job, the migrants receive the balance, if there is one. If a worker has borrowed a large sum—usually to pay for a wedding, since mukadams have taken over from landowners in filling this role—it may take two or three seasons before the worker pays back what he owes.

The consolidation of this labour regime has led to a new debate among researchers: is this ‘neo-bondage’ merely a continuation of halipratha, a quasi-feudal throw-back, or is it something new, a capitalist wage-labour relation? Breman sets himself firmly in the latter camp. Drawing on his own working-class background for experiential support, Breman tries to measure the dawning ‘proletarian consciousness’ of workers, which separates them from halis of previous generations. Halipratha was a debt-bondage system akin to Western feudalism: neither contractualized nor monetized, it was a personal form of domination. Halis were kept in check by relations of deference, supported by the everyday violence of masters to servants. Not that ill-treatment as such has disappeared: Breman notes that violence of men against women remains a permanent feature of everyday life. Indeed, among the migrants, the ‘double shift’ is omnipresent. But now, aggression flows somewhat more in the opposite direction, from landless to Brahmans, especially when the latter attempt to further restrict the freedom of the former. Riots broke out when the farmers started hiring private bodyguards to protect their crops from theft. Such episodes are part of a larger, structural change in labour relations.

Unlike under halipratha—where relations began informally when the hali was engaged and then continued throughout his life—contracts with mukadams are temporary, lasting only until the completion of a job or for a few years thereafter if wedding expenses have to be repaid. Mukadams,
furthermore, are not employers but rather intermediaries. Deference, while still expected, is no longer on offer to the same extent. The landless give their children names formerly reserved for the higher castes, wear better clothing and buy consumer goods: cigarettes replace bidis, and so on. The landless have also come to abhor working in agriculture. If they have to take farming jobs (when and where they are available), Halpatis prefer the freedom of casual labour to the bondage of the farm servant, even if they pay dearly in security of employment. These perhaps minor transformations are for Breman a barometer of proletarianization, following a change in the form of labour itself—its commodification. This is indicated above all by the fact that the employers care little how their workers survive when not employed. Indeed, one of the main reasons, according to Breman, why Brahmans prefer to employ migrants is that they are never faced with this question.

The new labour regime in India is based on a blurring of the urban and rural workforce into a general designation of ‘wage hunters and gatherers’, as the title of Breman’s 1994 book has it. Mukadams recruit the landless for manual labour of whatever kind, in whatever location. Breman gives a vivid description of the labourers’ situation:

These working men, women and children are sometimes needed in the towns and sometimes in the countryside. Sometimes they are put to work in the obscure and degraded landscape in between these two extremes: alongside the highways and railway lines, in agro-industrial enclaves, brick kilns, quarries and salt pans, gathered together in temporary camps that arise where rivers are dammed, where earth has to be moved to dig canals or lay pipelines, where roads have to be laid or bridges and viaducts built, and so on. They live and work at these sites as long as the job lasts. The rest of the time they are confined in slum-like, sprawling settlements on the fringes of villages, squatting with no legal title, waiting until the call comes for them to leave again.

This is not, however, to discount the importance of urbanization. Surat, for example, is one of the fastest growing cities on India’s west coast. But the inequalities of the countryside accompany the landless into the cities, where the best jobs even in the informal sector are reserved for higher castes. Halpatis, lacking basic education, find themselves relegated to the most unskilled urban work: in construction, for example, or as ‘helpers’ in factories. When the construction job is finished, excess workers are simply dispersed. This of course assumes that the landless even make it to the cities. Breman argues that they have largely been shut out of the urbanizing trend. Halpatis currently living in cities migrated there long ago, perhaps following former masters. The problem is not one of transportation, but rather income: living day to day with no savings, they cannot afford time without work, searching for employment. Nor can they afford to set up permanent residence, even in
the slums. The latter are not open to all comers—indeed, they are filled with petty slumlords, racketeers and rubbish mongers of all kinds.

How do the poor but not destitute find a foothold in the urban milieu? Breman’s fourth case study covers a village some 65 miles south of Surat, an urbanizing area in the shadow of an industrial complex built alongside the Bombay–Ahmedabad railway line. Here he finds the services of *mukadams* supplemented by a system of informal recommendations. Employers ask ‘loyal’—that is, docile—labourers if members of their families or villages are looking for work; those available are then fetched from the countryside. The result is that, here too, local proletarians are shut out of industries staffed with a migrant labour force, which tends to self-segregate, both at work and in the slums, according to caste and kinship relations. Though somewhat better paid, migrant workers in diamond-cutting and artificial-silk production are no more secure.

Here, the massive oversupply of labour is only half the story. Against those who claim that a wall exists between the informal and formal sectors, Breman maintains that the two are deeply imbricated. In his 1996 *Footloose Labour* he memorably depicted ‘the landscape of labour’ as a vast plain, broken by many larger and smaller hills:

> These hills are zones of industrial activities whose top is made up of workplaces that are related to, or which even completely satisfy, the criteria of formal sector employment, while from lower down attempts are made to gain access to the secure but fenced-off positions . . . Great mobility and fluidity prevail at the foot of the hills. There are many candidates for whatever chance is made available. Those who qualify in the first instance are then interested in prolonging their employment for an indefinite period in the hope of, finally, gaining access to the privileged corps that enjoys more permanent tenure with all the advantages this entails.

Breman suggests that trade unions may be largely indifferent to the plight of casual workers, who are supposedly too numerous to organize. Instead, unions busy themselves fighting rearguard actions to preserve what formality remains, thereby falling prey to a logic Marx described in *Capital*: dividing the employed against the precariously employed, both lose.

Throughout *The Poverty Regime*, Breman reflects on the changes that have occurred since his previous rounds of fieldwork. In the 80s, he thought he saw signs of progress: the agrarian economy of south Gujarat was largely stagnant, but the non-agrarian sector was expanding—opening up new opportunities for the landless. But employment peaked at the end of the 80s, in part due to the completion of infrastructural and other building projects, both public and private. The spectre of ‘absolute redundancy’ haunts the present volume: work is becoming harder and harder to find; three quarters of Halpatis live beneath the poverty line and spend up to 75 per cent of their income on food.
Today, Breman argues, this destitution afflicts the land-poor as well as the landless. In the 1970s, he had suggested that the Dhodhia—another tribal caste, who own some land, but not much—were able to use income earned from migration to improve their farms or educate their children. Migration was, for them, only a temporary necessity. This was an argument against the exclusion of the landless from land reform: even a smallish plot could help reduce poverty among the land-poor. Here he concedes that the Dhodhia were not a vanguard but an exception. For the bulk of this caste, landholdings were fragmented by patterns of inheritance, amid rising population growth. They are now no better off than their Halpati counterparts.

Among the other trends Breman records is the breakdown of traditional bonds, including those within the family. The landless milieu is full of broken homes, often because one or both parents lean a little too hard on local varietals of moonshine. Members of the same family in many cases do not know where others work, or what they earn. Young men leaving for the cities often arrive unattached, bonding with others from their village or region, but these bonds too break down. Landless labourers often tell Breman that what they need are leaders. He proposes that they have to get organized, and notes that when informal workers have done so, as in the Communist-run state of Kerala, they have won improvements. To be sure, the informal sector workers are not complacent as to their plight. They make use of the weapons of the weak: stealing, breaking equipment, feigning ignorance, working slowly and carelessly. Breman stresses their defiant insistence on ‘their right to live and work in dignity’. He concludes that ‘there is no evidence at all of internalization of dependence and subordination, or a docile acceptance of deprivation’.

On occasions when the workers have risen together to press their interests, the Indian state—invoking a Gandhian rhetoric of resisting change imposed through force—tends to step in against them. Breman’s concluding chapter contains a sharply critical account of the role of the Indian state in the perpetuation of the ‘village poverty regime’—noting that when Prime Minister Singh ‘went on record saying that the days of the “licence raj” were over for good, he basically confirmed that cheap labour would continue to be the cornerstone of economic policy.’ Breman voices deep scepticism about government schemes such as those envisaged by the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and the Unorganized Sector Workers’ Social Security Bill, both passed in 2005. This is not merely because of practical considerations—though objections can and have been made about the geographical targeting and overall feasibility of the schemes—but for more fundamental reasons:

To undo the vulnerability and insecurity that are the logical outcomes of the informalization doctrine, attempts to establish a floor of minimal well-being
have to rely on arrangements that are essentially formal in nature. Such initiatives stand no chance in an economic policy frame that remains firmly based on cheap labour.

Pointing to the ‘enormous gap between the logic of the proposals and the economic policy currently being pursued in India’, Breman considers ‘the prospects for a New Deal targeting the working poor of India to be very meagre’.

But might it be possible for their situation to get even worse? Breman fears that opposition to internal ‘enemies’ (Muslim or otherwise) could easily be directed against the poor as such. Variants of social Darwinism are already common among elites: the poor, they say, are incapable of raising themselves up, even with state aid, and are only a burden. This growing hatred of the poor has found its way into the statistical record, source of claims that poverty in India is falling. In Gujarat itself—under the watchful eye of Narendra Modi, BJP chief minister of the state since 2001—the state’s official 2004 Human Development Report claimed that the poverty rate had fallen to under 13 per cent; a miracle produced by simply omitting scores of cases of deprivation. As Breman observes, villages like Gandevigam hand out ‘Below Poverty Line’ (BPL) cards to almost all landless households.

Such wishful thinking is, however, not only intended to make the poor disappear, but also to make sure they keep up the good work. Gujarat depends on its super-exploited strata to deliver high rates of growth, advertising its easy labour laws in the national media. It was an early site of India’s neoliberal transformation since 1980, and in its use of targeted public investment to support the development of high-tech industries on an East Asian model, sees itself as a beacon of what the country might become. Breman modestly suggests that his findings undermine the claims of India’s neoliberals, by indicating how much of Gujarat’s population has remained untouched by its growth. But in fact his analysis achieves much more: other states cannot emulate Gujarat’s uneven growth, since this has depended in large part on its ability to draw migrant labour from poorer states into its informal labour force. Poor states are meanwhile getting poorer, as public investment declines, and rich states, possessing better infrastructure, have drawn a large share of rising private investment. Uneven growth on the ‘South Asian model’ is self-reinforcing.

Since the end of the 1990s, India has increasingly been ranked with China as one of the twin economic giants of the twenty-first century. Yet it is arguably India, with its talk of ‘leapfrogging the industrial revolution’, that presents the model for most of the rest of the world: growth will be based on industrial parks providing IT services for a global market, while manufacturing stagnates. This is a pattern of development that provides
jobs only for the educated, and for very few among them. It is a model in which the agricultural surplus population is no longer a weapon of development, but rather an unemployable, superfluous mass. Rather than China’s labour-intensive manufacturing, India’s trajectory more closely approximates that of Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, where manufacturing employment has stagnated or even declined. Could the stark disparities Breman depicts, then, represent the future of capitalism? In 2003, he wrote:

The fight against poverty seems to have been transformed into a fight against the poor. A point of no return is reached when a reserve army waiting to be incorporated into the labour process becomes stigmatized as a permanently redundant mass, an excessive burden that cannot be included now or in the future, in economy and society. This metamorphosis is, in my opinion at least, the real crisis of world capitalism.

He is one of the few researchers sounding the alarm of this other crisis, raging on beneath the financial turmoil of today’s headlines.