Introduction

In recent years there has been a sea-change in the ways in which the state in India has sought to present itself to its poorest citizens. To listen to leading members of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in 2004 one would think that the year 2000 (or even 2001 or 2002) was something like Ground Zero in this respect. Ministers from leading human development departments were in the habit of swatting away criticism of their ministries on the ground that everything was in flux. In a world of village education committees, citizen scorecards and newly vibrant *panchayati raj* institutions, not to mention a new era of public–private partnerships, it apparently made no sense to criticize ministers for faults that may or may not have dogged previous administrations.

This was nonsense, of course, for many of the innovations that were being trumpeted by the NDA were first given shape by the Congress and United Front governments of the 1990s, when village education committees and joint forest management were launched with appropriate pomp and fanfare.[1] It would also be unwise to assume that new rhetoric about a kinder and more responsive system of government must correspond in any clear way to the perceptions of poorer or more vulnerable people. All democratic governments are tempted by the fruit of exaggeration, and Partha Chatterjee is right to insist that poorer people in 'most of the world' (2004: 3) are very often compelled to meet the state as members of social groups 'that transgress the strict lines of legality in struggling to live and work' (Chatterjee 2004: 40). They inhabit, that is to say, the rough and tumble worlds of political society, where governmental agencies are met by wit and by stealth, and not uncommonly

[1] For this reason, too, the removal from office of the NDA after the 2004 general election is unlikely to lead to a significant movement away from what might be called the 'new public administration', or that more or less consistent running together of agendas for public service reforms, the decentralization and devolution of government activities and budgets, and participatory development. These agendas are also said to describe a prospectus for 'good governance'. On the election, see Ruparelia (2005).

by violence.[2] Civility and pluralism are not the defining features of their lives.

And yet something *has* been going on. New Delhi can now point with pride to a significant reduction in rates of income poverty in the country, albeit that these were sustained by a period of concerted economic growth that began a full decade before the reforms of 1991.[3] It can also claim that 'Human Development' in the country is getting better. A recent report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) suggests that India's Human Development Index (HDI) score rose from 0.439 in 1992 to 0.571 in 2001.[4] And, perhaps most of all, it can begin to make the argument that these improvements have been induced by a new regime of governance. Notwithstanding Chatterjee's claim that civil society and the poor co-exist in India like oil and water, government spokespeople insist that ordinary people are being listened to at the Block, District, State and national levels. They are reaping the rewards of an electoral system that empowers even the poorest men and women as citizens of different territorial jurisdictions. Public officials at the highest levels of the state can be called to account by citizens' organizations or through public interest litigation. In the localities, meanwhile, decisions are taken and public monies increasingly are spent by elected representatives who are accountable to villagers through *gram sabhas* and other open meetings.[5]

[2] In his 2001 Leonard Hastings Schoff Memorial Lectures, Chatterjee is mainly concerned with the political battles that have to be waged by groups like urban slum dwellers. In his view, the men and women who make up these groups are not treated by the state as if they were citizens. The fact that they occupy land illegally, and thus call into question the sanctity of private property, means that the state cannot deal with them as members of civil society. For Chatterjee, civil society in a post-colonial setting is limited to elite or bourgeois groups and their forms of politics. At the same time, however, the state does recognize a governmental obligation to populations of slum dwellers and other subalterns. This obligation reflects a prior commitment to practices of welfare provision and social control. The circle is squared, Chatterjee contends, in the field of political society. This is where groups of the urban poor seek the support of political parties like the CPI-M in West Bengal or Shiv Sena in Bombay (see Hansen 2001), or patrons (including 'criminals') from outside the formal worlds of party politics. Later in the book we shall comment on Chatterjee's instructive but perhaps overstated division between the worlds of civil and political society – a division which is inattentive to some of the more hybrid forms of state–poor encounters that we describe in part II.

[3] UNDP (2002: 16), drawing in part on data from the 55th round of the Household Consumer Expenditure Survey of India's National Sample Survey Organization. Critical evaluations of the poverty reduction thesis, and of some NSS data sets, can be found in Chandrasekhar and Ghosh (2002), Pogge and Reddy (2003), and Reddy and Pogge (2003). For a review, see Harriss and Corbridge (2003).

[4] UNDP (2002: 17). In addition, the reported Gender Development Index increased from 0.401 in 1992 to 0.533 in 2001. The Gender Empowerment Measure increased from 0.226 to 0.240 over the same period (UNDP 2002: 17).

[5] These formulations also skirt over the fact that accountability mechanisms have long been present within the administrative services. Even in colonial times officers would hold meetings with villagers from time to time, perhaps in the form of a *janata durbar* (see chapter 3).

It will be one aim of this book to interrogate the optimism of the government's account of recent developments in the fields of governance and governmentality. Is it really the case that poorer men and women are coming to enjoy the status of citizens, and are being engaged as such by government officers (and not simply as members of beneficiary or troublesome populations, as Chatterjee maintains)? And can this reasonably be described as a national story, or are we picking up the effects of policy changes, and patterns of political mobilization, that have been put in place in some regions and not in others? How *do* poorer people 'see the state', and how are governmental agencies seen by the people who advise or work for them? What would count as a convincing causal explanation, as opposed to a suggestive narrative sequence?

In these regards, it is worth noting that even some of the main sponsors of the new public administration are cautious about what should and should not be claimed. Agencies including the UNDP, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), and the World Bank, cast their evaluation studies in the most positive light and tread softly around points of contention or criticism. Where possible they signal the benefits of decentralization or of enhanced participation. Yet many of the people who work for these agencies are experienced and at times rather cynical individuals who know that much remains to be done. Their work in villages in central and north India cautions them against a chorus of acclamation that mistakes promise for performance. They point gently toward continuing problems of 'elite capture' (of development benefits), and of the misuse of public funds by poorly trained and poorly paid government servants. They also highlight a persistent gender gap in terms of rates of participation in village open meetings.

Some Left critics, meanwhile, point out that the decentralized local governance structures now lauded by New Delhi work most effectively in a state like Kerala, and perhaps also West Bengal, where there is a supportive political culture.[6] It is one thing to provide institutions to promote accountability and decision-making at the *panchayat*, Block and District levels, and quite another to produce men and women who are able to participate effectively in these new or revamped structures. The production of skilled citizens is not something that happens overnight. Men and women have to be educated, they need to develop a broad set of capabilities, to use Amartya Sen's term, and they need to be acquainted with the costs and benefits of new structures of rule.[7] Confidence has to be built up, and it is here, say critics like Chaudhuri and Heller, that

[6] The classic statement is that by Kohli (1987). See also Webster and Engberg-Pedersen (2002).
[7] Sen (1984).

the comparative advantage of organizations like the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPI-M), and associated bodies like the Kerala Sashtra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP: the People's Science Movement), is most in evidence (see also chapter 7).[8] To expect a similar level of success in Madhya Pradesh is to confuse moral exhortation around the virtues of civic society with the hard work of constructing a pro-poor political culture. (Digvijay Singh learned this the hard way in 2003.)[9]

Barbara Harriss-White goes even further. In her account of *India Working* she dismisses views of the state that she considers to be formalistic, or too focused on statutory responsibilities. She contends that the official part of the state has been hollowed out over the course of the last twenty or thirty years, and has been replaced by what she calls a 'shadow state' (Harriss-White 2003: 77). This vast assemblage of brokers, advisers, political workers, crooks and contractors surrounds the 'official state', deprives it of funds, and helps to ensure that it is run in part for the private benefit of some of its employees. The other main winners are the largely self-employed men (and some women) who benefit from a world of state-produced shortages and sanctioned fraud. They are the top dogs in India's 'intermediate classes'. The losers are the labouring households who make up the bulk of the 'India of the 88 per cent' (Harriss-White 2003:1).[10] They work unprotected in India's informal and black economies. They also need the protection of intermediaries to chart an unsteady course through what Chatterjee has called 'the politics of governmentality' (Chatterjee 2004: 23).

To read Harriss-White is to be put in mind of a world that is far removed from that described by government boosters. States fail poorer people on a regular and predictable basis, and they will continue to do so notwithstanding recent innovations in the field of governance. Harriss-White reaches these conclusions, moreover, on the basis of an approach to social science that she describes as 'field economics' (Harriss-White 2003: 9–10). Economics and political science sometimes deal with entities like 'the economy' or 'the state' as if they were self-evident or transparent; as if the conditions in the trenches, as Joel Migdal puts it, really do approximate to the textbook descriptions imposed upon them.[11] Harriss-White will have none of this, and rightly so.

[8] Chaudhuri and Heller (2002).
[9] The former Congress Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh was voted from office in December 2003. See our discussion in chapter 7.
[10] The figure refers to the percentage of people who live outside the major metropolitan cities, and thus at some distance from the centres of corporate capitalism (Harriss-White 2003: 1).
[11] Migdal (2001).

We said before that a first task of this book is to interrogate 'official' stories about the state in India. This being so, we need to follow the lead of Harriss-White and Chatterjee and dispense with black box approaches to questions of government, participation and empowerment. Boosterism and ethnography are uncomfortable bedfellows and we shall want to exploit this tension. There is much to be said for researching political society and the local state from the inside-out. At the same time, however, as the second part of this book will make clear, we believe that the lives of poorer people in rural India are being changed perceptibly, and in some cases for the better, by the new technologies of rule that we described above. An exclusive emphasis on the shadow state, or on a relentlessly 'vertical' political society, sometimes fails to point up the spaces of citizenship that are being created, or perhaps widened, in the wake of the good governance agenda and the popular mobilizations to which it can give rise. These developments are happening more rapidly and more deeply in some regions than in others, but the effects are real nonetheless, including in some parts of Bihar and Jharkhand, despite popular (or stereotypical) views to the contrary. It follows that a second aim of this book will be to document these changes, and to explain their differential spatial impress.

Technologies of rule, sightings of the state

We take the phrase 'human technologies of rule' from Nikolas Rose, and in part I of the book we link it to an idea of 'seeing the state'.[12] The book ranges quite widely at this point, as befits a volume in this series. Our purpose, however, is to think about how we might make sense of the 'facts on the ground' that we report in parts II and III. We agree with Harriss-White that states should be understood anthropologically. Instead of thinking of 'them' as discrete or singular entities, we prefer to follow Foucault in speaking of dispersed practices of government. States are best thought of as bundles of everyday institutions and forms of rule.[13] In part, this is for cultural or ideational reasons. Partha Chatterjee and Sudipta Kaviraj suggest that it is a mistake to assume that the life-worlds of elite, English-educated Indians coincide with those of their subaltern or vernacular counterparts.[14] Very often they do not, and we should expect lower-level public officials to reinterpret and sometimes significantly to change the practices of government that are handed down to them by Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers at the District, State or Union levels. But states also need to be understood as consisting of diverse and not always

[12] Rose (1999); see also chapter 2. [13] See Fuller and Harriss (2001).
[14] Chatterjee (1997a); Kaviraj (1991). See also note (2).

cohering human technologies of government. These are the quotidian practices of rule that structure and even produce settings for the conduct of business between 'the state' and its citizens or subjects. They refer not only to institutions like the IAS or the *zilla parishad*, but also to those forms of knowledge, vocabularies, practices of calculation and so on, that help to produce designated social groups (Scheduled Communities, for example, or households that are BPL: below the poverty line) and bring them into contact with agencies of government. They also refer to an idea of the state as an impersonal and disinterested actor – the state that claims to find expression in the Constitution of India, for example.[15]

We expand on this approach in part I of the book, where we consider some of the different ways in which governmental agencies in India have sought to address the question of 'the poor'. We shall argue that poorer people very often encounter the state through technologies of rule that help to structure a war on poverty. In New Delhi during the Emergency, for example, many slum dwellers would have encountered the state in the form of a bulldozer that was being driven, metaphorically at least, by a discourse that produced urban poverty as a sin or as unsightly.[16] By the same token, we believe there are good reasons to suppose that 'state–poor' encounters are now being restructured to some degree by new technologies of rule that seek (or claim) to produce members of the rural poor as clients of the government, and as active participants in their own empowerment. These technologies are built into a new suite of participatory development projects. Some of these are operated by external agencies like DFID and the World Bank. Others are run by the Government of India working in conjunction with non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They are also built into important new ventures that have been prosecuted by ministries concerned with employment creation (the Employment Assurance Scheme) and primary education provision (the advent of Village Education Committees is said to present new opportunities for parental supervision of teachers).

Our point, of course, is not that these new technologies of rule will always secure their stated effects. That is a claim best left to government boosters. But nor do we contend that they are bound to fail, or that the unintended consequences of government action must secure the further domination of the state over its (potentially rebellious) subjects. This is

[15] On the 'state idea', see Abrams (1988). For India, specifically, see Austin (1966).
[16] The encounters would not have been as one-sided as this sentence implies. Chatterjee is right to insist that 'illegal' slum dwellers will call on such protectors as are available to them in political society, as well as on their own resources and courage, to resist the agencies of 'urban improvement'. Sadly, however, in New Delhi during the Emergency, these battles were often lost: see Selbourne (1977) and Legg (2005a).

one of the arguments that James Ferguson makes in his generally splendid account of the effects of bureaucratic rule in Lesotho, and it is one that Partha Chatterjee comes close to on occasions.[17] Our argument is more modest. We consider it unwise to assume that the agenda of 'the new public administration' does not open up significant spaces of empowerment for the men and women it seeks to position as participants or possible beneficiaries. We make this argument, moreover, because we join with Fuller and Harriss in insisting that the ways in which technologies of rule are made flesh will depend on the manner in which they are interpreted and put into play by lower-level government workers, elected representatives and others. We also need to see why and how they are seized upon, understood, reworked and possibly contested by differently placed people within the population of 'the poor' (or the rural poor in this book) in both civil and political society.

This is why we have chosen to adapt a phrase associated with James Scott. Instead of looking at the ways in which the state might see its citizens, which was Scott's concern in *Seeing Like a State* (Scott 1998), we prefer to enquire into some of the myriad ways that the state comes into view. We are concerned here particularly, but not exclusively, with the ways that governmental agencies are seen by different groups of people within the rural poor. One of the guiding premises of this book is that 'the state' still matters greatly to people in rural India. It is sometimes to be feared or avoided, of course, although this is not something we pursue in detail here. Our focus is on the 'developmental state'.[18] But it can also be at the heart of people's livelihood strategies. Richer individuals know this too, and Harriss-White rightly contends that the placing of male 'members of trading households in the professions and the bureaucracy [including the Electricity Board and the IAS]' (Harriss-White 2003: 113) amounts to a pre-emptive bid for state licences or contracts. For most poor men and women, however, the state has only recently been positioned as a source of social power, and then mainly by members of the political classes. A tribal woman in rural India is more likely to turn to *sarkar* (government) for an entitlement, such as a ration card or pension, or perhaps for employment or to register a death. Or she might want to call upon the state to enforce her right to a minimum wage, say, or for protection against an accusation of witchcraft. She might also want to send a child to school or to a health-care facility.

[17] Ferguson (1990). Also Chatterjee (2004).

[18] Roughly, those agencies of state and governmental practices that are charged with improving or protecting the incomes, capabilities and legal rights of poorer people. Our focus here will be on government departments, but the definition deliberately reaches out to political parties and judicial bodies.

The tangible outcomes of these encounters will matter a great deal to the men and women involved. A job or certificate gained is very different to a job or certificate that is refused. But it also matters to people how the encounter is structured and performed, and this brings us to a second premise of our work. We can learn about the practices of government by attending to the diverse ways in which 'the state' is experienced and understood by differently placed individuals, including by its own employees. A low-caste man who is treated with respect by a teacher or a Block Development Officer might come to see the state in a very different way than an *adivasi* woman who is kept waiting for hours to see *sarkar*, who sees gangs of males push in front of her in what passes for a queue, and who is made to touch the feet of the official she finally meets (perhaps with the help of a *dalaal*, or local broker) at the end of rough and uncivil language. We need to pay close attention to how and where these performances take place if we want to come to a more nuanced understanding of how people inhabit and encounter the state, and how they react to its everydayness and their senses of what it is to be a citizen, client and/or subject.

This brings us to a third proposition. We shall argue that the sightings of the state that poorer people make are never straightforward or unitary. None of us sees the state (or the government, the market, even public culture) in a direct and unmediated fashion. We always see the state through the eyes of others, and with close regard for past memories, accounts that circulate in the public sphere, and how we see other people getting on or being treated. And yet this is not a trivial observation, or one without consequence. Part of the attraction of the new public administration is precisely that it expects a tribal woman in eastern India, let's say, to see the state in terms of practices of corruption or extortion, as well as of gender bias and a propensity for *ad hoc* or personalized rule. It then 'follows' that she can be empowered by the exit option, or by a decentralized form of rule that makes the state accountable to citizens on the basis of their statutory (and thus in some respects equal) rights. This suggestion is predicated very exactly on the notion that new practices of rule will promote new and unhindered sightings of the state.

But if we do not entirely share this optimism, or partake of what Chatterjee describes as the 'unscrupulously charitable theoretical gestures [of neoliberal ideology]' (2004: 39, and see our discussion in part II), we do accept that it makes sense to think of the co-production of state–poor encounters by three main sets of actors. We believe, that is to say, that public policy debates in India – for example, on the scope and purpose of participatory development, on the prospects for reducing corruption – can be illuminated by studies of 'how government works in

practice' that draw on three main vantage points. These are: the sightings of the state made by poorer people both as citizens and as often vulnerable members of political society; the sightings made by government officers in different line departments, and people at different levels of authority in political society; and the sightings made by members of the wider development community, including experts from the World Bank and other lending agencies, and senior bureaucrats in the Government of India.

Furthermore, because these sightings are mutually constitutive, it is a mistake to suppose that 'development studies' are simply a means by which people in the 'development business' look in on the world they seek to describe and even to mend. They are not, and we should not assume that claims on behalf of good governance are 'mere' rhetoric, however much these phrases are cheapened by misuse. Development studies must rather be understood as a set of human technologies of rule that help to structure and produce the worlds they aim to describe. They are not without effect, and it is unhelpful to contrast development studies as somehow 'bad' to a more virtuous concern for 'post-colonialism'. Matters are more complicated than this, as we show in part III. At the same time, it is important that we are aware of what Hirschman once called the indirect or recruitment effects of new ideas or practices of rule.[19] Even after the promulgation of new legislation and training manuals, a *panchayat sewak* or his/her supervisor might not convene village meetings in the manner that is called for in policy statements. But the fact that he or she has to hold meetings on a regular basis, and is now required to reach out to all the 'sensitive people' in the area (see our discussion in chapter 5), including poorer people who might make trouble for him or her, suggests that real changes are happening nonetheless. In this case, a new technology of rule has pushed a named agent to widen his or her previous circles of engagement, and perhaps also to change the terms on which these engagements are transacted. A sighting of the state by an external agency finally gives rise to a revised sighting of that state (or a slightly new version of it) by men and women who are constituted as its clients.

The organization of the book

We can now say that the job of part I of this book is two-fold. Chapter 1 considers in some detail what it means to talk of seeing the state, and how this lens might deepen our understanding of 'the politics of the governed'. We review some of the existing literature on the everyday state and society

[19] Hirschman (1981).

in India. We also draw attention to the ways in which encounters with the state are produced by dispersed state agencies amid conditions of greater or lesser institutional scarcity. Finally, we consider how recent debates in development studies have sought to attend to these conditions, and provide 'remedies' for state 'failure'. In chapter 2 we provide historical depth to these and other debates. A common conceit in development studies is that everything is new, when this is rarely the case. The first part of this chapter looks at the ways in which accounts of poverty in India have been produced by a very diverse set of human technologies of government, including the Census, the National Sample Survey and discourses about shame or backwardness. We also consider how, and with what consequences, certain individuals or groups have been labelled as members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, or as belonging to the Below Poverty Line (BPL) population. Poorer people very often see the state because the state has chosen to see them. Subsequent parts of the chapter consider how various state agencies and political parties have proposed to wage war against poverty in India, and how important schemes for poverty alleviation were democratized in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s in accordance with new views about the rights of the Backward Classes, and of the capacities and entitlements of poorer people. We also show how the multiplication of schemes speaks to the growing importance of visuality and presentation in the promotion of an anti-poverty agenda. Politicians need to be seen to be active on behalf of the poor.

We can put this another way. The first part of the book provides us with a language with which we can approach the debates now swirling around the new public administration and the boosterism that is attached to it. Before we can evaluate this agenda we need to decide upon a framework in which such an evaluation can take shape. This is what we hope to supply with our accounts of technologies of rule and sightings of the state. But what might be described as the evaluation itself can only take place in 'the field', with proper regard for all of the subtleties that this phrase should call to mind. In part II we draw on two research projects that we carried out in rural eastern India in 1999–2000 and 2000–1. The first of these projects was funded by a research council. The second was supported by DFID and positioned us for a while as development consultants. We shall come back to this later and in chapter 9. Taken together, the projects allowed us to investigate the income support, empowerment and protective functions of the state. Five hundred households (400 poor and 100 non-poor) in Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal were kind enough to provide us with information on the Employment Assurance Scheme, primary education, and legal struggles, respectively, and on how different groups of rural society encountered 'the state' in these arenas. The information was collected in part from an extensive questionnaire survey, but