

Botched-up Development and Electoral Politics in India

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The debates about the general election campaign in India have often pitted “development” against secularism. In the process, questions about the emergence of alternative political formations have been pushed to the sidelines. This article argues that a development versus secular polarisation of national debates reflects a gross simplification of the politics of development in independent India. Through an examination of the historical antecedents of the contemporary dominance of the political right in Gujarat and by drawing on recent research, this article makes two interrelated arguments. First, it shows that the success of the right is inextricably linked to the botched-up development priorities of the past several decades. Second, it points to the inadequacy of the pro-poor policies and programmes promoted by the left-of-the-centre political coalitions.

The debates during the general election campaign in India often pitted “development” against secularism. To the extent that such dichotomy worked to the advantage of the conservative Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the texture of the debates signifies a success of its prime ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi’s skills in setting the agenda for this election.¹ Notwithstanding the attempts on the part of some commentators to introduce nuances to these debates, the debating space was overwhelmed by a presidential style duel between Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi. In the process, debates over questions related to the nature of social welfare and economic development policies were sidelined. Even more importantly, questions about the emergence of alternative political formations were bulldozed over.

This paper argues that this state of affairs, that is, a development versus secular polarisation of national debates reflects a gross simplification of the politics of development in independent India. It shows that the success of the right is inextricably linked to the botched up development priorities of the past several decades. By implication, it argues that those interested in pursuing a progressive change in India’s political and economic scenario must invest in strengthening political formations that are actively engaged with mass politics. To make these arguments, this study offers a historical analysis and explanation of the emergence and consolidation of the right-wing movement in Gujarat, and supplements it with evidence from recent research (2009-13) in the state. Moreover, it builds on comparative insights from other states and a scrutiny of the progressive policy measures announced by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government to show that the Gujarat phenomenon, that is articulated in this paper, is more widespread than is generally acknowledged.

The state-led efforts for social and economic development in independent India have been characterised, by and large, by a deep-seated conservatism (Brass 2002). More often than not, political parties and governments have cashed on the promise of development. Governments seen to have made efforts to meet even some of the promises they made, received disproportional popular support. The Congress Party has historically been the prime beneficiary of this phenomenon of benefiting from the promises of development, which translated into a few for its constituents. However, by not building on the mandates they were given the governments of the past, including the recent UPA governments (I and II), have opened up the floodgates of a reactionary and right-leaning backlash.

My research about the evolution of Gujarat’s political economy is inspired by two long conversations I had with Sukhdev Patel of Gantar, Ahmedabad in October and December 2009. I gratefully acknowledge his leads.

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Gujarat, as the following discussion shows, has been at the forefront of these dynamic linkages between the politics of development and electoral politics. For a number of reasons that are not entirely absent from other regions in the country, the state has proved to be the most conducive ground for fanning a popular discontent against the failed promises of the left of the centre political formations. A review of the scholarly research cited here shows that these trends have been in the making for a long time. However, the Congress failed to respond because the party apparatus is not equipped – ideologically and politically – to deal with the popular backlash against the failed development politics of the past.

This paper also presents evidence that questions the Congress Party's ability to design and execute a "left of the centre" development agenda, which would be remarkably different from that of the market-based agenda promoted by Modi and his team. This gap, between what the Congress claims and what is needed is at the root of the Congress Party's failure. More importantly, evidence from other states suggests that this trend is more common than has been acknowledged thus far. Accordingly, this study offers a diagnostic of the India's political dilemma that accounts for the political effects of the failures of Nehruvian socialism. In the concluding section, it offers pointers for the development of an alternative politics that is rooted in a sustained engagement with mass politics.

1 Agenda of Development and Its Discontents

In a short editorial piece published online by NDTV, noted historian and author Patrick French touches upon an important question: how has the Congress Party in Gujarat managed to sink itself into a deep hole over the past two and a half decades? Suggesting that "the party seemed to have few ideas of how to improve its position", French reminds the reader of the Congress stalwarts that dotted the state's political landscape in an era bygone.² The argument that is made here is that a more fruitful perspective emerges from examining the unravelling of social and political coalitions that sustained the Congress Party's successful run at the ballot box prior to the 1990s. In particular, a decade-and-a-half-long period between 1974 and 1989 offers insights that help us see the contemporary politics in a clearer light.

1.1 Detour into the History of Electoral Politics in Gujarat

As a result of intra-party struggles at the national level in the year 1969 the Gujarat Congress split into two factions – the Congress(o)³ and the Congress(R),⁴ which later became the state unit of Congress(I). A key figure in Gujarat Congress at the time was the Gandhian Jina Bhai Darji who had worked among the adivasi communities in south Gujarat. By working closely with other Gandhians, Darji built a formidable social and political coalition that helped the state Congress stay afloat in the post-Emergency era. In fact, this coalition of Gandhian social activists proved critical to the revival of the party after Indira Gandhi's humiliating defeat in the 1977 general elections.

At a time when Indira Gandhi was left with few supporters with a mass base, Darji invited her to Gujarat. Darji and his Gandhian colleagues not only gave her a "spectacular welcome", they also organised a massive rally in Surat (Desai and D'Costa 1994), which was also the constituency of the then Prime Minister Moraraji Desai. Lakhs of people turned up to see Indira Gandhi in Surat and other places.⁵ These events proved truly redemptive for Gandhi, and culminated in the massive mandate she received in the 1980 general elections.

The national level outcomes also paved way for the dominance of Jinbhai Darji and his colleagues in the state unit of Congress (R/I). These leaders were known for their advocacy of land rights and other radical measures to improve the lot of the marginalised groups. Darji, in particular, had fought against the bondage system locally known as *hali pratha* under which adivasis had to pawn their labour to landowning and economically powerful groups such as Patels and the trading castes such as Baniyas and Bohras (Sanghavi 2010). The relatively radical agendas of its leaders cost the Congress (R/I) the support of the dominant caste groups. In the face of a potential reversals of political fortunes, the Gandhian social activists turned Congress politicians quickly set out to stitch together a formidable social and political coalition that came to be known by the acronym KHAM, which stood for the four caste groups – Kshatriya, Harijans (dalits), Adivasis and Muslims.⁶

The KHAM groups commanded more than 60% of the vote share in the state at the time, and remained a powerful electoral coalition for a decade. More importantly, the proponents of KHAM made a deliberate choice to openly advocate the interests of, and speak on behalf of, the four caste groups mentioned above (Mehta and Mehta 2013). It is noteworthy that such an open pursuit of caste-based electoral mobilisation has never been the style of the mainstream political parties. As Kanchan Chandra suggests, they have tended to play a "coded ethnic card" (Chandra 2000). The KHAM coalition's overtly pro-poor orientation, linked to the social reality of the time, led to a "massive infusion of the subaltern communities into politics" (Sheth 2002: 20).

1.2 Collapse of 'Subaltern' Unity

The political upheavals that Gujarat witnessed between 1974 and 1985 materialised in the context of significant economic anxiety for the aspiring young generation. It started with the Nav Nirman movement of the early 1970s, led primarily by university students and professors, young professionals, and the educated youth in general. In part as a backlash against what many saw was Indira Gandhi's failure to deliver on the promises of development, the Nav Nirman movement metamorphosed into an umbrella movement that encompassed popular concerns of food scarcity, corruption in government, grievances in the educational system, black marketing, price rise, civil liberties, and a sense of injustice to Gujaratis and the state of Gujarat (Shah 1974; Jones and Jones 1977).

While the movement led to the removal of the then chief minister Chimanbhai Patel in 1973, followed by suspension of

the state assembly, the key concerns of price rise and scarcity had not subsided. A somewhat rapid return of an eerie “normalcy” prompted Ghanshyam Shah to wonder, “when the tensions, which persist, will again erupt into violence” (Shah 1974: 1453). Unfortunately, it did not take very long. The occasion was the announcement of the first round of reservation quotas in the state, but the driver was the KHAM mobilisation engineered by the Gandhian social activists.

To simplify a bit, the KHAM coalition fomented a period in the state’s history when the representatives of subaltern groups “captured” state power via the electoral route. In the process, Gujarat witnessed the emergence of two backward caste leaders, Madhvasinh Solanki and Amarsinh Choudhary, who went on to become the state’s chief ministers. As indicated above, the KHAM era politics were different insofar it appealed overtly to the advancement of specific caste groups. In fact, it went a step ahead – the first KHAM backed government also explicitly excluded from political power the upper caste strata, in particular the Patels, thereby threatening their long-standing dominance (Patel 2002).

In its first full term in office (June 1980-March 1985), the Madhvasinh Solanki government made some valiant attempts to advance the agenda of social welfare and economic advancement for the marginalised groups. It resurrected land reforms, and presaging the Mandal-era politics, pursued a programme of reservation for the scheduled and other backward caste groups (Sheth 2002; Sanghavi 2010). Moreover, instead of risking a repeat of the long history of bureaucratic sabotage of land reforms, Jinabhai Darji instructed the party machinery to galvanise its cadres for effective implementation of land reforms on the ground (Sud 2007). Even though not much was achieved as a result of these reforms, people returned handsome dividends for the efforts that Darji and Solanki made.

In the assembly elections held in March 1985, the Madhvasinh Solanki government was voted into power with a large majority of 149 out of the total of 182 seats in the state legislature (Desai 2011). By his second term Solanki had capitulated to the landowning classes, and had virtually given up on the agenda of land reforms. The failure of land reforms and Solanki’s ambition of further consolidating his hold among the numerically strong middle caste groups, prompted him to announce an additional 27% reservation for the socially and economically backward castes (SEBCs) (Patel 2001).⁷ The announcement of SEBC reservations triggered an elite revolt,⁸ during which the dominant groups exploited every possible venue – street and college politics, the judiciary, and their brethren in the government machinery, including the police (Sanghavi 2010). The result was a deliberately engineered law and order problem, which overpowered a government that had been elected with a thumping majority.

1.3 Rise and Growth of the Right Wing

The KHAM era reforms failed. Congress(I) was the main beneficiary of the KHAM mobilisation even though it failed to capitalise on the success. The poor members of the four caste groups benefited the least. Scholars have attributed these outcomes to

two key factors: the failure of the faction-ridden Congress apparatus to mobilise its cadres, and the success of pre-emptive and reactionary mobilisation engineered by the landowning groups (Patel 2001; Yagnik 2002; Sheth 2002). Even so, the mere announcements of relatively radical policies by KHAM-backed governments alarmed the dominant caste elite, and prompted a massive fightback, of the kind that is perhaps unique in Indian history. Most notoriously, this reaction led to two rounds of anti-reservation riots in 1981 and 1985, and paved the way for the years of right-wing backed mobilisation of the middle and the upper strata of Gujarati society (Prakash 2003).

The two anti-reservation riots constituted “a watershed in the social and political history” of the state (Prakash 2003: 1,606). The dominant strata used this opportunity to consolidate the gains that accrued to them from the post-Independence initiatives of land reform, green revolution, and subsidised development of the small-scale industries (Prakash 2003). At the same time, this was also the moment when the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) initiated the process of expanding the unity of the dominant castes into a broader Hindu unity movement. In the final stages of the 1985 anti-reservation movement, violence was directed exclusively against the members of the Muslim communities (Spodek 1989; Sud 2008). While it is commonly acknowledged that the RSS and its affiliates perfected the “Gujarat experiment” over the years, popular debates fail to account for the sociological antecedents and the political effects of the experiment.

This author’s research in south Gujarat revealed a great degree of acceptance of Hindu practices and identification with Hinduism among even the poorest sections within adivasis. When adivasis are labelled as non-Hindus, they take it as a marker of social exclusion and as a reminder of the long history of exploitation.⁹ Hindu festivals such as Navratri and Ganesh Chaturthi are celebrated with far greater enthusiasm than they are in the caste society groups in other states such as Rajasthan or Madhya Pradesh. Notwithstanding the adoption and celebration of Hindu festivals at a large scale, some tend to focus exclusively on traditional practices, such as the post-monsoon ceremonies during which adivasis worship new sprouts of vegetation.¹⁰ Such selective representations of adivasi cultures prompt presumptions that prompt characterisation of adivasis as non-Hindus, without recognising their own agency in adopting the norms and practices of Hinduism.

Other scholars have also documented the proactive interventions of RSS and Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) in facilitating the integration of dalits and adivasis within the project of Hindu nationalism. These groups have asked their cadres to “dedicate themselves to the abolition of untouchability and to work for the all-round development of their ‘economically and socially backward Hindu brothers’” (Sud 2008: 1,263). Beyond the pro-forma campaigns run by government agencies, no similar efforts have been made by the avowedly secular Congress apparatus to counter the influence of the right-wing campaign. Indeed, as Prakash (2003) shows, the non-BJP parties, devoted to the agenda of secularism, seem to prove their secular credentials almost exclusively through the formal

means such as the interruption of the proceedings of the Parliament or state legislative assembly.

Successive BJP governments in Gujarat have aided the project of Hindu nationalism through institutional support for right-wing campaigns, for instance, through the appointment of para-workers called *gram mitras*. For instance, in 2009 the government appointed cadres of *gram mitras* collected signatures for a petition, which was drafted by the activists of Adivasi Suraksha Manch (or, the Forum for the Protection of Adivasis), and meant to be sent to the President of India. The petition articulated a demand that dalits and adivasis who convert to other religions be barred from benefits of state-sponsored social welfare schemes.¹¹ When asked to explain the reasons for signing the petition, a local leader who had for years been associated with a progressive non-governmental organisation, surprised with the analogy he used: “Converting to other religions is not good. For instance, if someone becomes a Bhil, we Rathvas cannot give (marry) our daughters to them.”¹² The reader should note that Bheels and Rathvas are two different adivasi *gotras* that often live in mixed villages albeit with a strong sense of social hierarchy. This author was witness to multiple instances of the assertion of Rathva superiority throughout the region, and was clearly associated with the processes of Sanskritisation and Hinduisation.

The roots of the project of Hindu nationalism run far deeper than is often accounted for in the debates about the communal designs of the RSS and its affiliates. Modi and his governments have tapped into and have fanned religious exclusivity. Even so, it is a mistake to see a linear relation between communalisation of the subalterns and the extent of their political support for the BJP. As discussed above, the state machinery has been used in a variety of ways to promote and reinforce the Hindu nationalist project both in rural and urban areas. The reversal of the causal arrow has significant implications for strategies needed to counter the upsurge of support for RSS and its affiliates. While it is likely that these efforts have yielded better results in urban and semi-urban constituencies (Jaffrelot 2013), it would be a mistake to assume that the reach of the project in rural areas is any less intense.

To a great extent, the success of the right-wing mobilisation feeds on economic anxieties of dalit and adivasi migrants (Shah 1974; Jaffrelot 2013) and the aspirations to secure a small share of gains from economic models that dominant actors support (Prakash 2003). Concrete measures, aimed to promote economic development and social mobility, are thus likely to be central to any efforts to counter communalisation. The relevant question then is whether the Congress Party and its governments have pursued economic development that would help avert the imperatives of marginalisation. The following section pursues this question.

2 ‘Gujarat Model’ and the Poverty of the Congress Response

The discussion above described an alternative view of the “Gujarat model”. This model is essentially a political model, which feeds on a particular type of politics of development in

independent India. Prior to getting into the details of this political version of Gujarat model, it is timely to consider how aspirations of the subaltern groups are reflected in the discourse of development.

Narendra Modi differentiates his approach to development from the 60 years of Congress approach in a very interesting manner. Speaking to gatherings at election rallies in Santrampur and Rajpipla during the 2009 general elections, Modi said, “For 60 years, the Congress Party has been doling out hens and goats in the name of tribal development; I want to ask you why my adivasi brothers should not aspire for floriculture?” Modi’s vision for market-linked development is not based on some apologetic explanation of trickle-down theories. Therefore, even though in reality the Gujarat model is not structured to integrate every adivasi to markets, Modi prods his audience to think of themselves as market players. A quote showcased on Modi’s website during the recent election campaign said, “Forget if you are rich or poor. All you need is faith in yourself. If you have the passion to work then just get up and set forth and you will find the way!”¹³ At this level, Modi’s developmental model parallels the Bollywood movies that sell dreams. Bollywood movies and Modi’s political campaigns have both done well.

The political version of the Gujarat model, thus, goes like this: Immediately following Independence, people, especially the poor in India, looked up to the state for advancing their social and economic status. Even though a decisively conservative development model promoted by successive governments meant that the gains for marginalised groups were minimal, they voted for whichever party they thought was in the best position to deliver some gains. Local and regional intermediaries played a significant role in making these small gains palatable (Mitra 1992). For a long time, the Congress happened to be the default option. In Gujarat, the poor people’s support of the Congress peaked in 1985 assembly elections, which the Congress Party failed to capitalise. The BJP, backed by RSS cadres, replaced the Congress as the party that the middle classes saw as their saviours. Gradually, by feeding on what this author would call as the compulsions of marginality, the party apparatus has also convinced a good number of poor people to believe, even if grudgingly, that they must vote for Modi if they also want to partake in the little state support that makes its way to their village (see also Patel 1999).

Unlike the economics of the Gujarat model, on which account Modi’s perspective differs sharply from that of the Congress (or, at least that is the reigning assumption), the politics of it must also be explained in terms of the behaviour of Gujarat Congress, which in all likelihood has been guided by the party high command. Considering the golden run the Congress Party had in the state not so long ago, and that a significant percentage of Gujarat voters, especially among the poorer section, continues to back it (Jaffrelot 2013), the Congress Party would have put its best foot forward to consolidate its gains in the rural and adivasi communities. One needs to examine whether the party apparatus in the state invested, even if for instrumental reasons, in advocating for the programmes and policies that serve the rural citizens and adivasis.

One important litmus test for the state Congress would be the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 enacted by the UPA. Even though most discussions of the FRA have focused on the questions of land rights and environmental conservation, the FRA is historical for political reasons. It represents a concrete effort towards economic and political empowerment of disenfranchised adivasi groups – it not only recognises their rights to land and forests, but of being part of the process of the adjudication of such rights (Kumar and Kerr 2012; Kashwan 2013).

The Gujarat Congress was in a particularly strong position vis-à-vis the FRA because Madhusudan Mistry, one of the prominent Congress leaders in the state, was a key member of the Joint Parliamentary Committee related to the FRA. However, the Gujarat Congress did not rope in Mistry to spearhead the FRA-related mobilisation that could have benefited the party significantly during the 2009 general elections. On the contrary, some of the key Congress leaders resented Mistry's rise within the party based on what these leaders saw was a narrow focus on forest land-related issues.¹⁴ Intra-party battles, in which a key Gujarat leader stationed in Delhi played a prominent role, overwhelmed the considerations of the interests of the party and its constituents.¹⁵

At the same time, most of the prominent Congress leaders interviewed for this research demonstrated a poor and an apolitical understanding of the FRA provisions. Their views were largely synchronous with the anti-FRA positions taken by the forest department, which is vested in maintaining the status quo of its exclusive control of the territory (Kashwan 2013). An important political consequence of such understanding of the FRA was that most Congress leaders did not think of the FRA or the BJP government's failed implementation as a key election issue, even within the constituencies with a majority of adivasi voters.¹⁶ On the other hand, the cadres and leaders who demonstrated politically nuanced views about the FRA (and, other issues related to adivasi interests) were generally pushed to the margins of the Congress Party hierarchy in the state. Reliable information from at least one important and keenly contested adivasi constituency suggests that neither the Congress nor the BJP has raised land rights during the ongoing election campaign.¹⁷

A full understanding of the Gujarat model is incomplete without accounting for a lack of political imagination within the Gujarat Congress and the failure of the high command to address this in any meaningful sense. This is not to suggest that no leader has brought up important questions within the internal debates, but the party structure does not facilitate that critical suggestions are followed up, leave alone implemented.¹⁸ It has resulted in big losses for the constituents on whose behalf the Congress could have advocated, indeed helped implement, key programmes and policies beneficial to the masses. This discussion about the failure of the Gujarat Congress to come up with a concerted and sustained response to the failed policies of the BJP governments begs an important question: To what extent these failures reflect a fundamental flaw of the intra-party affairs of the Congress at the national level, and by implications affect the ability of Congress-led

governments to ensure implementation of concrete policies and programmes that would help advance the social and economic position of its key constituents?

3 Is the Gujarat Story an Exception?

What does the discussion above, which implicates Gujarat Congress in the politics of the Gujarat model that Modi-led BJP has exploited for its electoral gains, tell us about national politics? The FRA, which was the empirical hook for the discussion above, constitutes an important case in point. Within the Congress Party the issue of the debilitating effects of forest laws on the adivasis was first raised prominently by Manishankar Aiyar and Digvijay Singh, with the latter even demanding that a meeting of the concerned chief ministers be called to discuss the issue (Agarwal 2000). Media reports suggested that Singh got a terse reply from Sonia Gandhi addressed to all Congress chief ministers, in which the Congress chief warned of the "inherent dangers in seeking hasty amendments to the Act" and blamed the states for "lack of vigilance" in its implementation.¹⁹ The chief ministers' meet that Digvijay Singh called never took place.

The FRA is often listed among the other rights-based legislations that the UPA governments enacted under the leadership of the National Advisory Council (NAC). However, interviews with activists involved in the first round of meetings in the prime minister's office suggest that it was the prime minister who first mooted the idea of enacting a separate law under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs.²⁰ Rahul Gandhi, along with some key members of Parliament, was part of the Tiger and the Wilderness Forum, which opposed the proposed law recognising land rights (Rangarajan 2005). By this time, Digvijay Singh had relocated to Delhi, and had suitably changed his position. Singh now argued that the FRA was a non-starter and "he did not believe that tribals and forest-dwellers should be doled out forest land, as is envisaged by the Act" (Bindra 2007).

The Congress Party's ambivalence about the FRA is certainly rooted in the fundamental contradictions that Congress leaders see between promoting conservation and the pressures that the party faced to resolve the contradictions built into India's forest laws (Aiyar 2003). Indeed, a careful examination of the policy struggles that took place during the enactment of the FRA suggests that had it not been for the strong nationwide mobilisation spearheaded by forest rights groups, the resurgent threats of Maoism, and the UPA's reliance on the support of the communist parties, the FRA would not have materialised (Asher and Agarwal 2007).

Notwithstanding the above analysis, it is important to account for the instrumental nature of electoral politics. Might the FRA have received a short shrift because the forest land-related question affect a comparatively small percentage of voters, who are spread out across a number of states? To address this question one must consider another issue that has similar social and political implication but is relevant to the concerns of a much larger proportion of the voting population. Have the state of affairs been any different vis-à-vis the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)? Notwithstanding the usual implementation

failures related to the implementation of a programme meant exclusively for poorer sections of a society, the MGNREGA has made a difference to the lives of the poorest people in the society. Multiple studies that Dilip Mookherjee summarised in a recent essay show that “providing employment to rural unskilled labour is the single most direct and effective way of reducing poverty”, and the MGNREGA was successful “in providing a safety net and reducing poverty for the most vulnerable sections of the rural population” (Mookherjee 2014).

The Congress Party leaders announced a campaign for popularising MGNREGA and the other progressive programmes implemented by the UPA.²¹ Even though there are no reports to suggest that Congress cadres came out in large numbers to execute even such a minimalist campaign of disseminating information about MGNREGA, what was really needed was to motivate Congress cadres to monitor and aid the effective implementation of the programme. A long-time adviser of the UPA and one of the main proponents of replicating the MGNREGA across the country’s rain-fed areas for promoting sustainable livelihoods, Mihir Shah argues, “Without a cadre of social mobilisers or *Lok Sewaks* (at least one in every village), it is difficult to convert NREGA into a truly demand-driven programme, where works are undertaken in response to the needs and aspirations of a fully aware citizenry”.²² The Congress Party has not made any attempts to intervene at that level – there are no Lok Sewaks promoting MGNREGA in the villages where, for instance, the Gujarat government appointed *Gram Mitras* are helping collect signatures in support of RSS-sponsored petitions.

The discussion above, about two of the main pro-poor policies of the UPA, needs to be supplemented with a brief reference to other key policy measures that have been documented in the media and the literature extensively. These policies of the UPA-II include the operation green hunt, shunting out of ministers of environment and forests who sought to follow the laws of the land, and letting the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) (MMDR) Bill 2011, which was tabled in Parliament in December, 2011, lapsed without being passed. All of these offer additional evidence that the UPA was not fully committed to the goals of pursuing policies and programmes that justify its claim of a different idea of India. Indeed, that some sections within the party floated the name of P Chidambaram as a potential prime ministerial candidate, before the Congress vice-president consented to take on the responsibility, suggests a decisive turn in favour of an ideological preference for market-led development that is not very different from the BJP’s policies.

The first chapter of a booklet that the UPA-II government brought out to showcase its achievements focuses on “Ensuring safety and security of the citizens”, and comprises charts and figures on topics such as “trends of terrorist violence in J&K”, “security situation in north eastern states”, and “trends in left wing extremist violence”. While the booklet includes the MGNREGA, the terms such as *adivasi* or *dalit* (or, the corresponding official designations) do not find a place in the booklet.²³

Evidently, the Congress Party has moved on to a new grammar of development, and a new imagination of its core constituents

and their main concerns. In the process, it has provided further evidence that the politics of the Gujarat model of development needs a careful scrutiny. The following concluding section outlines a proposal for a politics of development that is based on a rethinking of the project of progressive change.

4 Glass Ceilings

The discussion in the previous section illustrated that the Gujarat model of development and the contemporary rise of conservative forces in the country cannot be fully explained without accounting for the development politics of post-Independence India. The discussion in Section 1 of the unravelling of the KHAM coalition and the progressive strengthening of the conservative forces vividly illustrates this point. Although the constraints of space prevent a comparative analysis of Madhya Pradesh, its politics has gone through a very similar period of consolidation of political forces in favour of the BJP. The two-term chief ministerial stint of Digvijay Singh was focused significantly on the progressive policies and programmes aimed to promote human development, political devolution, and the distribution of government land to the landless. These programmes and policies provoked an elite revolt of sorts, including from within the Congress Party (Corbridge and Harriss 2000; see also, Manor 2004; Pai 2009). Saroj Giri similarly points the emergence of Bal Thackeray and Shiv Sena in Mumbai as a direct consequence of the vacuum left open by the Communist Party of India (CPI) (Giri 2012).

To reiterate the argument, it is virtually impossible to disentangle the failures of the post-Independence project of development from the contemporary rise of reactionary and conservative forces within the country’s polity. The ambiguity and half-heartedness of the pursuit of the progressive policies and programmes by the previous UPA government also point to a glass ceiling against progressive change that the Congress has failed to breach. It would be a mistake to read these failures merely as an implementation problem. To build on Paul Brass’s argument cited earlier, we are witness to an ongoing consolidation of the backlash against India’s inherently conservative development policies and programmes. These policies have not served those who needed them most, but have helped create a sense of resentment among the very groups that have benefited the most from the notionally socialist state’s policies and programmes (Corbridge and Harriss 2000; Prakash 2003).

The debates that pitch secularism against development detract from careful discussions about an alternative politics of development that needs to be nurtured. If the discussion above suggests something, it is that the scary possibility that unbridled capitalism will marry regressive cultural revivalism cannot be averted without a significantly expanded engagement with mass politics.²⁴ This is so because the root problem is not that a demagogue magically captured the imagination of masses (with presumably false consciousness), irrespective of what the Congress leaders in Gujarat would like us to believe. India is staring at a decisive right-wing turn in its politics because the governments of the yesteryears failed to address the developmental challenges we face as a country.

India has the world's largest informal economy, which constitutes about 84.7% of the total jobs in the country (Gudavarthy 2014). The informal nature of the economy, combined with the patterns of migration and casualisation of workforce associated with it, have been one of the key ingredients in the rapidly expanding support base for the BJP in Gujarat and elsewhere. The middle classes and castes are engaged not only in the reproduction of economic inequality, but also in the construction of the broader cultural-nationalist identities through a variety of social, cultural, educational, and religious associations and organisations (Shah 1974; Prakash 2003; Jaffrelot 2013).

5 Strategies for the Future

One important implication of the analysis presented above is that future efforts to counter the advance of right-wing cultural and economic projects will succeed only if such response builds on the strengths of mass politics. Moreover, any such project will have to be a political and economic project: It must engage actively with electoral politics and governments at appropriate levels on an ongoing basis, while speaking to the economic problems of those who are dependent on the informal economy and the agrarian and forest-based rural economy.²⁵ Such a model of political and economic mobilisation, which Jonathan Fox refers to as “accountability politics” has evolved gradually in countries throughout Latin America (Fox 2007). Accountability politics entails working in collaboration with link-minded across the state, society, and market divides, and build on accumulated social and political capital.

Instead of assuming the existence of homogeneous “masses” whose interests are in opposition to another monolithic class, be it political or economic elite, the political and economic pathways out of the current predicament would recognise the greatly stratified nature of society. Progressive change, which reduces inequality and improves political voices, will emerge from the interlocked social, political and economic arenas. Such interlocking means that those in the positions of power and decision-making have to rely on the support of those who are affected the most by policy decisions (Bebbington 2008). India has for long been home to a large number of social movements, but few have actively engaged with electoral arena on a sustained basis. As an illustration, it is possible to cite one such non-electoral political formation which is intensely engaging with electoral politics and the elected governments. The case in point is the All India Union of Forest Working People (AIUFWP), which is engaged in the mobilisation of forest-dependent people cutting across social categories.

The constituents of AIUFWP share common interests and shared histories of forest and land rights struggles with forest departments across a number of states. In the ongoing election season, AIUFWP has facilitated direct dialogues between their constituents and the chief ministers of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. AIUFWP has developed a novel strategy – “first give and then take” – for demanding political accountability. The AIUFWP members develop a list of demands with which they approach non-BJP, non-Congress Party candidates. The voters promise to vote for candidates who are willing to

accept the demands and give it in writing on a piece of stamp-paper.²⁶ Irrespective of whether such a strategy has any legal implications, it is symbolic of the attempts to establish a direct line of accountability on the part of the elected representatives.

Previously, the AIUFWP worked closely with Uttar Pradesh's Mayawati-led Bahujan Samaj Party government, resulting in the effective realisation of land rights of several thousand forest-dependent people. It also facilitated multiple linkages between the forest-dependent people, the National Committee on Forest Rights Act (NCFRA) appointed jointly by the tribal and forest ministries, and the then Chief Minister Mayawati who was apprised of the wrongful actions of forest officials in sabotaging the implementation of the FRA. These multifaceted linkages and dialogues led to the suspension of a senior forest official (NCFRA 2010), thereby setting up an example for how to hold the government officials to account.

It cannot be a coincidence that AIUFWP decided to throw its electoral weight behind non-Congress, non-BJP political parties, which are also outcomes of mass politics perfected by regional parties during the recent era of transition in India's polity (Rangarajan 2005). The strength of the emergence of these political coalitions is to be judged by the extent to which they help counterbalance the power that dominant parties and actors wield in the political system. Restoring a semblance of such power balance is a bigger gain than would be, for instance, a Congress victory that is engineered out of the fear of the upsurge of the right in the political and economic domain. Because large sections of India's population are beyond the scope of the formal economy, the poorly regulated market-based strategies that the political right seeks to push through are bound to lead to contradictions.²⁷ It is such contradictions, and not either the actions of the state Congress or the ideological support for secularism, which has prevented Modi-led BJP from fully capturing the political space in the adivasi dominant regions of Gujarat. In the short run, the advocates of progressive change must prepare to respond constructively to similar contradictions that are likely to emerge now that the right has succeeded electorally.

Questions related to the values and practices of secularism are of utmost importance, and are integral to a critical discussion of the ways forward. However, the reduction of the ongoing debate about India's future to a clash between development and secularism is a sure sign that we need to get back to the drawing-board. A conservative upsurge of the middle and upper middle classes risks erecting political blinder, blinding us to an inherently conservative past and the failed record of the conservatism masqueraded for long in the form of Nehruvian socialism. As Nandini Sundar has argued, the “sword of property-less socialism falls most heavily” on the poorest sections in our society, who have paid the price of development through displacements, evictions, and more recently, by virtue of outright militarisation of the hinterlands (Sundar 2009: 12). The agenda of building a political and economic future must not be left to parties and groups that have become accustomed to centralised authority controlled by a few – let it be taken over by coalitions of masses and political activists who have their ears close to the ground and eyes set on the goals of building a more just social and political order.

NOTES

- For a conservative perspective, see the following blog by Gurcharan Das: <http://gurcharan-das.blogspot.com/2013/10/secularism-or-development-making-right.html>. This and all other hyperlinks in the text have been accessed between 1 August 2014 and 7 August 2014.
- "How Modi Eclipsed Congress in Gujarat?" by Patrick French, Opinion, NDTV Elections 2014 on 26 April 2014, available at: <http://www.ndtv.com/elections/article/election-news/how-modi-eclipsed-congress-in-gujarat-514369>
- Indian National Congress Organisation (INC(O)).
- In Congress®, R stands for Requisition, generally known as New Congress.
- Harish Khare suggests that more than a lakh people turned up for her Surat meeting. See Khare (2004). The discussions I had with social activists working in the area around Chhota Udaipur where Indira Gandhi addressed another large rally organised by Rangpur ashram similarly mentioned swelling crowds at these meetings. Apparently, it was common among the adivasis in the region to address her as Indira Rani, but many among her audience were apparently disappointed with the simplicity of her attire and her earthly behaviour. They had expected her demeanour to be befitting of their imagination of "queen" Indira. Interviews and discussions, May 2009.
- Some Marxist analysts see the lower caste kshatriya identity as a sort of oxymoron, the result of a false consciousness. But, the students of rural politics in India would know that a number of middle and lower class groups think of themselves as kshatriyas. Such an identity offers a politically productive tool for electoral mobilisation.
- The SEBCs were the precursor to the category of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) coined much later by the Mandal Commission.
- The formulation of elite revolt is owed to Corbridge and Harriss (2000).
- Field interviews, 21 March 2009.
- Interviews and discussions, NGO leaders, 21 March 2009.
- While this discussion pertains to one village, meetings and petition signings were also reported from other villages in the region.
- Field interviews, village leaders, 5 April 2009.
- See, <http://www.narendramodi.in/if-you-have-the-passion-to-work-then-just-get-up-and-set-forth-and-you-will-find-the-way/>
- Field interviews, Gandhinagar, 27 April and 1 May 2011.
- Group discussion with Congress politician and cadres, 9 November 2011.
- In fact, individuals appointed as campaign in-charge by one of the prominent Congress leaders were instructed to stay away from raising the FRA issue. Field interviews and discussions, 30 March 2009.
- Telephonic interview, social activist, 4 May 2014.
- Interview with a Congress politician, 9 November 2011.
- "Green Signal: Sonia Gandhi Objects to Amendment in the Forest Conservation Act", 13 August 2001; available at: <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/sonia-gandhi-objects-to-amendment-in-forest-conservation-act/1/230922.html>
- Interview with forest rights activists, 11 March 2009.
- "New Congress Campaign to Focus on Landmark Laws", *Business Standard*, 6 February, 2008, http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/new-congress-campaign-to-focus-on-landmark-laws-108020601099_1.html
- Italics added for emphasis. See, Shah (2009).
- Ironically, this author accessed the booklet via a link posted on the website of the Ministry of

- Tribal Affairs. See, http://pmindia.gov.in/ebook/2004-2013/ebook_PMO_English.pdf
- This formulation is prompted by a discussion with and ideas from Rajesh Ramakrishnan and Milind Wani, although they are not responsible for the specific point I make here.
 - According to the data cited by Mihir Shah, the percentage of agricultural labour households in India who own land is around 50 in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, 60 in Odisha and Uttar Pradesh and over 70 in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. And if we focus on adivasis, the proportion shoots up to as high as 76%-87% in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Rajasthan. See, Shah (2009).
 - "SP Candidate Vows to Fulfil Demands of Forest People", *The Times of India*, 29 April 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/lok-sabha-elections-2014/news/sp-candidate-vows-to-fulfil-demands-of-forest-people/articleshow/34372678.cms>
 - Readers are directed to Christopher Jaffrelot's illuminating talk, "The Politics of Narendra Modi in Gujarat – 2001-13", available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOq23ctxRK4>

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