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Class Coalitions and Social Protection: The Labouring Classes and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in Eastern India

Indrajit Roy

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Class Coalitions and Social Protection: The Labouring Classes and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in Eastern India

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ABSTRACT *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. I nuance existing perspectives on class politics by emphasising the importance of both collaboration as well as conflict between social classes.*

1. Introduction: class coalitions and social protection

Many governments and international development agencies have begun to formulate and implement agendas for social protection to offset the challenge posed by global poverty. Such agendas transcend short-term poverty alleviation strategies (Barrientos & Hulme, 2008). Some social protection policies are potentially transformative (Sabates-Wheeler & 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 dispersed and where structural and cultural sources of oppression converge to create divisions within the poor (Bernstein, 2007, p. 7). Unionisation and other forms of equity-focused collective action in such regions are rare or weak, making state-driven social protection an imperative. Nevertheless, even as governments across the world adopt social protection programs, the outcomes of such initiatives remain vastly varied. Understanding the factors for such variations assumes urgent relevance.

What explains such variations? This paper responds to this question through a focus on India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). As social scientists and development agencies seek to 'bring politics back' into policy analysis, scholars studying the MGNREGA have sought to foreground such political variables as effective bureaucracies (Reddy, 2013), political will (Maiorano, 2014) the strength of civil society organisations (Aakella & Kidambi, 2007), the relationships between villages and supra-local institutions (Corbridge & Srivastava, 2013; Pattenden, 2011),

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and connections with the ruling political party (Gill et al., 2013). However, drawing on the scholarship of authors who centre class in the analysis of social policy, not only in India (Breman, 2007; Lerche, 2012; Pattenden, 2015) but also elsewhere (Esping-Anderson, 1990), this paper argues for a consideration of class politics (building on Ahn, 2008; Bernstein, 2008; Breman, 2007; Gooptu & Harriss-White, 2001; Harriss, 1982; Lerche, 2010; Pattenden, 2011a) in analysing the outcomes of social protection schemes (drawing on Carswell & de Neve, 2013; Harriss et al., 2010; Jeffrey & Lerche, 2000; Pattenden, 2011; Ruud, 2003; Véron et al., 2003; Williams, Veron, Corbridge, & Srivastava, 2003) such as the MGNREGA. The 'class politics' framework deployed here builds on the recent insights offered by the approach advanced by Pattenden (2015).

The paper departs from depictions of class politics as a straightforward conflict between such binary categories as bourgeoisie and proletariat, dominant class and working class, and rich and poor. Rather, drawing on scholars who note the possibility that contemporary capitalism has generated three rather than two classes (Bernstein, 2008; Gibbon & Neocosmos, 1985; Harriss-White, 2008), the paper elaborates the ways in which the nature of class coalitions *and* class conflicts (Przeworski, 1985) shapes access to social protections. While the paper's overall argument is that class politics is critical to the implementation of social protections, it specifically examines to the crucial role of class collaborations and conflicts for poor people to access social protections. Where poor people are subjected to exclusionary class coalitions, their ability to access social protection ~~programs~~ are restricted. On the other hand, where they are embedded in inclusive coalitions with other social classes, they are more successful in gaining access.

2. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act: foregrounding class politics

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was legislated in September 2005 by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government subject to significant pressure by its Left-leaning allies. The Act represented a constitutional commitment on the part of the Indian state to guarantee one hundred days of employment 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 spends over US$ 8 billion annually on this ~~program~~, nearly a third of the World Bank's annual outlay, an investment that has continued even under a rightwing government not particularly known for state support of social protection. As a state-owned, well-resourced, demand-driven and rights-based ~~program~~, the MGNREGA represents a bold attempt anywhere in the world to affect a transformative social protection policy.

The fundamental unit of the MGNREGA is the application ('demand' in the official parlance) for work made by an applicant. Employment on an MGNREGA project usually entails teams of ten-to-twenty workers carrying out earthworks for the construction of small dams, 'excavating' ponds, afforestation activities, laying non-tarred laterite roads, and the like for about ten-to-twelve days. These works are usually carried out on public land, but limited works on farms of small and marginal farmers- those who deploy their own household labour for agricultural purposes- 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 break from all previous public works ~~programs~~, 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 ~~program~~ provides rural labourers the opportunities to demand work during the cropping season and allows workers to engage with the ~~program~~ at higher wage rates. At the same time, this very provision fuels fears among farmers that their long-term interests are under considerable siege by an unsympathetic regime. Farmers fear that the ~~program~~, by attracting labourers, will fuel shortages in the workforce, increasing costs and reduce agricultural surpluses.

Understandably, 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 (Banerjee & Saha, 2010; Berg, Bhattacharyya, Durgam, & Ramachandra, 2012; Carswell & de Neve, 2014; Drèze & Oldiges, 2011; Dutta, 2012; Imbert et al., 2011; Khera, 2011; Pankaj & Tankha, 2010; Roy, 2014; Sudarshan, Bhattacharya, & Fernandez, 2010). Others have highlighted the impediments to the implementation of the policy, particularly drawing attention to the rampant corruption that plagues it (Adhikari & Bhatia, 2010; Bhatia & Dreze, 2006; Vanaik & Siddhartha, 2008). Banerjee (2012) locates the MGNREGA in the discourse of the right to work and human rights more generally. Some writers sympathetic to the MGNREGA have upheld the ~~program~~ as an example of the way in which neoliberalism has been contained in India (Jenkins & Manor, 2017; Shah, 2008). More critical authors have situated the MGNREGA within the 'neoliberal turn' of the Indian state (Roy, 2018; Vasavi, 2012). Others have sought to theorise the ~~program~~ as integral to the fabric of postcolonial capitalism (Chatterjee, 2008; drawing on Sanyal, 2007).

Recent analysts of the program have forced a consideration of the class dimensions of the MGNREGA. Pattenden's (2015) class-relational approach to the study of the MGNREGA directs attention to the 'class-based conflicts that shape' the program (Pattenden, 2015, p. xx). He reminds us that the program is shaped by and shapes existing antagonisms between classes, making its implementation a highly contentious matter. Indeed, numerous scholars suggest that the MGNREGA reduces the labouring classes' dependence on their employers (Roy, 2014), results in upward pressure on wages (Berg et al., 2012; Carswell & de Neve, 2014; Dreze & Khera, 2011; Jakimow, 2014; Khera, 2011; Reddy, 2013) and provides a rallying point for workers (Khera & Nayak, 2008; Pankaj & Tankha, 2010; Shah & Mehta, 2008).

This paper builds on the recent insights offered by the class politics approach advanced by Pattenden (2015). However, it departs from conceptualising class politics as a binary contest between the labour-hiring bourgeoisie and the labouring proletariat. Rather it develops an account of class relations by elaborating *both* class conflict *and* class collaboration. Building upon this interlocked elaboration of class politics, the paper then directs attention to the balance of power between different classes. It examines the ways in power is contested between different classes and suggests that the balance of power is not necessarily concentrated among the dominant classes. Here, the paper builds on Pattenden (2011), Jeffrey and Lerche (2000), and Véron et al. (2003) to highlight the competition between different classes over the polity of the Panchayats under study. The paper makes particular note of the competition over the polity between the established dominant classes and the emergent challenging classes and the ways in which such competition interacts with class relations to shape social protection.

3. Analytical and empirical methodology

The approach in this paper emphasises the importance of relations between social classes. Class is defined as '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). A key variable shaping the formation of class is the social relations between those who hire out their labour for agricultural work and those who hire in such labour (Patnaik, 1976). The second variable of interest is the class basis of political authority at the local level (Mendelsohn, 1993; Lerche, 1996). Together, these two approaches allow me to develop an account of the ways in which class relations influence social policies such as the MGNREGA.

3.1. Class categories

A consideration of classes under conditions of actually-existing capitalism leads students to eschew a polarised model of the class structure in which the dominant classes and the labouring classes

supposedly engage in a direct confrontation with one another. Bernstein (1996, 2010) suggests, for instance, that the spread of capitalist relations in agriculture have created three, rather than two, broad social classes with significant empirical overlaps, rather than neat distinctions, between them. In between the labour-hiring capitalist farmers and the labour-selling classes lies the category of the 'petty commodity producers', or those who produce largely through household labour (Gibbons and Neocosmos, 1985, see also Harriss-White, 2008). Such 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.

Utsa Patnaik (1986) calls for a consideration of 'net' labour exploitation as a criterion for measuring class. Her formulation is in turn criticised by Sumit Guha (1982) for the assumption of identical labour days. Complicating the straightforward assumptions that class is determined by access to material resources or control over the exploitation of labour, scholars such as Harriss (2012), Harriss-White (2003), Picherit (2012), and Guru (2005) insist that caste and class be analysed conjointly in any analysis of social relations in the Indian context. Based on this literature, the categorisation of classes adopted in this paper rests on two variables: a). Labour and b). Caste.

3.1.1. Labour. Ramachandran (2011) develops a broad criteria for the identification of classes in the Indian countryside. Based on this criteria, he suggests that there are three broad social categories: the rich landlords and capitalist farmers; the peasantry; and manual workers. Ramachandran is careful to note that these are categories, not classes, and proceeds to lay out the *class differences within these categories* which impinges upon the social relations of production in the Indian countryside.

In Ramchandran's formulation, the landlords and capitalist farmers control the best land and have access to assured surpluses. Members of neither class engage in any agricultural operations themselves but either lease out their land to tenants (as landlords do) or exclusively hire labour to do so (as capitalist farmers do). Ramachandran notes that landlords provide the main pillar of the class power of the ruling classes, but then goes on to add that the wealthier among the capitalist farmers 'are also entrenched in positions of social and political dominance' (Ramachandran, 2011, p. 59).

The social category of the peasantry is similarly differentiated into socio-economic classes. Based on a range of criteria, Ramachandran (2011) classifies the peasantry as rich, middle and poor. Such a differentiation indicates that, although all classes of peasants deploy their own labour on their farms and produce for (and are subjugated by) the capitalist market, they are far from homogenous. Their market orientation makes peasants inherently capitalist, even if they may not all benefit uniformly from their access to such markets. Rich peasants supplement their own labour by hiring *in* labour: while they may participate in agricultural operations on their own farms, they do not hire out their labour. Poor peasants hire *out* their labour in addition to farming their own plots of land so that they could meet their subsistence needs: they do not hire in labour. Middle peasants hire in as well as hire out their labour in addition to deploying their own labour on their farms: 'upper' middle peasants tend to hire in more than they hire out, while 'lower' middle peasants tend to hire out more than they hire in.[1]

The third social category to which Ramachandran directs our attention, which he analyses as a class, is the one he calls manual workers. His use of the term stems from the empirically-informed perspective that 'it is no longer possible (nor particularly helpful) to separate a *class* of non-agricultural workers from the larger pool of manual workers- that is, to recognize rural farm and non-farm workers as discrete categories- in most villages' (Ramachandran, 2011, p. 62). Manual workers are engaged in a diversity of non-agricultural occupations, such as animal husbandry, petty vending, domestic work and miscellaneous low-remuneration jobs in the private sector. Tailors, butchers, porters and venders with precarious livelihoods could well be included in the category of manual workers. A large number of 'manual workers' find temporary, often seasonal, employment on farms in rural northwestern India as well as, increasingly, in construction sites and brick kilns across the

country. Ramachandran notes presciently that manual labourer tends to be the most caste-heterogeneous class in the Indian countryside.

3.1.2. Caste. Ramachandran's formulation reminds us that caste remains a crucial marker of exploitation, discrimination and marginalisation in contemporary India. However, he continues to avoid caste as an analytic category. If class refers to the social relations of production between those who hire out their labour and those who hire in labour, then analysts ignore caste at their own peril. Not only is caste a basis of shaping ideas of labour and status in the Indian context (Guru, 2006; Teltumbde, 2001), labour markets continue to be segmented along caste lines (Ahmed, 1998; Parry, 1999). Not for nothing has caste been described as 'enclosed' (Ambedkar, 1917) or 'congealed' (Lohia, 1964) class. Caste endogamy remains widely prevalent, contributing to its enclosure and congealment (Desai et al., 2010). Caste shapes not only access to social and symbolic resources but also material resources. Caste solidarities are common, as is discrimination on the basis of caste (Thorat & Newman, 2012). Violence to suppress collective claims by oppressed castes or to protect the honour of privileged caste women from purported interlopers of 'low castes' is common.

Caste status and labour exploitation interpenetrate in employers' strategies. Marxists, however, continue to baulk at the idea of incorporating caste into any analysis of class. Even as erudite a scholar as Ramachandran, who observes that 'the system of socio-economic class in rural India does not exist independently of caste discrimination and other forms of sectional deprivation' steers clear of analytically incorporating caste in his analysis. Noting this unfortunate tendency in Marxist analysis of the political sociology of class, Barbara Harriss-White and Nandini Gooptu remind us that, if 'caste, as a social institution, continues to configure the labour market and determine relations between labour and capital, then it would be too restrictive an interpretation to exclude "caste" politics, outside the work place, as being irrelevant to the politics of labour' (Gooptu & Harriss-White, 2001, p. 101). Because experiences of labour rest very significantly on caste status, to exclude caste from an analysis of class is a blunder. If contentions between classes are preceded by contentions *over* class, then scholars must be sensitive to the ways in which caste identities inflect class identities. More recently, Alpa Shah and Jens Lerche (2018) have urged us to reflect on the ways in which caste and tribe intersect with class to produce 'conjugated oppression' (Bourgois, 1988) in India.

The combination of sociological practice and the bureaucratisation of social identities have produced three broad clusters of castes: the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes; the Other Backward Classes; and the General Castes. The General Castes refer to the self-styled high castes, (Savarnas among the Hindus and Ashraf among the Muslims) who consider themselves at the apex of a hierarchical caste system. Members of such high status high caste communities regard themselves as socially and ritually superior to others. In practice, they constitute some of the most privileged people in the country, in terms of wealth (Vakulabharanam & Motiram, 2012) and occupation (Deshpande, 2011). At the other end of the caste spectrum are the low status, 'untouchable' communities designated as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), whom political activists refer to as Dalits and Adivasis respectively. Members of these castes are condemned by others as 'untouchable' and 'primitive'. Dalits and Adivasis face widespread social discrimination with debilitating consequences for the wealth and occupations available to them (Gang et al., 2008; Guru, 2005; Mosse, 2018; Teltumbde, 2018). The Other Backward Classes (OBCs), represent a more amorphous category, classified as they are by different States as 'low' on the caste hierarchy but not 'untouchable'. Members of communities classified as 'Other Backward Class' tend to be better-off than members of 'untouchable' communities but worse off than those of privileged communities (Deshpande & Ramachandra, 2014).

3.1.3. A three-fold categorisation. In this paper, labour and caste are taken to co-constitute class. Based on the interaction of the two variables, I use a three-fold classification developed in Roy (2018) and depicted in Figure 1. The three classes discussed in this paper are:

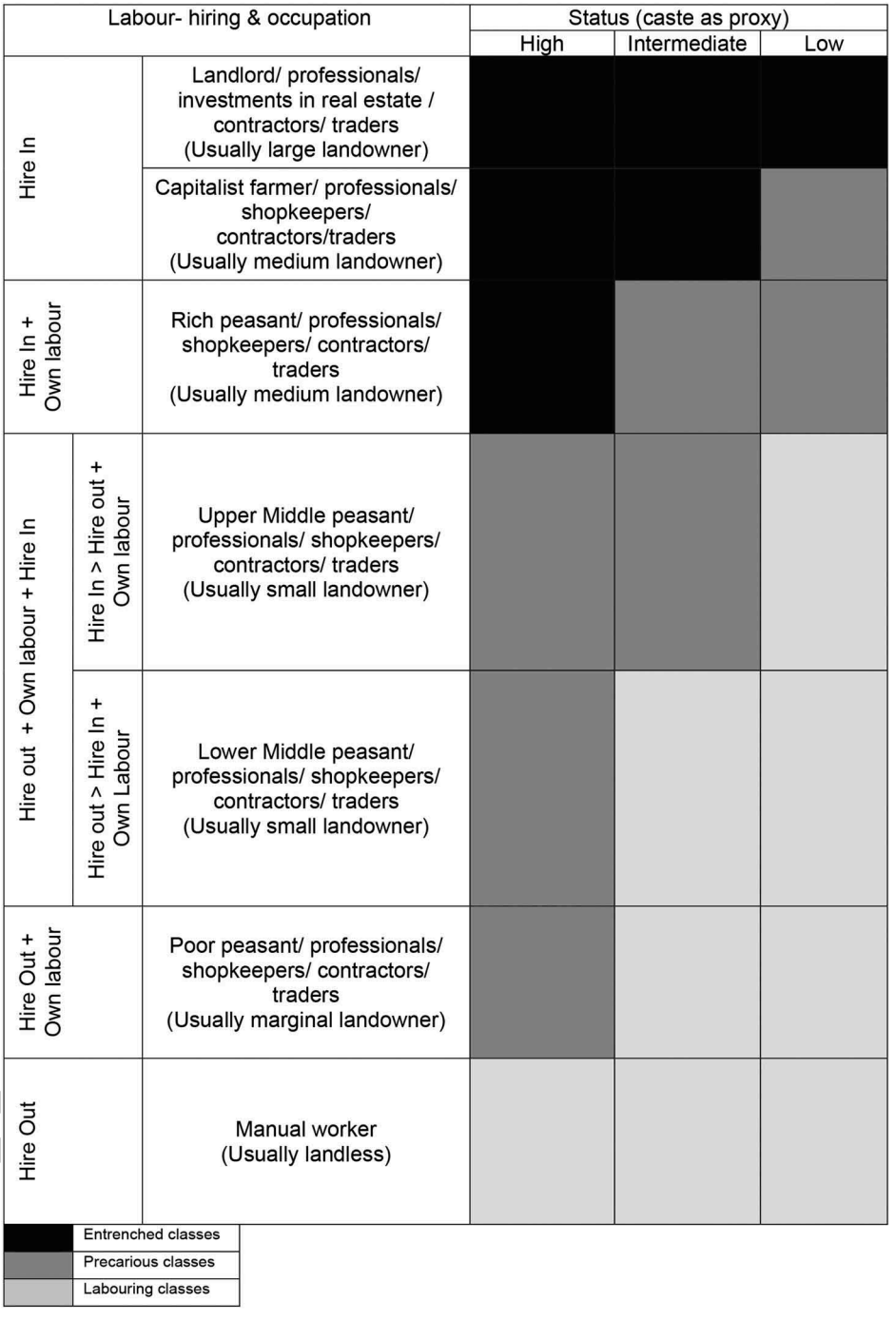

Figure 1. Scheme for categorisation of social class.

(1) Entrenched classes: The classes at the apex of the regional and/or national political economy. Their control over the economy enables them to hire and discipline labour to their advantage. 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 classes typically comprise of high-status, labour-hiring families who are able to capitalise on their economic and social resources in order to sustain their position at the apex of the agrarian hierarchy. 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 classes. The entrenched classes 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' (Pattenden, 2015) 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.

(2) Precarious classes: The classes at 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 labour, but they are in no position to discipline labour to their own advantage: moreover, they may find themselves as hiring out their labour as well. Their position in the political economy is precarious, dependent on the electoral success of politicians who represent their interests. Precarious classes typically comprise of intermediate-status rich and middle peasant families who deploy a combination of labour strategies (hire in labour, hire out labour and exploit their own or family labour) to reproduce themselves. However, high status middle and poor peasants are also categorised as precarious classes, as are 'low status' capitalist farmers and rich peasants who may exclusively hire in labour. They approximate the category of the petty commodity producers (PCP) (Gibbon & Neocosmos, 1985). Nevertheless, their socio-economic position remains vulnerable, hence the appellation of 'precarious classes' is applied to them.

(3) Labouring classes: The classes at the bottom of the regional and/or national political economy. They have no control over the economy, except as labourers 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 labour if they are to survive. Their social resources are often inadequate for them to raise their economic status. Of course, the labouring classes typically comprise of manual workers of all status groups. In addition poor and middle peasants of intermediate and low status families are also categorised as 'labouring classes'. They approximate the category of the 'classes of labour': 'the world's producers who depend-directly or indirectly- on the sale of their labour power for their own daily reprorduction' (Panitch & Leys, 2001, p. 9). However, where Bernstein suggests that the classes of labour are released from pre-capitalist social relationships (Bernstein, 2010, p. 111), I find that notions of village life, communal identities and collective obligations remain important to their social lives. Hence, I use the term 'laboring classes'.

On the one extreme, landlords and capitalist farmers of high status castes are categorised as 'entrenched classes', to refer to their entrenched economic and social position. Likewise, landlords and capitalist farmers of intermediate status castes who exclusively hire in labour are also categorised entrenched classes. High status rich peasants who hire in labour as well might exploit their own labour are also categorised as entrenched classes. At the other extreme, manual workers who hire out labour are categorised as labouring classes, to highlight the need for them to sell their labour in order to reproduce themselves. Intermediate and low status poor peasants and lower middle who combine hiring out of labour with exploitation of own labour are also classified as labouring classes, as are low status middle peasants. In between these extremes lie the precarious classes, who typically combine petty commodity production with an intermediate status in the caste hierarchy.

3.2. Study-setting and methods

The study on which this paper is based was conducted in two adjacent Gram Panchayats from the same administrative block in two eastern Indian States of Bihar and West Bengal. Two wards were selected within three kilometres of one another in the Bhargama block of Bihar's Araria district, while another two wards were selected within five kilometres of one another in the Old Maldah block of West Bengal's Maldah district. A brief profile of the different social classes in the four locations are presented in Table 1 while a detailed discussion of the basis on which the locations were selected may be found in Roy (2018).

Table 1 focuses on three key elements of access to the MGNREGA by the labouring classes in the study localities. In Column 4, I present data on the availability of the 'job card' on the basis of which members of a household can claim employment. In Column 5, I present data on the households whose members reported ever applying for work during the life of the ~~program~~. In Column 6, I present data on the households whose members reported receiving employment at any point of time during the life of the ~~program~~. All households reported having worked for about 20–25 days since the inception of the ~~program~~ in their localities. As it happens, respondents from every single household interviewed knew about the ~~program~~ and its key features.

The data suggest that Rahimpur's labouring classes appear to have been relatively successful in obtaining work under this ~~program~~. In Ditya, although the labouring classes were able to receive job cards, they were not as successful in obtaining employment. Sargana's labouring classes, though they received fewer job cards, appeared to have been more successful than their counterparts in Ditya but less so than the ones in Rahimpur. The labouring classes in Roshanar Ward 5 were unable to even obtain job cards, much less employment in the ~~program~~. Evidently, labouring classes in Ditya and Roshanar Ward 5 were less successful than those in either Rahimpur or Sargana Ward 1.

A straightforward class-analytic explanation of such variations might be that labouring classes were stronger in Rahimpur and Sargana Ward 1 and weaker in Ditya and Roshanar Ward 5. However, subsequent fieldwork in these wards did not suggest significant differences in the organisational abilities of the labouring classes across the four sites. But it did compel me to appreciate the nuanced and entangled webs of coalitions and conflicts that animated of the class politics in these wards. Fieldwork included ethnographic 'hanging out' (Clifford, 1997, p. 56) with members of different classes in informal settings in the village and outside it, quasi-structured interviews with elected and unelected leaders as well as with the local officers and bureaucrats responsible for executing the ~~program~~, and discussions with workers on MGNREGA projects. These explorations revealed the combination of ways in which the relations of production interacted with the relations of distribution in each ward.

The polities of both Ditya and Roshanar Ward 5 were effectively under the control of one or the other labour-hiring class. In Ditya, the precarious classes were in control of the policy and had managed to subdue the entrenched classes. But in Roshanar Ward 5, the locality's precarious classes were incorporated into patronage networks instituted by supra-local entrenched classes. The labouring classes found themselves in a conflictual relationship vis-a-vis both the labour-hiring classes. On the other hand, both Rahimpur and Sargana Ward 1 were characterised by bitter tussles over the control of the polity, with no one class being successful in marginalising the others from the affairs of the polity. But class relations were differently configured in the two wards. In Rahimpur, the entrenched classes continued to be politically influential and forged political coalitions with the labouring classes to preserve this influence and undermine the emerging clout of the precarious classes. 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 classes. In both these localities, the labouring classes were embedded in class collaborations with either of the labour-hiring classes against the other. Thus, two broad patterns emerge from the fieldwork. The first pattern points to *exclusionary class coalitions* marked by conflict between the labouring classes and the labour-hiring classes. The second pattern points to *inclusive class coalitions* marked by collaboration between the labouring classes and either of the labour-hiring classes. While poor people's access to social protection in the

villages witnessing class conflict was severely inhibited, such access improved considerably in the villages characterised by class collaboration.

4. Exclusionary class coalitions

Much of the literature on class politics and social protections relate the strength of working class mobilisation to the establishment of progressive social policy and higher welfare outcomes (Hibbs, 1977; 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 Heller (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. Herring and Edwards (1983) too establish a link between working class mobilisation and the institution of progressive social policy in Maharasthra.

In this vein, observers have emphasised the successful ways in which members of dominant classes prevent the labouring classes from accessing social protection (Breman, 1990; Guérin & Venkatasubramanian, 2009; Jeffrey & Lerche, 2000) when the latter are relatively weaker than the former, as they are in many cases. In the context of the MGNREGA, commentators have illustrated the ways in which dominant classes disincentivize work on the MGNREGA (Kumbhar, 2013), delay implementation (Gill et al., 2013), threaten labourers seeking work with exclusion from other social protections (Jakimow, 2014), divert works illegally to improve their own properties (Reddy, 2013; Shah & Mehta, 2008) and use a variety of corrupt practices to appropriate MGNREGA resources for private gains (Pattenden, 2011a).

4.1. Roshanar: labouring classes face a class coalition led by entrenched classes

Roshanar Ward 5, in Bihar's Araria district, typifies one way in which the labouring classes are posited in a conflictual relation with the labour-hiring classes. Capitalist farmers who upheld family values, propagated clean-caste practices and derived their income from market exchange of their agricultural produce recognised the area's landlords as their guardians because of the financial and social support they received. Middle and poor peasants of both communities constituted the locality's precarious classes. The entrenched classes appropriated to themselves the role of guardians for the locality's rich and middle peasants who they helped from time to time. Manual labourers from all communities made up Roshanar's labouring classes. The landlords, farmers and peasants sought to isolate the undeserving labourers deemed unworthy of their support from the deserving labourers who they considered helping. The others were absorbed in a paternalistic framework marked by shared solidarities between the entrenched and the precarious classes against the labouring poor.

The entrenched classes and the precarious classes both recruited agricultural labourers to work their fields. Both classes relied on hired labour for their agricultural operations, although the entrenched classes were more dependent on them than the precarious classes were. Agriculture remained the major source of income for them. The precarious classes did not depend as much on agricultural labour, since they deployed their own household labour where necessary. They nevertheless supported the entrenched classes in their claims on the labours of the working classes as many among them were tenants of the locality's entrenched classes. The class compact between the entrenched classes and the precarious classes was relatively coherent. The result was a systematic suppression of agricultural labourers across the ward.

The MGNREGA was introduced in Roshanar in the context of such a class coalition between the entrenched and precarious classes against the labouring classes. The entrenched classes considered

the MGNREGA as a ~~program~~ that would disrupt the availability of labour to their agricultural operations. The precarious classes were no less hostile to the ~~program~~, and feared it as a conspiracy by India's corporate lobbies to destroy Indian agriculture. They instructed the para-professional responsible for the implementation of the program to not publicise it too much, not release application forms, not issue job cards and certainly to not provide work. Their remarkable success is evident from the fact that, although labouring classes in Roshanar had heard of the MGNREGA and wanted to work on it, not one had been able to even register for the program.

4.2. Ditya: labouring classes face a class coalition led by precarious classes

West Bengal's Ditya ward (Maldah district) typifies the second way in which the labouring classes were embroiled in class conflict with the labour-hiring classes. The labour-hiring peasants of the Desiya community constituted the locality's precarious classes. Middle and poor peasants of the Saotal community as well as the manual workers of all communities made up Ditya's labouring classes. Manual workers perceived labour-hiring peasants, artisan and entrepreneurs- precarious though their surplus and status were- as their exploiters. Both the labour-hiring classes recruited farm hands to work their fields. The entrenched classes were, however, less dependent on agricultural labourers than were the precarious classes. Not only were their numbers fast depleting, but their agricultural holdings were limited and they drew substantial portions of their household incomes from salaries in the public sector, as teachers and bureaucrats. The precarious classes, on the other hand, relied overwhelmingly on agriculture and on the repression of agricultural wages to enhance their own profits. The contradictions between the precarious classes and the labouring classes was palpable.

Ditya's entrenched classes had witnessed a dilution of their social and economic resources due to the land liberation struggles led by the precarious classes. Their dominance in the locality was subsequently curbed as a result of the ascension of the CPI(M) and the precarious classes who supported the party. The precarious classes, despite their vulnerable economic surpluses and insecure caste status, dominated Ditya's politics. As affiliates of the CPI(M), they controlled the Panchayat since the introduction of the Gram Panchayat elections in 1978. Although CPI(M) vote shares declined after 2003, the Congress Party, which was witnessing a resurgence in Ditya was also under the control of the precarious classes. The entrenched classes acquiesced with the leadership of the precarious classes in Ditya.

Into this scenario, the MGNREGA was launched in 2007. The CPI(M)-affiliated precarious classes controlled the Gram Panchayat were wary of the program from its inception. Initially, they seem to even have welcomed its implementation as a means of demonstrating their own pro-poor credentials. Precarious class politicians disseminated information about the program and even distributed job cards, the administrative device which recorded individuals' demands for and receipt of employment under the program. But once they realised that the program was not targeted to a specific section of the population but one to which could be accessed by anyone willing to perform manual labour, their enthusiasm evaporated. Both labour-hiring classes concurred that the MGNREGA would hurt agricultural profits and destroy Ditya's farming community. They did everything possible to reject applications, pretend that work did not exist, and invent bureaucratic obstacles to providing work. The result of their machinations was that only one-sixth of the total job cardholders in Ditya were able to obtain any kind of employment. Those that did found their payments frequently delayed, leading to further lack of interest among the labouring classes for the program.

4.3. Exclusionary class coalitions and the failure of the labouring classes in accessing MGNREGA

The findings from the fieldwork outlined above resonate with the scholarship that suggests the antagonisms surroundings the MGNREGA. The scheme increases wages (Azam, 2011; Berg et al., 2012; Dreze & Khera, 2017; Imbert & Papp, 2012; Muralidharan et al., 2016), especially women's

wages (Azam, 2012; Gill et al., 2013; Reddy, 2013). Heightened wage levels are associated with enhancing respect from farmers (Jakimow, 2014), reduced working hours (Carswell & de Neve, 2014) and decreased harassment of women by their employers (Garikapat, 2009). Labourers approach dominant classes for work and payments less often, thereby diminishing the frequency of personalised interactions with more powerful people (Pattenden, 2017): such reduced interactions are particularly significant for single women (Khera & Nayak, 2012). There is some evidence to suggest that the scheme has fomented the organisation of labouring classes to improve its implementation despite bureaucratic resistance (Khera & Nayak, 2008; Pankaj & Tankha, 2010; Reddy, 2013; Shah & Mehta, 2008).

The mere possibility that the MGNREGA might improve the condition of the labouring poor have, unsurprisingly, led dominant classes resist its implementation by consolidating exclusionary class coalitions wherever possible. In Roshanar, members of the entrenched classes, supported as they were by the locality's precarious classes, allied to sabotage the ~~program~~ altogether. They were so successful that not one of the labouring classes was even able to register for the program. In Ditya, members of the precarious classes scrambled to prevent their labourers from seeking employment under the MGNREGA. While they were not as successful as the dominant classes were in Roshanar, they did manage to limit labouring classes' access to the scheme.

5. Inclusive class coalitions

That exclusionary class coalitions perpetrated by the dominant classes prevents the poor from accessing social protections is evident from the two study locations discussed earlier and resonates with the broader literature cited above. The evidence from these two villages thus supports the broader consensus that, where labouring classes find themselves excluded from class coalitions formed by dominant classes, they are less likely to be able to access social protections.

Nevertheless, the data presented in Table 1 suggest that labouring classes were relatively more successful at accessing social protections in study localities Rahimpur and Sargana Ward 1. What explains their relative success at accessing social protections in these two wards? A response to this question leads us to take Przeworski's (1985) suggestion about the analytic importance of class coalitions to accessing social protection. In a similar vein, Ansell and Samuels (2014) call attention to the *competition* between autocratic elites and middle classes, arising out of the latter challenging the former. Such competition often leads to either of these two classes to align with working classes to undermine the influence of the other. Their accounts remind us of the ways in which labouring classes may be embedded in class coalitions with either the entrenched or the precarious classes that help them access public services including social protections. Following these leads, the remainder of this section highlights the ways in conflict and competition between classes entwines with class collaborations to enable poor people to access social protections.

5.1. Rahimpur: entrenched classes collaborate with labouring classes against the precarious classes

Rahimpur ward in West Bengal's Maldah district exemplifies one way in which the labouring classes were embedded in class collaborations with one of the labour-hiring classes. Rahimpur's landlords, capitalist farmers and rich peasants of the Sheikh community constituted the locality's entrenched classes. Middle and poor peasants of the Sheikh community, and rich peasants from the Shershabadiya and Bind/Napit communities comprised Rahimpur's precarious classes. Manual labourers of all communities, alongside poor peasants of the Shershabadiya and Bind/Napit communities, made up the labouring classes. Conflict and collaboration between Rahimpur's different classes were intertwined. Tensions marred the relationship between the labour-hiring peasants and the entrenched landlords/capitalist farmers. Rahimpur's entrenched classes rented their agricultural properties to precarious class sharecroppers and tenants, from whom they derived ground rents. Issues of timing and modality of paying the rent often soured relationships. Conflictual relations also

marked the relations between the locality's labour-hiring peasants and the labouring poor. A particularly sore point between the precarious class and the labouring classes was the timely payment of wages. As a consequence, labourers frequently turned to members of the entrenched classes for help to overcome the shortages caused by their wage shortfalls.

Although both the labour-hiring classes – the entrenched classes and the precarious classes- recruited workers on their fields, the entrenched classes' dependence on farm hands was much less than that of the precarious classes. The entrenched classes had diversified their sources of income: agricultural incomes constituted only a small (and declining) proportion of their household incomes, and supplemented incomes from salaries, medical practice, involvement in actuarial activities, contracting labour, and rents from the transportation sector. The precarious classes, however, remained dependent on agricultural incomes and relied on the repression of workers' wages to enhance their own profits. The labouring classes found themselves in far greater conflict with the precarious classes than they did vis-à-vis the entrenched classes, because of the former's inability to meet their demands for wages.

Furthermore, Rahimpur's labour-hiring classes were deeply divided and fiercely opposed one another. The entrenched classes were scions of the established landed gentry, whose landed privileges dated back to the Permanent Settlement of the nineteenth century. They typically aligned with the Congress Party. The precarious classes, on the other hand, had emerged in the wake of the land liberation struggles of the 1960s, and had been beneficiaries of the tenancy reform policies of the left front government between 1977 and 1983. They affiliated with the CPI(M).

The entrenched classes effectively incorporated the labouring classes into a class collaboration against the precarious classes. To be sure, the labouring classes did not consistently support the entrenched classes: the results of successive Panchayat elections revealed that entrenched classes and precarious classes alternated in their control over the local government, indicating the fickleness of the labouring classes' support to the entrenched classes. Nevertheless, the entrenched classes were able to establish themselves as 'guardians' of the labouring classes, as people who cared for and were concerned about the poor. They extended loans and cash advances to labouring class households without rigorously following up. These the precarious classes, with their limited surpluses, could not afford.

The MGNREGA was introduced in Rahimpur during 2007 against the backdrop of this 'incorporative class coalition' in which the entrenched classes coopted the labouring classes against the precarious classes. The Congress-affiliated entrenched classes who controlled the Gram Panchayat perceived the ~~program~~ as a means of consolidating political and electoral support from the labouring classes. By implementing the ~~program~~, they could demonstrate that they were good and reliable 'guardians' who cared for and were concerned about the fate of the poor, unlike the precarious classes. This they could do without hurting their own class interests, since were not as dependent on hiring in labour as members of the precarious classes were. They hoped that by regulating the seasonality of the MGNREGA, they might be able to exacerbate the shortages of labour required by the small and medium farmers, squeezing their surpluses even more. The implementation of the ~~program~~ might even induce further demands for increasing wages as well, adversely impacting the locality's precarious classes. Of course, demands for higher wages would also affect the entrenched classes too, but given their economic surpluses and diverse sources of income, they would be better able to absorb these costs than the precarious classes would. The political advantages of the MGNREGA far outweighed the costs. Undoubtedly, the MGNREGA was warmly welcomed by Rahimpur's workers. During my interviews with workers, I was told about its manifold benefits, some of which I have documented elsewhere (Roy, 2014). But it should be clear that the entrenched classes perceived the ~~program~~ fundamentally as a means of undermining the growing political influence of the precarious elites and arrest the dilution of their own privileges.

Labourers working under the MGNREGA unhesitatingly credited the ward's entrenched class politicians, whom they called their *garjians*, for their employment under the program. Such politicians and their associated political fixers were willing to undertake the necessary leg work for it. They collected applications for employment, organised it so that Panchayat functionaries could easily process

them. Works were sometimes organised on private properties belonging to the entrenched classes: these included preparing the farmlands for sowing excavating and cleaning ponds, and even harvesting crops. On paper, the MGNREGA allowed such works on the properties of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and households identified as living 'below the poverty line' (BPL). Since most of the entrenched classes had managed to get themselves identified as BPL, they were not, in letter at least, flouting MGNREGA regulations. The labouring classes were aware of the irregularities attending to the program, and openly talked about them with one another in the presence of the entrenched classes. Nevertheless, as far as they were concerned, they were paid full wages in a timely manner without them having to follow up, and agreed that the level of effort was commensurate with the wages paid.

5.2. Sargana: precarious classes align with labouring classes against the entrenched classes

Sargana Ward 1 in Araria district, Bihar exemplifies the second way in which the labouring classes were embedded in class coalitions with one of the labour-hiring classes. The landlords, capitalist farmers and rich peasants of the locality's Rajput and Kayasth communities made up its entrenched classes. Middle and poor peasants of these communities, as well as the rich and middle peasants of the Yadav, Kevat and Dusadh communities, reviled as they were as 'low' caste or 'untouchable', comprised Sargana's precarious classes. As did labour-hiring professionals of the Dhobhi, Musahar and Dusadh communities, all stigmatised as 'untouchable'. Labourers from all communities, poor peasants of the Yadav and Kevat communities, and poor and middle peasants of the Dhobhi, Musahar and Dusadh communities made up the locality's labouring classes.

Contentious and collaborative subjectivities wove together to mark the relations between Sargana's different social classes. Where conflict marred the social transactions between the entrenched classes and the precarious classes, and between the entrenched classes and the labouring poor, coalitions were not uncommon. Sargana's entrenched classes, the landlords and capitalist farmers of the Kayasth and Rajpur communities, rented their agricultural properties to precarious class sharecroppers and tenants of the Yadav, Koeri and Kevat communities. Contentions over the timing and modality of paying rents often embittered relationships between the two.

Sargana ward 1's labour-hiring classes were thus embroiled in a conflictual relationship with one another. The entrenched classes descended from the landed gentry which had acquired enormous properties and prestige under the aegis of the Permanent Settlement. They usually aligned with the Congress Party, although they were increasingly attracted to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The precarious classes, on the other hand, benefitted from the land sales and transfers which the entrenched classes initiated in order to escape the land ceiling legislations. They leased in land from the entrenched classes, reminding the latter that the law was more favourable to tenants rather than landlords. And finally, some among the precarious classes had extended support to the landless labourers in the 'land liberation' struggles of the 1960s. Affiliated with such competing socialist-oriented parties as the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) or the Janata Dal (United)- JDU, their advent diluted the authority and privileges of the entrenched classes. While the precarious classes were unable to annihilate the entrenched classes, they did pose a formidable challenge to their dominance in the locality. Members of both classes reviled one another, and sought to collaborate with the labouring classes in order to tip the scales in their own favour.

The precarious classes proved more successful in forging a coalition with the labouring classes because they both shared the same resentment against the entrenched classes. They supported, though not without caution, the labouring classes in their disputes with the entrenched classes. Support included participating in delegations, convening meetings to discuss disputes, and offering advice to the labouring classes about judicial and legal procedures. It was not uncommon for the precarious classes to instigate the labouring classes to occupy agricultural properties held by the entrenched classes in violation of the land ceiling legislation.

This class coalition between the precarious classes and the labouring classes against the entrenched classes provided the backdrop to the introduction of the MGNREGA in 2008. The precarious classes

who then controlled the Gram Panchayat anticipated that their (albeit cautious) implementation of the ~~program~~ would consolidate support for them from the labouring classes. By popularising the program, they hoped to wean the labouring classes away from farm work for the entrenched classes. Of course, the MGNREGA would also attract labourers away from the farms of the precarious classes. But because the precarious classes were not averse to labouring on their own farms (unlike the entrenched classes), they were more likely to tide over the resultant shortages of labour. The political advantages of the MGNREGA far outweighed the costs. Thus, even as the labouring classes were effusive in their praise for the MGNREGA, it needs to be borne in mind that the ~~program~~ was implemented at all in the village because the precarious classes perceived it to be in their own interests and against those of the entrenched classes.

MGNREGA labourers did not hesitate to credit the locality's precarious class politicians for the implementation of the MGNREGA. Precarious class politicians and their fixers not only managed the paperwork on their behalf, but they even disseminated information about the program in the first place, urging people to register for the ~~program~~. MGNREGA bureaucrats told me about the high levels of excitement among precarious class politicians, whose fixers collected and filed MGNREGA applications in droves and instigated people to demand jobs from time to time. Works were often organised to lay brick and gravel roads and to repair and maintain community assets such as ponds. The entrenched classes had illegally encroached upon many such community assets, and the implementation of MGNREGA works proved a convenient device with which to mobilise public action against such encroachments. Precarious class politicians instigated labourers to remove such encroachments so that they could commence their works. The labouring classes gladly obliged.

Entrenched class bureaucrats associated with the MGNREGA, such as the Post Master (scion of a privileged caste landlord family and son of a BJP politician) who was then responsible for routing the wage payments to the workers did their best to halt the works and withhold wages to the workers. Precarious class politicians, such as the President of the Panchayat, would then intervene to pay a specified sum (about 60% of the wages) to the workers from their own pockets. When the bureaucrat finally released the payments after a few months, the President pocketed the entire amount for himself. These transactions were known to the labourers who reasoned that as long as they were paid in a timely way, they did not object to the President keeping a portion of the wages as rewards for his 'management' (labourers' words). Under the aegis of such a collaboration, over two-thirds of all job cardholders obtained work under the program, although as we have seen, the wages they received were not always as prescribed by the law.

5.3. Inclusive class coalitions and the success of the labouring classes in accessing MGNREGA

The findings from Rahimpur and Sargana direct attention to the ways in which class coalitions enable working classes to access the MGNREGA. With the obvious caveat that these findings pertain to poor people's access to social protections rather than the formation of welfare states per se, they resonate with Esping-Andersen's (1990) caution against a singular valourisation of working class-strength (see also Manow, 2009). As he reminds us:

> It is a historical fact that welfare state construction has depended on political coalition-building. The structure of class coalitions is much more decisive than are the power resources of any single class.
>
> Esping-Andersen (1990, p. 30)

As the fieldwork illustrates, class coalitions characterise all four of the fieldwork sites. However, they are inclusive of the labouring poor in only two of the four localities: it is in such localities that the labouring poor were relatively successful in accessing social protections. Even as the scheme enhanced labourers' wages and heightened their sense of respect, their allies among the dominant

classes were willing to tolerate these increases because of their potential to infringe upon the labour supply and status of their competitors. In Rahimpur, the entrenched classes fomented demands for MGNREGA work among the labourers during the agricultural season to wean them away from working on the farms of their emerging precarious class competitors. Sargana's precarious classes sympathised with and supported labouring classes in their demands for MGNREGA work because their claims for dignity would ultimately impinge upon the status of the self-styled high castes.

6. Class coalitions and social protection

Authors seeking to explain the factors for the access to social protection schemes by the labouring classes have emphasised variables such as their autonomy (Pattenden, 2011b), their organisation (Ahn, 2008), and their synergies with local governments (Heller, 1996). These are valuable contributions to the literature and significantly enhance our understanding of the efforts and attempts by the labouring classes in influencing the implementation of social protection programs in their own favour. However, these perspectives pay inadequate attention to *class coalitions* as key determinants of social policy outcomes.

Where the labouring classes are embedded in class coalitions with one of the labour-hiring classes against the other, as in Rahimpur and Sargana Ward 1, they are able to gain access to the MGNREGA. On the other hand, where they are excluded from such collaborations, or confront a coherent class coalition of the labour-hiring classes, as they do in Ditya and Roshanar Ward 5, their ability to access the MGNREGA is restricted.

Even as this paper highlights the role of inclusive class coalitions in enabling the labouring classes access social protections, it also alerts us to variations within such coalitions. Inclusive class coalitions permeate society in both Rahimpur and Sargana Ward 1. However, the class relations that produce them are very different (Roy, 2018). In Rahimpur, the MGNREGA is implicated in what I have elsewhere called an 'incorporative coalition' whose focus is to preserve the political power of the entrenched classes. On the other hand, in Sargana Ward 1, the MGNREGA conduces to what I have referred to as a 'populist coalition' whose focus is to undermine the political power of the entrenched classes, even if to consolidate the emergent position of the precarious classes. To be sure, neither scenario is revolutionary. The possibility of labouring classes establishing a classless society does not materialise in either scenario. Nevertheless, the implementation of the MGNREGA under the populist class coalition we see in Sargana Ward 1 is more likely to confront and address the underlying causes of poverty and inequality than it is under the incorporative coalition that marks Rahimpur.

Similarly, the paper also noted variations within exclusionary class coalitions. In Ditya, where the polity is controlled by the precarious classes, the labouring classes 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 such conflict. By contrast, in Roshanar Ward 5, where the entrenched classes control the polity in collaboration with the precarious classes, there is no question of applying for employment as the labouring classes have not even obtained job cards. The non-implementation of the MGNREGA in a polity controlled by entrenched classes appears to be much worse for the labouring classes than in a polity controlled by precarious classes.

This paper supports the scholarship that calls for a consideration of class politics in analysing the outcomes of social protection schemes. Departing from depictions of class politics as a straightforward conflict between such binary categories as bourgeoisie and proletariat, the paper elaborates the elaborate the ways in which the nature of class coalitions and class conflicts shapes access to social protections. Where poor people are subjected to exclusionary class coalitions, their ability to access social protection programs are restricted. On the other hand, where they are embedded in inclusive coalitions with other social classes, they are more successful in gaining access. As policy-makers and international development agencies seek to 'bring politics back in', appreciating and analysing the political role of class coalitions in the delivery of social protections becomes more urgent than ever before.

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Note

1. The 'upper' middle peasant class of Ramachandran's (2011) formulation appears to be proximate to Patnaik's (1986) 'middle peasant'. His 'lower' middle class seems to map on to the latter's 'small peasant'.

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