

COVERSHEET

Making & Breaking Poverty in Koraon, Utter Pradesh

2nd Draft, 16th March 2003

Orlanda Ruthven
Student Associate
Queen Elizabeth House
21 St Giles
Oxford OX1 3LA
Tel: 01865 273 595 (wk)
Tel: 0798 5414788 (mobile)
orlanda.ruthven@wolfson.ox.ac.uk

Sushil Kumar
Research Officer
c/o Ashok Kaul
New G9, Hyderabad Colony
Benares Hindu University
Varanasi 221005
India
sushilfdc4@rediffmail.com

Abstract

The paper discusses ten narratives developed with households from two distinct communities (Kol 'tribals' and Muslims) resident in two villages in Koraon Block, Utter Pradesh. It compares the structural position of these two neighbourhoods and the five neighbouring households in each. With an emphasis on the agency of individuals and communities, we argue that, in spite of structural similarities, the households diverge markedly in their approaches to poverty and progress. While shocks (sickness, accident, violence and social humiliation) can not themselves be controlled, households differ in their approach to shock-absorption and management, in their efforts and ability to upgrade and to sustain the benefits of upgrades, and in their approach to government and patron-mediators. Households absorb or cope with shocks and uncertainty by means of affiliation to patrons (in the case of Kols) and the wider clan or community (in the case of Muslims). Attitudes to risk then appear to depend on the extent to which risk is traded off against security; while for Kols the trade-off is high (discouraging risk), for Muslims it is low. Kols and Muslims each sustain their membership to their respective spheres of relations, the former broadly hierarchical and the latter, reciprocal or 'horizontal'. Far from being indicative of incomplete or imperfect markets, these spheres of "non-market" relations afford some protection from the highly competitive markets in to which both communities must sell and the associated limits on opportunities to add value and accumulate.

Key words: livelihood, security, north India, rural, narratives
Word Count: 8566

The paper to be presented at the conference 'Staying Poor: Chronic Poverty and Development Policy' to be held at the University of Manchester, 7 to 9 April 2003(www.chronicpoverty.org)

GLOSSARY

<i>Bidi</i>	a small leaf-bound cigarette
<i>Brahmin</i>	the highest of Hindu caste groups and landowners in the region
<i>Gram Pradhan</i>	elected representative of a panchayat (a village and its surrounding land)
<i>Harijan</i>	Gandhi's term for the 'untouchable' castes or dalits, also the local term used in Koraon
<i>Harvahi</i>	An 'attached' labour contract between ploughman (known as the harvah) and landlord
<i>Kol</i>	The main 'tribal' group in the region
<i>Purdah</i>	the tradition of seclusion of women practiced by Muslims and some high-caste Hindus in some parts of India

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. TWO POOR NEIGHBOURHOODS IN KORAON	2
3. SICKNESS & OTHER SHOCKS	6
4. POVERTY “INTERRUPTERS” AND THE RISK-SECURITY AXIS	8
5. GOVERNMENT: HELP, HINDRANCE OR IRRELEVANCE?	14
6. CONCLUSION	17
REFERENCES	18

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts two things. It is an effort to describe agency as a process in the “making and breaking” of poverty of households and groups through what Geoff Wood (2003) has called a “career approach” to poverty (10). Secondly, it seeks to refocus attention from the structural causes and consequences of being poor and from individual measures of poverty towards the differences between groups and households which are structurally comparable.

We take five case studies from each of two communities and develop recent life narratives which track, as it were “individuals and groups through gateways of opportunity and disaster” (Wood 2003, 10). While we are not here concerned with how these groups engage with each other, our focus is to explore the difference in poverty experience within and between comparable groups (and in this sense, we build on Frances Stewart’s concept of “horizontal inequality”, Stewart 2002). Why is this family better-off than its neighbour? Why has this community successfully accessed government resources and the other not? Why did these people deal with sickness more thoroughly and successfully than those? Do particular households or groups accumulate “interrupters” of poverty? Likewise do they share or accumulate “sustainers” or “accelerators” of poverty and how so?

In order to answer these questions, we attempt to move beyond individual measures of poverty (whether these be income, consumption, expenditure, capabilities..) and draw out the cultural and political dimensions of economic difference and, conversely to draw out the economic implications of structures of power and social difference. In this way this paper seeks to provide flesh on the “bony” recognition that we mustn’t ignore power (as development agents are often inclined to do).

The paper is organised in the following way. First we provide background on our two communities (Kol ‘tribals’ in one village and Muslims in another) and compare their structural positions. Then we discuss two critical poverty issues, firstly **shocks**, their effects and how they are managed (in our narratives these refer mostly to acute sickness, accident and/ or death but also to violent abuse in the hands of police or other villagers). Secondly, **livelihoods**, the way in which they are upgraded and downshifted over time and the risk-security continuum on which different livelihood strategies lie. We then outline the developmental roles of the **government** and how this has been experienced differentially by the two communities. We conclude with a summary of points of comparison and contrast between the two communities and on the value of our ‘career’ narrative approach.

2. TWO POOR NEIGHBOURHOODS IN KORAON

The two neighbourhoods on which this paper focuses are in two villages in Koraon Block, Allahabad District, Uttar Pradesh. Koraon is considered one of the most backward and marginal areas of a district otherwise rich in fertile land; 38% of Koraon Block's 250,000 population is categorised as Below Poverty Line (BPL) by the standards of Government of India (GoI)¹ and just under 30% are Scheduled Caste². Koraon's density of 200 plus people per square kilometre is 35% of the average for UP State.

Koraon's relative backwardness has been gradually redressed since the fertility and productivity of the region was transformed by the construction of a canal irrigation system from a major dam project in the 1970s. Paddy and wheat are now produced over two seasons. The change has resulted in widespread intensification of farming, mechanisation of ploughing through tractors (while transplanting and weeding are still done manually) and a related shift in the way in which labour is organised on the farm. While *harvahi* (attached or bonded labour retained principally to plough and paid mostly in the form of output from a portion of land) had been widespread until the late 1970s, it declined rapidly and a small sample of labourers in the region suggests only around 20% of adult males are *harvahs* (Ruthven & Kumar 2002a). Intensification has made timeliness and speed crucial for harvest outcomes and this is reflected in the growing role of piece-rate labour gangs, replacing daily and *harvahi* labour.

Koraon region has no significant industries and farming exists alongside a limited number of non-farm sector small-scale agro-processing and piece-rate opportunities (such as carpet-knotting which has declined sharply since the mid 1990s) and *bidi* rolling. *Bidi*-rolling, the only activity providing employment on any scale, is relatively unskilled with few barriers to entry but is poorly paid and regularly disrupted by factory closure responding to oversupply. It is generally pursued by Muslims, women (in *purdah*) and elderly men. It will be argued here that it nonetheless plays a critical "social security" role.

Petty trade and "consumer services" (tailoring, wedding services, financial services...) have increased steadily with purchasing power in the region. For the unskilled and risk-sensitive, casual labour opportunities off the farm are mostly in construction and earth moving, while this has declined since the mid 1980s completion of the canal network construction.

This paper focuses particularly on five Kol 'tribal' households of Barahulla village and five Muslim households of Kushphara village. The households were part of a larger study

¹ According to Koroan Block Development Officer (BDO), the GoI uses the following standards to define BPL: All families with <Rs.22,000 total annual income. Annual income is estimated according to the following norms: Rs.600/ acre un-irrigated land; Rs.1200/ acre irrigated land; Rs.1500/ milch cow and Rs.50/ day for wage labour. Wage labourers are assumed to access daily wages for 6 of 12 months in the year. Many assumptions in these norms are faulty and the effect is to bias the BPL standard towards small and medium farmers and away from wage labourers.

² The Government of Uttar Pradesh's definition of SC included Kols and other 'tribes' until 2000 when the BJP government in Lucknow created a new category of ST (Scheduled Tribe) for the first time in the state.

about financial behaviour and management undertaken with 68 households across the two villages between August 2000 and September 2001 for the IDPM's Finance & Development Programme³. Both the villages are large (more than 1000 households) but divide easily into distinct hamlets where particular communities have settled. For the purposes of this paper we focus on two hamlets, a Kol hamlet in Barahulla and a Muslim hamlet in Kushphara. The five households in each hamlet are neighbours, well-known to each other and, in some cases, directly related.

The family size of the two groups is similar. Household members average 6 to 7 in each case while dependency ratios are significantly higher in the case of Muslims (55% as opposed to 24% for Kols). Per capita income levels between the groups are comparable averaging around Rs.330 (\$36)⁴ a month or Rs.4000 (\$430) a year, around 18% the national average. The income range within each group is large (even larger among the Kols), with the lowest in each case being only 15% or so of the highest. It reflects our interest in exploring the contrast between neighbouring households as well as between two communities. The income differences relate most directly to family size (the exceptional "earners" in each case were small families) and of the gearing power of skills in a generally unskilled labour market.

The structural position of the two communities (i.e. their physical access, infrastructure provision, proximity to sources of work, land distribution etc.) are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: The structural position of Kol and Muslim households

	Kols of Barahulla (5 cases)	Muslims of Kushphara (5 cases)
<i>Physical access</i>	1 km from tarmac road, 10 km from market centre & Block HQ	0 km from tarmac road, 2 km from market centre & Block HQ
<i>Infrastructure</i>	Post Office, 1 government & 2 private primary schools, 1 private junior school, no electricity, 70% irrigation	Post Office, MFI, 2 government schools (primary & junior) & easy access to Koraon schools, partial electrification, full-coverage irrigation
<i>Local off-farm livelihood options</i>	Very little (occasional off-farm canal work)	Kush. is a satellite of Koraon so offers trading & small industry options, <i>bidi</i> -rolling (previously carpet-knotting was widespread)
<i>Land holdings</i>	2.1 acres	0.2 acres
<i>Origins & relations with village elite</i>	Tenants of large Brahmin landowner (ex Pradhan) who "brought" them as labourers from MP several generations ago	Some long-term residents, others migrated to Kush. over last 10-20 years from more remote villages and peri-urban areas (motivated by earning opportunities & space)
<i>Educational level</i>	Yrs of schooling of HH: 0 (1 exception of 10 yrs) Ave. % children ⁵ attending school: 50	Yrs of schooling of HH: 0 (1 exception of 5 years) Ave. % children attending school: 63

³ Further details, working papers and a bank of data arising from this project are available on www.man.ac.uk/idpm

⁴ These dollar values are calculated using US\$1=Rs.48 (February 2003) and a multiplier of 5.2 to reach purchasing power parity (PPP). Source: World Bank Development Indicators, 2002.

⁵ I.e. children of school-going age.

The table shows that as a “satellite” of Koraon (the Block Headquarters and a burgeoning market town of 25,000 population) Kushphara residents are somewhat better placed than Barahulla residents in terms of physical access, infrastructure and income opportunities. Indeed this has been a key attraction of Kushphara to immigrants from other parts of eastern UP and neighbouring Madhya Pradesh. By contrast, the educational level between our case studies is not significantly different. All adults, except two male household heads, are illiterate and never attended school. In spite of proximity to a wider choice and higher standard of school, many Muslim children of Kushphara still don’t attend school at all or only for limited years before the compulsions of labour or marriage overtake⁶. Even more significant is the contrast in land holding. As a “scheduled caste”, Kols were made a priority group to receive land during the process of land redistribution following Zamindari Abolition and Consolidation in the 1970s. By contrast, Muslims were categorised along with other General Castes and were not considered a priority, in spite of widespread landlessness.

Table 1 also notes the “structural” difference of the two communities in relation to local elites. A central point of identity with the Kols is their tenancy relation with “KSP”, a Brahmin and one of the largest landlords of Barahulla village (holding at least 150 acres of fertile land). The Kols had been “brought” to Barahulla by KSP’s ancestors following their acquisition of land prior to independence, a “gift” from the local ruler keen to reduce his tax burden. As such their hamlet sits on his land and is surrounded by his fields. By contrast, Kushphara’s Muslims have settled gradually, many only over last 10-20 years.

Table 2: Summary features of 10 case study households

Name of HH (age)	Other households members (ages)	Main livelihood(s)	PC Income mthly (annual)	Farm land	Other assets
FIVE KOL HOUSEHOLDS OF BARAHULLA					
Shyamlavati (41, FHH)	2 sons (17, 11)	Wage labour (on & off-farm)	Rs.4180 (Rs.16,700)	1.5 acres	2 oxen
Sakha (45, FHH)	2 sons (27, 18)	Wage labour, own farm	Rs.4080 (Rs.16,300)	3 acres	2 oxen, 1 cow
Rahathu (33) Aduri (31)	2 sons (6 & 4)	Wage labour (on & off farm)	Rs.1176 (Rs.5900)	0.65 acres	1 ox
Nachkau (37) & Amarkali (35)	Mother, 3 sons (10, 4, 1), 3 brothers, their wives & 6 children	Farming (mostly leased), grocery store, masonry	Rs.1180 (Rs.34,200)	1 acre	2 oxen & calves, shop stock
Pangul (70)	Only him	Masonry	Rs.9960 (Rs.9960)	3 acres	Tools, cash

⁶ Most of these children attend government primary and middle schools. Only in one case did a daughter attend the local *madrassa*.

Table 2 continued...

Name of HH (age)	Other households members (ages)	Main livelihood(s)	PC Income mthly (annual)	Farm land	Other assets
FIVE MUSLIM HOUSEHOLDS OF KUSHPHARA					
Rashidun Nisa (FHH ⁷ , 35)	4 sons (16, 14, 8, 4) & 2 daughters (12 & 5)	Carpet-knotting, <i>bidi</i> -rolling	Rs.2520 (Rs.17,640)	1 acre	No
Attaullah (40) & Zubeda (37)	3 sons (7, 4, 2, 0) & 3 daughters (16, 13, 10)	Mobile trading, <i>bidi</i> -rolling	Rs.1920 (Rs.17,280)	No	No
Mohammed Sharif (32 & Razia (28)	brother, brother's wife, brother's daughter (4)	Wedding band, <i>bidi</i> -rolling, off- and on-farm labour	Rs.3000 (Rs.15,000)	No	Cash savings, music instrus
Firdos (40) & Rukhsana (35)	2 sons (16, 0) & 6 daughters (13, 12, 9, 7, 5, 3)	Petty trading, <i>bidi</i> -rolling	Rs.2000 (Rs.18,000)	No	Cash savings 2 cows
Roshan (36) & Mainum (33)	1 son (10)	Tailor	Rs.8664 (Rs.26,000)	No	Sewing machines

The basic features of our ten case study households, reviewed in the next four sections, are summarised in Table 2. Among the Kols in Barahulla, we have two households (**Nachkau & Pangul**) who can be said, to some extent, to have “interrupted” their chronic poverty in early adult life through upgrading their skills and a mix of defiance towards and productive use of their elite contacts. We have two middle-aged female heads of household (FHH) (**Shyamlavati** and **Sakha**), both widows, one of whom lost her husband during our research. Bereft of their main breadwinners, they struggle to get their sons into stable and quality work but appear to be descending into deeper poverty as assets are eroded. Finally, we have a household (**Rahathu**) which sustains through the research period in a condition of perpetual vulnerability, fire-fighting, debt and failed efforts to sustain independence from bonded arrangements.

Among the Muslims in Kushphara, we have two households (**Roshan** and **Firdaus**) from mobile, peri-urban backgrounds who settled 15 years ago in a “progressive” village where land and income options were more available. But shocks related to sickness as well as psychological issues and burgeoning family size lead them to downshift into relative poverty. One new resident family (**Attaullah**) struggles with social humiliation and the continuous uncertainty of petty trading business. A long-term resident household (**Sharif**) “interrupts” its poverty through upgrading a traditional livelihood. Finally, a household (**Rashudin**) which had been stable is knocked in to insecurity by the death of its main breadwinner, and is now female-headed.

⁷ FHH: Female-Headed Household

3. SICKNESS & OTHER SHOCKS

The most prevalent type of shock afflicting our households was acute disease or incapacity caused by accident⁸. A common thread in some narratives was that poor families must make strategic choices about how much to spend on the health treatment of who. It may not be practical to keep an old man alive when there are young people who need to be fed. **Nachkau** (37) is candid about the choice his family faced when his father became seriously ill at the age of 60 six years ago. Estimating a cost of Rs.4000 (12% of this household's income)⁹ for treatment with a Western doctor in Allahabad city, the family opted for the local doctor instead. Within a month of sickness, Nachkau's father died. This contrasted with their approach when one of the young wives in the family contracted TB a year earlier and who was cured with the full Western treatment at a cost of Rs.5000.

TB is a familiar disease with a standard treatment. Yet even when able "breadwinners" fall sick, poor families, suffering already from a dramatic decline in income, will shy from any expense on treatment which seems superfluous. The eldest son, **Udal** of Nachkau's neighbour **Sakha** (45) has not recovered since suffering torture and abuse in police custody after his arrest in 1998 on charges of robbery. In late 2001 Udal finally went to a government clinic in Allahabad city (a return bus trip is the costs of 2-3 days' wages). The doctor prescribed for TB and Udal purchased medicines for 20 days at a cost of Rs.500. The doctor told him to come back when the medicine was finished but because of shortage of money, he did not return and quickly fell overdue with his treatment. By early 2002 he was extremely weak once more. Thankfully, on our return a year later, money acquired from the mortgage of homestead land to Sakha's relative has enabled the family to pay for further treatment and Udal is feeling better. The treatment cost Rs.3500 (21%) and, since treatment generally takes a whole year and costs Rs.5000 it is likely he did not complete it.

Dr Shamin Ali is a private doctor (not fully qualified) running a clinic in Koraon. Because of 24 hour service, credit facility and the range of services offered, Dr Ali's clinic is extremely popular among the poor. He says most TB patients won't come to him until the disease is already at an advanced stage. He estimates 90% of poor people discontinue treatment for TB once started, and often start and stop treatment several times because it is expensive and because they feel better. If TB has reached an advanced stage the cost of its treatment increases from Rs.5000 (28% of average household annual income for our case studies) to Rs.15,000 (85%). If treatment has been aborted several times and the TB becomes resistant, the cost becomes exorbitant.

⁸ The frequency with which such shocks are experienced means that they are often not received as extraneous 'shocks' so much as part of a continuously hazardous existence, a point raised by Hulme & Shepherd, 2003 (pg 29).

⁹ To provide some indication of household purchasing power in each case, all Rs. prices are followed by percentage figures in brackets which indicate what proportion of the household's annual income the sum represents.

The stress which acute sickness brings to poor households is compounded when a disease is rare, more difficult to cure or to diagnose. Since **Roshan's** (36) only son was born ten years ago, his wife Mainum has had at least six miscarriages. Since 2000 she's got worse with regular severe bone pains. The diagnosis has been confusing. From the beginning she vomited blood and, while the doctors suspected TB, she tested negative. Other doctors suspected sciatica but treatment had no effect. When we escorted Mainum to a recommended doctor in Allahabad, tests suggested bone TB. The couple followed the course prescribed but stopped after a month when no visible results appeared. When we returned in February 2003 Mainum's condition had worsened and she is now barely able to move. Yet still the couple had not pursued treatment consistently since our visit to Allahabad with them in late 2001. In despair that following more Western treatment would be money wasted, they had reverted back to local doctors.

Unlike Nachkau and Sakha, Roshan's financial situation was healthy throughout the first year of our research. A skilled tailor with a regular shop in Koraon and a small family, he brought in about Rs.2000 a month. But by early 2003, in less than a year, the household's per capita income was to plummet from Rs.8,700 to Rs.1500 (17% of earlier amount). Struggling with the expense of painkillers, Roshan defaulted on rent payments for his shop and was forced to close, "mortgaging" his machines to his landlord. He now works on demand from home.

Under pressure from Mainum and others, Roshan took a second wife in July 2002. While she is doubtless needed to care for Mainum and their son, it may also be the case that both Mainum and he are coming to terms with the likelihood of her death. The question begs as to how different the family's response would have been if it were Roshan not Mainum who had contracted a complex illness. Women, particularly those unable to bear children perhaps, are more easily interchangeable.

Rashidun (35), desperate to save her husband, tried everything, only to watch him die slowly. He was sick for a year before his death, vomiting frequently with symptoms of flu and fever. Believing him cursed or "pursued by a black shadow", Rashidun took him to two different Muslim priests in villages 20-30 km distance. The couple made seven visits over nine months, spending a total of Rs.1500 (8%) over the period in travel and donations. This became difficult to sustain. While he felt somewhat better, the condition persisted and they turned to a nearer Western doctor. Over the next 2-3 months he met the doctor regularly and took medicines at a cost of Rs.9000 (51%) before eventually dying. The tale illustrates the contrast in treatment costs between Western and local medicine. In a context where the outcome of Western treatment is uncertain, it is a huge risk to take.

The health problems faced by Koraon, as other rural Indian, residents is not simply about access. Access to drugs is almost unlimited and, relative to non-producing countries in Africa for example, drugs are affordable (relative to other prices) since they are made and marketed locally¹⁰. One problem faced by the poor is in fact in deciding when and when

¹⁰ The relative prices of consumer and prescribed medicines in India would be comparable (in PPP terms) to those available in Europe and the US. Thus our poor case study households would be spending a

not to spend on treatment which is easily available and this is often a question of deciding who does and does not warrant different levels of expenditure. The second major problem is when symptoms are less familiar. It is difficult to get clear diagnosis and people frequently die “mysteriously”. But certainty doesn’t come before a cure and the cure will depend on following a course of treatment, a matter of faith and financial commitment.

Sickness and subsequent death are not the only major shocks, while they are the most common. When we return in February 2003 **Attaullah** (40) and Zubeda are in shock following the elopement of their second daughter (15) with an older married man of the village (the brother of Sharif). The community appears to deem her and her family (rather than him) to be at fault in spite of her young age. The incident, compounded by Attaullah’s filing a case (which led to the arrest and beating of the culprit), is making the family’s situation in the village unupportable. Friends are pressurising them to leave. Meanwhile, Zubeda’s health has not recovered since the birth of her ninth child in June 2002 and Cashpor, an organisation replicating the Grameen Bank in the region, has refused Attaullah another loan for his trading business, mindful of the likelihood of his imminent departure.

The high incidence of shocks among our case studies and the long adjustment and recovery process required for each, help us to understand the kind of uncertainty which is lived continuously by poor households. Shocks themselves are largely unavoidable but livelihood strategies are a direct effort to reduce their impact. Households spread risk across income sources, invest in networks which aid rapid adjustment and recovery and discount the future for the present, “managing immediacy within severely constrained choices” (Wood 2003, 8). These aspects of livelihoods are discussed in the next section.

4. POVERTY “INTERRUPTERS” AND THE RISK-SECURITY AXIS

We have noted that the difference in income between neighbours relates in large part to the impact of skills in a skill-scarce labour market, as well as to family size. Most residents spend their lives selling into markets which are oversupplied and highly competitive, thus offering scant opportunity for accumulation. In this section we begin by looking at one or two of the exceptions. **Pangul Kol**’s PC income is \$1080, a little under half the national average. His narrative is a clear illustration of the impact of skill upgrading.

Pangul’s father was a *harvah* labourer to KSP and Pangul (70) remembers tumultuous relations with the Pandey family as they tried to ensure that he would follow his father as their *harvah*. Pangul was always adamant that he would not stoop to this (going so far as to risk suicide by setting fire to himself). He succeeded in his resistance and, soon after his mother’s tragic death in childbirth when Pangul was 12, he started to work instead for another high caste family as a *harvah*. He left following a dispute during which he was caught smoking *ganja* “on duty” and vowed never again to be a *harvah* for anyone.

comparable proportion of their income on health to a poor American with no access to social security (check relative prices)

Pangul was out of the mould. But he was insecure and uncertain how to move forward into an alternative livelihood.

Following his defiance towards high caste village farmers, Pangul faced a tough period after which he finally secured land to sharecrop. But his real break came when (in his late 20s-early 30s perhaps) he met a trained mason (a fellow *ganja* smoker) while working on a canal construction site. The mason took him on as an apprentice and after two years, he started working independently. By the time he was allotted government land in 1976 he had little use for it and gave it to his nephews to sharecrop. The land has nonetheless made a big difference to his life, keeping him generally “in the grain” and making it easier for him to help others. The tragedy of his mother repeated itself when his own wife died soon after giving birth to a son (who also died), leaving two small daughters for Pangul to raise alone. It is only because of his ability to raise unusually high wages that he has married them off successfully in to secure families. Pangul’s daily wages are 3-4 times those of an agricultural labourer and exceptional in his community.

Pangul’s high earning power, sense of duty towards his community and age have elevated him to a position of sage for the neighbourhood. Leaving alone his youthful defiance, he is also held in high regard by KSP and his sagely role is doubtless buttressed by the respect of the KSP family. Pangul has successfully renegotiated his position without removing himself.

Shyamlavati (41) and her husband were all too aware of the predicament for their sons (now aged 18 and 12) if they failed to “upgrade” their skills towards a better livelihood. But in spite of her efforts to convince him, Anil quit school after 6th class (aged 13). The second son is still in school. **Pangul** had taken Anil on as an apprentice, an opportunity which could have positioned him well in the on-going boom in construction. But relations broke down after a dispute and, following the failed apprenticeship, Anil started working for a local grain trader. He started on a casual basis but, after taking an advance of Rs.1500 (8%) in 1999, he’s been working full-time at the rate of Rs.20 per day. He says he didn’t realise that taking an advance would have the effect of bonding him to low wages.

The value of a “career” approach to poverty is in what we learn, not only about upgrading but the problems with sustaining an upgrade, once achieved. Poor people face immense pressures to downgrade or downshift once again. There are several among Kushphara respondents for example, who rode on the wave of expansion in the carpet sector and reached the level of unit managers (managing 10-20 workers each). Over the period their living standard appear to have shifted significantly upwards from one previously based on *harvahi*,¹¹ sharecropping or other services to landlords¹². But since the mid 1990s the market has plummeted and many of today’s petty traders are “refugees” from carpet-based livelihoods.

¹¹ An “attached” labour contract between ploughman (known as the *harvah*) and landlord

¹² i.e. ritual service or *jajmani*.

We have also seen with **Roshan** the tailor, how a steady daily income of Rs.100 (nearly \$11) was no match for the prolonged struggle of his wife's sickness and his edge in the labour market was rapidly eroded. The family's only buffer turned out to be Roshan's sewing machines, now locked up in his shop, mortgaged to the landlord. In spite of his "upgraded" livelihood, Roshan's ability to deal with shocks proved as fragile as anyone's.

The risk experienced by those households capable of investment in skills and materials is not simply the risk of whether a particular business venture will fly or die. It is the risk that extraneous shocks can be avoided long enough to realize and sustain for a time the benefit potential of the investment.

Nachkau's is a comparable tale of "downshifting", brought on by competition and "free-rider" problems rather than by dramatic shocks. After his marriage **Nachkau** opened a grocery store in the brick home next to his house which he had financed through the government housing scheme, Indira Awas Yojana. He was encouraged to start the business by his sister's husband who sold a pile of aubergines on his doorstep to demonstrate what money could be made. Nachkau took naturally to business he says, because he's always hated physical labour. The shop was the first of its kind in the village and brought in a regular income of more than Rs.1000 (or 40% of total household income) a month.

Through most of our research year **Nachkau** had three main advantages over his Kol neighbours: (i) he has maintained a joint family which enjoyed economies of scale and meant that everybody benefited from the earning power of his mason brother; (ii) he farmed on a larger scale than other Kols (7-10 acres/ year) most of which was leased or sharecropped on good terms, and (iii) he ran a good business (a village grocery store).

Towards the close of our research, his exceptional position is eroded on all three fronts. First, he faces new competition, not from another Kol but from his landlord KSP, which reduces his earnings by 50%. Second, in early 2002 the family finally splits under pressure from **Nachkau's** relatively prosperous mason-brother ("now we will suffer alone", Nachkau declared). Third, consequent to the split, none of the newly separated units have sharecropped or leased land to farm (in spite of the ease with which they can access it) since they can no longer raise the labour or investment. By our last meeting in early 2003 Nachkau's situation is comparable to other Kols once again.

But those households who never get close to upgrading their livelihoods are as common (or more so) as those who achieve an upgrade (however briefly) once or twice in their careers. This is because they received no education at the outset, they failed to acquire or see though training while young enough, because they are so assaulted by shocks and their associated costs that they are repeatedly pulled back to opt for security, even at an exorbitant price.

Both **Rahathu** (33) and his brother were in *harvah* to farmers in a neighbouring village until after their father's death four years ago. Rahathu left following a row over a wage

advance while his brother left because, while the contract offered security, he was unable to manage any expenses other than basic food (even clothes and medicine). When we first met him, Rahathu's main income was from off-farm labour (of which he said he could secure 100 days a year at an average of Rs.35 (\$3.8) a day, not bad for the locale). He has tried travelling to regional cities for work but – as the only male adult in the family with an elderly mother and a delicate wife – he feels unable to leave for long periods.

Throughout the research year Rahathu was racked by the pain of his 3 year-old son who had gall stones. He was told the operation costs Rs.6000 (just over 100% of his annual income) and continually struggled for ways to raise this sum. He struggled equally to manage daily essentials such as fertiliser, kerosene and treatment for his sick wife. His situation was continually precarious and even after considerable effort he often appeared unable to secure the money required; when he did, he was unable to pay as agreed. In late 2000 he found a way to raise the money required: by contracting himself to a new land owner in a village 30 km away. It is August 2001, a year since his son first experienced pain, before Rahathu finally receives a lump sum of Rs.4000 from his new boss and the operation goes ahead successfully. At our last meeting in February 2003 Rahathu tells us he could not at the time afford the follow-up treatment required for his son so he is not completely cured. He will finance this eventually, he says, by selling a small plot of land.

During the course of the research, Rahathu reverted from the position of a free wage labourer able to raise relatively good wages, to a *harvah* once again, as he had been five years earlier. He is now far from home, with a new landlord. Because he took an advance double the value usually given to *harvah* labourers, his contract is on much worse terms than before. Rahathu received the extra Rs.2000 upfront at a cost of the produce from 0.65 acres of land (worth perhaps Rs.6500) which he would have received at year end. Rahathu is paying an interest (Rs.4500) of 225%/ year or 19%/ month – the price of having the money upfront.

Rahathu's story illustrates the risks of independence from landed patrons. Firstly one is left with no "social security" support when a crisis strikes. Secondly, if bonding or attaching oneself eventually becomes necessary, the terms will be much worse than they would have been if the relation had already existed when the need arose. In other words, one is worse-off if one is not a client (Hulme & Shepherd 2003, 24).

Unlike him, most of Rahathu's neighbours resign themselves to continued interdependence with their landlord KSP. Rahathu and Dangar (Shyamlavati's dead husband) had both distanced themselves from KSP some years earlier, foc using instead on higher paid casual work and fostering alternative relations with less influential patrons. As with Rahathu, after the shock and financial need following her husband's death, Shyamlavati is no longer able to sustain this position. Within weeks of her husband's death in February 2002, her oxen pair also die. Proclaiming that Anil (her 18-year old son) never learned to farm properly she says it will be impossible to manage the land. Meeting the family's grain needs thus becomes the most urgent task. Following Dangar's death Shyamlavati had accepted KSP's gift of 50 kg of wheat towards the

funeral. While she gets a small amount of grain through sharecropping out her land, she is now back working regularly for KSP, appreciative of the security he has shown new willing to provide.

The economic ties of attachment between the Kols and their landlord are further underwritten by a religious framework which positions KSP as their spiritual leader. A quote from a group discussion with young Kol labourers illustrates this: “They have never asked KSP directly for a raise or questioned the basis of his low wages. Sometimes he gives extra and they take what he gives without question. They wish to preserve the relation of security and they are mindful that they are his tenants and that their hamlet is surrounded by his fields. Pandey is their priest and he never takes payment for the service he performs during births, marriages and deaths, for which they are grateful. By contrast they say they often bargain with other landlords in the village”.

KSP holds a three-dimensional authority over his Kol tenants, deriving from his status as a landlord, a priest and a mediator in the developmental functions of government (explored in the next section). Pangul, the neighbourhood sage, suggests that his neighbours defy this authority at their peril. He connects the suffering of his two neighbours Rahathu and Dangar with their distance from KSP and their short-term approach towards those who assist them. He says his own progress has been a result of keeping regular company with high caste, wealthy families which led him to have higher aspirations for his own life, the outcome of a relation renegotiated from his childhood.

We have seen that, given the difficulties in upgrading and sustaining strong labour market positions once achieved, Kol households revert repeatedly to a default position of security and patronage. But few Muslim families have such entwined relations with patrons. Landless, unpatronised and a religious minority historically marginalized from access to government resources, Muslim households tend to be more mobile and appear to bear greater risks with their livelihoods.

Attaullah (40) is one of a growing number of landless Muslims of Kushphara engaged in petty trade. His trading has been facilitated by his wife’s membership to Cashpor, a microfinance institution replicating the Grameen Bank in the region. Screening borrowers by group reputation and capacity to save (thus repay) rather than by assets, Cashpor opens a new and easy line of credit to those who have not traded before. But borrowers acknowledge that Cashpor contributes to a rapid rise in competition and a corresponding erosion in their margins. Attaullah’s still not sure if he can make more than he would from erratic wage labour and by our calculations, his womenfolk collectively earn substantially more than he, rolling *bidis*. Yet alternatives are slim: most of the small supply of better-paid wage work is comfortably cornered by Harijans and travel further a field is out of the question for him and other husbands with no grown sons. The opportunity cost of trading for Attaullah is low¹³.

¹³ When we return in February 2003 Attaullah has been refused further credit by Cashpor, probably on the suspicion that he will soon leave the village following the humiliation of his daughter’s elopement. His business is deteriorating for lack of working capital.

Kushphara's Muslim hamlet is full of tales of micro-enterprises started up in the face of low opportunity cost and in a tradition of mobility and trade. While landlessness leaves people vulnerable in their need to earn grain, Muslims are in general readier to opt for high income ideas (rather than low-income grain security). Intrepidity in business is apparently compounded in the significantly higher dependency ratios of Muslim families. Among the faithful, a conviction that God will provide for all, buttresses the practice of having large families, while also reinforcing the Islamist line that no birth control is permitted by the Prophet.

Attaullah and **Firdaus** (40) both recognise the short-term (or worldly) benefit of having a small family. But the benefit of controlling life in this world, says Firdaus, would be a cost in the next. If God gives us life he will feed us also; if we suffer it was perhaps his plan, says Attaullah.

Barquat Ali, a local religious teacher and Attaullah's uncle, illustrates the dilemma of faithful Muslims. "There was a saint who was anxious to see God. The angel said to do so he'd have to leave his family and reach the first of seven skies. The saint objected, saying he could not leave his family since there would be no-one to feed them. The angel told him to hit the stone on which he stood with his stick. He did so and the stone parted in two, revealing a pool of water beneath. The angel requested him to hit the pool with his stick and he did so, revealing another small stone. Again the angel requested him to hit the stone and it parted, revealing a beetle busy eating grass inside the stone. "What do you see?" said the angel. "If this small insect can live thus, how can you be anxious for your family? God provides for every living thing". The saint accepted this and left for his journey to the first sky."

To conclude, we have shown how livelihood upgrading is difficult to achieve and even harder to sustain through shocks (internal and external to the household). Within this general context, the two communities present a contrast in their approaches, given the difficulties of sustaining an edge and protecting oneself from competition. With no (or fewer) ties to land and high mobility Kushphara Muslims lean towards trading and other small business in sectors where margins are slim and competition is tight. When shocks strike they are more likely to raise larger sums through networks of cash-based relatives in Koraon and further a field. Crucially, their detachment from landlord patrons means that they face a low opportunity cost (or, in other words, they have less to lose) in pursuing such apparently risky and enterprising strategies, compared to the Kols of Barahulla. The Kols, focused on farming to meet grain needs (on their own or other's land), repeatedly prioritise security on the "security-risk" continuum as a way to ensure that shocks can be survived. In doing so, they may meet the objective of "short-term security, while reproducing the conditions for long-term insecurity in the future" (Wood 2003, 8).

Wider IDPM research findings (Ruthven & Kumar 2002b) suggest that, in spite of comparable income levels and asset holdings (other than land), the borrowing, saving and spending behaviour of the two groups is very different. The IDPM research distinguished respondents by livelihood groups, two of which were Traders and Self-Employed

(consisting mostly of Kushphara Muslims) and Poor Farmer Labourers (predominantly Kols from Barahulla). The Traders and Self-Employed group borrowed, withdrew and recovered almost double what they repaid, deposited or lent, while the Farmer-Labourer group repaid and deposited similar sums to what they'd borrowed and withdrawn. Further, the first group spent half as much again of what they earned during the year and the extra expenditure, over the second group, was mostly on health treatment and weddings. In spite of "negative net-worth", the trader group sustains itself because of fast capital turnover, higher artisanal skills (sometimes), broad-based borrowing options and higher labour mobility.

5. GOVERNMENT: HELP, HINDRANCE OR IRRELEVANCE?

What is the government's role in the two aspects of life on which we focus here: (i) interrupting poverty and the risk-security trade-off, and (ii) shocks and how people cope and recover from them? While the government appears in several guises in our narratives (in the form of the police, elected representatives and the health service), we focus here on its role in providing resource transfers to the poor.

The Kols' experience with local government appears to have been positive. **Shyamlavati** and **Sakha**, as well as **Nachkau**, each received Rs.20,000 (113% average annual income of our group) through the Indira Awas Yojna (IAY) Scheme to be used on the construction of a brick house. Shyamlavati and her husband got the house built and now live and store grain in it; Sakha spent half the money on the house which remains unfinished and used the balance for her son's marriage and a fixed deposit in the Post Office; Pangul says he could have got it but wasn't around at the right time.

All five families also received land title for the first time between late 1970s and early 1990s. The amount they received differs (between 1-3 acres) and appears to link directly to effective lobbying (directly or on their behalf) and the strength of contacts. For the most part this process has occurred without hassle (while there are delays of up to ten or so years). All five households also hold 'BPL' (below poverty line) ration cards, entitling them to a quota of essential commodities (grain, sugar and kerosene) at subsidised rates. This doesn't always count for a great deal¹⁴ for two reasons: (i) the market price for grain is often lower than the price offered in the ration shops, and (ii) the delivery system is itself dysfunctional with supplies often limited or unavailable. Toward research end a new scheme, Antyodaya Anna Yojna (AAY) is reaching Koraon's ration shops, promising a grain allowance (35 kg/ month) at a rock-bottom price (of Rs.2.5/ kg) for "BPL" households. **Sakha** at least is enthusiastic and declares it will impact directly her ability to save her wages.

Excepting Rahathu, our Kol respondents each have overdue debts to banks disbursed through government schemes under the IRDP¹⁵. Loans were used in a range of

¹⁴ The official entitlement with a BPL ration card to September 2001 was 0.7 kgs of sugar @ Rs.13.5/ kg (compared to a market price of Rs.17) and 5 litres of kerosene @ Rs.10/ litre per month (compared to a market price of Rs.15) per card-holding household.

¹⁵ Integrated Rural Development Programme.

investment and household purposes (including business start-ups, machinery, livestock and marriage). The average outstanding debt of the four indebted families is just under Rs.6500 (37% average annual income), most of what they originally borrowed. Theoretically it will need to be paid back with interest accumulated over 5 and 12 years. Since the late 1990s, India's banks, subjected to the new rigours of prudential norms, have sought to recover bad debts (or Non-Performing Assets). But the recovery process, like the original disbursement, is somewhat discretionary. **Sakha** and **Pangul** have been so far left in peace (with only letters to taunt them) and **Nachkau** got the police off his back after he'd paid two thirds of what was owed. **Shyamlavati** gained some time when the police saw the state of her husband on his death bed but, since we returned in February 2003 we heard they were visiting once again. Shyamlavati is asked to pay Rs.9000, roughly equivalent to her household annual income since her husband died. Even if the bank/ administration cut their losses, the price to pay for the respondents is permanent blacklisting and exclusion from further schemes, ironic since many of these poor borrowers took money under pressure from mediators and bank officials¹⁶.

Given the relatively substantial support they have secured from the government, these Kol families are surprisingly unengaged with government process (knowing *how* to access) and contacts (knowing *whose* assistance to get and how). This is in contrast to the Harijan (or "Untouchable") community in another of Barahulla's hamlets who specialise in informal brokerage and fixing which they use to secure as many government benefits as possible, including coveted off-farm work contracts paid at government rates. "Kol people don't like politics" commented one Harijan respondent.

The success of the Kols in accessing government benefits is more understandable when we understand the role of KSP. While as a Scheduled Caste group Kols have certainly been targeted under more central and state schemes than Muslims, they have also been assisted, be it with some discretion and strategic interest, by their patron. In leveraging government resources for his tenants, KSP keeps the unwritten contract of labour attachment attractive in a changing and more mobile economic environment. He also positions himself as a mediator between government resources and his tenants, reproducing their dependence on him. In spite of their relatively benign experience of government, it is in his interest that they should remain distant, suspicious and frightened in order to secure this mediator position. Alpa Shah (2003) has shown for Bero Block in Ranchi District, Jharkhand, how mediators between poor villagers and the local developmental administration, seek to maintain the suspicion and (in this case) moral disgust of the local tribals as a kind of entry barrier to those entering mediator business. "The discourse of corruption is itself an important weapon for the local elite" (19).

The contrast with Muslim experience is striking. While three of our five cases have BPL Ration Cards (Sharif says he's been recently removed from the list as a way to entice a bribe and Roshan says he was mis-categorised because he didn't pay), only **Rashidun** has land. **Sharif** recounts that during land distribution (1970s and 1980s) it was only those Muslims who paid hefty bribes and had close relations with the Pradhan who were

¹⁶ Such a policy is also not helpful to the banks, under government pressure to disburse new welfare schemes (such as SGSY) and facing a dearth of eligible (i.e. non-blacklisted and poor) applicants.

allotted land. Since Muslims were not deemed a priority group under land distribution, their claims were to be judged alongside those of General Caste groups, making them vulnerable to the discretion of village elected officials. Further, none of the five cases had received IAY housing grants nor IRDP loans.

Although she has a small plot of land (which she can not farm herself), **Rashidun** could do with some help on a monthly income of Rs.1470 for a family of seven. If she were able to secure it, her Widow's Pension would give her another Rs.150, or 10% on her income, enough to buy 1 kg grain everyday. Informed of the Pension by a visiting government official, she approached the Gram Pradhan as advised (or rather the Gram Pradhan's husband, since the elected Gram Pradhan, a woman, is in *purdah* and unable to perform the full duties expected). She was told she must produce a fee of Rs.500 in order that her name be forwarded for approval to the Block Office. **Sharif**, Rashidun's neighbour, also reports that the Gram Pradhan's husband has had his name removed from the BPL list so that he must pay to have it put on again. Both Widow's Pension and BPL lists are the responsibility of Gram Pradhans (elected officials) who can use their discretion freely. The lists are reviewed every five years.

The case studies demonstrate a stark contrast in the number and extent of transfers by the government to these two communities whose poverty levels are comparable. While to Kols, the government has delivered resources on several accounts (be it with delay, unpredictability and some mystique), to Muslims, the government has delivered very little, viewed as largely irrelevant (and mildly malevolent) in their lives.

The Kols' understanding of government is subsumed in their integral relations with their patron, KSP. While KSP has been effective in getting government resources delivered to his tenants, in so doing, he sustains his position as mediator and patron. In this way, Kols could be said to be "vertically integrated" or inserted in to the structures of bureaucratic and local elite power. By contrast, Muslims are detached. While their community leaders doubtless foster a shared identity and affiliation, they do not appear to liaise or mediate on behalf of the group with local elite patrons or government officials. While individual members may be tied or "bonded" in relations of attachment with Hindu landlords, this could not be said for the community as a whole and most social security is sourced by Muslims from within the wider group. The community's relation with local authority reflects a historical exclusion from government benefits and an avoidance of the kind of patron-client relations which could potentially insert them collectively into particular power relations. In contrast to Kols, Kushphara's Muslims can be said to be "vertically disintegrated" and – to some degree – "horizontally integrated".

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have compared two neighbourhoods and a sample of neighbours within them who, broadly speaking, are structurally similar. We have tried to show that, in spite of comparable residence, incomes, assets and education, neighbours and neighbourhoods diverge dramatically in their approach to risk and shock-management, their efforts and ability to upgrade and to sustain the benefits of upgrades, as well as their approach to government and patron-mediators.

We have used a “career” approach to poverty at the household level to shed light on why and how neighbours have achieved different levels of income and security and why others have failed to sustain earlier levels. By comparing sets of households from two distinct communities, we have tried to highlight shared features (by community) and how such features might enlighten us on the culture and politics of economic life.

Our narratives demonstrate the close relation between income, upgrading (of productivity and skills) and number of dependents. But equally, they demonstrate the difficulties first in achieving an upgrade or edge in the market and secondly, sustaining it when crises strike. They suggest that attitudes to livelihood risk link to the extent it is traded off against security, when security itself is a function of proximity to patrons and/ or group affiliation. While Kushphara’s Muslims lose little by “trying their hand” at this trade or that venture, Kols lose relatively more in seeking independence from landed farmers and working for higher rates on the labour market. A failed Muslim trader can still source “social security” in his community network (as well as fall back on *bidi*-rolling) while a failed casual labourer must pay the price of disassociation when he allies with a new patron on disadvantaged terms.

In general, Kols and Muslims each sustain their membership to their respective spheres of relations, one broadly hierarchical and the other, reciprocal (Wood 2003). Both these are spheres of “non-market” relations affording some protection from highly competitive markets. The most vulnerable in Koraon are arguably so, not because they are not linked to markets or must live with imperfect markets, but because they are *over-exposed* to a cut-throat competitive market for the goods they sell (labour, grain, cloth). It is those individuals outside or excluded from such collectives, those without buffer to such markets, who appear to find themselves most vulnerable.

Sometime in the future Koraon’s Muslims and Kols may engineer or consolidate their “horizontal integration” whilst also ensuring the benefit of “vertical integration”, of alliance with patron-mediators and government officials. Such an outcome has, to some extent, been achieved by Koraon’s Harijan community, emerging from an era of protest and resistance and highly active in politics and brokerage. For the moment, it is difficult for Muslims or Kols to work on both fronts simultaneously, and near impossible to work on neither.

REFERENCES

- Hulme, D & Shepherd, A (2003) Conceptualising Chronic Poverty, in World Development (forthcoming)
- Ruthven, O & Kumar, S (2002a) Moving Mud, Shifting Soil: Change & Development in Wage Labour Livelihoods in Uttar Pradesh, India, ODI Working Paper 176
- Ruthven, O & Kumar, S (2002b) Fine-Grain Finance: Financial Choice & Strategy Among the Poor in Rural North India, Finance & Development Research Programme Working paper 57, IDPM Manchester
- Shah, A (2003) States of Understanding: Local Politics and the Developmental State in Jharkhand, Eastern India (chapter for forthcoming PhD thesis, Anthropology Department, LSE)
- Stewart, F (2002) Horizontal Inequalities: A Neglected Dimension of Development, Working Paper No.81, OEH Oxford
- Wood, G (2003) Staying Secure Staying Poor: the 'Faustian Bargain', in World Development (forthcoming).