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Protests, neoliberalism and right-wing populism amongst farmers in India

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ABSTRACT

Why do farmers facing imminent dispossession still support and acquiesce to a right-wing nationalist project? Why and how does a neoliberal capitalist state make welfare provisions to subalterns? This article answers these questions by explaining the weak protest of local farmers in an under-construction smart city in India. Underlining the key role played by the state, the article shows how right-wing leaders launch redistributive neoliberal policies to help address some of the losses of soon to be dispossessed farmers. Simultaneously, they exploit existing caste and class dynamics by politically accommodating protesting farmers into important positions in the ruling party.



KEYWORDS

Authoritarian populism; dispossession; infrastructure; smart cities

1. Introduction

In September 2016, around 2,000 farmers led by the *Bhal Bachao Samiti*¹ (Protect Bhal Committee, henceforth BBS) and Sagar Rabari (real name) from *Gujarat Khedut Samaj* (Gujarat Farmers' Society) gathered in front of the local office of Dholera Special Investment Region (SIR) Development Authority [DSIRDA] in the western Indian province of Gujarat.² Many of these farmers were recently served notices to vacate their land for the project. Farmers were particularly angry because, in December 2015, they managed to get an order from the Gujarat High Court which directed the DSIRDA to maintain the status quo and not acquire any land from farmers until the matter was duly heard (Express News Network 2015). However, ignoring the court order, DSIRDA kept sending these notices. As three farmer leaders were negotiating with DSIRDA officials, the crowd outside grew restless. Some women farmers forced their way into the office, and the rest of the crowd followed.

Once the women were inside, the matter suddenly snowballed into a commotion as the crowd broke down furniture, tore maps hung on the walls, and threw away official

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¹*Bhal Bachao Samiti* is the banner under which a group of local farmers led the protest against the Dholera smart city project. Gujarat Khedut Samaj is a provincial level farmers' rights group.

²This incident and several events in the article were narrated by members of BBS, Gujarat Khedut Samaj and farmers who joined or witnessed the protest.

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files. It continued for almost an hour as nobody seemed to be able to control the situation. The DSIRDA officials then offered to negotiate farmers' demands including an immediate stop to notices. Other demands such as shutting down the local DSIRDA office were to be taken up with senior officials in Gandhinagar, the provincial capital. However, none of these promises was followed up over the next few months.

The farmers were opposing the Dholera Special Investment Region (SIR) project, which is also referred to as the Dholera smart city. Dholera is one of the 22 villages located in a low-lying area off the Gulf of Khambhat on the Arabian Sea in the western Indian province of Gujarat, where 920 square kilometres of agrarian land are to be acquired, dispossessing close to a 39,000-local population. Hence, the farmers are least likely to continue farming and will have to contend with these urban/industrial transformations. The protest movement by the soon to be dispossessed farmers, thus, was built on a logical sense of insecurity. It was led by the *Bhal Bachao Samiti* (BBS), with representatives from all 22 villages. Although the movement has not been successful in cancelling the project, the farmers managed to get an order from the High Court stopping land acquisition until the court gives a final verdict (Express News Network 2015). As of March 2022, the status remains the same as the High Court is yet to give a final order.

Before the above incident, another huge protest against the project was organised in 2015, under the banner of Koli Samaj (Koli Society)³ (Figure 2). Although close to 10,000 women and men attended the meeting, it did not yield much beyond the show of strength. In fact, just a few months later, when the protesting farmers planned a *Padayatra* (march on foot) rally from Dholera to Gandhinagar (Figure 1), only a few leaders from Dholera participated. What transpired later was that many of the farmer leaders were persuaded by individual caste and community leaders to skip the event. In July 2017, the SIR project was in full swing with farmers regularly served notices to vacate their farmlands. According to a DSIRDA bureaucrat, some of these farmers 'voluntarily',⁴ accepted compensation.

During my fieldwork spanning 2015 and 2017–2018, despite imminent dispossession of land and livelihood, it was difficult to find either resistance or consent as predominant themes in the subjective expressions of the farmers. Instead, what emerged was ambivalence and aspiration. Interestingly, the same group of *Gujarat Khedut Samaj* leaders removed 36 of the 44 villages from another Special Investment Region project in a 100-day long agitation against the same government in 2013 (Duncan and Agarwal 2017). The picture one gets by studying the protest in Dholera is of a resistance that fails to keep momentum after every major protest event. Notably, these soon to be dispossessed farmers continued to vote for the ruling right-wing Hindu nationalist political party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has openly backed the project since its launch in 2009 by the then Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, currently Prime Minister of India.

³There are two main communities or castes in the Dholera region. Close to 70% are the Koli, a middle caste subsistent peasant community classified as Other Backward Classes (OBC). Around 20% are Darbar, an upper-caste group who ruled this area during and before the British.

⁴Interview with Trivedi (pseudonym), DSIRDA official, December 2017. Pseudonyms are used throughout unless mentioned otherwise. While Trivedi claimed that farmers voluntarily accepted compensation, the process of land pooling that was practised did not have any chance for the farmers to decline the government offer. Also, during the interviews with farmers, they denied knowledge of any possible ways to reject compensation.



Figure 1. Pictures from the anti-SIR rallies (Source: Gujarat Khedut Samaj)



Figure 2. Pictures from the anti-SIR rallies (Source: Gujarat Khedut Samaj)

This brings Gaventa's (2019) arguments into context: 'why in a situation of glaring inequality where one may intuitively expect upheaval, does one instead find, or appear to find, acquiescence? Under what conditions and against what obstacles does rebellion begin to appear' (cited in Bernstein 2020, 3). Raising those questions for Dholera, how do we make sense of these events: a farmers' resistance against a project that threatens to dispossess them loses momentum after every major protest? Why do farmers who face land dispossession support and acquiesce to a right-wing project? And secondly, linked

to this is another key question: why and how does a neoliberal capitalist state make welfare provisions to subaltern classes?

In answering these questions, this article shows the coming together of neoliberalism⁵ and right-wing Hindu nationalism, what is commonly called Hindutva⁶, contributing towards our understanding on the rise of authoritarian populism in rural areas of India. The continued rise of authoritarian populism in rural areas across the globe over the last few decades makes such an analysis extremely important (Scoones et al. 2018).

The province of Gujarat provides an interesting case here as it has been ruled by the BJP Party continuously since 1998, following which the party has built strong support in the rural areas beyond its traditional urban base through a range of strategies.⁷ A significant chunk of this period was under the current Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, who was the province's Chief Minister between 2001-2014. Because of his hardcore Hindutva based authoritarian politics mixed with a dose of populist approaches, Modi has been variously argued as an authoritarian populist (in some cases fascist as well) by scholars (Ahmad 2016; Bello 2019; Chacko 2019; Nilsen 2018; Sud 2022). In such a context, rural Gujarat provides a strong archetypal case of authoritarian populism that can now be argued to be in practice in many parts of India although not much has been written on it.

On the other hand, Gujarat has also been amongst the leading provinces in India in the race towards neoliberalism. The setting up of a host of provincial institutions targeting privatisation, financialisation and other neoliberal policies underlines this (see Bhagwati and Panagariya 2012; Debroy 2012; Sen and Drèze 2013). Narendra Modi led many of these reforms. Among Modi's key policies, was the Special Investment Regions (SIR) Act passed in 2009 to 'create large size investment regions and industrial areas' and 'develop them as global hubs of economic activity supported by world-class Infrastructure' (Government of Gujarat 2009). Dholera was one of the thirteen initial SIRs launched in 2009. As smart city discourse proliferated across the world, it was claimed that Dholera will be developed as a smart city and hence came to be referred to as Dholera smart city. During Modi's reign, such neoliberal economic policies have gone hand in hand with political illiberalism as it came to be treated as a 'Hindutva laboratory'⁸ (Spodek 2010; Sud 2012) and the state and its machinery have been at the centre of this process as the article explains. To tell the story of the continued rise of authoritarian populism in rural India, the article analyses the everyday practices of the state that facilitate the coming together of neoliberalism and right-wing Hindu nationalism.

The fieldwork for the qualitative research to understand the farmers' protest, and the role of Hindutva organisations in weakening it, was done in Dholera and in the cities of Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar through 2015, 2017 and 2018 along with follow-up

⁵Neoliberalism refers to the laissez-faire economic liberalism practised since the 1980s, including policies such as privatisation, free trade agreements between nations, state deregulation, the opening up of financial markets, encouragement of foreign direct investment, and reductions in government spending to increase the role of the private sector in the economy (Harvey 1989, 2005).

⁶Hindutva, which translates into Hinduness, is a political and cultural exclusivist ideology championed by Hindu nationalist organisations seeking to establish the hegemony of Hindus (see Jaffrelot 1996 for details).

⁷For example, in the rural areas, traditional farmer unions such as Gujarat Khedut Samaj were replaced by the BJP supporting Bharatiya Kisan Sangh although, of late, there has been a reversal of such support.

⁸On overlap of liberalisation and Hindutva in India, see Chacko (2018), Corbridge and Harriss (2000), Gopalakrishnan (2006). On Gujarat and Hindutva, see Bhattacharjee (2019), Simpson (2013), Sud (2012), Yagnik and Sheth (2005).

interviews and field visits later. Various stakeholders including farmers, land brokers, bureaucrats, and politicians were interviewed along with ethnographies at multiple spaces. Section 2 of the article discusses the key theoretical contributions. Section 3 focuses on how everyday Hindutva politics uses several strategies to diffuse active dissent against the SIR project. The next section (4) documents practices employed by the actors of the state, which essentially represent significant departures from core neo-liberal ideologies. Section 5 (Conclusion) sums up key points.

2. The state channelling neoliberalism and hindutva

Despite living with the knowledge that the loss of their land was imminent, Dholera farmers were not always vocal in protest. While some farmer leaders especially from BBS were actively protesting, most farmers could not be mobilised. On occasions, even farmer leaders would miss important demonstrations or meetings. To start with, following James Scott (1990), this absence of contestation should not always be seen as acquiescence or support for the SIR project in Dholera. It is by paying attention to the negotiations made in everyday life, to what people do and say, that we can see how 'counterhegemonic consciousness is elaborated' (Scott 1990, 200). This is especially true as there are sporadic protests, a sustained fight at the High Court by a few farmers, or everyday incidents such as government officials being banned from entering villages.

What this article explains is why the same resistance has not been successful in creating a sustained momentum that could get the SIR project cancelled. It finds that this is due to the key role played by the state as its functionaries and mechanisms have been captured by various right-wing Hindu organisations. Hence, the state, its actors and their practices become a key analytical framework. Scholars including Abrams (1988) and Mitchell (1991) have argued that the entity of state has been difficult to define. As Sud (2008) has summarised, the state has been interpreted 'as a set of discourses (Mitchell 1991; Hansen and Stepputat 2001), a web of bureaucratic personnel, institutions and practices (Evans et al. 1985), a field of politics and power (Miliband 1969; Jessop 1977; Bardhan 1984), a set-up in which the distinction between public and private is blurred (Gupta 1995), or even a unit in which significant action often takes place in proto-state 'shadows' dominated by non-state actors (Harriss-White 1997). In the case of Gujarat, such non-state or shadow actors come from various Hindutva groups. A type of dominance has been created over the years as these groups have infiltrated state organisations at multiple levels (Simpson 2013 and Sud 2012). They often act as gatekeepers to the state playing a key role in citizens' access to the state.

Stuart Hall, while describing Thatcherism, proposed the concept of authoritarian populism as 'an exceptional form of the capitalist state—which, unlike classic fascism, has retained most (though not all) of the formal representative institutions in place, and ... at the same time has been able to construct itself (as) an active popular consent' (Hall 1979, 15). In using tactics to appropriate state machineries through Hindutva groups, Modi and subsequent BJP governments in the province have exhibited many tenets of 'authoritarian populism' as was discussed by Chacko (2019), Nilsen (2018), and Sud (2022). Bello (2019, 67–68) and Sud (2022) have elaborated on some of these tactics used by Modi and Hindutva forces to win elections or enter newer geographies. During the BJP's rule in Gujarat (since 1998), Modi's period (2001–2014) is significant

as he has been implementing a number of these right-wing authoritarian populist policies across India after becoming the Prime Minister in 2014 (Ahmad 2000, 2016, 2020; Sud (2022); Vanaik 2017). While the existing scholarship has shown some of the broader trends, this article outlines the dynamics playing out in the rural areas which are key to understanding Indian politics as two-thirds of the population still live here and are dependent on the rural economy. Moreover, recent events such as the Covid-19 pandemic have underlined the importance of these areas as economic hardships in the cities and towns led to a huge migration of labourers back to the villages.

Using Stuart Hall's framework to analyse the 'profound changes' that rural areas across the globe have been witnessing, Scoones et al. (2018, 01) have listed a few elements of authoritarian populism to analyse its relevance (Borras 2018; Scoones et al. 2018).⁹ Where possible, these 'charismatic' leaders have come up with mega-infrastructure projects with essential neoliberal tenets that draw a lot of attention towards the project and create a spectacle, as discussed later in this article. The construction span of these infrastructure projects is usually long, during which such leaders may have sold their imageries at various platforms or won many elections using their grandeur as a measure of the leader's success or ability to do something 'big'. Thus, what matters most is how it is the *first greenfield smart city in the world* (Nag 2016) or how it is the biggest smart city or how it is double the size of Delhi or six times the size of Shanghai.¹⁰ Whether its promise has been delivered or not remains less important. When delivered in full or in parts, authoritarian leaders such as Modi and Erdogan, among others, have used 'seductive language and technologically utopian imaginings of the future' (Bunnell 2015) to push such neoliberal projects that create a semblance of economic growth while ultimately dispossessing the same people they claimed to benefit.¹¹ However, such projects also dispossess large groups of landowners such as farmers and small business holders as their land is transferred to investors or used for construction.¹² The Dholera project can be framed within such contradictions. In a democratic system, to win elections despite dispossessing a huge population, such transfer requires not just the use of state power but also an intricate way of breaking opposition wherein Hindutva plays a key role.

Hence, when such projects have faced protests by farmers, the 'charismatic' leaders have turned to authoritarianism or have gone back to other populist welfare measures to mitigate some of the losses of the farmers (Scoones et al. 2018). The contributions by Adaman, Arsel, and Akbulut (2019) and Gürel, Küçük, and Tas (2019) on Turkey, Andrade (2019) on Brazil, and Gaventa (2019) on the USA reflect on some of these tendencies. However, as the article explains, to understand and explain Dholera and by

⁹After Scoones et al's (2018) invitation article, the Journal of Peasant Studies has published a series of articles analysing cases around the globe. Several scholars have also contributed richly to this scholarship on various forums (Sud 2020). This list is, of course, not exhaustive

¹⁰Narendra Modi, in one of the 2014 parliamentary election campaign speeches in front of a business group, the Indian Merchants' Chamber, claimed that Dholera city will be double in size of Delhi and six times the size of Shanghai. This is, of course, factually wrong (Newsd 2020).

¹¹Starting with Gujarat, Modi has launched a series of gigantic infrastructure and construction projects managing to create a spectacle. While this article does not discuss this further, Narendra Modi's use of such mega projects to redefine India's identity as essentially a Hindu state (instead of a secular state) is noteworthy. Since becoming the Prime Minister of India, several core Hindutva projects that redefine India's identity have been either delivered or are under construction such as the Parliament redesign (Trivedy, 2019), Kashi-Vishwanath Corridor Project (NDTV 2021), the Ayodhya Ram Temple (Bajpai 2020).

¹²There is a wide literature on such projects focusing on their dispossession (see Levien 2018 for a summary).

extension Gujarat and India's authoritarian populism, we need to understand the everyday interactions between the state, society, and the key role that economic and socio-cultural measures play in these villages.

In explaining this, the article discerns the prevalence of Hindutva and how its actors have controlled the state and society. This domination, through various processes of amelioration, and brokerage, among others, has ensured that they come across as nothing extraordinary. Hence, Hindutva actors may simultaneously negotiate or help diffuse farmers' protests while also smoothing a business deal. Their practices may include contradictory steps ultimately to create acquiescence and further their dominance in state and society. This is a 'disjuncture' in Hindutva through which its actors and practices depart from its foundational ideologies ultimately to further entrench organisations and institutions of state and society. For example, even if Hindutva ideologies would argue for a unified Hindu society to bring back a caste order wherein upper castes are supposed to occupy higher positions, in practice, they may cede space to lower castes to gain a certain electoral advantage. This disjuncture represents a constellation of forces, practices not all of which are ideologically centred around Hindutva (Anderson and Longkumer 2018; Reddy 2011).

In similar tactics of disjuncture, through a host of economic measures that may signify a departure from the basic tenets of neoliberalism such as agricultural subsidies, the state negotiates the farmers' resistance. This brings to the fore the economic logic of the diffused protest. In his book, 'Give a Man a Fish', James Ferguson (2015) analyses redistributive neoliberalism in which the state has taken an active role in the process by handing out direct cash to citizens. While not argued by Ferguson, the strategies of the state actors in Dholera can be seen as an attempt to keep neoliberalism on track by negotiating some of the resistances, which may arise due to the extreme impact of neoliberal policies.

As BJP and Modi take authoritarian populist strategies to newer areas in India, the story of rural Gujarat that this article tells us is important to understand the contradictions of their practices. Hence, it can open new possibilities for countering authoritarian populism by understanding their own contradictions and how they negotiate those, something Borras (2018) has earlier outlined.

3. Hindutva politics: caste solidarity vis-à-vis contradiction, elite co-option

As farmers were losing their land to the project, it was not that the smart city project (the *raison d'être* for the loss) 'was such a terrible thing that everyone forgot their usual squabbles ...' (Simpson 2013, 05). Existing patronage and caste squabbles found their way into the language of the daily lives of villagers in their opposition or support of the project. Within this, Hindutva politics has assimilated a host of practices to mitigate protests by farmers or to ensure support for the BJP party. Desai (2015) studying the rise of the BJP among 'lower' caste population in the city of Ahmedabad pointed towards the 'desire' and 'ambivalence' that mark subaltern political subjectivities (also see Balakrishnan 2019; Cross 2014). In Dholera, Hindutva actors using the state and its institutions managed to create a sense of ambivalence towards the neoliberal project. This ambivalence made it 'difficult to find either resistance or consent as predominant themes in the subjective expressions of the dispossessed' (Desai 2015). The next sections discuss a series of such strategies.

3.1 Navigating farmers' resistance through caste solidarity and contradictions

Caste remains an important indicator of economic, social as well as political relations in rural India. In Dholera too, caste has a significant bearing on the support towards or opposition against the smart city project. As illustrated in similar cases by Berenschot (2011), Hindutva has successfully replaced existing patronage structures by empowering 'lower' castes such as the Kolis in Dholera. Koli leaders now act as key points of contact for the BJP politicians for any action or information.

When local farmers petitioned the High Court against the project, every village head (most of whom are Kolis) from these 22 villages signed letters explicitly mentioning their support for the project. One narrative successfully established amongst the villagers has been to transfer the blame for the loss of land to the previous Congress government at the federal level that launched the Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor, which necessitated the Dholera SIR project: 'Modi had no other option but to agree (to the project).'¹³ Hence, the neoliberal policies due to which farmers were going to lose their land became associated with both BJP and Congress, although the latter has been out of power in Gujarat since 1995. Jenkins (1999) also makes this argument of obfuscation at the macro scale in his highly cited 'reform by stealth' thesis that neoliberal reforms went through in India as the 'blame' was shifted between the centre and provincial governments and various parties.

Coming back to caste, until 2007, the elected provincial Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) of the Dhandhuka constituency, to which Dholera villages belong, were from upper caste groups. However, during the 2007 provincial assembly election, the Koli community, which is close to 70% of the local population, fielded a Koli local who stood as an Independent and went on to win the seat. The Koli Samaj, an umbrella group of the Koli community, supported him. The BJP quickly understood the Koli community's sentiments and ceded space by fielding a local Koli in 2012 who fought an upper caste candidate from Congress and won. Hence, the Koli farmers voted for a party that launched and implemented policies to dispossess them of their land within three years. Just before the 2012 elections, Kolis were promised that some of the Koli majority villages would be taken off the SIR project.¹⁴ Post-election, the BJP did not deliver it. The Koli Samaj then held a massive anti-SIR meeting in Dholera in 2015 (Figure 2). The huge crowd in the meeting and the High Court order that stopped further land acquisition boosted confidence amongst the anti-SIR protesters.

In 2017, Koli leaders in the anti-SIR movement, BBS, planned to organise a rally before the provincial assembly election to send a strong message to the government. However, Koli Samaj, the umbrella organisation of Kolis, stepped back. During an interview, a local Koli Samaj leader spoke about the pressure from Koli BJP leaders from Gandhinagar urging not to go openly against the BJP government closer to the election: '... I received a call directly from a minister. He asked us to not do anything until the elections ...'¹⁵ Although organisations such as Koli Samaj claim to be apolitical, they are often arm-twisted by BJP as many leaders from such organisations ultimately aspire to political

¹³Interview with Ranchorbhai, (Pseudonym), (village head) in August 2017.

¹⁴Interview with Naranbhai in September 2017, and Bhaubhai in December 2017.

¹⁵Interview with Rambhai (pseudonym), January 2018. During the interview, Rambhai cited the name of the provincial minister who called them.

positions in ruling parties or governments. Even during the anti-SIR meeting of 2015, leaders of Koli Samaj would criticise a specific policy, or a BJP cabinet minister, but shied away from an anti-BJP agenda. Whereas the Koli Samaj advised constituents to vote for the BJP in 2012, there was no clarity in the 2017 elections. Hence, by negotiating contradictions through caste solidarity or by conceding political space to the 'lower' caste, Hindutva politics mitigated the anti-SIR protests from becoming a strong force.

3.2 Co-option, aspiration, sub-nationalism delivering Hindutva

In one of the protesting farmers' meetings in September 2017, it was decided that the BBS would campaign against Bhupendrasinh Chudasama, the Darbar BJP leader and a Dholera native. Bhupendrasinh, MLA from a nearby constituency, was a powerful BJP Cabinet minister, holding multiple portfolios. BBS planned to defeat a strong incumbent minister and increase the pressure to cancel the SIR project. With an anti-BJP wave across rural Gujarat, it seemed plausible. As news about the plan broke, Darbar community elders summoned Darbar farmer leaders within BBS and convinced them not to go ahead. These BBS leaders were promised the cancellation of the project after the election. The incident was significant because by ensuring that the anti-SIR Darbar leaders did not campaign against Bhupendrasinh, a definite defeat was averted. Bhupendrasinh won by a margin of just 327 votes (Election Data 2017).¹⁶ Secondly, by managing the anti-SIR protestors using caste solidarity, the Hindutva actors ensured a loss of face for the Darbar farmer leaders as BJP did not keep the promise of cancelling the SIR project. This led to many Kolis from BBS questioning the wisdom of the Darbar leaders of BBS, as they felt cheated, thus creating a rift within BBS. There have been many similar incidents mentioned during interviews by opposite caste groups. Caste solidarity and/or animosity often trumped the resistance against the SIR.

BJP also changed tactics and lured many farmer leaders by offering them tickets to fight local elections. One such leader was Bhimsinh. In 2015, during my fieldwork, he was a staunch critic of the SIR project. In fact, in a 2014 report in the Frontline magazine that highlighted the protesting farmers, Bhimsinh was photographed sitting with the farmer leader, Sagar Rabari from Gujarat Khedut Samaj (Figure 3; Katakam 2014). However, in 2017, Bhimsinh was a changed man after he unsuccessfully fought the local village council election on a BJP ticket. He now supported the project, explaining how the SIR will bring development to Dholera.¹⁷

Not very different was the curious case of Kunwarsinh, the General Secretary of BBS. He was always critical of the smart city in public. Surprisingly, for a farmer leader, his main business was real estate. When the Dholera SIR project came, his family, which controlled the opposition Congress party in this area, swiftly took up the chance of land brokering. With the massive sum earned as brokerage, he started a few real estate projects in Dholera and nearby places. More surprisingly, in private, Kunwarsinh often came across as a supporter of the SIR project:

'... How will Dholera progress if not SIR? We have all become richer because of the land business not because of... farming. We gave up farming ages ago... I do not meet the BJP leaders

¹⁶Bhupendrasinh's election win was challenged by the opposition Congress candidate, and he was on the verge of losing his seat. The court case is still under review as of February 2021 (Vaidyanathan, 2020).

¹⁷Interview with Bhimsinh December 2017



Figure 3. Bhimsinh (extreme left) with Sagar Rabari (right) in the magazine article (Katakam 2014)

*because of Pradeepsinh's family or Bhupendrasinh. They are both cheaters. We made Bhupendrasinh what he is now ... However, I support Modi. He is doing great for India and we Indians are getting our respect in the world ... He is the Hindu Hriday Samrat (King of Hindus' heart) ...*¹⁸

Thus, even within the resistance movement, there are leaders supportive of the neoliberal project and/or its ability to deliver development. He often posted Modi's lectures on his social media accounts. At the same time, Kunwarsinh praised Modi as the king of Hindu hearts, a title given to him by right-wing groups. Such appeal eclipses ideologies of support or opposition towards the SIR project, ensuring the continued electoral success of the BJP. What works for Hindutva politics is the presence of these leaders who can help undermine the class-based unity amongst the Darbars and Kolis and exploit the caste contradictions that existed historically.

In similar ways, aspiration and hope created through construction and real estate activities brought in a semblance of economic development manufacturing legitimacy to the project. The activities due to the project created an impression of progress while also delivering some economic benefits to a certain section. The highway on which these villages were located was widened to four lanes after the project was launched. Concrete buildings started appearing as real estate projects were launched. With the enormous increase in land prices, many farmers came out of their cyclical debt. Although locals continue to undertake seasonal migration to nearby cities in search of employment,

¹⁸Interview with Kunwarsinh August 2017

the construction and infrastructural investment provided some opportunity for upward mobility. A farmer stated,

'I could never imagine that I could come out of my debt. But having sold half of my land, I have paid back (the loans), built a "pucca" house, a car for the family and have some fixed deposits in the bank ...'¹⁹

Scholars have similarly argued that the lack of resistance could be due to 'aspirations' and 'hope' that such projects may evoke (Cross 2014). Both Balakrishnan (2019) and Cross (2014) found that lower castes view these projects as 'a space of promise and hope' and 'a great leveller'. Gürel, Küçük, and Tas (2019), Levien (2018), Sud (2009) and other scholars have similarly documented instances of the breakdown of protests in the Indian contexts by variegated groups and how some land sellers support the infrastructure project, while others may not.

The SIR project also resonated with the narrative of the sub-national identity of Gujarat for many. One local businessman (unclear political affiliation) expressed his support of the project: '*... we will have schools, hospitals, airports ... If the solar farm comes up, Dholera will supply electricity to the world. Gujarat will remain number one.*'²⁰ Appeal to sub-national identity has shaped expectations of informed villagers and helped form consent. An important factor for Modi's successful election campaigns during his tenure as the Chief Minister of Gujarat was his ability to appeal to sub-national identities (Bobbio 2012; Jaffrelot 2016).

4. Disjuncture in neoliberalism

The policies associated with the Dholera SIR project along with its implementation would underline it as a representative case of neoliberal policies by an entrepreneurial state (Akhtar 2020; Datta 2015; Government of Gujarat 2009; Sampat 2016). The promotion of privatisation through various means (clear from interviews and the dossiers on SIR), subsidising land for private corporations, and attempts to involve private corporations and consultants in the delivery of the smart city underline the core neoliberal philosophies behind Dholera. Beyond these, the Special Investment Region promised tax breaks to investors.²¹ What is interesting in the case of Dholera is how through disjuncture between ideologies and practices, state actors try to deliver the neoliberal project.

While David Harvey and many scholars following him laid down the broad policy prescriptions of neoliberalism, several scholars widened our understanding of how it has come to be experienced (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Ong 2006; Venugopal 2015 and Wacquant 2012, among others). This approach identifies neoliberalism in the real world and focuses on the disjuncture between neoliberal ideologies and their practices (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 352). It considers neoliberalism not as an 'end-state' but as a process – and as a project embedded in the context, 'produced within national, regional, and local contexts defined by the legacies of inherited frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices, and political struggles' (349). At the same time, being embedded in the context, neoliberalism should not be seen as a unitary top-down

¹⁹Interview with Kanubhai, July 2017.

²⁰Interview with Bhaveshbhai, November 2018.

²¹Interview with Trivedi (pseudonym), DSIRDA official, December 2017.

force as it is constituted by situated practices. Similarly, to understand Dholera, the focus should be on the ongoing political and social processes, rather than a specific set of neo-liberal policy templates. The next sections explore these negotiations that shape and constitute neoliberalism in these rural areas displaying a disjuncture between what is proffered and what is practised.

4.1 Welfare policies for farmers

The 2017 Gujarat provincial election results alarmed the BJP due to the significant electoral loss in rural areas across the province. While they clung to power, BJP was only able to win 63 seats out of the 140 rural seats (down from 77) whereas the opposition Congress party won 71 seats. Overall, they polled 2 percentage points less than Congress in rural areas compared to 7 points higher if the urban areas were included (Kumar 2017). The incoming BJP government reacted to this shrinking vote with a slew of measures targeting rural areas. In the 2018–2019 provincial budget, the government sanctioned INR²² 192.1 billion to be spent on new electricity connections for farmers, and another INR 401.1 billion for electricity subsidies. Crop loans were to be provided at zero per cent interest (Financial Express 2018). In the 2019–2020 budget, similarly, significant allocations were made towards agriculture (India Today 2019).

Since 2012, as acknowledged during interviews by locals in Dholera, several farmers received benefits under the scheme named *Sujalam Sufalam*. Through the scheme, the government-funded 60% of the total cost of building water reservoirs for farmers in dry areas. Dholera farmers were particular beneficiaries of the project and most interviewers acknowledged that the cabinet minister, Bhupendrasinh, had an important role to play in this. They received the funding soon after the 2012 assembly elections when the protest movement against SIR projects across the province gained momentum.²³ The timing was important from another perspective. Around 2013, Modi started his campaign for the Indian Prime Ministerial post. Thus, strategies were required to quell any possible future protest in the countryside of Gujarat as Modi projected himself as someone who gave the best of the deals to farmers and corporates in a period of a pan-India struggle for most lawmakers handling such issues.

The *Sujalam Sufalam* scheme is interesting from two perspectives. Firstly, such welfare projects are against the basic neoliberal tenets of cutting down on public subsidies and expenses. Following Washington Consensus' (Williamson 1990) policy prescriptions, governments around the world have been cutting welfare budgets. The Gujarat provincial government has been at the forefront of such policy measures withdrawing funding from most social sectors over the years (Reserve bank of India, 2020: 55). Contrasting the trend, the *Sujalam Sufalam* project is a departure from neoliberalism similar to what James Ferguson (2015) suggested through 'redistributive neoliberalism' or what Brenner, Peck, and Theodore (2010a) referred to as 'opportunistic moments, workarounds and on-the-hoof recalibrations'. Interestingly, this departure was intended to deliver the neoliberal project of Dholera SIR in the longer run.

²²INR (₹) or variously termed 'Rupees' or 'Rs' refers to the currency of India. At the current exchange rate (as of March 2022), 1 USD equals INR 74.00.

²³In fact, it was in 2013 when 36 out of 44 villages under the Mandal-Becharaji SIR were cancelled after the 100-day long protests ((Duncan and Agarwal 2017).

Secondly, while the *Sujalam Sufalam* scheme funded 60% of the cost, to cover the remaining 40%, the government appealed to religious and social institutions to contribute. Many of the farmers received funding from religious groups such as the Swaminarayan temple in Dholera.²⁴ This furthers another neoliberal tenet, which scholars have pointed out in other cases (Kaya 2015), and underscores how neoliberalism finds a marriage of convenience with right-wing ideologies such as Hindutva.²⁵

Involving such religious or social groups to contribute to developmental projects is a feature of neoliberalism in practice, as Kaya (2015) has shown in the case of Turkey. Bhattacharjee (2019) and Simpson (2013) have demonstrated the increasing friendliness between various Hindutva organisations and the Swaminarayan sect in the rebuilding of the Kutch region in Gujarat after the 2001 earthquake. In fact, the Swaminarayan temple priests, over the years, have vocally supported BJP and asked its supporters not to vote for Congress in the 2017 assembly elections (Express News Service 2017).

Importantly, most of the beneficiaries were now BJP supporters. During interviews, they opposed the SIR project due to imminent dispossession but also acknowledged that they did not attend the protest meetings. Farmers confessed to having attended BBS meetings earlier. They now claim that it would be immoral to go back after taking financial help from religious groups. Thus, the welfare services by these religious groups have weakened the farmer protest and, simultaneously, ensured votes for the Hindutva party. Hence, both neoliberalism and Hindutva helped each other proliferate in these villages.

Thachil (2014) argues that the delivery of such welfare measures helped BJP gain new supporters while preserving its core constituency. One donor of *Sujalam Sufalam*, a local upper-caste businessman and a BJP supporter, who made it big from land business in Dholera, saw this donation as a way to give back to his 'poor' or 'backward' neighbours.²⁶ Similarly, a BJP leader claimed that he donated land to construct water reservoirs for his villagers because this is what Hinduism taught him. The involvement in the welfare projects of Hindutva organisations helped address upper caste youth's disillusionment with the loss of their community's traditional influence in society (Simpson 2013). Thus, *Sujalam Sufalam* brought new supporters into the Hindutva organisations without antagonising traditional upper-caste voters.

The second contradictory policy decision taken by the BJP government, especially due to the influential role played by Bhupendrasinh, was to bring back Dholera under the Narmada Canal notified area and escalate the speed of construction of the distributary canals in the villages. The canal water has been a long-term demand by the local farmers. BBS made it a war cry 'SIR hatao, Narmada laao' (Remove SIR, bring Narmada) and has been lobbying for Narmada's canal water for decades. Suddenly, just before the provincial elections of 2017 as the BJP sensed the rural discontent, funds were allocated to start construction swiftly. The canal construction in that regard helped negotiate some of the demands of the anti-SIR farmers.

²⁴Many of the farmers who built the water reservoirs over the last few years with the help of the state and religious groups were interviewed during fieldwork and confirmed this.

²⁵Both Adaman, Arsel, and Akbulut (2019) and Gürel et al (2019) have developed similar arguments about neoliberal policies pursued by the Justice and Development Party while overlapping them with a call to go back to conservative Islam.

²⁶Interview with Valjibhai (pseudonym), a real estate dealer in Dholera and Ahmedabad in December 2017.

4.2 Compensation for activation area

As farmers' protests peaked in 2014-2015, SIR authorities in Gandhinagar took some steps to negotiate with them. One such measure was to grant compensation to the farmers. In the SIR Act, land is acquired using a mechanism called land pooling. The process does not pay any monetary compensation but returns usually 50% of the original size of land to the farmer after basic infrastructure such as electricity, roads, sewerage is laid (referred to as serviced plot or final plot) (Ballaney and Patel 2009). Thus, when the Dholera SIR was announced in 2009, there was no clause of monetary compensation. However, with the sustained farmer protest that culminated with the High Court status quo order, the state changed tactics. Farmers losing land to the under-construction Activation Area, a 22.5 square kilometre zone proposed to be developed as an industrial park within the Dholera SIR to kick-start business, were to be paid financial compensation. The compensation diffused the possibility of more court cases despite the High Court ruling as none of the dispossessed farmers went to court after receiving it. In addition, the compensation was swiftly paid which led to an overall positive perception. Further, farmers were allowed to carry out farming until the government started construction.

Such measures taken by the state in Dholera to diffuse farmers' protests can be considered what James Ferguson (2015) called 'redistributive neoliberalism' in South Africa, where through cash transfers to the poor the state was somehow trying to mitigate the worsts of neoliberalism. He found that such economic support was key in a world of declining opportunities for agricultural livelihoods and formal wage labour. In similar ways, in a pan-Indian context of diminishing agricultural returns and farmers' suicide at a record high, some of these redistributions can be termed as a way to keep the neoliberal project going. Acts such as building canals for agriculture, subsidising water reservoirs or even compensating the dispossessed farmers instead of leaving them to the market, are particularly notable because they break with the entrenched logic of neoliberalism. While Ferguson (2015, 3) heralded the cash transfer as the coming of 'a new kind of welfare state', the measures adopted by the state in Dholera did help in diffusing the protests.

4.3 Transparency, coercion and state force

The hardship and suffering that the neoliberal policies resulted in across the world until the 1990s led to what Stiglitz (2008) termed the 'post-Washington Consensus consensus'. Others have referred to this process of the 'more aggressive neoliberal doctrines, usually associated with Thatcher and Reagan' as giving way to 'modified versions in the Clinton era and under Blair's Third Way' (Gooptu 2011, 36). States were encouraged 'to promote as well as regulate markets, and to provide various infrastructure and adopt frameworks of good governance ... to encourage transparency and accountability' (Murray and Overton 2011, 313).

With the extreme controversies due to land acquisition that was governed by a British era law in India, there was an attempt to make land acquisition and subsequent transfer fairer by making the process more transparent and participatory (Levien 2018). One step towards this was the 'Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013' which was cleared by a cross-party consensus in the Indian Parliament in 2013.²⁷ Another key policy that was encouraged across the

world was the digitisation of land records aimed at making land transfer transparent (Nayak 2013). However, despite the lofty talks of ‘transparency’ or ‘public participation’ in the ‘post-Washington Consensus consensus’, actual practices stood in stark contrast.

Taking a cue from such discourses, the Special Investment Region (SIR) Act of 2009 through which Dholera SIR came into existence made it compulsory to organise public hearings. The Town Planner or a designated official would take questions from the affected public and give them written responses within a specified time. This also included a compulsory Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) public hearing. In 2013, in the EIA hearing for the Dholera SIR, several farmers raised important issues which remained unanswered. An interesting incident on the complications of the land records digitisation process came to light during this EIA hearing. The computerised land records and the subsequent map that was used by the EIA consultants enlisted a village that submerged in the Arabian Sea several years ago (Akhtar 2020). However, in the new plan of the Dholera SIR, many farmers were allotted their ‘Final Plot’²⁸ (Kaushik 2014). The petitioners against the SIR project highlighted these issues at the High Court and the authority’s inability to answer those became a key argument against the project in the High Court in 2015. Learning from this experience, the authorities stopped the exercise of public hearings. When they organised these, it was a low-key affair and BJP supporters cordoned off BBS members. On one occasion, when the public hearing for farmers losing land to the National Highway project was ongoing, BBS leaders attended it. However, they were not allowed to voice their issues because ‘they did not belong to the village’ where the public meeting was held.²⁹

The use of coercive measures on other occasions has also been frequent. Many BBS and Gujarat Khedut Samaj leaders were taken into preventive custody when they planned a protest outside the Vibrant Gujarat venue (Chakravarty 2015). During the fieldwork, cases of surveillance of even the smallest of the BBS meetings were common. The use of such coercive measures by successive BJP governments has ensured that radical farmer organisations or progressive political groups barely exist in the rural politics of Gujarat as was pointed out by Sud (2009).

To sum up, these strategies and policies of the state demonstrate ‘a dogged capacity to exploit these same crises in the course of its own adaptive reinvention’ (Peck and Theodore 2012). The process of implementing the neoliberal project displays a ‘lurching dynamic, marked by serial policy failure and improvised adaptation and by combative encounters with obstacles and counter-movements’ (178-179). What is idiosyncratic in Dholera, however, is the use of caste, religion, or ethnicity by Hindutva actors to keep the neoliberal project moving.

5. Conclusion

The article started with the questions: Why do farmers who face land dispossession support and acquiesce to a right-wing nationalist project? Why and how does a neoliberal capitalist state make welfare provisions to subalterns? Throughout, the article showed

²⁷See Chakravorty (2016) for critical reviews of the 2013 law.

²⁸Final Plot refers to the serviced plot which is usually 50% of the original size of the plot, given back to the original owner. In this case, the plots were marked on the maps although these did not exist.

²⁹Interview with Vijayrajshinh, a farmer leader in Dholera, December 2018.

that answers to both the questions are interconnected as dispossessed farmers acquiesce to right-wing groups for welfare provisions. Secondly, the article provides evidence of how the state in everyday practices constitutes and is simultaneously constituted by intricate linkages between neoliberalism and Hindutva. It also showed how the actors and practices of the two ideologies may come together on occasions to help each other, and how they may depart from their ideologies depending on the context in which they are implemented.

Whereas farmers have bargained with the BJP leaders, the state has adopted policies that sporadically answer to some of their demands and could possibly try to provide some relief to the soon to be dispossessed farmers. A semblance of economic growth was generated even if it caters to a limited population. Thus, rapid infrastructural development and real-estate investment have made both neoliberalism and Hindutva more hegemonic through hope, aspiration and aspects like caste mobility that lead to anticipatory development.

In explaining the weak resistance against the SIR project and the continued rise of the BJP in these rural areas, the article also showed how these phenomena are connected. First, Hindutva adopted a range of strategies like caste solidarity or animosity, elite co-option, etc. The second was the disjuncture in neoliberalism that illustrated how there is a significant departure between the ideologies and practices of neoliberalism. In linking the two, the article revealed a processual interplay of what Desai (2015) called desire and ambivalence, which shapes the political subjectivities of the farmers in Dholera. These subjectivities are much 'more complex and open than the binary between acquiescence and resistance would suggest' (Desai 2015). Thus, farmers do not arrive at any historical conjuncture as fully formed subjects: opponent-victims of neoliberal capital, ideological subjects of Hindutva or Indian secularism. Rather, they arrive as already enmeshed in a set of contingent and interdependent relations, which both allow them to curry concessions from the BJP but are also unable to fully organise against forces that are slowly, transforming their landscapes.

Lastly, farmers in Dholera do not have much to rely on to counter Hindutva or neoliberal policies. Put simply, despite appearing to not consistently protest, it is more appropriate to argue that long-term societal dynamics compelled them to do so. The absence of sustained resistance to the project cannot be taken as evidence of societal legitimacy, but rather represents some mix of less visible forms of contestation and acquiescence, as James Scott (1990) argued. Within the context of Dholera, the dynamics that are likely to displace farmers from agriculture are critical to account for the acquiescence that fills that grey area. It is not always economic reasons that can explain the cause but also the everyday state and how it helps right-wing Hindutva politics and neoliberal policies to come together.

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