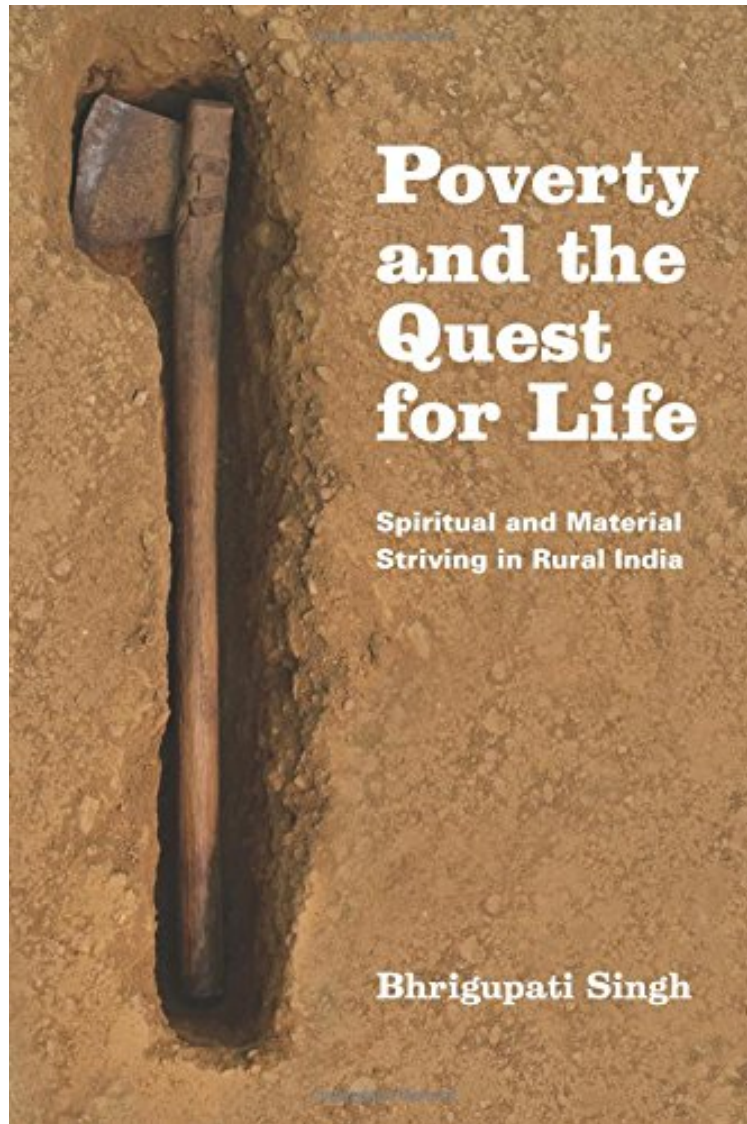


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# Poverty and the Quest for Life: Spiritual and Material Striving in Rural India

*Bhrigupati Singh*

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The Indian subdistrict of Shahabad, located in the dwindling forests of the southeastern tip of Rajasthan, is an area of extreme poverty. Beset by droughts and food shortages in recent years, it is the home of the Sahariyas, former bonded laborers, officially classified as Rajasthan's only primitive tribe. From afar, we might consider this the bleakest of the bleak, but in *Poverty and the Quest for Life*, Bhriyupati Singh asks us to reconsider just what quality of life means. He shows how the Sahariyas conceive of aspiration, advancement, and vitality in both material and spiritual terms, and how such bridging can engender new possibilities of life. Singh organizes his study around two themes: power and ethics, through which he explores a complex terrain of material and spiritual forces. Authority remains contested, whether in divine or human forms; the state is both despised and desired; high and low castes negotiate new ways of living together, in conflict but also cooperation; new gods move across rival social groups; animals and plants leave their tracks on human subjectivity and religiosity; and the potential for vitality persists even as natural resources steadily disappear. Studying this milieu, Singh offers new ways of thinking beyond the religion-secularism and nature-culture dichotomies, juxtaposing questions about quality of life with political theologies of sovereignty, neighborliness, and ethics, in the process painting a rich portrait of perseverance and fragility in contemporary rural India.

*Poverty and the Quest for Life* is a brilliant ethnographic exploration of the complex internal contradictions and tensions in a cultural milieu too long dominated by the serene binarisms of structuralist thought. Singh provides deep insights into the economics of survival, caste relations, forms of worship, and the ethics of sexual passion, never shying away from the problem of describing evanescent phenomena that escape more flatfooted authors or from the meat-and-potatoes aspects of economics.