**Class politics and social protection: A comparative analysis of local governments in India**

1. **Accessing social protection: a class-analytical lens**

Dramatic differences in the quality of human life are a prominent feature of today’s world. Poverty and inequality mutilate the life chances of millions around the globe, notwithstanding otherwise impressive economic achievements. To offset the challenges posed by the persistence and production of poverty and inequality, many governments and international development agencies have begun to formulate and implement agendas for social protection. Nevertheless, even as governments institute social protection programs to ameliorate human misery, the outcomes of such initiatives remain vastly varied. Understanding the factors for such variations assumes urgent relevance.

What explains such variations? In this paper, I contribute to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to reignite interest in class politics as shaping the implementation of social protections. I build on and develop a discussion of politics that takes seriously class politics, especially the ensemble of collaborations and competitions between classes. This argument marks a radical departure from at least three influential perspectives that seek to explain variations in social policy outcomes: one, which emphasises differences in regime type (Boix, 2001; Brown and Mobarak, 2009; Rothstein 2011; Gerring, Thacker and Alafro, 2012); two, which highlights the nature of state institutions, especially the constitutional structures of decision-making that disperse (or concentrate) political authority (Huber et al, 1993; Gerring and Thacker, 2008); and three, which privileges the nature of the bureaucracy as an explanatory variable (Tendler, 1997; Grindle, 2007). In the paper, I nuance existing perspectives on class politics by emphasizing the importance of both class collaboration as well as class conflict.

The motivation for this enquiry and the approach preferred stems from the well-established fact that social protection outcomes vary within countries whose units are constituted by identical legal, bureaucratic and constitutional institutions. Not only that, in federal countries, variations occur *within* sub-national units such as states, provinces and even districts. What does one make of such variation? In this paper, I draw on the systematic comparison of a small (four) number of cases to argue that class politics, defined by the dynamic interaction between class relations and distribution of class power, is a key driver of local variations in social protection outcomes. Certainly, local variation in policy outcomes important in itself. More compellingly, however, it is important because national-level social protection outcomes are not only aggregations of local outcomes. Rather, such outcomes are a product of class collaborations and class conflict. Thus, the purpose of this paper is not to repeat the well-established claim that variations in social protection outcomes are common within countries. Rather, my argument is that to explain such variations, scholars need to take seriously the ensemble of collaborations and competitions between classes.

Much of the literature on class politics and social protections relate the strength of working class mobilization (as represented by the rise of social democratic parties) to the establishment of progressive social policy and higher welfare outcomes (Hibbs, 1977 and Korpi, 1983). In this vein, Esping-Andersen (1990) underscores the importance of class politics in shaping the welfare state in northern Europe. In the Latin American context, a major contribution to the literature has been made by Segura-Ubiergo’s (2012) recent comparative account of class politics in the shaping the emergence and trajectories of welfare states in Latin America. In the Indian context, Patrick Keller (2000) makes a forceful case for an appreciation of class politics in shaping the welfare state in the country’s Kerala State, in order to explain its exceptional performance in human development indicators. Atul Kohli’s (1987) analysis of the successful implementation of pro-poor land reforms in West Bengal also foregrounds the role of class politics. Ronald Herring (1983) too establishes a link between working class mobilization and the institution of progressive social policy in South Asia.

Against these views valourising class conflict between the working class and the dominant class, the class-analytic lens used in this paper relies on Przeworski (1985) cautioning students against an uncritical acceptance of a model of irreconcilable class conflict. Class compromises between fractions of dominant classes and working classes are common, making class *collaborations* possible. Side by side, Ansell and Samuels (2014) call attention to the *competition* between autocratic elites and middle classes, arising out of the latter challenging the former. Other scholars (Jeffrey, 2000; Pattenden, 2011) also nuance the idea of a single dominant class and distinguish instead between dominant classes with entrenched privileges and disposable surpluses and dominant classes with precarious surpluses and little privilege. Their accounts remind us of the complexity of class relations and the need for inductive examination of the concrete relations between, within and over different classes.

The paper also departs from prevailing accounts of class as it draws on an understanding of class as comprising “a group of people who by virtue of what they possess are compelled to engage in the same activities if they want to make the best use of their endowments,” (Elster, 1985), where endowments include material possessions, social status and cultural affiliations and are bounded by mobility closure (Weber, 1968) as well as interaction closure (Giddens, 1973). Such an understanding compels us away from an economistic understanding of class towards incorporating variables such as social status and social identities (Roy, 2018). In the Indian context, this entails directing attention to such features as caste (Gooptu and Harriss-White, 2001, which shape access to resources and opportunities. By incorporating variables such as caste into understandings of class, this paper recognizes the ways in which class does not merely interact with caste but is *shaped* by it.

1. **India’s National Rural Employment Guarantee Act**

The argument presented in this paper is formulated in the empirical context of India, a socially heterogeneous developing country. India is a federal democracy, with substantial devolution of responsibility for social policy on 29 sub-national units called States. Furthermore, under the Indian Constitution, States have devolved responsibilities for implementing social policy in rural areas upon elected local governments called Gram Panchayats (Bohlken, 2016; Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Pande, 2003; Bhavnani, 2009; Chauchard, 2014; Chauchard, 2017). That nearly 70% of all Indians, including some of the most impoverished and vulnerable people, live in rural India, makes the Gram Panchayat an ideal site for analyzing social policy outcomes. India’s villages are served by 240,000 Gram Panchayats and nearly 2.9 million elected representatives, with control over budgets and plans. Some Gram Panchayats have managed to considerably improve the social conditions of their citizens while others have not. Thus, variations occur not only across States, but within them: indeed, as we shall see in this paper, variations occur even within districts of Indian States. What explains this puzzle?

In response to this puzzle, I employ a focused comparison across four villages of the implementation of a large centrally-planned and centrally-sponsored social protection scheme designed to guarantee employment to rural Indians on public works. The scheme under study is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). MGNREGA was legislated in September 2005 by the United Progressive Alliance government subject to significant pressure by its Leftist allies (Chopra, 2011). 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 program 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 program, nearly a third of the World Bank’s annual outlay. As a state-owned, well resourced, demand-driven and rights-based program, MGNREGA represents a bold attempt, in the Indian context, to initiate social protection for its poorest people (Dreze and Khera, 2017; and Joshi, 2010). Against anxieties that the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government would discontinue it, allocations for the program has in fact been increased since the new government took over in 2014 (Bannerjee et al, 2016; Gulzar and Pasquale, 2017).

Underpinning MGNREGA is the constitutional 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 Head of the Gram Panchayat, along with elected councilors, are expected to take decisions on the implementation of the program through mutual consultation and based on ratification from popular assemblies. In practice, however, the allocation of works is the result of tussles between the head and other members of the Gram Panchayat, the bureaucracy and other locally influential persons. Sometimes works are ‘supplied’ on the order of district bureaucrats (Khera, 2011) or local politicians (Marcesse, 2018). In most cases, the head 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.

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 programs, MGNREGA guidelines do not impose any seasonal limitations on the execution of projects. By not restricting projects during the cropping and harvesting season, the program provides rural laborers the opportunities to demand work during the cropping season and allows workers to engage with the program at higher wage rates. The program does appear to offer substantive alternatives to workers, potentially altering relations of labor between them. At the same time, this provision fuels fears of labor shortages among farmers. This feature of the Act makes the implementation of this policy a vigorously contested affair (Roy, 2014; Roy, 2018; Pattenden, 2016).

The program has generated tremendous interest in academic, policy and activist circles. Scholars have examined the outcomes of the program 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., 2018; Bose, 2017; Carswell and de Neve, 2014; Dreze and Oldiges, 2011; Dutta et al, 2012; Imbert and Papp, 2012; Khera, 2011; Pankaj and Tankha, 2010; Ravi and Engler, 2015; Roy, 2014; Sudarshan et al., 2010; and Veeraraghavan, 2015). 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; Niehaus and Sukhtantar, 2013; Shankar and Gaiha, 2013; Vanaik and Siddhartha, 2008). Banerjee (2012) locates MGNREGA in the discourse of the right to work and human rights more generally. Some sympathetic writers have highlighted MGNREGA as an example of the way in which neoliberalism has been contained in India (Manor and Jenkins, 2017; Shah, 2008). More critical authors have sought to understand 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).

Much scholarly attention has been directed towards exploring the program’s efficacy. How does one measure the program’s performance? The most commonplace approach examines the program’s performance in terms of the employment generated per household before examining outcomes in terms of wage rates, household incomes and consumption (Bannerjee and Saha, 2010; Berg et al., 2018; Bose, 2017; Carswell and de Neve, 2014; Dreze and Oldiges, 2011; Dutta et al, 2012; Imbert and Papp, 2012; Khera, 2011; Pankaj and Tankha, 2010; Ravi and Engler, 2015; Sudarshan et al., 2010). For the purpose of this paper, I will focus attention of MGNREGA performance to the employment generated under the aegis of the program, measured by the annual employment days generated per household. This follows the standard approach adopted by most analysts of the program (Dreze and Khera, 2017; Marcesse, 2018; Pattenden, 2017). I complement this analysis by drawing on scholars (Carswell and de Neve, 2014; Roy, 2014; Dey, 2010; Dreze and Khera, 2017) who have drawn attention to the transformative potential of MGNREGA that include, among others, reduction in workers’ dependence on employers and changes in social relations between workers and employers.

1. **The empirical puzzle: variations in MGNREGA performance**

The implementation of MGNREGA varies enormously across the country, as Table 1 illustrates. Marked differences in implementation are discernible between and within States (Gill et al, 2013; Reddy, 2013; and Pellissery and Jalan, 2013). There are often variations within states and even districts and blocks (Mercesse, 2018; Pattenden, 2017; and Roy, 2018). Understanding the factors for these variations requires us to delve into the villages in which the program is actually implemented, in order to understand the contentions and collaborations around it. It requires us to examine the program’s implementation against the concrete political contexts of the localities where the program has been introduced. What factors explain variations in the program’s outcomes for the laborers engaged with the program?

Much of the scholarship responding to this question focuses on State-level considerations to explain variation. While Maiorano (2014), drawing on the case of Andhra Pradesh, emphasizes the commitment of State-level politicians as being key to the success of the program, Chopra (2014) highlights the importance on bureaucratic commitment to the success of the program in Rajasthan. Jenkins and Manor (2017) point attention to variations in attitudes of State governments to explain the relative success of the program in Rajasthan in contrast with Madhya Pradesh. Pattenden (2017) suggests that States with greater levels of inequality and poverty tend to implement MGNREGA poorly compared with States where overall balance of power favours the laboring classes. Other scholars, while directing focus away from State-level factors, nevertheless continue to highlight the importance of considerations above the village level, such as physical proximity of villages to bureaucratic offices (Pattenden, 2011a; and Corbridge and Srivastava, 2013), political party affiliation (Das, 2015; and Gill et al, 2013), politician-bureaucratic linkages (Gulzar and Pasquale, 2017), activism of civil society organisations (Aakella and Kidambi, 2007; and Kannan and Jagajeevan, 2013) as well as the extent to which dominant classes control local governments (Pattenden, 2011a; 2011b; Reddy, 2013).

An emerging scholarship has sought to examine factors for variation in the performance of MGNREGA between local governments within the same district. The competitive nature of elections to local governments in most Indian States (Bohlken 2016) often insulates them from supra-local politics since State-level politicians do not want to risk alienating any candidate. Under these circumstances, Marcesse (2018) emphasizes the ‘selective activation’ of MGNREGA works by bureaucrats and heads of Gram Panchayats: some heads are more able to succeed in supplying these works than others on account of their ability to pay rents to bureaucrats and caste background. Offering a different analysis, Pattenden (2015) situates MGNREGA within locality-specific class antagonisms: he argues that the extent to which local governments are controlled by dominant landowning classes shapes their ability to deliver MGNREGA works to the laboring poor.

In this paper, I draw upon the insights offered by both strands of this emergent literature. With Pattenden (2017), I situate MGNREGA in the context of class relations prevailing at the local-level. With Marcesse (2018), I appreciate the ability of heads of the Gram Panchayats to selectively activate MGNREGA works. However, the analysis of class politics offered in this paper also departs from their analysis in important ways. By situating MGNREGA in the context of local-level class relations, I consider not only class antagonisms but also cross-class collaborations. By considering the balance of class power in the Panchayats, I consider the possibility that heads of Gram Panchayats are not merely rapacious individuals only interested in rent-seeking but are socially embedded in class-caste relations which they seek to promote.

1. **Class politics and MGNREGA implementation**
2. Class politics, rural labor and public works

In an agrarian economy, *class relations* are crucially shaped by ownership over arable land and the purchase or sale of labor power. Those unable to own land are often compelled to sell their labor to those who do. Many of those who own marginal landholdings are also economically dependent on selling their labor to those with greater endowments of land. A vast majority of such laborers are drawn from castes historically stigmatized as ‘low caste’ or discriminated against as ‘untouchable’ (Thorat, 2009). In this paper, following Utsa Patnaik (1986), I refer to sellers of labor in India’s rural context as the ‘rural poor’, using the term interchangeably with ‘laboring poor’. They are the ones who were most willing to seek employment under MGNREGA. The hirers of labor, by contrast, 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. Nuancing such a polarized model, I follow scholars who disaggregate the dominant classes (Bernstein, 2010; Harriss-White, 2012). As elaborated in Roy (2018), I refer to the collaborations and conflicts within dominant classes, between ‘entrenched elites’ and ‘precarious elites’.

The entrenched elites broadly correspond to an elite with “high” status, large landholdings and assured surpluses, assets and investments. Their control over the economy enables them to hire and discipline labor to their advantage while their command over social status buttresses their economic clout. Their position in the political economy is entrenched, allowing them to stave off significant challenges to the economic and social resources at their disposal. Entrenched elites typically comprise of high-status (so-called Savarna Hindus and Ashraf Muslims), labor-hiring families who are able to capitalize on their economic and social resources in order to sustain their position at the apex of the agrarian hierarchy. Nevertheless, upwardly mobile intermediate-status landlords and capitalist farmers, whose economic and social position is entrenched in the agrarian hierarchy are also included within the ambit of the entrenched elites. The entrenched elites combine their dominance in the agrarian hierarchy with investments outside of the sector, connections with the bureaucracy and family members who work as professionals in the formal sector. They approximate the ‘dominant classes’ to which different authors refer, with the caveat that they may not need to exercise their direct domination over others in order to sustain their privilege.

Precarious elites are situated in the middle of the regional and/ or national political economy. Although they might command some economic resources, their social resources are inadequate to buttress their economic position. Their economic resources might allow them to hire in labor, but they are in no position to discipline labor to their own advantage: moreover, they may find themselves as hiring out their labor as well. Their position in the political economy is precarious, dependent on the electoral success of politicians who represent their interests. Precarious elites typically comprise of “low” status (so-called Shudras, both Hindu and Muslim) rich and middle peasant families who deploy a combination of labor strategies (hire in labor, hire out labor and exploit their own or family labor) to reproduce themselves. However, high status middle and poor peasants are also categorized as precarious elites, as are ‘low status’ capitalist farmers and rich peasants who may exclusively hire in labor. Their socio-economic position remains vulnerable, hence the appellation of ‘precarious classes’ is applied to them.

The laboring classes are socially the most heterogenous, comprising manual workers of all status groups, with a preponderance of members of communities stigmatized as “untouchable” (Dalit, both Hindu and Muslim) or “primitive” (Adivasi) (Guru and Chakravarthu, 2005; Shah and Lerche, 2017; Thorat and Newman, 2012; Ramachandran, 2012). Additionally, poor and middle peasants of “low” status families are also categorized as such. They have little control over the economy, except as laborers who must hire out their bodies to perform manual work. Their position in the political economy is shaped by their poverty, making it imperative for them to hire out their labor if they are to survive. Their social resources are often inadequate for them to raise their economic status.

Entrenched elites may conflict with precarious elites and the laboring poor in some cases, spawning a potential coalition between the latter two. Elsewhere, precarious elites may conflict with the laboring poor as well as entrenched elites. In both scenarios, rural labor are enmeshed in coalitions with either fraction of the dominant class. Alternatively, entrenched elites and precarious elites may coalesce together against the laboring poor. Or, either fraction of the dominant class coopts the other and directly confronts the laboring poor. In such scenarios, rural labor are isolated.

Entrenched elites and precarious elites not only compete to recruit labor but- perhaps more importantly- to control political office, thereby shaping the *balance of class power*. The competition between the entrenched elites and precarious elites is exacerbated in the realm of political control over the Gram Panchayat. Entrenched elites typically revile precarious elites as upstarts out to usurp their own authority, as rustic and unrefined, and socially inferior. Precarious elites pride themselves as challengers to the authority of entrenched elites and perceive themselves to be rightful claimants to political power on account of their emergent, though still precarious, economic clout. Their conflicts mirror national and State-level competition between caste clusters (Jaffrelot, 2005; Gudavarthy, 2014; Jayal, 2013). These competitions assume particular salience at the level of Gram Panchayats (Bohlken, 2016): control over the Gram Panchayats allows heads and functionaries to distribute public resources in ways that advance their own interests. Such control also allows them to undermine opponents. This point has been most forcefully made by Herring and Edwards (1983) in the context of the successful implementation of the Employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharasthra: the supply of the program to the rural poor was restricted by the rural dominant classes to the agricultural lean season so that labor could be made available for their farming activities. Likewise, while discussing the working of the Employment Assurance Scheme, Veron et al. (2003) argue that an important motivation of politicians was to control the supply of labor to competitors.

Thus, entrenched elites may control Gram Panchayats in some cases, irrespective of the prevailing class relations. Where, additionally, they conflict with precarious elites, they may well deploy public resources strategically to undermine their antagonists. Likewise, irrespective of the prevailing class relations, precarious elites may hold office in others. Under such circumstances, and if they conflict with entrenched classes, they may not shy away from mobilizing public resources against their opponents[[1]](#endnote-1). Public works schemes, such as MGNREGA, comprise a significant resource in the coffers of the Gram Panchayat and in the hands of elected heads such as the Gram Pradhans. Control over and disbursal of these resources are key to their attempts at maintaining their own class dominance as well as undermine that of their adversaries.

Class relations interact with the balance of class power to produce varied class politics in different Gram Panchayats. Table 2 illustrates the possible permutations. In the empirical section of the paper, I describe four types of class politics and their implications for the implementation of MGNREGA. In Gram Panchayats where entrenched elites and rural labor coalesce against the precarious classes *and* where the Gram Panchayat is controlled by the entrenched elites, we witness what I call an ‘incorporative class politics’ as elaborated in Section 5.1 below. Gram Panchayats where precarious elites and rural labor aligned against the entrenched elites and where precarious elites control the Gram Panchyat exemplify a ‘populist class politics’, as I elaborate in Section 5.2 below. Where precarious elites coopt entrenched elites, as well as control the Gram Panchayat, what I call a ‘differentiated class politics’ prevails: Section 5.3 discusses this further. Finally, where entrenched elites coopt precarious elites against rural labor and where they control the Gram Panchayat, we see the prevalence of an ‘aristocratic class politics’, as I explain in Section 5.4. Other scenarios are of course possible as suggested in Figure 1, but have not been considered in this paper for paucity of space.

b). Case selection and research methods

The data presented in the rest of the paper were collected from four Gram Panchayats in two Indian States, one in the east (Bihar) and the other in the west (Gujarat). As Table 2 shows, the two States are both ‘average performers’ on MGNREGA[[2]](#endnote-2): neither state is remarkable for its implementation of the scheme. Both vary widely on significant economic and social indicators but nevertheless converge in terms of the persondays of employment generated per household under the aegis of MGNREGA. Moreover, each State demonstrates enormous variation across districts. That by itself is not surprising because Indian States are internally heterogenous, marked by enormous economic, social and ecological diversity. What is potentially surprising is the variation within a single district and even sub-district units such as blocks and Gram Panchayats within a single district. Tables 3.1 and 3.2 illustrate intra-district variations by revealing differences across blocks in Araria (Bihar) and Junagadh (Gujarat) district respectively.

It might be argued that a higher population of Scheduled Castes, percentage of marginal landholdings or proportion of agricultural laborers should make the implementation of MGNREGA more likely, given that these parameters are often associated with poverty in India (Marcesse, 2018; Chauchard, 2014; Trivedi, 2014). However, the data presented in Tables 3.1 and 3.2 belie these expectations. Let us consider the data presented in Table 3.1, which pertains to all nine blocks in Araria district. Scheduled Castes comprise a higher proportion of Palasi’s population than neighbouring Narpatgunj: yet the former clocks a higher person-day figure than the latter in the consecutive years 2012-13 and 2013-14. The proportion of marginal landholdings in Bhargama block is much lower than in Kursakanta, yet the person-days figure is higher. Similarly, despite the share of agricultural laborers in marginal employment being lower in Ranigunj than in Araria block, the person-days figure is higher.

The situation in the fifteen blocks of Junagadh district is similar, as readers will glean from Table 3.2. Scheduled Castes comprise half the proportion of Malia’s population compared with Kodinar, yet it clocks higher persondays of employment per household than the latter. The proportion of marginal holdings to total holdings in Bhesan is lower than in Junagadh block, yet the former witnesses more person-days employment per household. In Patan Veraval, agricultural laborers in marginal employment comprise a mere 3% of the population of total workers, compared with 9% in Sutrapada: yet, the former sees a higher figure of person-days per household than the latter. A careful perusal of the data suggests that percentages of Scheduled Castes, the proportion of marginal landholdings and the share of agricultural laborers in marginal employment to the population of total workers does not necessarily predict employment generation levels under MGNREGA.

Not only does the supply of employment provided under MGNREGA vary across blocks, but also *within* them. Variations across Gram Panchayats (GPs)[[3]](#endnote-3) within a single block are presented in Tables 4.1 (a single block in Araria district) and 4.2 (a single block in Junagadh district). For the sake of brevity, data has been presented for only ten GPs from each of the blocks, with attention to the variation within a block. As with Tables 3.1 and 3.2, the data focuses on persondays of employment generated per household (against the stipulated maximum of 100 days) per annum for both years. The standard deviations for each GP are also noted so that readers can appreciate the extent of variations occurring within a single block.

How do we explain variations across Gram Panchayats within a single block? To answer this question, I deploy 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 program’s implementation in one Gram Panchayat in Bihar with the other, and one Gram Panchayat in Gujarat with the other.

The two Gram Panchayats in each of the states are located in the same district and block, enabling me to control for institutional effects, such as block-level bureaucratic capacity. As is evident from Tables 4.1 and 4.2, despite their inhabiting identical institutional terrains, the performance of MGNREGA in the study localities demonstrates remarkable variations. I focus this study on one GP with relatively high rates of employment days per household over three years and one GP with relatively low rates over the same duration in each block. I compare GP 10 (which I will call Sargana in this paper) with GP 5 (Roshanar) in Bihar, and GP 6 (Gajra) with GP 10 (called Hardi throughout this paper) in Gujarat. Fieldwork was conducted in these Gram Panchayats over the winter of 2012, winter of 2013-14 and early spring of 2015. A total of 60 past and current beneficiaries on the scheme were interviewed in each block, of which 26 were women[[4]](#endnote-4). These semi-structured interviews were complemented by direct observations of interactions between beneficiaries and heads of GPs as well as structured interviews with heads and other GP members. In the rest of this paper, I draw on interviews and direct observations to explain variations in the supply of employment across GPs in a single block.

The explanation offered in this paper focuses on variations in class politics across the four GPs. 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 class politics is manifested and the laboring classes are able to access social protection schemes[[5]](#endnote-5). In this vein, each of the four study localities provides a paradigmatic example of a specific intersection of class relations and balance of class power. In Gujarat’s Gajra GP, where precarious elites and entrenched elites are in competition with one another, the entrenched elites shape the Panchayat’s agenda. Gajra’s politics is paradigmatic of an ‘incorporative’ class politics. On the other hand, in Bihar’s Sargana GP, where precarious elites and entrenched elites contest each other, it is the precarious elites who shape the Panchayat’s agenda. Sargana’s represents a ‘populist’ class politics’. By contrast, in Gujarat’s Hardi locality, the few members of the entrenched elites who remained in the village had accepted the leadership of the precarious classes, who in turn controlled the Panchayat’s agenda: Hardi represents, in this paper, a ’differentiated’ class politics. On the other hand, in Bihar’s Roshanar locality, the entrenched elites ruled the roost: the precarious elites accepted their leadership and acquiesced with them fully. Roshanar typifies an ‘aristocratic class politics’. Table 5 presents a schematic representation of the social composition of the different classes in the four selected localities.

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 MGNREGA is implicated in perpetuating or undermining extant class coalitions, competitions 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 program 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.

1. **Varieties of class politics, variations in MGNREGA**
   1. **Gajra: incorporative class politics**

Gajra is located 11 kilometres north-east of Veraval town, off the western coast of Gujarat. 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 block.. For members of this class, control over the polity is a prerequisite to consolidating and expanding their investments in agriculture, construction and real estate. Concerns such as shortage of labor, 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.

Challenging their political control are 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 aspire to translate 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 agricultural laborers. The conflict between the precarious classes and the agricultural labor was obvious.

The implementation of MGNREGA provided an opportunity for Gajra’s entrenched classes to assert their political power in the locality. By offering employment on the programme to agricultural laborers, they contributed to agricultural laborers demanding higher wages. 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 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 head 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 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 laboring poor (A Muslim man), 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. For instance, a Dalit woman who worked under the scheme for about fifteen days during the previous year, gave me the example of the recently constructed Bharat Nirman Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra, a project under MGNREGA to build community centres in the village. The contractor collected the job cards from her and approximately another 125 people – the number of people to be officially employed on the construction work. He actually deployed his own equipment and complemented it with labor (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 profit[[6]](#endnote-6) earned by the contractor (via his control over the head 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. As another Dalit woman, who had also received money in return for lending her card, told me:

“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 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 labor. The modality was the same. He paid off the individuals from whom he took 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 labor, 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 labor 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 labor on their land, undermining their nascent political organisation and ambition to translate their numerical strength into political control of the Panchayat. The implementation of 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” (head’s words, English) so that the labor and materials ratio and related payments could be rationalised. Given Gajra’s incorporative class politics, the entrenched elites appropriated MGNREGA to preserve their control over the polity and undermine the challenges from the small and medium farmers.

* 1. **Sargana Ward 1: populist class politics**

The livelihood strategies of Sargana’s laboring poor range from hiring their labor for agricultural work to migrating to Delhi, Punjab and Rajasthan to work in the construction sector – either as laborers 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 laboring poor are drawn from the Musahar community, stigmatised by the privileged castes as ‘untouchable’.

The small and medium farmers of high-status Rajput and Kayasth communities comprised the core of the entrenched classes of the locality. Comprising 3% of the population, they hired labor on their farms. 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 agricultural laborers were directly in contradiction with the entrenched classes in Sargana. Economically, they were at the receiving end of entrenched classes attempting to depress wages. Socially, they continued to confront caste-based discrimination on account of being stigmatized as “untouchables” or “low castes. 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 laboring poor over the latter’s demands for wages. But they also shared the antipathy of the laboring poor against the entrenched classes, who continued to loom large in the village’s polity.

A bitterly contested polity thus undergirded the populist political coalition between the laboring poor 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 elites and the laboring poor. For the first time in the history of the Gram Panchayat, a small farmer from a low status community was elected as the head. Despite the evident tensions and contradictions between the small and medium farmers and the laborers they hired on their farms, the head and other leaders of the precarious elites lent explicit and unambiguous support to the laboring poor in their claims against the entrenched elites. Although the political coalition between the precarious classes and the agricultural labor could not marginalise the political influence of the entrenched elites and it was riven with internal contradictions, it did contain the political clout of the entrenched classes.

The populist political coalition between the precarious elites and the laboring poor in a polity shaped by the precarious elites provided the backdrop of the introduction of MGNREGA. Although the newly elected head 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 labor and levels of agricultural wages, he saw the programme as an opportunity to sustain the support of the laboring poor that elected him. For other sections of the precarious elites, it was clear that the implementation of 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 head’s interest, came from the mobilisations of the members of the laboring poor 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 head commonly found himself at the receiving end of their rage. In response, he sought to facilitate the engagement of the laboring poor with 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 impetuousness it induced among the laboring poor. He frequently delayed payments to workers, hoping that this would dishearten laborers and wean them away from the programme.

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 MGNREGA. When they complained to the head, 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 head 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 laborers were aware of the profits made by the head – 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 head, the transactions were not only ways of earning rents, but also about consolidating the support of the laboring poor, facilitating the erosion of the influence of the entrenched classes and outflanking the rival sections from among the precarious classes.

The implementation of MGNREGA in Sargana Ward 1 contributed to sustaining the populist political coalition that was being forged between the precarious classes and the laborers. 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 laboring poor was not central to the political coalition between the precarious elite and the laboring poor, the egalitarian impulses that animated this coalition bore the potential of instigating broader societal transformation. In this important sense, the implementation of MGNREGA in Sargana Ward 1 conduced to the possibilities of recognising and confronting the underlying causes of poverty and inequality.

* 1. **Hardi: differentiated class politics**

The agricultural labor 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 labor. The local hirers of labor 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 labor 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 labor 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 labor. Laborers 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 labor, because of the alleged attractiveness of work in the nearby industries. Contradictions over the appropriation of the surplus plagued the social relations between the laboring poor and the precarious elites. The class politics was a cleaved one, in which neither class was willing to accept the leadership or domination of the other.

When MGNREGA was introduced, it riled the precarious classes even further. They feared that the programme’s implementation would exacerbate the shortages of labor 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 laboring poor complained. As I conducted my discussions with them, the head 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 laborers 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 head 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 the laboring poor. They had underestimated the extent to which the laboring poor did indeed want employment under 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 clases in control of the polity would countenance.

The cleavage between agricultural laborers and the classes with precarious surpluses, particularly over the questions of wages, pit the members of both classes against each other. MGNREGA was perceived as a threat to the assured availability of labor, 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 MGNREGA in Hardi was somewhat reduced by the precarious classes drawn from the locality’s different communities. The core focus of the cleaved class politics was the maintenance of and consolidation of the political power of the locality’s precarious elites. The laboring poor were excluded from the ward’s polity. Despite the interest among the laboring poor for 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 laboring poor saw the programme as ‘relief work’ (*raahat kaam*), they were interested in ensuring that they were made available.

* 1. **Roshanar: aristocratic class politics**

The overwhelming majority of Roshanar’s inhabitants constituted the laboring classes in the village. They hired their labor 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 labor was hired by small and medium farmers. 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 head 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-head’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 labor and depress agricultural wages. These efforts pit them in direct contradiction with agricultural laborers. 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.

The precarious elites were not the only ones making claims on agricultural laborers. The entrenched classes did not yet make investments outside of agriculture and continued to deploy labor on their farms. They too sought to repress wages and sustain the social difference between themselves and their laborers through caste-based discrimination. Together, the precarious and the entrenched classes pursued an aristocratic politics aimed at maintaining their political and economic control over labor. 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, leading to the construction of aristocratic class politics in the village.

A section of the precarious classes managed to gain political control of the Gram Panchayat in 2006. Unfortunately, they viewed the agricultural laborers of the Kunjra Muslim community as ‘stooges’ of the entrenched classes. They strongly believed that the agricultural laborers of this community had caved into pressure from the entrenched elites and had actually voted for them during the elections.

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. The new head’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 laboring classes. Thus, despite a large demand for 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 head was to appeal to the entrenched classes, those wielding political influence at the locality. However, the classes with precarious surpluses were hostile to the very notion of the laboring poor engaging with public works rather than local agricultural operations. The entrenched classes were even more unremitting in their hostility to MGNREGA.

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 laborers, even though it provided them an opportunity to undermine their political rival, the head. Despite no hard evidence about the allegation that MGNREGA was responsible for labor shortage or pressurising agricultural wages in an upward direction, they maintained an inscrutable hostility towards it.

1. **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 laboring poor to social protection. This paper has harnessed the strength of the class-analytic approach to initiate three departures. One, it has disaggregated the dominant classes to reflect the realities of actually-existing societies. Two, it has forced attention to the role of the interaction between class coalitions and the balance of class power in local governments’ implementation of social protection. And three, it has enabled us to appreciate the centrality of social identities such as caste- rather than occupation, income or assets- in the making of class.

The involvement of the agricultural laborers in political coalitions with either fraction of the dominant classes is characteristic of polities that witness bitter contests over control. In these polities, one or the other dominant class can at best shape the polity and not exert control. Where agricultural laborers are involved in class coalitions with one fraction of the dominant class against the other, as in Gajra and Sargana Ward 1, they are able to gain access to social protection programs such as MGNREGA. By contrast, where they are isolated, as in Hardi and Roshanar Ward 5, their ability to access MGNREGA is restricted.

Agricultural laborers inserted themselves in class coalitions in different ways. In Gajra, the entrenched classes shaped its polity. However, they faced concerted 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 laboring poor were not as apparent as were the contradictions between the precarious elites and the laboring poor. The entrenched classes and the laboring poor were embedded in a class coalition. The balance of class power and the class coalition in the locality was thus underpinned by an incorporative class politics. Providing the latter with access to MGNREGA was calculated as a strategy to undermine the already besieged surpluses accruing to their competitors from the precarious classes. In Sargana Ward 1, 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 laborers. Differences among themselves notwithstanding, the precarious classes forged a class coalition with the agricultural laborers, in order to contain the continued challenge from the entrenched elites and consolidate their own position. A populist class politics underpinned the balance of class power and the class coalitions in Sargana.

In polities where either fraction of the elite classes have succeeded in establishing their control, the laboring classes found themselves politcally isolated. Thus, entrenched classes controlled the polity in Roshanar Ward 5, forged a class coalition with the precarious classes. An aristocratic class politics underlay Roshanar’s polity. 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. A differentiated class politics permeated Hardi’s polity. In both locations, the agricultural laborers 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 MGNREGA was restricted because of their political isolation.

The balances of power that underpin variations in access of the agricultural laborers 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 laborers accessing 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 laboring 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 laborers 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 laborers. For the precarious classes in Sargana Ward 1, alliance with the agricultural laborers is a crucial repertoire in their contest with the entrenched classes. As social scientists and policy-makers seek to examine alternative means of addressing the dramatic differences in the quality of life that continues to prevail in the contemporary world, the imperative to analyse class politics becomes greater than ever before.

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1. It is not inconceivable for the laboring poor to be elected to office either, although their relative autonomy might remain stymied in case they are dependent on either of the two fractions of dominant classes for employment. For this reason, they are not included as a separate category for consideration in this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The data presented in this paper considers the helpful notes of caution offered by Carswell and Cripps (2013) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The names of Gram Panchayats have been either withheld or changed throughout this paper in order to protect the identity of participants. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. No non-participants were interviewed for the purpose of this study. The focus on past and present beneficiaries of the MGNREGA alerts us to an obvious limitation of this work: we cannot compare participant perspectives on the program with those of non-participants. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. It has been suggested that the organisation of agricultural labor 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 GPs in each of the states. In the two Bihar GPs, the Communist Party of India (Marxist/ Leninist-Liberation) provided a basis for organisation to agricultural laborers in both the study localities through its affiliate, the All India Agricultural Laborers Association (AIALA). Despite this constant, the outcomes of the MGNREGA varied across the two locations. No such comparable organisation existed in the Gujarat GPs to support agricultural labor. MGNREGA outcomes varied despite this.

   Others have pointed to the migration of agricultural labor to cities as causing labor shortages and allowing the workers who stay back to bargain for better wages (Jha, 2004). Again, migration levels in the two Bihar GPs are comparable to one another, as are migration levels in the two Gujarat GPs. 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. At local prices, monies earned: ₹140 \* 125\* 90= ₹1,575,000. Costs incurred on labor: ₹200\*12\*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. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)