Research Paper

Kinds of Agency Among the Impoverished: Coping, Compliance, and Transformation in the Context of Structural Deprivation

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Abstract: This paper analyses the forms of agency exercised by individuals living in extreme poverty, drawing from ethnographic narratives collected in urban South India. Three distinct but overlapping modes of agency are conceptualised: inward-directed, other-directed, and inner-directed agency. These responses illustrate how the poor cope with their conditions, comply with or resist hegemonic institutional norms, and occasionally transform their existential realities. The article engages with theoretical perspectives on agency, including Bourdieu's habitus, Giddens' structuration theory, and Sen's capabilities approach, to illuminate the limitations and possibilities of human action under structural constraints. The study highlights the deeply personal yet socially patterned strategies of meaning-making among the marginalised and proposes a framework for understanding agency in the context of persistent inequality. In particular, it emphasises the importance of interpreting agency through transformative political acts and everyday, often symbolic, forms of resilience, coping, and re-signification that constitute survival for those at the margins of society. By amplifying the voices of those whose lives are rarely considered in dominant discourses, this paper contributes to a reimagining of agency that centres human dignity, relationality, and the subtle negotiations of the poor.

Keywords: agency, poverty, coping strategies, structure, resistance, habitus, India, marginality, empowerment, recognition

I. Introduction

Poverty is not merely an economic condition; it is a lived reality that shapes and is shaped by the everyday practices of those who endure it. While development discourses often emphasise structural constraints, less attention is paid to how individuals negotiate their impoverished circumstances through creative and adaptive strategies. The phenomenon of agency among the poor often remains invisible or is reduced to simplistic binaries of resistance or compliance. Yet, as this study reveals, the agency of the poor is rich with complexity, deeply embedded in cultural meanings, and shaped by the emotional, symbolic, and material exigencies of everyday life.

This paper explores these negotiations through the lens of agency, seeking to understand how the poor exercise volition and creativity in environments that offer limited opportunities for substantive change. By focusing on the narratives of individuals living in poverty in Tamil Nadu, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the sociology of agency. It critically interrogates the assumptions of rational action models and instead foregrounds how structures of domination, cultural scripts, affective economies, and survival imperatives shape human action. Through this analysis, we hope to broaden the sociological imagination regarding what constitutes agency and how it is performed, lived, and felt among the most marginalised.

II. Theoretical Framework

Agency, as understood in contemporary sociology, is not merely the capacity to act but to do so within and against structural constraints (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The exercise of agency is historically situated, relational, and imaginative. Bourdieu (1986) situates agency within the concept of habitus, wherein dispositions formed through socialization influence one's practices. These embodied histories, formed through class, caste, gender, and spatial location, structure both the possibilities and limits of action.

Giddens (1984) emphasizes the duality of structure, highlighting that while structures constrain action, they are also reproduced by it. Structures are not external to actors but are instantiated in daily routines and practices. Sen's (1999) capabilities approach brings normative depth to agency, focusing on what individuals can

effectively do and be. He emphasizes the need to examine individuals' real freedoms to pursue goals they value. Kabeer (1999) further nuances this by highlighting the gendered dimensions of agency in development contexts, arguing that empowerment involves changes in the ability to make strategic life choices.

This article also engages with the idea of "thin" and "thick" agency. While "thick" agency refers to transformative, reflexive, and future-oriented acts, "thin" agency refers to choices made in highly constrained environments, often for immediate survival (White, 2009). Drawing from these theories, this study categorises agency into inward-directed (coping and symbolic restructuring), other-directed (compliance within hegemonic systems), and inner-directed (transformative actions), providing a grounded and culturally sensitive typology for understanding agency among the poor.

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Giddens (1984) emphasizes the duality of structure, highlighting that while structures constrain action, they are also reproduced by it. Structures are not external to actors but are instantiated in daily routines and practices. This perspective underscores the interplay between agency and structure, suggesting that individuals continuously negotiate their actions within the constraints and possibilities presented by their environments. Sen's (1999) capabilities approach brings normative depth to agency, focusing on what individuals can effectively do and be. He emphasizes the need to examine individuals' real freedoms to pursue goals they value. This approach considers individuals' quality and range of freedoms, offering a broader view of human well-being and development.

Kabeer (1999) further nuances this by highlighting the gendered dimensions of agency in development contexts, arguing that empowerment involves changes in the ability to make strategic life choices. She points out that agency must be understood in the context of social inequalities that often restrict women's choices and opportunities. Kabeer's work draws attention to the intersectionality of agency, examining how various social categories interact to shape one's ability to act.

This article also engages with the idea of "thin" and "thick" agency. While "thick" agency refers to transformative, reflexive, and future-oriented acts, "thin" agency refers to choices made in highly constrained environments, often for immediate survival (White, 2009). Thin agency highlights the importance of understanding everyday forms of resilience and coping, which may not appear transformative but are crucial for survival in adverse conditions. Drawing from these theories, this study categorizes agency into inward-directed (coping and symbolic restructuring), other-directed (compliance within hegemonic systems), and inner-directed (transformative actions), providing a grounded and culturally sensitive typology for understanding agency among the poor. This framework allows for a more nuanced appreciation of how individuals navigate their socio-economic realities, emphasizing the dynamic nature of human action under constraint.

IV.   Methodology

This study draws from qualitative fieldwork conducted in urban Tamil Nadu, particularly Madurai, over several years. Data was collected through life history interviews and ethnographic immersion with marginalised individuals, including street children, sex workers, the homeless, domestic workers, and Dalit communities engaged in stigmatised labour such as scavenging. A total of over 80 narratives were collected, offering insights into the diverse experiences and coping mechanisms of the urban poor.

A narrative analysis approach was employed to identify recurring patterns of coping, compliance, and resistance. The analysis emphasizes emic perspectives—how individuals understand and make sense of their lives in their own terms. The narratives were coded thematically using grounded theory methods to allow concepts to emerge from the data. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, anonymity, and trauma sensitivity were maintained. The researcher's positionality as both insider and outsider in relation to the communities studied informed the interpretive lens and allowed for a dialogic relationship with respondents.

This methodological choice underscores the belief that the voices of the marginalised must be treated not as anecdotal or supplementary, but as primary epistemic sources for sociological theorisation. The study thus challenges dominant development epistemologies that often erase the subjectivities of the poor.

V.   Inward-Directed Agency: Coping as Personal Transformation.

Inward-directed agency is strategies that help individuals reconfigure their inner world rather than change external conditions. These strategies are often deeply symbolic and rooted in cultural beliefs, emotional

adaptation, and psychological survival. They offer a sense of control and meaning in contexts where external change appears unattainable. While these strategies may appear apolitical, they reflect complex negotiations with structural violence and social marginalisation. Inward-directed agency includes practices that restructure perception, emotion, and meaning-making to endure systemic neglect and exclusion. This form of agency reveals the deeply personal ways in which individuals maintain a sense of coherence and continuity in the face of fragmenting social realities.

These strategies become especially important when external support systems, such as welfare schemes or community networks, are either absent or exclusionary. The psychic reorganisation of experience allows individuals to build internal resilience. For many, these practices are not simply escapism but form a culturally embedded repertoire that allows for emotional repair and moral survival. They help preserve a sense of dignity and moral worth in the absence of formal recognition or justice.

4.1 Fatalistic Strategies Fatalism, often rooted in religious or moral cosmologies, provides a narrative structure that makes suffering intelligible. Among Dalits and marginalised women, belief in karma or divine justice serves as a coping device. Veeramma, a scavenger woman, justifies her suffering through karmic logic, asserting that her hardships repay past misdeeds. Chithamma, another participant, invokes the idea of divine reward for honesty and compassion. These narratives are not passive resignations but reflect an active reinterpretation of suffering in culturally intelligible terms.

Such responses resonate with Scott's (1985) notion of "weapons of the weak," wherein everyday acts and beliefs become subtle forms of resistance or endurance. These fatalistic strategies help individuals to construct moral universes where they retain dignity, often by positioning themselves as virtuous sufferers destined for eventual cosmic justice. They also serve intergenerational functions, offering moral scripts to children and framing deprivation as a test of character or spiritual merit. This provides psychological comfort and intersubjective coherence in social worlds marked by disruption and shame.

Furthermore, fatalistic strategies often coexist with deep critiques of existing inequalities, expressed through indirect cultural expressions, prayers, and invocations. They serve as emotional shelters and systems of deferred justice that offer hope beyond the material present. As such, they foster a spiritual economy that rewards resilience, patience, and moral virtue, transforming suffering into a moral high ground that legitimizes the lived experience of poverty.

The everyday language of karma, fate, and divine justice in these communities often reveals complex ethical reasoning rather than mere superstition. These beliefs not only enable endurance but often guide behaviour in communal settings, offering an ethos of mutual aid, forgiveness, and solidarity. Thus, fatalistic narratives are socially generative and not merely self-contained.

4.2 Retreatist Strategies Some individuals disengage from harsh realities through retreat into fantasy or altered states. This includes substance use, spiritual trance, or immersion in popular culture. As observed in the case of Mani, a rickshaw puller who finds solace in MGR films, cinema becomes a form of emotional refuge. Similarly, young boys like Vijay use video games to create alternate worlds where they feel powerful and in control. For many others, especially the homeless and destitute, alcohol or ganja provides a temporary escape from hunger, shame, and existential fatigue.

These strategies align with Bourdieu's (1986) idea of symbolic capital—where meaning is extracted from seemingly non-productive acts. The choice to retreat, while often pathologised by outsiders, may reflect a strategic decision to preserve psychic integrity in a world where dignity is continually eroded. Retreatist practices may also be shared and ritualized within peer groups, producing new forms of affective community and belonging that exist outside conventional norms.

Importantly, these practices are not only about escape but about preservation. By selectively engaging with parts of the cultural world—songs, myths, performances, cinema—individuals in poverty articulate a form of cultural citizenship that allows them to affirm belonging in a world that systematically excludes them. Even drug-induced hallucinations or ritualistic behaviours reflect attempts to control and reorder a chaotic environment. They transform passive suffering into acts of emotional survival and symbolic control.

In some cases, retreat into alternative worlds becomes a pathway for imagining futures. Participants speak of dreams shaped by film heroes, stories of magical survival, or imagined reconciliations with estranged kin. Such dreams may never materialise in structural terms but perform the critical function of keeping despair at bay and hope alive.

4.3 Metaphoristic Strategies These involve symbolic inversions and creative reinterpretations of daily experiences. Bhavani, a homeless woman, refers to her pavement space as her bungalow, thereby transforming degradation into dignity. Sex workers call their work "entertainment business" or "fieldwork." These acts of re-

signification allow individuals to reclaim a degree of narrative control over their lives. This strategy includes sub-techniques such as inversion, reversal, episodification, and objectification—each enabling a reframing of reality. Such practices of re-signification align with de Certeau's (1984) concept of "tactics" in everyday life, wherein the weak manoeuvre within spaces dominated by the powerful. These tactics imbue life with symbolic value and render repetitive survival acts meaningful. Though these strategies do not challenge structures directly, they allow for continuity of self and identity in degrading contexts.

The metaphorical approach also includes dramatising ordinary acts as rituals—sweeping the pavement becomes a ceremonial act of home-making; sharing leftover food is seen as sacrificial generosity. These inversions enable participants to inscribe honour, control, and aesthetic value into otherwise demeaning conditions. For example, mendicants reframe begging as penance, allowing themselves to reclaim spiritual authority even as they are materially dispossessed. These metaphoristic transformations are deeply social acts, performed for self and others, enabling the construction of micro-identities and social scripts that resist erasure.

Such metaphorical acts often serve pedagogical functions as well—children are taught to view their marginal positions as spaces of unique strength, patience, or spiritual wisdom. Over time, these narratives coalesce into localised worldviews that offer cultural coherence and communal belonging. Thus, metaphoristic strategies are both survival tools and cultural productions.

5. Other-Directed Agency: Compliance and Strategic Participation Other-directed agency involves strategic conformity to institutional expectations in order to gain access to scarce resources. While this does not challenge the structure, it reflects a calculated engagement with power. This form of agency is characterised by an awareness of structural constraints and a deliberate performance of expected behaviours to secure minimal benefits.

Dalit students running errands for upper-caste teachers in order to reduce humiliation illustrates this form of agency. These acts are not mere subservience but are infused with complex rationalities about survival and limited mobility. Students like Vinodh, who perform menial tasks for teachers, reframe their compliance as evidence of favour or closeness, transforming humiliation into virtue through moral imagination. These interactions are also strategic in that they may shield students from further abuse and offer micro-opportunities for inclusion.

Such agency reflects what Mahmood (2005) calls "docile agency"—where power is negotiated not through resistance but through embodied practices of ethical self-formation. Similarly, many poor individuals comply with state training programs or adopt identities that conform to the idealised figure of the "good poor"—the honest rickshaw puller, the dutiful domestic worker—not because they internalise the values of the powerful but because such performances yield survival benefits. This raises critical questions about agency as co-optation and the politics of recognition within development systems.

Other-directed agency also involves instrumental participation in state-sanctioned programs, NGO initiatives, and religious charities that require individuals to demonstrate virtue, discipline, or gratitude to access aid. The poor are often expected to perform gratitude or docility to qualify for support, thereby reproducing the moral hierarchies of giver and receiver. Such engagements are shaped by knowledge of what behaviours are intelligible or acceptable to the dominant. They also create new forms of intra-community distinction, as some poor individuals are able to better perform these roles and gain access to limited resources.

Importantly, this form of agency may entail painful compromises, such as distancing from one's cultural practices, policing one's own speech and attire, or even excluding others from one's community to maintain eligibility. Yet, these acts are not devoid of consciousness or critique. Many participants expressed ambivalence about their actions, indicating a reflexivity that complicates simplistic views of compliance. Other-directed agency thus underscores the tension between survival and dignity, recognition and erasure.

Moreover, this strategy of conformity can sometimes serve as a stepping stone to more assertive forms of engagement. A person who first conforms to institutional rules may later use that position to question, subvert, or negotiate better outcomes. Thus, other-directed agency is not a fixed condition but part of a dynamic trajectory of survival and assertion.

6. Inner-Directed Agency: Aspiration and Collective Transformation. Inner-directed agency refers to efforts aimed at substantive transformation, both personal and collective. While rare, such instances reveal the potential for resistance and change. They represent a deeper realisation of self-worth, a critique of oppressive structures, and a commitment to building alternatives. This form of agency often emerges from moments of ethical disruption, solidarity, or radical imagination, catalysing shifts in how individuals and communities understand themselves and their possibilities.

6.1 Personal Transformation Reshma, a young girl forced into begging, remembers the kindness of a foreigner who shared a meal with her. For her, this moment symbolizes recognition and hope, affirming her personhood beyond her social role. These moments of ethical encounter can trigger a reimagining of self and future, catalysing desire for change. Such moments resonate with Fraser's (2000) argument that recognition is a prerequisite for justice, especially for those whose social identities are devalued.

Other examples include individuals who resist caste-based labour roles, pursue education despite structural barriers, or exit exploitative relationships to build new familial arrangements. These actions, though often invisible in public discourse, reflect a commitment to dignity and autonomy. A woman who refuses to send her daughter into domestic work despite dire poverty, a youth who learns legal rights through a street-level NGO and begins to advocate for others—these are personal acts with collective resonance.

Personal transformation also includes the reclaiming of time, body, and narrative. Individuals begin to structure their days around learning, religious devotion, or community engagement rather than survival alone. Such shifts are not always spectacular but indicate a reorientation toward long-term well-being. Even the act of articulating one's story as valuable is itself transformative. Through these practices, people begin to see themselves not merely as survivors, but as agents capable of shaping history.

Inner-directed agency at the personal level also involves reclaiming authorship of one's life story. The act of narration—sharing one's life history, naming injustices, and imagining new futures—is itself a political act. These narrative shifts alter how individuals relate to themselves and the world and can act as precursors to broader social participation or activism.

6.2 Collective Organising Instances of Dalits uniting to resist caste-based oppression reflect a more overt form of agency. These actions, though often suppressed or overlooked, challenge the dominant order and create new possibilities for collective identity and action (Tilly, 2004). In several villages studied, groups of marginalised people formed alliances to demand land rights, protest police violence, or establish community-based education initiatives. These acts disrupt dominant narratives that portray the poor as apolitical or inert.

Such organizing is often spontaneous, messy, and rooted in relational ethics rather than formal politics. It creates alternative socialities that reject exclusion and reclaim collective voice. Yet, as Spivak (1988) cautions, hegemonic institutions often ignore or mistranslate such voices.

Collective organising also draws on emotional solidarities forged in everyday life—shared labour, mutual care, and common histories of suffering. These networks often operate outside formal structures and may include informal women's groups, youth collectives, or ritual-based gatherings that serve as platforms for political consciousness. They also reflect an aspiration for justice that is not confined to material redistribution but includes dignity, visibility, and narrative control.

Importantly, such movements face intense pushback from dominant groups, including surveillance, repression, and co-optation. Yet, they persist because they are rooted in lived experience and collective memory. They enact what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls the "epistemologies of the South"—ways of knowing and acting that challenge the universality of dominant paradigms. As such, inner-directed collective agency offers a crucial site for imagining more just and inclusive futures.

Practices of storytelling, ritual, education, and intergenerational mentoring sustain these collective movements. They build social memory and knowledge reservoirs that contest inequality and prefigure alternative worlds. In doing so, they expand the political horizon of what is possible, making collective agency a vital source of resistance and renewal.

7. Discussion: Agency within Constraints, Creativity, and Contradiction The expanded analysis of the three types of agency—inward-directed, other-directed, and inner-directed—compels a deeper sociological reflection on the nature of human action in conditions of persistent deprivation. These categories are not rigid; they overlap, interact, and shift depending on context, access to resources, gender, caste, age, and temporality. What emerges from this study is not a hierarchy of agency but a spectrum of engagements, each embedded in the socio-material realities of poverty, marginality, and systemic neglect.

Inward-directed agency, far from being an apolitical resignation, is shown to be rich with symbolic creativity, emotional intelligence, and moral imagination. By invoking spiritual logics, metaphorising survival, and retreating into symbolic worlds, the poor not only cope but craft dignified identities in a world that constantly devalues them. These strategies reflect a politics of meaning-making that challenges poverty reduction to material lack alone.

Other-directed agencies reveal the calculated negotiations that individuals make with institutional power. These strategies are marked by compliance, but not without critique. The poor perform idealised roles to secure access to basic services and recognition, often suppressing their own cultural and emotional needs in the process. This reveals the complex dynamics of agency as both an instrument of survival and a potential mechanism of internalised domination. Yet, within these dynamics are moments of irony, resistance, and micro-subversion that unsettle the hegemonic scripts they appear to uphold.

Inner-directed agency, though rarer and riskier, is the most transformative. It represents a reclaiming of voice, space, and time, both individually and collectively. From personal acts of defiance to grassroots organizing, these forms of agency disrupt the dominant social order and propose alternative ways of being and belonging.

These transformations often emerge from within the very cracks of the system—moments of encounter, solidarity, and suffering—that ignite new imaginaries.

These forms of agency reflect a complex moral and political economy of action. They challenge development discourses that valorise only visible forms of resistance or economic productivity. Instead, this study foregrounds the nuanced, layered, and deeply human strategies through which the poor assert meaning, belonging, and hope.

A key insight here is that agency must not be defined solely by its capacity to produce structural change but by its ability to sustain life, construct meaning, and preserve dignity in hostile environments. Sociological analysis must, therefore, shift its evaluative lens from asking whether the poor resist power to how they live within and against it. This reconceptualisation broadens the understanding of political subjectivity and recognizes agency where it has long been denied.

8. Conclusion: Toward a Plural and Situated Understanding of Agency This study has sought to complicate and enrich the sociological understanding of agency among the impoverished by analysing the nuanced strategies of coping, compliance, and transformation. The three conceptual categories of inward-directed, other-directed, and inner-directed agency provide a framework for examining how the poor exercise creativity, resilience, and critique in their daily lives. Far from being passive victims or romanticised heroes, the subjects of this study reveal themselves as meaning-makers and moral agents who navigate their circumstances with a complex mix of vulnerability and ingenuity.

Inward-directed strategies highlight the symbolic labour of the poor, who reconstitute identity and meaning in profoundly alienating environments. Other-directed strategies underscore the conscious navigation of institutional structures, revealing how marginal actors perform, comply with, and sometimes manipulate dominant norms for survival. Inner-directed strategies remind us of the enduring human desire for autonomy, recognition, and collective transformation.

Importantly, these modes of agency are not mutually exclusive. They often exist simultaneously or evolve across an individual's life course. A beggar may resort to fatalistic explanations for her suffering, while also resisting social stigma through metaphorical self-framing, and eventually participating in collective organizing for housing rights. These trajectories reflect the fluidity of agency as lived experience rather than as a theoretical abstraction.

The implications of this study are twofold. First, it invites sociologists and development practitioners to rethink how agency is identified, supported, and valued. Interventions that overlook the symbolic, emotional, and cultural dimensions of agency risk misrepresenting or undermining the very people they aim to support. Second, it advocates for development and policy frameworks that acknowledge and build upon the diverse repertoires of action already employed by the poor, instead of imposing external models of empowerment or success.

Ultimately, to understand agency in poverty is to listen earnestly and respectfully to how the poor live, love, mourn, imagine, and act. This requires new theoretical lenses and ethical commitments to solidarity and justice. By centering the narratives and strategies of those on the margins, we move closer to a sociology that explains the world and serves its transformation.

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