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***Class politics and social protection: the
implementation of India's MGNREGA***

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Abstract

In this paper, I direct attention to the role of class politics in shaping the outcomes of social protection interventions. I highlight the ways in which class politics is constituted by the interaction of class relations and the balance of substantive class power in a polity. I demonstrate the ways in which variations in class politics influence outcomes of a large social protection programme in India, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). In localities where either of the elite classes has successfully co-opted or eliminated the other, their stark contradictions against the interests of agricultural labourers result in them sabotaging the labour-friendly MGNREGA or implementing it half-heartedly. On the other hand, in localities characterised by an overarching framework of contest between the precarious classes and the entrenched classes, dominant class hostility to agricultural labourers is dissipated and labour-friendly programmes such as the MGNREGA have a chance of being implemented. However, the transformative aspect of the programme's intent, in terms of dissolving the relations of power that bolster poverty, appears to be more in evidence in localities where emergent classes with precarious surpluses, together with agricultural labourers, challenge the influence of the entrenched classes. In these localities, the implementation of the programme, even where fraught with difficulties, contributes to dissolving hierarchical relations and establishing egalitarian ones.

Keywords: transformative social protection, class politics, caste, Bihar, Gujarat, rural labour, precarious class, entrenched class, India

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1. Accessing social protection: a 'class politics' lens

As scholars and development agencies make the case to 'bring politics back in' (Devereux, 2002; Pattenden 2011b; Carswell and de Neve 2014) for the study of policy impact, a consensus has emerged even among the proponents of the 'institutionalist' approach, that history and politics matter (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012; Fukuyama, 2009; and North et al , 2012).

But what kind of politics? In this paper, I build on and develop a discussion of politics that takes seriously class politics, the distribution of power between contending social classes. In developing such an account, I draw on Barrington Moore Jr's (1966) seminal work outlining the importance of class coalitions in shaping the institutional forms of democracy and authoritarianism. Influenced by Moore Jr, but also departing from his exclusive focus on class coalitions, Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) emphasise the intersecting role of class coalitions and balance of power¹ between different classes in shaping development outcomes. In this vein, I will analyse the ways in which the interaction of class coalitions and the balance of class power in local polities shapes the access of India's rural poor to a social protection programme such as the MGNREGA. This question is a supply-side question of the poor being deprived of access to social protection schemes.

Many governments and international development agencies have begun to formulate and implement agendas for social protection to offset the challenge posed by the persistence and production of global poverty. Such agendas transcend short-term poverty alleviation strategies (Barrientos and Hulme, 2008). Some social protection policies are potentially transformative (Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux, 2007) in that they are well resourced, state-based, demand-driven and rights-based. These policies are of particular importance in rural regions, where impoverished populations tend to be concentrated and where structural and cultural sources of exploitation converge to create divisions within the poor (to adapt Bernstein, 2007: 7). Unionisation and other forms of equity-focused collective action are rare or weak, making state-driven social protection an imperative. India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is an exemplar of such a policy orientation, although, as I will show, its outcomes vary across regions and localities within regions.

The MGNREGA was legislated in September 2005 by the United Progressive Alliance government subject to significant pressure by its Leftist allies. The Act represented a constitutional commitment on the part of the Indian state to guarantee at least 100 days of employment to any household whose members demanded work. By 2009, the programme had been expanded in all 600+ districts of the country. Budget documents suggest that the Government of India (2013) spends over US\$8 billion annually on this programme, nearly a third of the World Bank's annual outlay.

¹ They also highlight the role of transnational factors, which are, understandably, irrelevant to the implementation of the MGNREGA in rural India.

As a state-owned, well resourced, demand-driven and rights-based programme, the MGNREGA represents a bold attempt, in the Indian context, to initiate social protection for its poorest people.

The fundamental unit of the MGNREGA is the right bestowed upon applicants to demand work. The demand is made to the Gram Panchayat, the rural local government institutions. The guidelines make it obligatory for the Panchayat to respond to an application for work by providing it within 15 days, failing which claimants are eligible to receive unemployment allowance. The President of the Gram Panchayat, along with elected councilors, are expected to take decisions on the implementation of the programme through mutual consultation and based on ratification from popular assemblies. However, in practice, the allocation of works is the result of tussles between the president and other members of the Gram Panchayat, the bureaucracy and other locally influential persons. Sometimes works are 'supplied' on the order of district bureaucrats. In most cases, the president of the Gram Panchayat wields considerable amount of influence in the actual distribution of job cards that would enable people to apply for work, the allocation of works and the approval of wage payments. However, where the president is elected by other members of the council (the ward members), his/her actual role is significantly curtailed. In such circumstances, it is the ward member of a given locality whose motivations and actions assume significance. Where the president, alongside other members of the council, is directly elected by the population, there – on the other hand – the members of the council (Gram Panchayat members) are substantially less important.

Employment on an MGNREGA project usually entails teams of 10 to 20 workers carrying out earthworks for the construction of small dams, 'excavating' ponds, afforestation activities, laying non-tarred laterite roads, and the like, for about 10 to 12 days. These works are usually carried out on public land, but limited works on farms of small and marginal farmers – those who own less than two hectares of land – are permitted. Works are also allowed on the farms owned by members of historically oppressed communities, such as Dalits and Adivasis. In some states, wages for workers employed on MGNREGA projects compare favourably with prevailing market rates.

In a remarkable break from all previous public works programmes, the MGNREGA guidelines do not impose any seasonal limitations on the execution of projects. By not restricting projects during the cropping and harvesting season, the programme provides rural labourers the opportunities to demand work during the cropping season and allows workers to engage with the programme at higher wage rates. The programme does appear to offer substantive alternatives to workers, potentially altering relations of labour between them. At the same time, this provision fuels fears of labour shortages among farmers. This feature of the Act makes the implementation of this policy a vigorously contested affair.

The programme has generated tremendous interest in academic, policy and activist circles. Scholars have examined the outcomes of the programme in terms of the employment generated, the infrastructure created, the impact of wage rates and household incomes, and on local social relations (Bannerjee and Saha, 2010; Berg et al., 2012; Carswell and de Neve, 2014; Dreze and Oldiges, 2011; Dutta et al., 2012; Imbert and Papp, 2012; Khera, 2011; Pankaj and Tankha, 2010; and Sudarshan et al., 2010). Others have highlighted the impediments to the implementation of the policy, particularly drawing attention to the corruption that plagues it (Adhikari and Bhatia, 2010; Bhatia and Dreze, 2006; Vanaik and Siddhartha, 2008). Banerjee (2012) locates the MGNREGA in the discourse of the right to work and human rights more generally. Some sympathetic writers have highlighted the MGNREGA as an example of the way in which neoliberalism has been contained in India (Manor and Jenkins, forthcoming; Shah, 2008). More critical authors have sought to understand the MGNREGA as a manifestation of the 'neoliberal turn' of the Indian state (Vasavi, 2012). Others have sought to theorise it as integral to the fabric of post-colonial capitalism (Chatterjee, 2008; drawing on Sanyal, 2007).

The implementation of the programme varies enormously across the country. Not only do political commitments vary (Maiorano, 2014), but so do capacities of the bureaucracies in different states (Chopra, 2014). Moreover, there are often variations within states and even districts and blocks. Understanding the factors for these variations requires us to delve into the villages in which the programme is actually implemented, in order to understand the contentions and collaborations around it. It requires us to examine the programme's implementation against the concrete political contexts of the localities where the programme has been introduced. What factors shape the access of agricultural labourers to social protection schemes such as the MGNREGA? A related question is: what factors explain variations in the programme's outcomes for the labourers engaged with the programme?

In this paper, I explore the factors of these variations by drawing on my ethnographic research in four villages, two each located in two states. In each state, the villages under study demonstrate enormous variations in labourers' engagement with the programme, despite sharing institutional, socio-economic and organisational features. In order to understand variations across villages, I deployed the strategy of paired comparisons (Tarrow, 2010). This strategy is useful to analytically foreground differences within a pair of cases, rather than across them. In this vein, rather than comparing MGNREGA in Gujarat with MGNREGA in Bihar, I compare the programme's implementation in one of the Bihar sites with the other, and one of the Gujarat sites with the other. For my analysis, I draw on, as well as depart from, the literature on class politics. This framework combines the examination of *class relations* (building on Ahn, 2008; Bernstein, 2008; Breman, 2007; Gooptu and Harriss-White, 2001; Harriss, 1982; Lerche, 2010; and Pattenden, 2011a) with an investigation into the *balance of substantive power among classes* in the local polity (drawing on Jeffrey and Lerche, 2000).

2. Class politics

2.1. Class coalitions

In an agrarian economy, ownership over arable land and the purchase or sale of labour power are crucial determinants of class relations. Those unable to own land are often compelled to sell their labour to those who do. Many of those who own marginal landholdings are also economically dependent on selling their labour to those with greater endowments of land. In this paper, following Utsa Patnaik (1986), I refer to sellers of labour in India's rural context as the rural poor, using the term interchangeably with 'labouring poor'. They are the ones who were most willing to seek employment under the MGNREGA. On the other hand, those hiring labour have often been described as the 'rural rich (Patnaik, 1986), landlords and capitalist farmers (Rakshit, 2011; Ramachandran, 2011) or 'dominant class' (Jeffrey and Lerche, 2000; Jeffrey, 2000 Pattenden, 2011a; Pattenden, 2011b) in the literature. However, these authors (see especially Jeffrey, 2000; Pattenden, 2011a) also nuance the idea of the 'dominant class' to refer to the dominant classes with disposable surpluses and status, as distinct from the dominant classes with precarious surpluses. Following their leads, I explicitly disaggregate the dominant classes into 'entrenched classes' and 'precarious classes'. I use the former term to refer to the dominant classes of high status 'castes' and large landholdings, while my use of the latter term refers to dominant classes of lower status 'castes' and more modest landholdings. It is the tensions and collaborations between the entrenched elites and precarious elites, and their relative influence over state resources via their control of the Gram Panchayat, that is the focus of this paper.² Figure 1 below presents the scheme used for making the classification in this paper.

It has been suggested that the organisation of agricultural labour is a key contributor to their ability to access social protection schemes (Ahn, 2008; Pattenden, 2011b). These two factors may be held constant across the localities in each of the states. In the two Bihar locations, the Communist Party of India (Marxist/ Leninist-Liberation) provided a basis for organisation to agricultural labourers in both the study localities through its affiliate, the All India Agricultural Labourers Association (AIALA). Despite this constant, the outcomes of the MGNREGA varied across the two locations. No such comparable organisation existed in the Gujarat locations to support agricultural labour. Despite this, MGNREGA outcomes varied.

Others have pointed to the migration of agricultural labour to cities as causing labour shortages and allowing the workers who stay back to bargain for better wages (Jha, 2004). Again, migration levels in the two Bihar locations are comparable to one another. Likewise, in Gujarat, migration from the two study locations is comparable. The two pairs of villages in both states are adjacent to one another, share a common ecology and are equidistant from the nearest town and major arterial road.

² This is not to suggest that the labouring classes have no agency or ability to manoeuvre or manipulate the policy. Their negotiations and imaginations are analysed in Roy (2014a), Roy (2014b) and Roy (forthcoming).

Of central importance, then, are the class relations that underpin social life in each of the study localities. One of the study localities in each pair is characterised by conflict between the precarious classes and the entrenched classes. The other locality in each pair is characterised by cooperation or cooption due to which a situation of conflict does not obtain. In each of the cases, the precarious classes are also in conflict with agricultural labour, a conflict that shapes and is shaped by their conflict with the entrenched classes.

Figure 1: Scheme used for categorisation of classes in this paper

Land	Caste	Occupation	Class
<i>If...</i>	<i>And...</i>	<i>And...</i>	<i>Then...</i>
Landless agricultural labourer	Upper caste	Petty commodity production	Labouring poor
		Retail	Precarious class
		Professional	Precarious class
	Other castes	Petty commodity production	Labouring poor
		Retail	Precarious class
		Professional	Precarious class
Poor peasant	Upper caste	Petty commodity production	Labouring poor
		Retail	Precarious class
		Professional	Precarious class
	Other castes	Petty commodity production	Labouring poor
		Retail	Precarious class
		Professional	Precarious class
Middle peasant	Upper caste	Petty commodity production	Precarious class
		Retail	Entrenched class
		Professional	Entrenched class
	Other castes	Petty commodity production	Precarious class
		Retail	Precarious class
		Professional	Precarious class
Rich peasant	Upper caste	Petty commodity production	Entrenched class
		Retail	Entrenched class
		Professional	Entrenched class
	Other castes	Petty commodity production	Precarious class
		Retail	Precarious class
		Professional	Precarious class
Landlord and capitalist farmer	Upper caste	Petty commodity production	Entrenched class
		Retail	Entrenched class
		Professional	Entrenched class
	Other castes	Petty commodity production	Precarious class
		Retail	Entrenched class
		Professional	Entrenched class

2.2. Balance of class power in the local polity

The balance of power between the different elite classes is the second variable of interest in this paper. The balance of *class* power between and within the dominant classes – entrenched and precarious – and labouring classes needs careful analysis: this requires us to ask questions about those who set the agenda for the polity and are responsible for taking decisions (or non-decisions, as Bachrach and Baratz (1962), famously popularised).

Some authors have suggested that in polities marked by a high degree of inter-elite competition, the implementation of pro-poor policy is to be expected, if only in order to facilitate attempts by different classes of the elites to consolidate their position (Houtzager and Moore, 2003). Veron et al. (2003) direct attention to the roles performed by the supra-local politicians in actually implementing pro-poor policies, such as the Employment Assurance Scheme, that would win them electoral support and undermine the influence of local competitors. Herring and Edwards (1983) make a similar point about the successful implementation of the Employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharashtra. Building on these insights, it may be argued that competition among elite classes is a crucial factor shaping the implementation of social protection schemes such as the MGNREGA. However, intra-elite competition does not exist in a vacuum. It operates in the context of the balance of class power in the localities. As we shall see, the balance of agenda-setting power favors precarious classes in one locality of each pair. In the second locality of each pair, entrenched classes shape the polity's agenda.

A dynamic account of the interaction between class relations and the balance of substantive power in the local polity is crucial to understanding the ways in which intra-elite competition is manifested and the labouring classes are able to access social protection schemes. In this vein, each of the four study localities provides a paradigmatic example of a specific intersection of class relations and balance of substantive power. In Gujarat's Gajra locality, where precarious classes and entrenched classes are in conflict with one another, the entrenched classes shape the polity's agenda. Gajra's politics is paradigmatic of an 'incorporative' politics. On the other hand, in Bihar's Sargana locality, where precarious classes and entrenched classes contest each other, it is the precarious classes who shape the polity's agenda. Sargana's represents a 'populist politics'. By contrast, in Gujarat's Hardi locality, the few members of the entrenched classes who remained in the village had accepted the leadership of the precarious classes, who in turn controlled the polity's agenda: Hardi represents, in this paper, a 'differentiated politics'. On the other hand, in Bihar's Roshanar locality, the entrenched classes ruled the roost: the precarious classes accepted their leadership and acquiesced with them fully. Roshanar presents us with a prime example of an 'aristocratic politics'.

3. Measuring outcomes

A consideration of these dynamic interactions between class relations and the balance of power in the polity is important in examining the outcomes of social

protection programmes with transformative claims. In the context of these interactions, what do 'outcomes' even mean? Raising these questions, many scholars (Carswell and de Neve, 2014; Roy, 2014a; Dey, 2010) have drawn attention to the transformative outcomes of the MGNREGA that include, among others, increase in agricultural wages, reduction in workers' dependence on oppressive employers, and greater bargaining power vis-à-vis these employers. These interventions notwithstanding, more needs to be said about the question of the programme's impact on poverty and its underlying causes (following Barrientos and Hulme, 2008; Devereux et al., 2011; Ghosh, 2011; Koehler, 2011; Pattenden, 2011b; Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux, 2007).

In this paper, although I focus on the employment received by applicants in the study localities, the analysis of my data compels me to confront the ways in which the MGNREGA is implicated in perpetuating or undermining extant political coalitions and conflicts, and the consequent ways in which it is appropriated by members of different classes. It alerts me to the possibility that employment generated under this programme may inhere transformative possibilities in some contexts, but not so in others. Alternatively, the failure to secure employment might stem from a variety of factors, some of which may actually be pregnant with transformative possibilities.

The paper focuses on four Gram Panchayats in two Indian states, one in the east (Bihar) and the other in the west (Gujarat). The material draws on long-term research on political imaginations of membership in the political community, for which I have been conducting fieldwork in the two states and elsewhere in India. The two Gram Panchayats in each of the states are located in the same district and block, making it convenient to control for institutional effects. Despite their inhabiting identical institutional terrains, the performance of the MGNREGA in the study localities demonstrated remarkable variations, as is evident from Table 1. Gajra in Gujarat and Sargana in Bihar 'outperformed' the block and the comparator Panchayats by a wide margin.

Each of the selected Gram Panchayats represents a specific permutation of class relations and balance of substantive power. Gajra Panchayat (Gujarat) and Sargana Ward 1 Panchayat (Bihar) were characterised by bitter conflicts over the control of the polity, with no one class being able to marginalise the other from the affairs of the polity. But class relations were differently configured in the two localities. In Gajra, the entrenched classes continue to be very influential, having diverted their agricultural surpluses into contracting and real estate. They forged political coalitions with the agricultural labour to preserve their influence and undermine the emerging political clout of the precarious elites. In Sargana Ward 1, on the other hand, the precarious classes had emerged as politically influential and forged political coalitions with the labouring classes against the continued threats posed by the entrenched elites. In both these localities, the labouring poor were parts of coalitions forged by one or the other elite classes against the other. In Hardi Ward 3, the entrenched classes had all but practically migrated out of the villages to take up more lucrative and comfortable lives in Ahmedabad, the state's largest city and beyond. This left the precarious

classes completely in control of the polity and the labouring poor with no scope for any cross-class alliances. But in Roshanar Ward 5, the locality's precarious classes – ostensibly in control of the ward's polity – were incorporated into patronage networks instituted by supra-local entrenched classes. Though the agricultural labour were excluded from the polity in both wards, their relations with the elite classes were differently configured. Figure 2 maps the different combinations in which class relations interacted with the balance of substantive power.

Figure 2: Key features of class, caste and employment under MGNREGA

	Bihar/ Araria/ Bhargama (31)		Gujarat/ Veraval/ Patan Veraval (18)	
Village	Sargana	Roshanar	Gajra	Hardi
Employment per official data, 2009-13	41	26	49	11
% Landless	70	80	40	80
Communities contributing disproportionately to classes of labour	Musahar	Muslim	Muslim, Dalit,	Dalit, Koli
Communities contributing disproportionately to precarious elites	Yadav, Kevat	Gangot	Koli	Ahir
Communities contributing disproportionately to entrenched elites	Rajput, Kayasth	Rajput	Ahir	Patel

Figures in parenthesis= Average persondays of employment generated per person in block.

4. Varieties of class politics, variations in MGNREGA

4.1. Gajra: incorporative politics

Gajra is located 11 kilometres north-east of Veraval town. There are many opportunities for unskilled employment in the area. The construction of electric towers undertaken by Paschim Gujarat Vij Limited and the Gujarat Electricity Board is one example. The fisheries in Veraval town and the railway station at the nearby Adri Road also provide employment for many people in the village. There are cement and coal industries as well, at which some individuals are casually employed. A paper mill is located four kilometres away. Despite relatively low levels of landlessness, the dependence on these industries for livelihoods is quite high. The majority of cultivators are marginal cultivators, who need to supplement their income from wheat cultivation with the casual work they get in the vicinity.

The locality's large farmers, mostly of the high-status Ahir community, form the core of the entrenched classes in the locality. They have been able to convert their agricultural surpluses into investments in construction and real estate. The wealthiest of them is an influential and well connected contractor in the *taluka*³. Other members of this class have managed to secure for themselves pensionable jobs and maintain two establishments – one in the village and the other in the town. For members of this class, control over the polity is a prerequisite to consolidating and expanding their investments in agriculture, construction and real estate. In fact, as their incomes from non-agricultural sources outstrip their incomes from agriculture, they have come to develop 'extroverted' interests away from agriculture. Concerns such as shortage of labour, reduction in subsidies and fixing of procurement prices are not as crucial for them as control over political office. They have therefore made every effort to hold onto political office.

A concerted challenge to their political control is mounted by the small and medium farmers, members of the middle-status Koli community. Members of this community are no longer content with their marginalised role in village affairs and are interested in translating their numerical predominance into ensuring a more representative elected council. Their small and medium plots of land give them access to few of the surpluses enjoyed by the large farmers. Moreover, they are unable to capitalise on their social and cultural capital in the way the Ahir large farmers can, because there are few members of their community in influential positions at supra-local levels. Limited surpluses and restrained social status means that they are unable to meet the demands for market wages raised from time to time by the labouring classes. My interlocutors from among the agricultural labourers told me about the routine violations in the agricultural wages legislation. My interlocutors from among the small and medium farmers did not deny this allegation, but blamed the high costs of subsidies and low levels of agricultural productivity for their inability to meet demands for market wages.

³ A sub-district unit.

The conflict between the precarious classes and the agricultural labour was obvious. Many among them sought employment in other opportunities, contributing to a further shortage of agricultural labour. It appeared from these conversations that such conflicts were less marked with the large farmers. These farmers used mechanised technology. Where they deployed labour, they were able to, it seems, absorb the costs of labour more easily than the small and medium farmers could. The classes with precarious surpluses found themselves in conflict with both the entrenched classes (who they challenged politically) and the labouring poor (who challenged them economically). The contradictions between the labouring classes and the entrenched classes were less evident. Therefore, when faced with the challenge posed by the precarious classes, the entrenched classes sought to forge a political coalition with the labouring classes. The focus of this coalition was not the welfare of the labourers as such, but to undermine the growing political organisation of the small and medium farmers. While the entrenched classes were careful to highlight the conflict between the labourers and the small and medium farmers, they cultivated a social distance from agricultural labour themselves. Privately, as I was told by three of my interlocutors from among the agricultural labour, the entrenched classes joked about Koli labourers' putative 'low' caste status and their alleged thick-headedness. In short, the entrenched classes sought to pursue an incorporative politics in the locality, in a bid to preserve their political control.

The implementation of the MGNREGA provided an opportunity for Gajra's entrenched classes to assert their political power in the locality. The programme helped them to consolidate the support of the labouring classes by offering them employment on the programme. Of course, they took care to ensure that such work was provided in the lean season, so as to not affect the physical availability of labour. But it did result in the labourers demanding better wages when they were hired for agricultural activities. This was a demand which the large farmers could meet, but the small and medium farmers could not, thereby exacerbating the conflict between the two and undermining the latter's political ambitions.

Another attractive proposition for the entrenched classes was the provision in the MGNREGA for the use of appropriate machinery. Gram Panchayats were allowed to spend up to 40 percent of the total permissible expenditure on contractors. This was of particular interest to the contractor whose protégé was the elected president of the Gram Panchayat. He insisted on deploying his machinery and materials for the purposes of the project in a manner that far exceeded the permissible limits stipulated in the MGNREGA. In a public meeting convened by the Panchayat to discuss the projects, he urged his co-villagers to think about their village's development. He wanted to have the village nominated for an award under the recently-constituted Apna Taluka Vibrant Taluka Scheme (literally: Our *taluka*, Vibrant *taluka*) announced by the State's Chief Minister.

One of my interlocutors from the labouring classes (and of the Muslim community), who was present at that meeting, recalled: "This programme was meant as a relief

(raahat kaam) for the 'small castes'. But the 'big castes' took it away. They kept talking about development. We needed employment.”

However, he conceded – as did several other interlocutors from these same classes – that the contractor did employ “many individuals” from the village. An example given to me was that of the recently constructed Bharat Nirman Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra, a project under the MGNREGA to build community centres in the village. The contractor collected the ‘job cards’ from approximately 125 people – the number of people to be officially employed on the construction work. He actually deployed his own equipment and complemented it with labour (12 individuals hired at market rates) from outside the village. With all the machinery at his disposal, the work was completed within two days. However, he claimed the payment for deploying 125 people over 90 days, the duration for which the project was allocated on paper. The difference between the actual costs incurred by him and the monies received by the Gram Panchayat constituted the profit⁴ earned by the contractor (via his control over the president of the Gram Panchayat). Of course, he had to pay off the officials, who turned a blind eye to this malpractice. He had to also pay the 125 individuals from whom he had collected job cards in order to show that they were working on the project – there were varied reports about how much each individual had been paid. I was told it differed according to the community of the individual (and, consequently, social distance). All these payments were directed towards these individuals, despite them not having worked at all on the project. They were intended as ‘gifts’ from the contractor, who tried to use these as evidence of his ‘generosity’.

That my interlocutors were talking about these payments in the first place makes it clear that they did not buy into any of the talk about the contractor’s generosity. But they were also being pragmatic:

“Who would refuse to take money if it came to your doorstep? Thanks to these monies, we are able to take up alternative employment and make our ends meet. At least we do not know have to beg the farmer for work. If they don’t treat us with respect, we don’t work for them... So, please don’t talk too much about this. [Contractor] is a good man. He keeps his word. Meet him, you will like him.”

The contractor was not alone in engaging in such a practice. In the same village, another member of the entrenched elite, a school teacher who lived in Veraval town, used the MGNREGA’s provision designed to help small farmers cultivate their own farm land. This provision was being used by a large farmer, who had obviously under-reported the land in his possession, to use stone-crushers on his field instead of labour. The modality was the same. He paid off the individuals from whom he took

⁴ At local prices, monies earned: ₹140 x 125 x 90 = ₹1,575,000. Costs incurred on labour: ₹200 x 12 x 2 = ₹4,800. Costs incurred on materials: ₹100,000. Bribes paid to officials: ₹200,000. Payments to 125 individuals: ₹ 8,000. Total profit: ₹1,575,000 - (₹4,800 + ₹100,000 + ₹200,000 + ₹100,000) = ₹ 117,020. This figure was arrived at through discrete discussions with one of the officials associated with the MGNREGA at the sub-district level.

the job cards, paid the rent of the stone-crusher, and pocketed the rest of the money himself. In doing so, the schoolteacher forged his linkages with individuals from among the agricultural labour, who saw him as a decent man, to whom they could turn for help. It is not that they did not know that he had made a profit using their card, but they could not help noting that the cash they received supplemented their earnings from other insecure livelihoods.

These practices made the agricultural labour even less dependent on the small and medium farmers. The precarious surpluses at their disposal meant that they were unable to demonstrate such faux generosity. The result was that it became even less affordable for the small and medium farmers to hire labour on their land, undermining their nascent political organisation and ambition to translate their numerical strength into political control of the Panchayat. The implementation of the MGNREGA provided the opportunity for the entrenched elites to preserve their political control over the Panchayat. It also enabled them to undertake materials-oriented developmental works that made them popular, even as it lined their pockets. The records were “managed” (president’s words, English) so that the labour and materials ratio and related payments could be rationalised. Given Gajra’s incorporative political settlement, the entrenched elites appropriated the MGNREGA to preserve their control over the polity and undermine the challenges from the small and medium farmers.

4.2. Sargana Ward 1: populist politics

The livelihood strategies of Sargana’s labouring classes range from hiring their labour for agricultural work to migrating to Delhi, Punjab and Rajasthan to work in the construction sector – either as labourers on construction sites or in brick kilns. Landlessness is high, and dependence on local agricultural work is consequently high. A disproportionately high number of the labouring classes are drawn from the Musahar community, stigmatised by the privileged castes as ‘untouchable’.

The local hirers of labour tend to be the small and medium farmers, who together comprise less than 3 percent of the population. But their economic clout remains substantial in an agrarian economy. Even as their hold over the political process in the locality has been contained and pared down, members of high status communities (Rajput and Kayasth) among them utilised their social and cultural capital to secure important appointments for their kin in the supra-local judiciary and the bureaucracy, as well as in the private sector. The small and medium farmers of these communities comprised the core of the entrenched classes of the locality.

The agricultural labourers were acutely aware of the twin dimension of the demands advanced by the entrenched classes: the economic dimension manifested in the attempts to depress wages, and the social dimension revealed in the efforts to maintain social difference through caste-based discrimination. Labourers continued to hire their labour out to the entrenched classes. Even though men from the labouring classes migrated seasonally, women were constrained to hire their labour

for agricultural work in order to make ends meet. Although this was gradually changing, with women gradually withholding their labour for agricultural work on the farms of the entrenched elites, it continued to be true for the majority of the labouring households.

Their antipathy vis-à-vis the entrenched classes was shared by Sargana's precarious classes (about 15 percent of the population), drawn from heterogeneous social backgrounds. Members of the precarious classes included retailers with no agricultural land (often from among immigrant Kayasth families), professionals (especially those who benefited from the government's affirmative action policies, such as Dusadhs), and small and medium farmers from among the low-status communities (Yadav and Kevat). In different ways, they were reviled as upstarts by the entrenched classes. The small and medium farmers among them did have conflicts with the agricultural labourers over the latter's demands for wages. But they also shared the antipathy of the labouring classes against the entrenched classes, who continued to loom large in the village's polity.

A bitterly contested polity undergirded the egalitarian political coalition between the labouring classes of labour and the precarious classes. The entrenched classes controlled the Panchayat till as late as 2006. They were ousted that year, following a carefully calibrated coalition of precarious classes and the labouring classes. For the first time in the history of the Gram Panchayat, a small farmer from a low status community was elected as the president. Despite the evident tensions and contradictions between the small and medium farmers and the labourers they hired on their farms, the president and other leaders of the precarious classes lent explicit and unambiguous support to the labouring classes in their claims against the entrenched elites.

However, the political coalition between the precarious classes and the agricultural labor could not marginalise the political influence of the entrenched elites. They benefitted from the state government's unwillingness to initiate radical reforms in land distribution. Moreover, they had remained in power till as late as 2006 and considered their ouster from the Gram Panchayat a temporary phenomenon, something that could easily be reversed in the near future. Members of the entrenched elites continued to control important local institutions, such as Public Distribution System (PDS) retail shops, which made subsidised foodgrain available to the poor, the Post Office, through which welfare assistance was routed, and fertiliser shops that made available subsidized fertilisers to farmers.

At the same time, the locality's precarious classes could not establish their dominance over the labouring classes or project their interests as those of the rural poor. For one, the contradiction between the two was too evident to be missed, even if kept on the back-burner for the time being. The agricultural labour refused to be subordinate partners of any coalition led by precarious classes, but rather insisted on being equal members of it. They imbibed the egalitarian claims advanced by the precarious classes against the entrenched classes and insisted that they be treated

the same way. This was not unnoticed by the small and medium farmers. One of them (of the Yadav community) told me,

“There was a time, while my father was alive (some 40 years ago) when the Musahar (agricultural labourer) would be begging us to give them work. They used to be so poor they would borrow food from us, or dig out grains stored by rats. My father would only have to send word to them the night before and they would land up early the next morning [during the winter harvest]. He would ask for five labourers, 20 would line up. Today, we have to go to their hamlets and plead with them to come. They stand here (pointing to the entrance of his house) and ask us for *chai*, whereas in the past they would be grateful if we gave them water or the starch we feed the buffaloes. And when they do come to work, half the time is spent on the mobile talking with his brother in Punjab. The brother tells them, ‘Hey, why are you working for the farmer?’ And then he gives them all kinds of ideas. But what can we do? After all, we did the same thing to our *maliks* (employers). The Musahars are also human, like we are. We are all equal. And we need their help against the privileged castes. So, we just laugh to ourselves and let them be.”

The populist political coalition between the precarious classes and the labouring classes in a polity shaped by the precarious elites provided the backdrop of the introduction of the MGNREGA in 2007. Although the newly elected president himself was a small farmer, and along with other small and medium farmers was sceptical about the potential impact of the programme on the availability of labour and levels of agricultural wages, he saw the programme as an opportunity to sustain the support of the labouring classes that elected him. For other sections of the precarious classes, it was clear that the implementation of the MGNREGA posed no direct threat. While this did not necessarily mean unequivocal support for the programme among these groups, the possibility that it was not a direct threat to them certainly resulted in them not actively opposing it. Although, privately, several of these individuals faulted the design of the programme for allegedly inducing laziness among the population, they did not mobilise against it in the way the entrenched elites did. On the other hand, not a few retailers reported favouring the programme, since it would, if it actually met its objectives, transfer cash into the hands of an otherwise impoverished population and increase consumption, which would only benefit them. Thus, the responses to the implementation of this programme among the retailers and the professionals – two important constituents of the precarious elites – were mixed: at best, they were favourable and at worst, they were indifferent. There was little active opposition.

But the thrust of support to the programme’s implementation, which spurred the president’s interest, came from the mobilisations of the members of the labouring classes themselves. They actively sought information about the programme, and approached the leaders and functionaries of the organisations of which they were members to help them secure ‘job cards’, apply for work and follow up when wages were delayed. They did not hesitate to organise protests before senior block-level bureaucrats and submit representations to them when their entitlements to timely and

complete payments were infringed upon by petty officers. The president commonly found himself at the receiving end of their rage. In response, he sought to facilitate the engagement of the labouring classes with the MGNREGA.

During my fieldwork, wages for the works undertaken were disbursed through the Post Office. Sargana's post master, the official in charge of these payments, was a scion of one of the entrenched Rajput elites, a journalist of a widely read Hindi newspaper and the son of a BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) functionary. He was vehemently opposed to the programme, because of the alleged impetuosity it induced among the labouring classes. He frequently delayed payments to workers, hoping that this would dishearten labourers and wean them away from the programme. With this act, he was able to demonstrate his relevance to the labouring classes. He began paying workers up to 70-80 percent of the wages immediately after the completion of works. When the payments would come through the formal conduit, he pocketed them in their entirety, deriving a substantial monetary benefit through the entire transaction.

Another case that was reported to me by my interlocutors had to do with the reduced wages that the post master paid to the workers on the MGNREGA. When they complained to the president, he took up the matter with the post master. In his presence, he asked the workers to file a case of sexual molestation against the post master. Fearing the repercussions this would have on his journalistic career and his mother's political ventures, the post master caved in. Apparently, the president extracted a bribe from the post master. He distributed a portion among the workers and pocketed the rest himself. It was unclear to me if the workers ever received the total monies that were due to them.

While the labourers were aware of the profits made by the president – and also of the fact that they were not receiving the full and complete wages as they should, despite involving him – they were emphatic that his intervention sustained their engagement with the programme in the first place. At the same time, they were also clear that this was an act of shrewd “management” (their words, in English) that undermined a member of the privileged families, rather than the impulses of a generous man. For them, he was a clever politician who could humble the rich and the powerful. For the president, the transactions were not only ways of earning rents, but also about consolidating the support of the labouring poor, facilitating the erosion of the influence of the entrenched classes and outflanking the rival sections from among the precarious classes.

The implementation of the MGNREGA in Sargana Ward 1 contributed to sustaining the egalitarian political coalition that was being forged between the precarious classes and the labourers. While the core focus of this coalition was to undermine the presumptions of the entrenched elites, they were anchored in frameworks of social equality and the interrogation of hierarchy. The classes that championed the programme were marked by their opposition to the privileges of the entrenched elites (even though some sections admittedly sought to appropriate these privileges for

themselves). Thus, although the welfare of the rural poor was not central to the political coalition between them and the precarious classes, the egalitarian impulses that animated this coalition bore the potential of instigating broader societal transformation. In this important sense, the implementation of the MGNREGA in Sargana Ward 1 conduced to the possibilities of recognising and confronting the underlying causes of poverty and inequality.

4.3. Hardi: differentiated class politics

The agricultural labour in Hardi benefited from the same economic opportunities as their counterparts in Gajra. However, landlessness was higher in this locality, due to which they were even more dependent on hiring out their labour. The local hirers of labour were the small and medium farmers of the Ahir community, as well as far fewer Koli and Dalit cultivators. Unlike their counterparts in Gajra, these farmers developed few or no linkages with extra-agricultural activities. They produced groundnut, wheat and chickpeas.

The balance of substantive power in the locality was tilted entirely in favour of the precarious classes, as the entrenched classes had mostly set up base in urban areas of Gujarat and beyond. This meant that the agricultural labour and the precarious classes were directly pitted against one another. The Ahir members of the precarious classes controlled the Panchayats and sought to completely exclude the agricultural labour from it. However, they took care to involve the precarious classes of the other communities in all major decisions in the polity to prevent class tensions from overlapping onto caste tensions.

However, the precarious classes could not translate their political influence to control labour. Labourers resented the repressed agricultural wages they were being paid. The farmers, for their part, complained about their surpluses being squeezed as a result of high input costs, low procurement prices and declining productivity of agriculture. To add to that, they reported shortages of labour, because of the alleged attractiveness of work in the nearby industries. Contradictions over the appropriation of the surplus plagued the social relations between the labouring classes and the precarious classes. Hardi's politics was differentiated, in which neither class was willing to accept the leadership or domination of the other.

When the MGNREGA was introduced in 2007, it riled the precarious classes even further. They feared that the programme's implementation would exacerbate the shortages of labour that they were already experiencing. They therefore resolved to oppose the implementation of the programme completely. Although job cards were issued, applications for work were left unattended, my interlocutors from among the labouring classes complained. As I conducted my discussions with them, the president of the Gram Panchayat, a medium farmer of the Ahir community himself, came over to inspect what was going on. During the conversation that followed, he insisted that labourers were perfectly content ("bilkul khush") with the existing opportunities in agriculture, as well as in the industrial opportunities in the vicinity.

Perhaps guessing the conversation we had just had, he looked towards my interlocutors for confirmation. My interlocutors chimed their agreement with him.

As soon as the president left, however, they turned back to narrate the different ways in which their applications for work had remained unheeded. Ironically, the initial impetus for the programme had come from the precarious elites themselves. They were the ones who distributed the job cards and spread information about the programme. Perhaps they had thought this would be a useful symbolic act that would enable them to cultivate support from agricultural labourers. They had underestimated the extent to which the labouring classes did indeed want employment under the MGNREGA. Although they called it “relief work” (*raahat kaam*), they did see it as an entitlement (“this programme is for us”). This was not something the elite classes in control of the polity would countenance.

The cleavage between agricultural labourers and the classes with precarious surpluses, particularly over the questions of wages, pit the members of both classes against each other. The MGNREGA was perceived as a threat to the assured availability of labour, coupled with the fear that it would exacerbate the increasing cost of wages. Although they could not resist all the demands for employment, they tried to reduce them to the extent they could.

The implementation of the MGNREGA in Hardi was somewhat reduced by the precarious classes drawn from the locality's different communities. The focus of Hardi's differentiated politics was the maintenance of and consolidation of the political power of the locality's precarious elites. In such a settlement, the labouring classes were excluded from the ward's polity. Despite the interest among the agricultural labourers for the MGNREGA, the effective control exerted by the precarious elites on the ward's polity meant that they could not access the social protection scheme once the elites had decided against it. However, the precarious elites were not successful in completing blocking information about the programme. Although the rural poor saw the programme as ‘relief work’ (*raahat kaam*), they were interested in ensuring that they were made available.

4.4. Roshanar: aristocratic class politics

The overwhelming bulk of the village constituted the labouring classes in the village. They hired their labour out to others in the locality, as well as to owners of construction companies, brick kilns and paddy farmers of Punjab and Haryana. Many of them retailed wares to low-income populations in the cities. Nearly half the population migrated seasonally in order to supplement or substitute precarious incomes from agricultural work.

Locally, their labour was hired by small and medium farmers, who comprised about 4 percent of the population. Many of these farmers were tenants of a wealthy, influential and Rajput large farmer based in a village less than a kilometre away. This farmer had been the president of the Panchayat for nearly three decades. In the

locality, political support for him was managed by a medium farmer, who himself had once been the ex-president's tenant and acknowledged that he owed his recently acquired wealth to the latter's goodwill. Despite their recent acquisitions, the small and medium farmers of the locality remained precarious. Unable to exercise effective control over other factors of production, they made every effort they could to squeeze labour and depress agricultural wages. These efforts pit them in direct contradiction with agricultural labourers. Within the locality, the representation of the two communities among different classes was lopsided. Kunjra Muslims comprised nearly three-quarters of the locality's population, but owned less than half its agricultural properties. Members of this community were thus overrepresented among the rural poor, and underrepresented among the elites, whether entrenched or precarious.

The precarious elites were not the only ones making claims on agricultural labourers. The entrenched classes did not yet make investments outside of agriculture and continued to deploy labour on their farms. They too sought to repress wages and sustain the social difference between themselves and their labourers through caste-based discrimination. Together, the precarious and the entrenched classes pursued an aristocratic politics aimed at maintaining their political and economic control over labour. The precarious classes supported the entrenched classes in their bid to preserve their power. The entrenched classes weighed in on the side of the precarious classes in their attempts to depress agricultural wages.

A section of the precarious classes managed to displace the entrenched classes from political control of the Gram Panchayat in 2006. Unfortunately, they viewed the agricultural labourers of the Kunjra Muslim community as 'stooges' of the entrenched classes by the politicians who now wielded power. They strongly believed that the agricultural labourers of this community had caved into pressure from the entrenched elites and had actually voted for them during the elections.

The MGNREGA was introduced in the Panchayat less than a year after these crucial elections and was a direct casualty of these coalitions, hostilities and suspicions. When news of the programme began circulating in the locality, the agricultural labourers began to take interest in its different features. Although men from many families migrated seasonally to brick kilns, construction sites and other locations in distant towns and cities, there was interest among women from these families to work on the programme. For many among them, employment on the MGNREGA was considered a way of enhancing income without compromising on their dignity by having to work for their neighbours and others in the locality. The new president's explicit affiliation with the agricultural labourers, and her electoral promises of ensuring that they received unqualified access to social protection, raised their spirits. Their friends, acquaintances and co-workers in other wards told them of the ease with which job cards could be obtained, works were being allocated and wages being disbursed. In the light of their experiences, many of Roshanar Ward 5's women hoped that they would now be able to benefit from the MGNREGA.

Their hopes were belied. The new president's husband made it clear that he did not intend to 'forgive' the Ward's population for their alleged collaboration with the erstwhile dominant classes. He refused to even accept any applications for job cards from any member of this locality. The consequences of this were borne by the labouring classes. Thus, despite a large demand for the MGNREGA job cards in the locality, not a single household was issued with one.

For the rural poor in Roshanar Ward 5, the only alternative to approaching the president was to appeal to the extant elites, those wielding political influence at the locality. However, the classes with precarious surpluses were hostile to the very notion of the labouring poor engaging with public works rather than local agricultural operations. During my interview with him, one of these gentlemen, normally affable, railed against the MGNREGA:

"This programme is a conspiracy by you people (urban middle classes, presumably). You refuse to invest in agriculture. You refuse to increase the minimum support prices. You increase the costs of fertilisers and remove all subsidies on irrigation. You refuse to invest in R&D (his words, in English). And then, you introduce this MGNREGA to ensure that we have no workers left to till the land. You can try your best to kill our agriculture so that your friends, the industrialists, can take over the land and introduce corporate farming. But we will not let this happen, I promise you!"

The entrenched classes were even more unremitting in their hostility to the MGNREGA: "[it] will break India's spine", one of them averred bluntly during my interview with him.

Clearly, this was not an issue over which either the entrenched classes of the Panchayat or the precarious classes of the locality were willing to extend support to the agricultural labourers, even though it provided them an opportunity to undermine their political rival, the president. Despite no hard evidence about the allegation that the MGNREGA was responsible for labour shortage or pressurising agricultural wages in an upward direction, they maintained an inscrutable hostility towards it.

The ability of Roshanar Ward 5's agricultural labourers to access state-sponsored social protection programmes was very constrained indeed. A key factor for this limitation was the patronage-based coalition between the entrenched and precarious elites from which the labouring classes were excluded. Neither the entrenched elites nor the precarious elites were interested in undermining one another's authority and influence. Therefore, they did not need the support of the labouring poor. The political ascendance of the classes of labour in the Gram Panchayat did not help them either. The emergent leadership suspected that the ward's classes of labour had collaborated with the elites. Based on this inference, they sought to exclude them from employment under the MGNREGA. Neither the precarious elites who influenced the ward's politics nor the entrenched elites who influenced the Panchayat's felt

compelled to support them on this issue. The result was a complete absence of the programme in this locality.

5. Social protection and class politics

A core strength of the class politics approach is that it enables analysts to consider the motivations and behaviours of different sections of the elite classes in facilitating or thwarting access of the labouring poor to social protection. Coupled with the approach in this paper – which is to disaggregate the category of ‘elites’, introduce the perspective of class relations and direct attention to the balance of *substantive* class power – this focus enables analysts to consider the motivations of classes commanding precarious surpluses and status against classes commanding consistent surpluses and status, on the one side, and the agricultural labourers, on the other.

It is these class politics to which I have directed attention in this paper. Rather than discrete variables such as the organisation of the labouring poor or their economic autonomy, I have argued that a relational approach is more fruitful in explaining their success (or otherwise) in accessing social protection. Disaggregating the ‘dominant class’ in the four study localities, I directed attention to the relations of conflict and coalition between the precarious classes (commanding precarious surplus and status) and the entrenched classes (commanding assured surplus and status). Discerning the relations of conflict between the two elite classes enabled me to identify the class coalitions which they sought to build with the labouring classes. When overlaid on polities with distinct configurations, my analysis allowed me to present a textured account of the way in which the dynamic interaction between class relations and the balance of power in the polity shapes the access of the labouring poor to social protection.

Where the agricultural labourers are involved in class coalitions with one of the classes of elites against the other, as in Gajra and Sargana Ward 1, they are able to gain access to social protection programmes such as the MGNREGA. On the other hand, where they are isolated, as in Hardi and Roshanar Ward 5, their ability to access the MGNREGA is restricted. However, as my analysis has also shown, access or its absence needs to be located against the specific political context in order to examine the transformative potential of the programme.

The involvement of the agricultural labourers in political coalitions with either of the elite classes is a characteristic of polities that witness bitter contests over control. In these polities, one or the other elite class can at best shape the polity and not exert control. Thus, the entrenched classes who shaped the polity in Gajra faced challenges from the precarious classes. As many of the entrenched classes had converted their agricultural surpluses into investments in contracting and real estate, their contradictions with the labouring poor were not as apparent as were the contradictions between the precarious elites and the labouring poor. Providing the latter with access to the MGNREGA was calculated as a strategy to undermine the

already besieged surpluses accruing to their competitors from the precarious classes. In Sargana Ward 1, on the other hand, it was the precarious classes who shaped the ward's polity, but they could not edge out the entrenched classes completely from its affairs. Neither could they project their own interests as the interests of the agricultural labourers. Differences among themselves notwithstanding, the precarious classes forged an egalitarian political coalition with the agricultural labourers, in order to contain the continued challenge from the entrenched elites and consolidate their own position.

On the other hand, in polities where either of the elite classes have succeeded in establishing their control, the labouring classes are isolated. Thus, entrenched classes controlled the polity in Roshanar Ward 5, having incorporated the precarious class in a patronage-oriented coalition. On the other hand, the precarious classes controlled the polity in Hardi, having benefited from the migration of the entrenched classes outside of the locality. In both locations, the agricultural labourers were pit in a direct class conflict with the elite classes. In neither case were they of any consequence to the elite classes. As a result, they were marginal to the ward's polity in both localities. Their access to the MGNREGA was restricted because of their political isolation.

The balances of power that underpin variations in access of the agricultural labourers to social protection schemes have to be carefully considered. Note that entrenched classes are salient to the polities of both Gajra and Roshanar Ward 5, but with very different consequences for the agricultural labourers accessing the MGNREGA. While in Gajra the privileges of the entrenched classes are under threat from the precarious classes, in Roshanar Ward 5 the entrenched classes have incorporated the precarious classes in patronage-oriented coalitions. Gajra's entrenched classes pursue an incorporative politics in respect of the labouring classes to preserve their privileges and increase their profits, while Roshanar Ward 5's entrenched elites are unencumbered by any such considerations, as they have pursued an aristocratic politics to protect themselves from possible onslaught. Again, note that the precarious classes are salient in both Hardi and Sargana Ward 1. But the implications of their salience are very different for the agricultural labourers in the two localities. Hardi's precarious classes have benefited from the near-total migration of the entrenched classes, while in Sargana Ward 1, the entrenched classes continue to pose a threat to the nascent political gains made by the precarious classes. Hardi's precarious classes can willfully ignore the claims of the agricultural labourers. For the precarious classes in Sargana Ward 1, alliance with the agricultural labourers is a crucial repertoire in their contest with the entrenched classes.

For precisely this reason, the *interaction* of class relations with the balance of substantive power is of signal importance in understanding the class politics underpinning and shaping the outcome of social protection schemes such as the MGNREGA. Agricultural labourers in both Gajra and Sargana Ward 1 are able to gain employment under the MGNREGA. Does this mean the transformative aspect of the MGNREGA is equivalent in both the wards? In Gajra, the MGNREGA is

implicated in an incorporative class politics whose focus is to preserve the political power of the entrenched classes. On the other hand, in Sargana Ward 1, the MGNREGA conduces to a populist class politics whose focus is to undermine the political power of the entrenched classes, even if to consolidate the emergent position of the precarious classes. These two situations inhere very different transformative possibilities: arguably, the implementation of the MGNREGA in Sargana Ward 1 is more likely to confront and address the underlying causes of poverty and inequality than it is in Gajra. Similarly, can the restricted access of the programme for the labouring poor in Hardi and Roshanar Ward 5 be considered equivalent? In Hardi, where the polity is controlled by the precarious classes, the agricultural labourers are at least able to obtain job cards and apply for work. Their conflicts with the precarious classes are public, even though members of these classes have developed elaborate mechanisms of managing these. In Roshanar Ward 5, on the other hand, there is no question of applying for employment, as the labouring classes have not even obtained job cards.

As social scientists and policy-makers seek to bring 'politics back in' to their analysis, the imperative to analyse class politics becomes greater than ever before. This paper directs attention to the role of political settlements in shaping the outcomes of social protection interventions. I have highlighted the ways in which class politics, as constituted by the interaction of class relations and the balance of substantive class power in a given polity, influence the implementation of India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. In localities where either of the elite classes has successfully co-opted or eliminated the other, their stark contradictions against the interests of agricultural labourers result in them sabotaging the labour-friendly MGNREGA or implementing it half-heartedly. On the other hand, in localities characterised by an overarching framework of contest between the precarious classes and the entrenched classes, dominant class hostility to agricultural labourers is dissipated and labour-friendly programmes such as the MGNREGA have a chance of being implemented. However, the transformative aspect of the programme's intent, in terms of dissolving the relations of power that bolster poverty, appear to be more in evidence in localities where emergent classes with precarious surpluses, together with agricultural labourers, challenge the influence of the entrenched classes. In these localities, the implementation of the programme, even where fraught with difficulties, contributes to dissolving hierarchical relations and establishing egalitarian ones.

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