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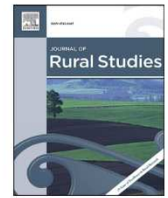
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## Journal of Rural Studies

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## Beyond clients and citizens: Making claims in rural India

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“All we wanted was for him to help us. Is this too much to ask?”<sup>1</sup>

Bhukhan Rishi, a 33-year-old landless labourer, tells me during one of several conversations about the claims he and his neighbours made on the elected President of the Gram Panchayat, the local village council. We are in Sargana Ward 1, a village in north Bihar, one of the most impoverished regions in the world. Bhukhan is from the Rishdeo community, historically stigmatised as “untouchable” and Musahar (loosely translated as “rat-eaters”). The context of our conversation is the allocation of ‘Below Poverty Line’ (BPL) cards, an official document that recognised the poverty of men and women such as Bhukhan Rishi and made them eligible for subsidized food, housing and other social welfare schemes operated by Central and State Governments in India. His companions, with whom I am chatting to understand better their engagements with local government, nod their heads in agreement. “He ought to help us. If he doesn’t, to whom will we turn?” Such accounts were presented to me by my interlocutors over the period between 2009 and 2015 during ethnographic fieldwork through which I sought to understand the variety of ways in which poor people negotiated their claims vis-à-vis their local governments and social elites.

How do we interpret the claims advanced by Bhukhan Rishi and others such as him? Narratives of seeking help from elected Presidents and other representatives to ensure that welfare documentation be made available to those eligible suggest that people could not rely on formal procedures. Poor people such as Bhukhan Rishi had to seek out their representatives to ensure that they were not excluded from welfare. As they did so, however, they expressed a keen awareness that it was, after all, the responsibility of their President to ensure they were not excluded. Thus, on the one hand, narratives of seeking help permeated the terrain of claim-making. So did, on the other hand, the awareness that elected Presidents had a duty towards helping their constituents, especially if they happened to vote for him or her. What do these apparently contradictory practices tell us about the nature of claim-making not only in rural India but elsewhere in the Global South?

Based on my observations, I engage with three strands of the literature that prime us to interpret such claims variously as ‘clientelism’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘political society’. I respond to calls in clientelism

studies for attention to be directed towards the agency of so-called clients rather than regarding them as passive subjects or recipients of benefits (Hicken and Nathan., 2020). I also respond to calls in citizenship studies for attention to vernacular cultures of rights, where claims approximating citizenship are advanced, without necessarily invoking its vocabularies (Madhok, 2021). Finally, I respond to Partha Chatterjee (2004) reflections on political society which urges further attention to the ways in which populations negotiate the differentiated landscape of citizenship they inhabit. Mobilising these three strands in the literature, and staging a conversation between them, I emphasise the agonistic content of claim-making in rural India, a formulation that underlines the dynamics of contention and consent that infuse poor people’s demands.

To do so, I first outline the key perspectives on clientelism, citizenship and political society that have informed reflections on poor people’s politics in much of the Global South. In the backdrop of this literature, I then document poor people’s claims in India asking local politicians to consider them eligible for BPL cards. These claims are situated vis-à-vis survey data that illustrates the overlaps (or not) between: (i) the eligibility of the population for the BPL cards were the BPL Schedule to be accurately implemented; (ii) the poverty rates according to the BPL Schedule and the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI); and (iii) the actual distribution of BPL cards among the MPI poor. Rather than shoe-horning the disparate narratives offered by my interlocutors under a single analytic rubric, I attend to the heterogeneity of their claims. The agonistic account developed in this paper recognises this internally fragmented quality of claim-making, often within a single neighbourhood. In the concluding section, I direct the distributional consequences of the agonistic claims and outline their efficacy.

This paper, thus, makes three contributions. One, it draws on original survey data to outline the potential exclusions fomented by the BPL Schedule among the poor. Two, it ethnographically illustrates the ways in which poor people push back against such exclusions and claim social welfare. Three, it offers an agonistic formulation of claim-making that engages critically with the prevailing ways of narrating, conceptualising, and theorising such claims, urging scholars to appreciate their heterogeneity. Such a formulation inaugurates an urgent but neglected

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<sup>1</sup> Interview notes, Sargana Ward 1, Rishdeo tola machan (West), March 6, 2010.

conversation between the literatures on clientelism, citizenship and political society.

## 1. Clients, citizens, claimants

This section introduces readers to three conceptualisations that have influenced social scientists' discussions of poor people's politics, especially their claims-making practices. The most important of these conceptualisations relates to 'clientelism', which has been extremely influential in the literature on poor people's claim-making practices. The second is on 'citizenship', whose importance in the literature on the politics of the poor is only now gaining prominence. The third conceptualisation is offered by 'political society', whose growing prominence in recent years is nevertheless limited to discussions on poor people's politics in India. Through a critical engagement with each conceptualisation, this section identifies areas of further research within each body of scholarship that the paper's emphasis on agonistic politics addresses.

### 1.1. Clientelism

The scholarly literature on clientelism is enormous.<sup>2</sup> A succinct formulation is offered by Allen Hicken's (2011) definition of clientelism as "a contingent exchange of particularistic benefits for votes". If a largesse extended by politicians is contingent upon support by their constituency – either now or in the future – then the transaction is deemed to be clientelistic. The argument suggests that poor people cannot rely on the universal provision of services and have little option but to seek help from politically influential individuals. Such individuals secure them resources. In return, the poor support them during elections. In this formulation, clientelism is both contingent and iterative.

This scholarship stresses clientelism as a form of exchange rather than a relationship (Hicken and Nathan, 2020) as was once commonplace (Lindberg, 2010). It departs from descriptions of clientelism as "a relationship based on political subordination in exchange for material rewards" (Fox, 1994: 153) in which the client supports and is politically subordinated to the patron. Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007) suggest that clientelism could persist even if political subordination is absent. Contingency rather than subordination is the defining feature of a clientelistic relationship (see also Hicken, 2011). If politicians' disbursal of resources to people is contingent upon the latter extending political support to the former, then the framework of clientelism could be applied.

Other studies identify "a set of targeted, particularistic exchanges that appear similar to clientelism" (Hicken and Nathan, 2020: 287). Some analysts suggest that personalised distribution of public goods may in fact be a form of buying credibility (Kramon, 2017; Muñoz, 2014; Schaffer and Baker, 2015; Chauchard, 2018; Guardado and Wantchekon, 2018; Muhtadi, 2019) that is intended to gain voters' attention, signal to them politicians' commitment to distributing benefits in the future and more broadly build a positive reputation. Others argue that clientelism may be used by politicians as a form of "turf protection" through which they deliver benefits for fear of losing actual and potential supporters (Lindberg, 2003, 2010; Nathan, 2019), thus responding positively to bottom-up initiatives that may even threaten to withhold support if demands are not met (Nichter and Peress, 2017; Diaz-Cayeros et al., 2016). These studies urge us to recognise "clientelism-adjacent" practices which are targeted and particularistic exchanges but are neither contingent nor iterative.

If clientelism is about contingent exchanges rather than relations of subordination, the role of bottom-up voter agency emerges as an area of further exploration. Indeed, recent works have demonstrated that voters

are sometimes the main instigators of such contingent exchanges, as voters approach politicians to demand assistance (Auerbach, 2015; Lindberg 2010, Nichter and Peress 2017, Nichter and Peress, 2017; Hicken, 2011; Nathan 2019). Such insights lead us to Hicken and Nathan (2020) to ask questions such as "(W)hich voters are able to initiate these exchanges, and why? Under what conditions are their bottom-up demands more binding on politicians? How do voters perceive a politician's refusal to provide demanded benefits?" A response to these questions requires an analysis of the ways in which different social groups are able to use, negotiate and challenge relations of power.

### 1.2. Citizenship

A possible way to respond to these questions might be to take recourse to the concept of citizenship. It might be said that voters are able to initiate exchanges with politicians when they think of themselves as citizens. When politicians and voters both take the claims of citizenship seriously, then-it might be argued-voters' bottom-up demands are binding on politicians. Voters might then perceive politicians' refusal to provide demanded benefits as a denial of their citizenship.

As a concept, citizenship has perhaps been the subject of even more scholarly attention than clientelism, given its far-reaching (and ever-increasing) scope. Long thought of as a bundle of rights conferred by the state (Madhok, 2018), recent scholarship insists on reflecting on citizenship as an ensemble of knowledges and practices through which people assert their membership of the political community (Isin, 2007). Such assertions may not immediately result in the expansion of rights or even invoke the language of rights. But they make claims on the state-either through bureaucrats or elected representatives-that are borne of their belief that they belong to the political community.

Scholars writing in this vein argue that citizenship mean very concrete things to the poor, reflecting their imbrications within the process of state-making (Hicken and Nathan., 2020) and their appropriation of 'universalising vocabularies' advanced by states (following Corrigan and Sayer, 1985). In this vein, James Holston (2008) directs attention to the 'insurgent citizenship' deployed by his interlocutors in Brazil's autoconstructed neighbourhoods: by highlighting their role as property-owners, tax-payers and consumers, residents of such neighbourhoods deploy the language of rights and demand to be treated as citizens. Similarly, drawing on the notion of 'critical liberalism', Courtney Jung (2008) notes the salience of the language of rights among indigenous populations in Mexico even as they protest the developmental claims being made by the state. Of a piece with this literature is O'Brien and Li's (2006) work on 'rightful resistance', which tells us of peasants in rural China invoking the rights conferred on them by the state to defend against claims on their land by private corporations. Similarly, Corbridge et al. (2005) emphasise the increasing use of the law by subaltern populations in the African continent as a means of bettering their lives, thereby inverting the practices of 'lawfare' that had been instituted by colonial authorities to dispossess them.

Others have insisted that citizenship refers to "a set of institutionally-embedded social practices" (Sundar, 2011: 589) that are constituted by and depend upon ideas and associations emphasizing membership and universal rights and obligations in a national community. Citizenship is thus a sociological rather than a juridical claim anchored in complexes of rights and obligations that may not be universally applicable. It results from historically precise interactions between particularist practices and universal laws that produced quite specific public spheres. Somers' account focuses on variations within England and the differences between the emergent public sphere in its pastoral and arable regions, due to which the rule of law became central to popular imagination in the former region, but not so in the latter. The universalization of the interaction between national laws and their appropriation by the working poor throughout England was made possible by a quite specific set of historical conjunctures. Indeed, the way in which citizenship as an instituted practice is implicated with notions of individual rights, private

<sup>2</sup> For excellent overviews, see Piliavsky (2013), Auerbach (2015), Hicken (2011) and Hicken and Nathan (2020).

property, and payment of taxes has contributed to an ambivalence about applying it uncritically as a universal optic to examine claim-making by people to whom these notions might not appeal (Singh, 2015).

Nevertheless, recent scholarship has cautioned against analysing practices of citizenship against pre-ordained checklists (Lindberg, 2010; Nielsen, 2018; Still, 2010). Rather, we are urged to explore the justificatory premises of demands for expanded entitlements which cannot ignore “vernacular rights cultures” (Madhok, 2018) that intimate demands for citizenship. An appreciation of such cultures-grounded in specific political imaginaries, justificatory premises and social subjectivities-requires attention to the aspirations of the substantive claims despite the absence of the language of formal rights. These claims are not only directed against governments, as much of the scholarship on citizenship would suggest, but also against social elites and members of dominant classes. This literature opens further opportunities to explore the narratives and practices deployed by poor people while advancing claims on politicians, bureaucrats, and other people in power.

### 1.3. Political society

A potential response to the importance of ‘vernacular rights cultures’ to claim-making by the poor is advanced by Partha Chatterjee 2004 through the formulation of political society. Such a formulation directs attention to the ways in which the poor appeal to differentiated, rather than universal, conceptions of citizenship to secure their livelihoods.<sup>3</sup> To defend the meagre acquisitions that they might obtain through methods that the apparatus of the rule of law labels as ‘illegal’, the poor seek redress in moral, rather than juridical, terms. Through such moral claims, they request exemptions from the rule of law rather than ask for it to be applied universally. Chatterjee supplies the example of the inhabitants of a squatter community in Kolkata to distinguish the operation of political society from both clientelism and citizenship. The squatters’ occupation of public land is deemed an illegal encroachment and they are threatened with eviction. In response, they request, appeal, and plead before authorities to not evict them. They invoke their own poverty and ask the authorities to consider their compulsions and constraints, not in the name of the law or the constitution, but in the name of the obligation of the state toward its poor. In doing so, they forge a moral solidarity among themselves, by presenting themselves as members of a single community of refugees-turned-squatters (Chatterjee, 2004: 57). The arbitrariness of these practices and the results they entail is unmistakable. But such arbitrariness is preferred by the squatters, Chatterjee assures us, to the rule of law because were the latter to be applied, they would all be evicted.

The formulation of political society demands that our understanding of citizenship exceed the usual formulations of political equality, grounded in universal suffrage and juridical rights for all. Chatterjee’s suggestion that the analysis of political practices be framed “as a redefined norm that endorses differentiated rather than equal citizenship as the normative standard for the modern state” (Chatterjee, 2004: 24) is important in this context. This suggestion is an important attempt to reflect on vernacular rights cultures in the context of claim-making. By directing attention to the bottom-up agency of claimants as well as the moral, rather than legal, demands they advance on bureaucrats, politicians and other political mediators, the perspective on political society offers useful insights into claim-making in the Global South. It reminds us that juridical and legal channels are not the only route to claim-making and that moral claims are just as, if not more, effective.

Nevertheless, by highlighting the moral nature of poor people’s

<sup>3</sup> Chatterjee labels the relationship on the basis of which poor people seek a negotiated settlement with their governments as that of political society. He distinguishes the relationship inherited in political society from the relationships inhabiting civil society where, according to him, the imaginary of the rule of law and a juridical conception of citizenship predominates.

politics, discussions on political society offer only a slice of the heterogeneous nature of their claims. Such a perspective ignores the way in which the poor *combine* different modes of claim-making. Such modes entail not only consent by the governed (to use Chatterjee’s phrase) but also more conflictual claims that make explicit the contradictions between the claimant and those who wield authority. Such a focus ironically dilutes the ‘political’ dimension of poor people’s claims and assumes that *they* acquiesce with the differentiated conception of citizenship which Chatterjee endorses. The focus on political society assumes that the poor are unwilling to question the asymmetries of power to which they are subjected. The literature on political society leaves considerable room to explore such interrogations of power by the poor.

## 2. An agonistic account

In critical conversation with formulations of clientelism, citizenship and political society, I draw on Chantal Muhtadi (2019, 2000, 2007, 2009) ‘agonistic’ approach to politics to reflect on the heterogeneity of the claims advanced by poor people in rural India. Mouffe urges analysts to recognise the impossibility of eliminating conflict from human life. She alerts us that, even in contexts of free and fair elections where robust mechanisms exist to hold elected leaders accountable, the dimension of conflict can neither be wished away nor co-opted within electoral institutions.<sup>4</sup> Instead, Mouffe offers her ‘agonistic account’ to conceptualize politics as social spaces which supply an arena for reconfiguring power relations.

Importantly, proponents of the agonistic view distinguish themselves from votaries of antagonistic conflict. Antagonism is violent and involves physical liquidation of adversaries. By contrast, the perspective of agonism points us to the negotiations over the terms on which the political community is constituted. The protagonists of an agonistic relation, even as they are in conflict, see themselves as sharing a common symbolic framework. The protagonists do not seek to liquidate one another. Rather, their practices aim to reshape extant social relations towards greater equality. By taking cognisance of power relations, an agonistic account departs from both deliberative notions of politics as well as formulations that focus on rational choice bargains. Unlike these latter accounts which abstract out questions of power, proponents of agonistic politics appreciate that although power cannot be eliminated in social life, it can be and is contested.

An agonistic account directs attention to the fraught conceptual histories between liberalism and democracy. As Mouffe reminds us, ‘On one side we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty; on the other the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty’ (Muñoz, 2014: 2). Her account reminds scholars that democracy and liberalism are historically and conceptually disjunctive. Such insights are valuable for thinking about rural politics in India, sometimes described as a ‘patronage democracy’ (Chandra, 2004) where resources are often allocated in a discretionary rather than rule-bound way and where lines of accountability are more opaque than transparent (Gupta, 2012). An agonistic perspective is particularly illuminating to discuss claim-making in rural Bihar where tensions between popular democracy and liberal understandings of development are palpable (Witsoe, 2013).

At its core, agonism is about reconfiguring power relations where power refers not merely to the holding of governmental positions but to the use of material, social and symbolic resources (Roy, 2018: 28).

<sup>4</sup> This advice follows from the distinction Mouffe (2005: 9) draws between what she defines as the realm of ‘politics’ and the realm of the ‘political’. She defines ‘politics’ as the ensemble of practices and institutions through which an order is created and human coexistence is organized. The ‘political’ on the other hand, refers to an arena of antagonistic struggle where social actors attempt to eliminate collective enemies.

Agonists aim to reconfigure power hierarchies towards equality, often expressing conflict but never resorting to violence. Agonistic claims recognise oppression and injustice but do not envisage a revolutionary overthrow of the oppressive and unjust order. Such claims encompass an inchoate antagonism, which recognises social contradictions but does not let it degenerate into mass violence. Instead, an agonistic perspective recognises that poor people can and do collectively mobilise heterogeneous- and contradictory-practices of clientelism, citizenship and political society as they endeavour to improve their lives.

An agonistic perspective thus helps to address the problems identified in each of the literatures above. First, its emphasis on social relations enables the analysis of bottom-up claims advocated in the literature (Hicken and Nathan, 2020). Second, its consideration of democratic possibilities beyond liberalism allows the investigation of vernacular rights cultures (Madhok, 2021). Third, its focus on contestation of power without unleashing violence permits an exploration of poor people's contentions vis-à-vis actors in political society (Chatterjee, 2004). To be clear, the agonistic account of claim-making is not intended to dismiss the valuable perspectives offered by the literatures on clientelism, citizenship and political society. Rather, such an account draws on the strengths of each approach while addressing limitations identified by their proponents.

Section II complicates the narratives offered by the three strands in the literature. By combining original survey data with ethnographic documentation of the claims advanced by the rural poor on their elected representatives, it illustrates the ways in which they successfully pressurise their local politicians to deliver. However, by unpacking the narratives underpinning these claims, the section allows us to consider the theoretical issues more carefully at stake as outlined above and discussed critically in Section III. As we shall see, poor people in rural Bihar adopt heterogeneous strategies of claim-making that encompass elements of clientelism, citizenship and political society without being contained within any single one of these conceptual rubrics. Their strategies are agonistic in that they advance claims for BPL cards on grounds that they are exploited and marginalised by dominant social groups: such claims are couched in broader narratives of a conflict between the poor and the rich. However, the conflict remains inchoately expressed. Instead of expressing a singular call for a revolutionary overthrow of the existing order, India's rural poor instead combine several modes of claim-making, as we shall see in Sections II and III. But before that, a short note on the methodology adopted for this paper is in order.

### 3. Methodology

As the world's largest democracy, India provides a paradigmatic setting to explore the dynamics of claim-making. The rural setting of this study is justified by the fact that between 70 and 85% of the world's poor-howsoever defined-lived in rural areas as of 2010. India's rural poor alone constitute nearly a quarter of the world's poor. Moreover, the country is home to some of the world's deepest poverty and largest welfare programs. As Akhil Gupta (2012: 23) observes, "One could hardly accuse the [Indian] state of inaction toward the poor: it would be difficult to imagine a more extensive set of development interventions in the fields of nutrition, health, education, housing, employment, sanitation, and so forth than those found in India."

I illustrate the dynamics of claim-making through a study of Bihar, a poor and overwhelmingly rural State in eastern India. I document the heterogeneous nature of claims made by the rural poor in one Gram Panchayat (village council), drawing on extended fieldwork between 2009 and 2015 that combined an original census survey with elite interviews and ethnography. Part of a larger project, the surveys on which I draw for this paper covered 165 households in a rural ward I call Sargana Ward 1. The schedule included the measures used by the Indian state to identify BPL households as well as measures developed by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) to measure

multidimensional poverty. Additional to basic socio-economic attributes of households, the surveys elicited information about the possession of BPL cards. Therefore, the data collected through the surveys helped me to identify overlaps between the people who actually received the BPL cards, those who were eligible to receive it under the state's policy framework, and those who might be eligible under a more expansive 'multidimensional poverty index' (MPI) framework for identifying the poor. The methodology is detailed in Roy (2018).

### 4. II

*They [The enumerators] asked us how we would like the government to help us. We told them we'd like to work-like they did, so we'd like some kind of training. Then we saw those mo\*\*\*\*f\*\*\*\*ers gave us high scores. Do we migrate for work? Oh yes we do. Every season. But my father [pointing to an elderly gentlemen resting on his cot] doesn't go, he's too weak to go, he's not ill, just too weak .... So, they gave him a '4' ... They then asked why I was reporting us as separate households [face flashing in anger] .... Why doesn't he take him [my father] home if he cares so much ... we don't live like that. But these boys-they just did not understand. They were pandits [reference to the enumerators' Brahman caste], from the town ... What would they know about the way we have been exploited for centuries? What would they know about the injustices we have endured?*

*We had no option but to ask for a meeting [in English] Sarvesh Mukhya [The Mukhya]. We had a meeting with him each evening for a week, just to be sure that things were alright.*

Group discussion notes, Sargana Ward 1, Rishdeo tola machan (West), March 7, 2010.

This section illustrates the claims advanced by the rural poor in Bihar's Sargana Ward 1. I largely follow Kruks-Wisner (2018) in defining claim-making as "action—direct or mediated—through which citizens pursue access to social welfare goods and services, understood as publicly provided resources intended to protect and improve wellbeing and social security". As the account in this section and the discussion in the next section show, such claim-making straddles different conceptual registers. Claim-making involves elements of clientelism, citizenship and political society without being limited to any singular formulation. But first, let us explore the significance of politicians to poor people's claims. Why are politicians, political mediaries, and brokers important to the claims made by people and not, say, bureaucrats responsible for delivering services?

### 5. The historical-institutional terrain of claim-making

The relative importance of politicians (rather than bureaucrats) to people's claims in rural India may well have to do with the sequencing of bureaucratisation and democratisation in the country. As Roy (2018) postulates, where bureaucratisation precedes democratisation, as in postcolonial states such as India, bureaucrats are well-entrenched and often drawn from privileged social groups. Colonial rule in the Indian sub-continent emerged in the Bengal Presidency of which Bihar was a backwater: hence, the bureaucracy (and police and judiciary) were relatively well-developed before elected legislatures, based on adult suffrage, came into being (Kamra, 2020; Chatterjee, 2004).

However, with Independence and the adoption of universal suffrage, it was the legislature rather than the bureaucracy that became more representative of the Indian population. Christophe Jaffrelot (2003) calls this trend India's "silent revolution" to indicate the progressive incorporation of members of historically marginalised populations into legislatures, compared to other arms of the government including the bureaucracy. Such incorporation has meant that the poor believe that their elected representatives and other politicians, rather than the bureaucracy, to be more socially proximate to them and therefore perceive them to be more sympathetic. Such patterns are amplified among Gram Panchayats across India where affirmative action policies have been implemented to ensure the representation of women and historically

oppressed communities (Corbridge et al., 2005; Diaz-Cayeros et al., 2016; Chauchard, 2018), including in Bihar (Gupta, 2012; Pankaj and Singh, 2005; Krishna, 2002; Sundar, 2011).

In this vein, recent scholarship has drawn attention to the shifting sands of clientelism in the contexts of political change in India. Akhil Gupta (2012) notes the move away from patronage to brokerage as concomitant with such change. Krishna (2002) argues that *naya netas* (emerging leaders) in rural India act as ‘intermediate institutions’ between the state and the population and to secure welfare benefits for the latter. *Naya netas* undertake such acts to win social prestige and influence rather than political authority or economic rents. Krishna’s work resonates with the scholarship that underscores the transformation in the politics of the Indian countryside from elite-based patronage networks to broader-based clientelistic relationships (Bussell, 2015; Muhtadi, 2019; Muhtadi, 2019; Witsoe, 2013; and Kramon, 2017). Such shifts are symptomatic of the widening radius of participation of people from hitherto-marginalised social and economic backgrounds. As political entrepreneurs, the *naya netas* of Krishna’s conceptualisation substantiate the citizenship claims of the poor by bringing them face-to-face with the institutions of governance that matter most to them.

Extending this thesis, James Madhok (2018) calls for a ‘post-clientelistic’ approach to studying local politics in India. He argues that with the institution of elected local government institutions and increased exposure to the practice of such institutions, scholarly approaches that hold clientelism central to the study of India’s politics need to be discarded. In a similar vein, Kruks-Wisner (2018) highlights the ways in which the rural poor are successful in pursuing social welfare through direct claims made on elected representatives and bureaucrats of the State government. Indeed, challenging narratives that predict an inability among the rural poor to pursue their claims, Auerbach (2015) show that the rural poor are more, not less, likely to successfully pressurise their elected representatives to deliver than their urban counterparts.

Against such optimism, however, scholars have pointed to the institutional and cultural factors that contribute to perpetrating clientelistic relations. Extensive field studies by Pranab Bardhan and his colleagues (Bussell, 2015; Bussell, 2015; Bussell, 2015; Bussell, 2015) point to the persistence of clientelism despite vibrant local democracy. Pattenden (2011) details the forms of ‘gatekeeping’ practiced by the dominant classes to structure, and control, the labouring classes’ access to state resources. Véron et al. (2003) make a similar point about poor people’s access to of their entitlements under the public-funded Employment Assurance Scheme. These authors call attention to the institutional features of democratic decentralisation in India, which enable members of the dominant classes to perpetuate their control over other people’s lives. A related argument is advanced by Piliavsky (2014), who highlights the moral economy of clientelism, and the ways in which patronage is embedded in a value system wherein ‘efficacy’ is attributed a key role. To be sure, none of these scholars suggests that clientelistic relationships have remained untouched by the democratic claims articulated by India’s poor over the last three decades. They agree that clientelistic relationships are not immutable. However, because villages are home to poor people and typically lack a middle class, many scholars continue to predict that they remain susceptible to clientelism. It is anticipated that rural residents engage the state through political intermediaries rather than through direct claim-making (Madhok, 2018; Krishna, 2002; Corbridge et al., 2005; Krishna and Schober, 2014).

Without undermining the asymmetries of power to which rural Indians are subjected, scholars urge students of Indian politics to take seriously the claims and practices of citizenship that animate their political engagements. Muhtadi (2019) argues that the post-colonial Indian state has successfully turned subjects into citizens who feel “legally entitled and morally engaged” with the state. Baxi (2002: 15) likewise focuses attention to the interpretation of the Indian constitution by the judiciary, which enunciates the “linkages between governance,

development, rights and justice”. Popular struggles add meaning to the legal status of citizenship conferred by the state (Eckert, 2006; Ruud, 2003; Sundar, 2011; and Chauchard, 2018), resonating with an insurgent conception of citizenship (Sundar, 2011) which challenges power and inequality instead of acquiescing with it. Kruks-Wisner (2018) contributes to a theorisation of “active citizenship” as integral to claim-making in the rural Indian localities she studies.

## 6. Sargana Ward 1: the social context of claim-making

The rationale for site-selection followed the well-established thesis in rural and peasant studies that economic autonomy enhanced political voice (Auerbach, 2015; Witsoe, 2013; Still, 2010): the more economic assets poor rural people owned, the more likely they were to make claims. In the context of Bihar, where land continues to be a major source of income and status, but landholdings are fragmented, the land held by ‘marginal farmers’, smallholders who owned less than 1 ha of land, was an important criterion for site-selection. Drawing on survey data, I selected for this study Sargana Ward 1, where ‘marginal farmers’, at 28% of the population, owned 71% of the land. This methodological and analytical approach is detailed in Roy (2018).

The decision to focus on wards, rather than Gram Panchayats, needs explanation. As the basic units of local government in rural India, Gram Panchayats are crucial to any study of rural politics. However, the institutional design of Gram Panchayats lends importance to elected ward-level councillors. Ward-level councillors in Bihar are responsible for advising the elected President of the Gram Panchayat, the Mukhya, on matters pertaining to their ward. As elected representatives, it is their responsibility to ensure that their constituents receive the services for which they are eligible. Although, as we shall see subsequently, rural Biharis recognised that the Mukhya, rather than the ward councillor, was ultimately responsible for the Panchayat, the official role of the ward councillor led me to design my focus on the ward rather than the Gram Panchayat.

Sargana Ward 1 comprised 165 households. The ward was located approximately 3 km north of the Bhargama block headquarters. Nearly 70 per cent of Sargana’s population was landless. Approximately 40 per cent of the landless earned their household incomes primarily from laboring on the fields of local farmers and peasants, while a third of all households depended mainly on employment outside of the village. They travelled as far as Punjab and Delhi, located nearly 1000 km to the west, to work in a variety of industries ranging from agriculture to construction. Others worked as masons, plumbers and laborers in the bazaar’s numerous eateries, kiosks peddling *chai* and *pan*, and shops retailing stationary items, low-cost garments, daily items of grocery, and footwear or offering photocopying services. Some of these establishments were owned by landless households. A few vended fruits and vegetables, milk, and trinkets and bangles. Additional to the landless, a small number of marginal landowners too complemented their agricultural labor with temporary migration to other locations in northern India. Over a quarter of all landless and marginal landowning households derived their incomes overwhelmingly from off-farm activities. Such households were involved in a range of activities including tailoring, weaving baskets, and pottery. Others owned small kiosks and eateries that sold snacks and meals or shops that retailed items of daily and special consumption.

Sargana’s class structure overlapped with its landholding structure. 80 per cent of the landless households and nearly half of all marginal landowners worked as manual labourers. Manual labourers comprised nearly two-thirds of Sargana’s population. They either exclusively hired out their labour, or complemented laboring for others with working on their own tiny plots of land and small-scale workshops or business units. They did not hire *in* any labour. By contrast, none of the seven medium and large landowners hired out their labor. Four of the locality’s large landowners and one medium landowner managed their agricultural operations either by leasing their land to sharecroppers or by directly

recruiting workers and overseeing their labour. Less than a tenth of all households in Sargana depended exclusively on hiring *in* labour for their production or consumption activities.

Overlaps between Sargana’s class structure and its several communities were also discernible. Members of the Rishdeo community, oppressed as ‘untouchable’, who made up a quarter of the population, constituted 40 per cent of the locality’s manual workers. On the other hand, the Kayasths (a ‘high-caste’ community) who comprised 23 per cent of the ward’s population, made up a miniscule proportion of its manual laborers. No member of the Rajput community (another ‘high-caste’ community), who made up 9 per cent of the locality’s population, was engaged in manual labour. The proportion of the Yadav and Kevat (both ‘low caste’ communities, ranked below the ‘high castes’ but above the ‘untouchables’) to the total population of manual workers were commensurate with their proportion of the total population of the ward (approximately 12%). Following the leads from literatures outlined above, I had expected the marginal farmers of the Yadav and Kevat communities to be most vocal about their claims while the landless Rishdeos-stigmatised as “untouchable” and with few assets-would be reticent. In fact, however, as the subsequent section will show, the locality’s Rishdeos were as vocal, if not more, than members of other communities when it came claiming the BPL cards.

Like rural politics elsewhere in Bihar, candidates associated with or affiliated to political parties contested local elections as ‘independents’ rather than as representatives of those parties. Thus, the Mukhya Sarvesh Mandal was affiliated with the Janata Dal-United (JDU), the same party that has governed the State from 2005, and which has enjoyed some support of the poorest people in the State especially of the Rishdeo community. He had won the election by narrowly defeating his nearest rival Amaresh Yadav, affiliated with the Rashtriya Janata Dal, the major opposition party in the State, commonly associated with the middle peasants of the Yadav community.

Other players also dotted Sargana’s political landscape. Competitors to the Mukhya’s post included Hunny Singh, affiliated with the Congress Party and scion of the largest landlord in the area as well as BJP-affiliated Dharmesh Srivastav. Although the RJD was aligned with the Congress at the State level and the JDU ruled the State in a coalition with the BJP, social relations between supporters of these parties at the village level were far from cordial. The Congress Party drew on the erstwhile landlords and rich farmers of the Rajput community (with whom the Yadav middle and poor peasants frequently clashed) while the BJP’s support came from the Kayasth retailers and trailers (who disparaged the Rishdeos as unclean and untouchable). The Communist Party of India (Marxist/Leninist-Liberation) enjoyed some support in the area among the landless Rishdeos, Yadvas and Rajputs although more as a social movement rather than as a political party. Several caste associations, such as the Musahar Seva Sangh, also dotted Sargana’s landscape.

The patterns of local politics in Sargana resonated with the social cleavages that marked State-level politics. While the high castes remained split between the Congress and the BJP, it was the ‘low castes’ who controlled the levers of the State’s key political parties, the JDU and the RJD. The political ascendance of the ‘low castes’ in Bihar has been a characteristic feature of the State’s politics since 1990 (Witsoe, 2013; Kramon, 2017; Roy, 2018), concentrating key decision-making authorities on them, at least at the local level. Bihar’s Dalits, worse off than the ‘lower’ castes in terms of both economic and social status, sought to leverage these political faultlines the best they could to advance their own claims and interests.

**7. A BPL survey: the policy context of claim-making**

It was in this keenly contested landscape that the BPL survey was rolled out early in 2008. The BPL census had been designed by India’s Planning Commission in 2000. The census schedule comprised 13 questions to ‘target’ rural households with social welfare including

subsidized food and housing, and a plethora of social assistance such as maternity benefits, old age pensions and access to child-care facilities.<sup>5</sup> The 13 questions that constituted the BPL census schedule included a range of parameters, reflecting the emergence of a multidimensional view of poverty in official circles. These parameters included: ownership of assets and durable items; sources of income; sanitation practices; and literacy levels. The schedule also canvassed information on the number of meals eaten by the household for most parts of the year, the number of clothing items and the households’ preference for assistance – variables that barely lent themselves to categorical answers. Each question was to be scored on a 0–4 scale, which meant that every rural household could receive a score ranging from ‘0’ to ‘52’.

The problems with the survey schedule were apparent to Sargana’s population quickly enough for it was at all clear to them how the schedule would sift through a mass of impoverished population and determine households eligible to be on the BPL list. The results of my own survey, presented in Table 1, concurred with the justified perception among the population that the government’s BPL survey would result in arbitrary consequences. My survey suggested that less than 13 per cent of all households would be eligible for BPL cards, assuming a completely unbiased selection process.

Table 2 shows that even were the BPL Schedule to be implemented without bias, over half of all Sargana Ward 1’s households would be categorised as MPI Poor but not BPL Poor.

Sargana’s residents recognised the exclusionary possibilities of the BPL survey. They therefore made claims on their Mukhya to mitigate against such exclusions. As the next section clarifies, such claims were far from unified or coherent. They were internally heterogenous and even though they sought to express the contradictions between the dominant and the oppressed, their negotiations were careful to combine contention with consent. The distributional consequences of their agonistic claim-making are discussed in Part III, in which I demonstrate the pro-poor allocation of the BPL cards in Sargana.

**7.1. Claim-making**

The institutional design of Bihar’s Gram Panchayats makes the Panchayat’s Mukhya the usual focus of people’s claims. Sargana’s Mukhya Sarvesh Mandal, a middle peasant of the ‘lower-caste’ Kevat community who cultivated his ten *bigha* plot through a combination of own, family and hired labour, was confronted regularly by claimants asking to be considered favourably for the BPL cards. I met Sarvesh Mandal at his home as he reviewed the progress over the actual disbursal of the BPL cards with his close associates, who happened to be middle and rich peasants from the Yadav and Kevat communities. As I broached the subject of the BPL cards during our interview, Sarvesh Mandal’s composed demeanour underwent a radical change. He was visibly agitated:

“It seems the Bihar Government does not want any poor people in this State. Its ridiculous that they have set a cut-off of ‘13’ for such a

**Table 1**  
Asset profile of the BPL Schedule Poor households in Sargana Ward 1.

Attribute	BPL Schedule Poor	BPL Schedule non-poor	Total (N)
Total population	12.73	87.27	165
Landless	18.26	81.74	115
Mud floor	14.71	85.29	136
Bicycle	3.95	96.05	76

Source: Author census survey, 2009-10

<sup>5</sup> The global and national politics of the BPL cards and the ‘targeted’ welfare regime in which they were embedded are detailed in Roy (2018).

**Table 2**  
BPL Schedule Poverty and Multidimensional poverty in Sargana Ward 1.

Multidimensional poverty	BPL Schedule Poverty	
	No	Yes
No	34.54	0
Yes	52.72	12.73

Source: Author census survey, 2009-10

poor State. This has been the bitterest part of my public life. I want to help them ....I had people come in every day. They would not understand my position ... they only wanted to have their way .....

*Now look at the Rishdeos .... They are good people, but they don't know how to conduct themselves in public. They are easily excited. They talk without listening to others. They said, 'Mukhyaji, you have to help us. We elected you. Now you better look after us ..... On the one hand, they were shouting at me. Can you imagine, the women came here too, and shouted at me! And the abuses they heaped on me ... Even men don't say such things. On the other hand, they were asking me to look after them ... I didn't know whom to talk to. If there were one or two of them, I could have a proper discussion, and we could sort this out. I tried to talk with [Ward representative]. But they shouted him down. They all wanted to talk to me ... But what do you do with a crowd [bheedh]?<sup>6</sup>*

Although broadly sympathetic to their demands, Sarvesh Mandal's account of the individuals who came to meet him invokes images of unruly and uncontrollable crowds. It diverges from the account offered by the said Rishdeos. My interlocutors in the ward's western hamlet, all landless laborers, emphasised that they held regular "meetings" (using the English term) with the Mukhya where they tried to clarify the survey questions and the implications of the answers they had given. They reported that they tried to speak directly with him because they considered him their well-wisher. After all, in his youth, his family had been a smallholder tenant. Moreover, he – rather than the Ward Member – was ultimately responsible for finalizing the BPL lists. My interlocutors' accounts revealed that they were annoyed by his inability to assure them that he would help them. They exchanged angry words with him because he tried to dodge responsibility for helping them. Bhukhan Rishi said:

*All we wanted was for him to help us. Is this too much to ask? We voted for him, so he ought to help us. He was poor once, so he should help others who are poor. We have been exploited (shoshit) for centuries. We face so much injustice (anyay). So has he and his community. Why ignore us and talk to the Ward Member?<sup>7</sup>*

Notwithstanding their confrontations with the Mukhya and expletive-laden exchanges with him, most of my interlocutors admitted that he was easier to approach and to negotiate with than his predecessor had been. His predecessor, Hunny Singh was a wealthy Rajput landlord who treated the Rishdeos with disdain. In a remarkably frank interview with me, Hunny Singh condemned the public distribution system (PDS) on the specious grounds that it made laborers lazy and unproductive. According to him, it distorted incentives and reduced their motivation to work. Subsidized food made the laboring poor insolent and allowed them to bargain for higher remuneration. Hunny Singh's views were not an isolated strand of opinion among the entrenched classes. His cousin who was also the locality's Post Master Gajen Singh was even more emphatic about dismantling the limited edifice of the PDS that existed. Like too many other members of their social class in Sargana, they both criticized the state's provision of social welfare as wasteful and anti-social.

By contrast, my Rishdeo interlocutors suggested that the present Mukhya was at least willing to talk to them, to hear them out, and to consider their claims. As we have seen, the Mukhya readily admitted the justness of their claims: it was the official stipulation to hold the cut-off at 13 which was coming in the way. He rubbished his predecessor's dismissive views on social provisioning as representative of a "feudal mind set" (*samantvadi manasikta*). As far as the Mukhya could see, the BPL cards were not the problem. That there were too few of them was.

## 7.2. Heterogenous claims

An analysis of both accounts revealed the internally fragmented quality of the claims. On the one hand, claimants requested the Mukhya for 'help'. They appealed to their Mukhya to look after them. They urged him to enumerate them as BPL populations because it would help them to escape poverty. Because of the Mukhya's impoverished origins, they considered it his obligation to help them out of poverty. These references to help were intended to arouse sympathy. On the other hand, they expressed a contractual relation with their elected representative: he had to help them because they had elected him. Even when they asked him to 'look after us', they anchored their request in vocabularies of holding him to account for having elected him.

At the same time, Bhukhan Rishi's father contradicted him almost as soon as he made the above remark:

*It doesn't matter whether we voted for him or not. People vote in all sorts of ways. They have different compulsions. Mukhyaji should help us because- well, he's the Mukhya, is he not? We are poor people. We are exploited by everyone. We have suffered injustice. If he won't help us, who will? You tell us, babu, who will?<sup>8</sup>*

Bhukhan Rishi did not disagree. Indeed, he murmured his assent. That they had voted for the Mukhya was only incidental, father and son seemed to convey. As the Mukhya, it was Sarvesh Mandal's obligation to help poor people like themselves, irrespective of how they might have voted (or not).

## 7.3. Expressing conflict

In advancing their claims on the Mukhya, Sargana's people refer to their poverty and deprivation while invoking the justness of their requests. Their claims drew on variations of: "We are poor people. You (The Mukhya) should (have) give(n) us the cards." The sense is that politicians like the Mukhya ought to protect and help poor people, even if that makes them unpopular with the wealthy and the propertied classes. When they met their Mukhya in their many delegations, poor people reinforced their collective personhood as *garib janata* or *garib aadmi* [both terms refer to poor people, the former as a collective and the latter could be interchangeable between the singular and the plural] to reiterate their commonly shared grievances and to seek collective redress. Although the delegations often comprised of neighbours who might all be members of the same community, they referred less to their caste identity and more often to their collective personhood as poor people. In emphasizing their collective personhood, they were not asking for BPL cards to be distributed to every household in the village or to every poor household or even to every poor household of their caste. But they justified their requests by referring to themselves collectively as being poor.

In emphasizing their poverty to the Mukhya, my interlocutors invoked metaphors of injustice (*anyay*) and oppression (*shoshan*). They did not interpret their being poor to results of past deed (*karma*) and bad fortune (*kismet*). Rather, as far as they could tell, they were poor because they were exploited by farmers, industrialists, contractors, middlemen, politicians, bureaucrats, policemen, and sometimes even by other

<sup>6</sup> Interview notes, Sargana Ward 1, Mukhya's Office, March 3, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Interview notes, Sargana Ward 1, Rishdeo tola machan (West), March 6, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Interview notes, Sargana Ward 1, Rishdeo tola machan (West), March 6, 2010.

people in poverty. “The rich are rich before of our blood and sweat” is a common refrain among the rural poor in Bihar, suggesting a fundamental contradiction between the rich and the poor. The rich are often called *dabang*, a term that is frequently used to describe ‘dominance’: *dabang log*, or dominant people are considered to oppress the poor and perpetrate injustice, it is frequently said. The state is held to be no less complicit in this ongoing injustice and oppression. As one 35-year old tailor, of the Kunjra Muslim community, put it,

The government take our rice to make biryani [a rice and meat preparation associated with luxury] for the rich. And they do not want us to eat even a simple chapatti [flattened wheat bread associated with poverty]

Interview, April 3, 2010.

While making their claims for the BPL cards, the rural poor collectively appreciated that their poverty was caused by the oppression of the rich, the *dabang log*, or dominant people.<sup>9</sup> In turn, they anchored their own claims for BPL cards in vocabularies of justice, urging the Mukhya to take decisions that were consistent with being just, or *nyaysangat* in Hindi. The government’s policy of targeting social welfare only benefitted manipulative people who would easily corner these resources. To countervail this possibility, the rural poor urged their Mukhya to proactively favour *them* rather than the dominant people who could appropriate the cards.

While the demand for and understanding of possession of BPL cards did not originate from a sense that the cards constituted a right, or that they should be allocated based on survey scores, the sentiment that the cards were for “poor people” (*garib aadmi*) was unmistakable from their claims. The claimants invoke the notion of being ‘poor people’ in an ambivalently conflictual relationship with wealthy and the propertied folk. As we have seen above, a sense of antagonism against the ‘rich’ prevails among the poor.

#### 7.4. An inchoate antagonism

That said, it is important to stress that such antagonism remains inchoate. Poor people do not express any thoughts about a revolutionary overthrow of the existing order or the annihilation of the propertied groups. Many among them labour on the fields and farms of wealthier peasants and farmers. They resign to the repression of wages, practice of social discrimination and nurturing of social hierarchy that their wealthier neighbours engage in. Others are in the debt of moneylenders or farmers, a situation about which they worry. But they do not identify a singular class enemy against whom they direct their antagonism.

Rather than call for an overthrow of the existing order, the rural poor collectively strive to leverage their elected representatives to secure their names on the BPL list. In that respect, the claims made by the rural poor are agonistic because they invoke the vocabularies of oppression and injustice and are situated within broader narratives of a conflict between the poor and the rich but refrain from embracing a revolutionary struggle to liquidate their adversaries. Instead, as we have seen, they combine several modes of claim-making.

Poor people’s claims are key to their attempt to secure social welfare that they believe will enable them- and their future generations- to lead dignified lives. These claims are internally heterogenous-straddling as they do the conceptual categories of clientelism, citizenship and political society. They invoke the notion of ‘poor people’ oppressed by the rich but do not endorse violent struggle against those oppressors. The antagonism is inchoate at best but they offer a basis for emergent claims that not only seek BPL cards but reveal a critical appreciation of power

<sup>9</sup> Such collective understandings resonate with the analysis offered by sociologists with expertise of different rural regions across India. For a sample of this rich scholarship, see Ruud (2003); Michelutti (2008); Still (2010); Sundar (2011); Waghmore (2013); Witsoe (2013); Chandra (2015); Roy (2018); Nielsen (2018); and Kamra (2020), among others.

relations in the locality.

#### 7.5. Collective claims amidst internal contradictions

My interlocutors nodded their heads vigorously while acknowledging the help they received from others in Sargana. Bhukhan Rishi’s nephew told me that they often requested other landless laborers, who were often Yadav, to accompany their delegations. These landless labourers often persuaded Amaresh Yadav (of the ‘low-caste’ Yadav community) and Dharmesh Srivastava, (‘high-caste’ Kayasth) both of whom were rivals to each other and to the Mukhya, to join them. Activists of the Musahar Sevak Sangh (MSS) and the CPI(M/L–L) added to their numbers and voice, while bringing them information about the ways in which people in other localities were negotiating with their elected representatives and political mediators. Not one of these individuals were supporters of the Mukhya: if anything, they had contested his election in the past and it was an open secret that many of the Rishdeo claimants who claimed to have voted for the Mukhya were in fact supporters of either BJP- or RJD-affiliated candidates rather than the JDU-affiliated Mukhya.

Mutual acrimonies among the members of the delegations were not uncommon. The activists of the CPI(M/L–L) and the MSS were often suspicious of one another. They also shared a mutual dislike for Dharmesh Srivastava, who reciprocated their hostility. Although Bhukhan Rishi and his friends disliked Amaresh Yadav’s partisan role in disputes between Rishdeo agricultural laborers and their Yadav employers in a neighboring ward, they tolerated his presence because it added to their influence. All these individuals contributed their presence and voice to the delegations that Bhukhan Rishi and other landless laborers took to the Mukhya.

However, the Mukhya also reported that many claimants approached him individually or in groups of two and three. Such claimants were usually rich peasants and farmers who would not, under most circumstances, be eligible for receiving BPL cards. He claimed that his predecessor Hunny Singh and scores of other wealthy Rajput householders had approached him requesting for BPL cards. If he was correct, that would mean that Sargana’s wealthiest and highest-status people sought BPL cards for themselves. The Mukhya’s claimants also included poor peasants from among the Kayasth and Rajput communities, who approached the Mukhya individually and without involving members of other communities. The Mukhya’s views chimed with the accounts of landless laborers and poor peasants from among the Yadavs and Rishdeos. I also gathered that not one of ward’s Kayasth or Rajput poor joined the delegations led by either Yadav middle peasants or Rishdeo labourers.

#### 7.6. Agonistic claims and the reconfiguration of power relations

The claims advanced by the rural poor of the Rishdeo community were not only about obtaining BPL cards and accessing welfare services. That their claims were anchored in narratives of exploitation, oppression and injustice suggest a sophisticated understanding of the ways in which their own poverty was caused by hierarchies of power and the attendant concentration of resources with the dominant classes of the “high-caste” communities. Access to the BPL cards offered the rural poor the opportunity to at least attempt a reconfiguration of this concentration of resources in material, social and symbolic domains. Such a reconfiguration promised to level the hierarchies to which the rural poor had been subjected and inaugurate a social order that was potentially more egalitarian to the one they had hitherto known.

In material terms, access to the BPL cards entailed access to housing and food subsidies alongside a plethora of welfare benefits. These benefits, paltry though these were in global terms, were not insignificant to the household livelihoods of the rural poor. They could utilise these benefits to improve their houses, buy essential foods, and add to their meagre savings. Although the rural poor were under no illusion that

these benefits would equalise their incomes vis-à-vis members of the locally dominant classes, they valued the material support they received from the state on account of being classified as living ‘below the poverty line’.

The material benefits accruing from being eligible for a BPL card would be meaningless without the social resources required to obtain them. By collectively pressuring their elected representative, local politicians and other political mediaries, the rural poor successfully mobilised their social resources in ways that members of locally dominant classes failed. As we shall see below, the Mukhya’s arbitrariness resulted in the rural poor obtaining more BPL cards than they (or anyone else) anticipated. Despite mutual bickering, tense exchanges, and graded social hierarchies, the rural poor convinced the Mukhya of the validity of their claims. That they succeeded, while their counterparts from among the dominant classes failed, signals a crucial way in which local power relations were at least partially reconfigured.

Layered onto the reconfiguration of material and social resources is the renegotiation of symbolic resources. The very institution of welfare programs aimed at ameliorating the living conditions of the poor suggested the commitment of the Indian state towards its poorest citizens. The potential benefits of the BPL cards to the rural poor were well-recognised locally. Access to welfare reduced the dependence of the rural poor on local elites for employment, credit and social support, thereby tilting the balance of power away from dominant social elites towards poorer ones. It was hardly surprising therefore that local elites disparaged the (meagre) outlays of social welfare not only as wasteful but as encouraging indolence. Ironically, their public denunciations did not prevent them from privately persuading their elected representatives to direct the BPL cards away from the poor towards the rich. By taking seriously the state’s welfare commitments and holding their elected representative accountable for their delivery, the rural poor actively sought to renegotiate their social relations with locally dominant classes. Their access to the BPL card was a symbolic resource that illustrated the state’s commitment to them, and was claimed as such.

Agonistic claims aim to reconfigure power relations. Such claims recognise that power operates beyond holding governmental positions to using material, social and symbolic resources. Agonists seek control of such resources to ensure egalitarian social relations. In doing so, they often express conflict but refrain from resorting to violence. While espousing narratives of oppression and injustice, agonistic claims do not envisage a revolutionary overthrow of the oppressive and unjust order. As we have seen, such claims encompass an inchoate antagonism that identify social contradictions without inciting violence. Rather, agonists such as the rural poor in India appreciate the value of heterogenous and contradictory practices of clientelism, citizenship and political society as they endeavour to undermine local power relations in their quest for dignified lives and social equality. The agonistic perspective enables scholars of rural politics in India to foreground the importance of reconfiguring power relations in ways that singular perspectives of clientelism, citizenship and political society do not.

### 8. III, the distributional consequences of agonistic claim-making

The distributional consequences of agonistic claim-making benefitted the poor in Sargana Ward 1. The survey revealed that, although only 13% of the ward’s population was eligible for BPL cards, in fact over 50% received it. Thus, 83 out of the ward’s 165 households obtained BPL cards when, in fact, only 21 would have been eligible for it were the BPL Schedule to be properly implemented. In a further twist, however, as many as 85% of the households (68 of 83) who received the cards were not, in fact, eligible for it as per the BPL Schedule. So, the basis on which the BPL cards were distributed departed spectacularly from the official procedure: such departure implied that the Mukhya did exercise a great deal of arbitrary authority over the identification of BPL households. Furthermore, of the 21 households eligible for the cards under the official schedule, six did not receive the cards, indicating that

the Mukhya’s decisions resulted not only in inclusion of ineligible households (ineligible recipients) but also, more worryingly, the *exclusion* of eligible households (eligible non-recipients). These patterns seemed to resonate closely with the practice of clientelism discussed above. An examination of the social profile of the ineligible recipients and eligible non-recipients, however, sprung further surprises.

Contrary to the expectations of the literature on clientelism, households of marginalised communities were disproportionately represented among ineligible recipients. Rishdeo households like Bhukhan Rishi’s, which comprised a quarter of the ward’s population, represented almost 40% of the ineligible recipients of BPL cards. Indeed, every single Rishdeo household that was eligible for the BPL cards received them. Furthermore, unlike typical examples of clientelistic practice which privilege social elites, high caste households were *under-represented* among ineligible recipients.

Among the six eligible households excluded from the BPL cards, three were of the Yadav community, “low” down the caste hierarchy but not historically oppressed as the Rishdeos. Of the remaining three, one was Dhobhi (a Dalit community, relatively better educated than others), another was Dusadh (another Dalit community, with relatively robust political representation) and a third was Kayasth (“high-caste” community whose members tended to be over-represented in the bureaucracy and judiciary of the State). Though the Mukhya’s actions may well have been clientelistic because they were not impersonal and did not adhere to formal stipulations, there was no evidence that they discriminated against the socially marginalised. Discrimination against the Yadav community was likely due to the perception that they tended to support the Mukhya’s rival: at any rate, Yadav households made up 24% of all BPL recipient households (approximately the same proportion of the population as in the village), so it is unlikely that the Mukhya systematically discriminated against the Yadavs.

Could it be that the cards were being directed towards members of the political party to which the Mukhya was aligned? This too was unlikely. The survey suggested that of the 12 families with members in any political party, only three received the BPL cards. While it is possible that all three recipients of the BPL cards were members of the same political party as the Mukhya, they were by far a minority of political party members in the ward. Even if the Mukhya sought to favour political party members, the scale of such favouritism was relatively small.

The survey findings suggest that the BPL cards were not being disbursed according to the (flawed) official rules based on the implementation of the BPL Schedule. Ineligible households received BPL cards and (to a lesser extent) eligible households were excluded, suggesting a personalised politics of distribution. Nevertheless, such personalised distributive politics did not seem to be systematically discriminatory against the socially marginalised Rishdeo community. Every single eligible household of the community received the BPL cards, as did many other marginalised caste households.

### 9. Beyond clientelism, citizenship and political society: the efficacy of agonistic claims

These idioms of collective personhood that combine different modes of claim-making coalesce a political identity that cannot be contained exclusively under the rubric of clientelism, citizenship and political society. It is here that an agonistic account offers useful insights, drawing on the strengths of existing approaches while addressing their limitations.

The agonistic perspective helps us to appreciate the ways in which the rural poor combine different methods of claim-making. They appeal to the kindness of their politicians while asking for help, invoke idioms of a contractual relation with them due to having voted for them, and suggest a broader responsibility that politicians owe to all residents within their jurisdiction, not only their voters. These methods combine the personalistic claims associated with clientelism, contractual claims associated with citizenship and moral claims associated with political

society. At the same time, it addresses the bottom-up agency of the voters themselves, the vernacular idioms of citizenship and the asymmetries of power inherent in political society.

Thus, the agonistic perspective does not merely combine the practices associated with clientelism, citizenship and political society but also addresses important limitations recognised within these literatures. The rural poor refer to the responsibilities of “their” politicians, thereby highlighting *their* agency in instigating the clientelistic exchange. They expect “their” politicians to serve those whose votes brought them to power, highlighting a vernacular culture of rights that nonetheless is effective in holding their politicians accountable. Appeals to their politicians for help are not only about obtaining BPL cards, but are embedded in expressions of conflict between the poor and the rich and an appreciation that access to BPL cards could challenge social relations of power.

Agonistic claims resulted in an inclusive distribution of BPL cards that benefitted the rural poor in Sargana Ward 1, especially those from oppressed caste backgrounds. Their bottom-up agency ensured that the Mukhya could not ignore their claims. A vernacular culture of rights held “their” Mukhya accountable to their claims. Their moral claims were embedded in an expression of conflict with the rich and dominant social groups in the locality. Although such antagonism was inchoate, it did result in collective claims based on broad social solidarities that resulted in a pro-poor distribution of cards.

## 10. Conclusions: limitations and extensions

Combining an original survey and ethnographic explorations, this paper engages critically with the prevailing ways of narrating, conceptualising and theorising poor people’s claims on the state for social welfare. Beyond approaches that label such interactions as ‘clientelism’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘political society’, I offer instead an ‘agonistic’ account of claim-making among the rural poor. Their references to the exploitation and injustice they have endured invokes notions of an inchoate antagonism against those characterised as ‘rich’. Such narratives intimate an ambivalent conflict between the ‘poor’ and the ‘rich’ without, it must be emphasised, calling for a revolutionary overthrow of the existing order.

A single village study hinders the ability to systematically test the broader applicability of the theory and findings presented in this paper. But it does suggest that prevailing conceptualisations such as ‘clientelism’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘political society’ offer a limited perspective of state-society relations in rural India. In rural north Bihar, as I have shown, the rural poor invoked a variety of terms to advance their claims on their village council president. These terms ranged from references to “request” (*agrah/nivedan*) to “help” (*madad*) “poor people” (*garib janata/aadmi*) to emphasizing the “exploitation” (*shoshan*) and “injustice” (*anyay*) they endured. The narratives invoked by the rural poor compel analysts to complicate prevailing conceptualisations and take seriously the agonistic nature of their claims.

While the agonistic claims of the rural poor remain understudied, there is mounting evidence that claim-making in rural India (and beyond) extend beyond clientelistic supplications and invocations of citizenship. Jeffrey Witsoe’s (2013) riveting account of rural politics in Bihar calls to mind the (agonistic) tensions suggested in this paper. Witsoe tells us of the claims to democratic rule and popular sovereignty by the State’s ‘lower castes’ who comprised the bulk of the rural poor in their State. Despite idioms of conflict between themselves and the dominant ‘upper castes’, the ‘lower castes’ did not seek to liquidate their oppressors. Writing in a different vein, but offering similar insights, Gabrielle Krus-Wisner (2018) notes the variety of ways in which the rural poor in Rajasthan advance their claims on the state. In some regions, these were meek and reticent, while in others they were more assertive and confident. In all cases, it becomes clear that binary categories of clientelism and citizenship are difficult to sustain.

A similarly ambiguous conflict is documented by Matthew Gutmann

(2002) in his fascinating study of Mexico. Gutmann sets for himself the task of describing the twists and turns experienced by a neighbourhood in Mexico City as they engaged with politics. Gutmann teases out the entanglements between defiance and compliance among his interlocutors. Gutman takes his readers on a journey through the political lives of the *los de abajo* (the ‘underdogs’) in a single neighbourhood of Mexico City, directing attention to the fragmentations and ambivalences of their claims on their city’s politicians and institutions.

Laura McLean’s (2014) study on political participation in Ghana also contributes to blurring the boundaries between such alleged dichotomies as clientelism and citizenship. Based on her analysis of popular orientations towards claim-making and political identities, the nature of political transactions, mechanisms of accountability, and notions of rights and duties, she demonstrates the intricate ways in which the vocabularies associated with clientelism are entangled with the idioms associated with citizenship. She argues that such entanglements reflect the existence of hybrid political cultures among rural Ghanaians. As she notes, her informants “were neither perfect citizens nor clients but articulated their own conception of everyday politics” (McLean, 2014: 114).

That State-level differences in commitment to and capacity for welfare provision shape the terrain of claim-making across India is well established (Heller, 2000; Singh, 2015). On the one end of the spectrum, States such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu demonstrate institutionalised channels through which the poor make claims on the state through such mechanisms as mass parties, social movements and local government institutions. At the other end of the spectrum, antagonism towards the state is widespread in States such as Chhatisgarh and Jharkhand where Maoist-inspired Naxalite insurgencies seek to overthrow India’s parliamentary democracy. Bihar illustrates an intermediate case, marked by an inchoate antagonism between the rural poor and the dominant classes. As the elected president of the local council, the Mukhya was viewed as sympathetic to the interests of the poor. But the constraints imposed by the targeted welfare program meant that the poor had to proactively pursue their claims. We can see here the possibilities for claim-making to be institutionalised into narratives of citizenship and for them to be limited to clientelistic supplications. Whether the agonistic claim-making documented in this paper follows either of these trajectories or a pathway beyond these dichotomies is a critical area for further research.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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