

The doublespeak of 'leave no one behind': implications for religious inequality in Hindu and Muslim pastoralist communities in India

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Abstract

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development pledged to 'leave no one behind'(LNOB). This article suggests that LNOB can be a form of 'doublespeak', susceptible to being used to mask ideologies and policies that worsen social, political and religious divisions. Despite stated commitments to LNOB, both Agenda 2030 and the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government of India adhere to narrow models of development that fail to address and exacerbate the growing problem of religious and other inequalities. It argues for reclaiming LNOB's radical potential by conceptualising it as an empty signifier that takes on meaning through the hegemonic struggle to articulate what 'left behind' means. It develops this argument through a case study of Hindu Nationalist developmental normativity and two mobile pastoralist communities in Gujarat: Hindu Rabaris and Muslim/Sufi Fakirani Jats. The empirical data show that in Gujarat's marketised neo-liberal land regime, mobile pastoralism as a livelihood is increasingly stressed and liable to be constructed as 'left behind'. Simultaneously, the Hindu and Sufi religious practices that shaped pastoralists' relationships with land and animals are being transformed and, framed by the BJP government's promotion of a Hindu nationalist religious identity, are shifting towards adoption of communal Hindu and Muslim identities that exacerbate social and religious inequalities, with particular effects on women. The paper concludes that LNOB has potential to tackle religious and other inequalities and generate a more radical and democratic politics of development if the range of demands that are met by this 'empty

signifier' is broadened to challenge the hegemonic representations that dominate, and religion's centrality in this struggle is recognised.

Introduction

In September 2015, the 193 UN member states agreed upon the global Agenda 2030 for sustainable development. Agenda 2030 includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with 169 targets, that replaced the earlier Millennium Development Goals (MDGs; 2000-2015). Its top-line ambition 'to leave no one behind' (LNOB) focuses on inequality as the key to sustainable development, which the MDGs had failed to address seriously (Fehling et al. 2013; Fukuda-Parr 2010). The Preamble to the Resolution on Agenda 2030 and the SDGs tells us:

We are resolved to free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet [...] As we embark on this collective journey, *we pledge that no one will be left behind* [italics added for emphasis] (United Nations 2015a: 1).

This commitment to LNOB has been heralded by some as a potentially globally game-changing shift in tackling both horizontal and vertical inequality that particularly affects those at the 'bottom' (Stuart et al. 2016; UNDP 2018; UNSDG 2022). States across the globe from all political persuasions have enthusiastically signed up to this commitment, giving the impression that leaders are united in a common aim to tackle extreme social and economic inequality within groups and nations as well as between wealthier and poorer countries (FCDO 2019; NITI Ayog 2020; United Nations 2015b). However, one barely has to scratch the surface to see that this is not the case (Burke and Rurup, 2019; Fukuda-Parr 2019; Fukuda-Parr and Hegstad 2019; Klasen and Fleurbaey 2018; MacNaughton 2017; Winkler and Satterthwaite 2017). LNOB may be a rallying call encouraging people to unite around a common cause to eradicate inequality, but its inherent vagueness lends itself to 'doublespeak' (a term linked to George Orwell's 'doublethink' in his 1949 novel 'Nineteen Eighty Four'): it can mean quite the opposite of what it implies in literal and radical terms, and it can be used by those genuinely committed to addressing extreme inequality as well as by those who appeal to it to give legitimacy to actions that go against doing so.

Ostensibly one of the most vigorous supporters of Agenda 2030 and its LNOB slogan has been the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India, elected in 2014 and again in 2019 (NITI Ayog 2017). The BJP endorsement of LNOB masks the worsening situation in India for both religious minorities and groups who fit poorly with state ambitions as to what the modern capitalist economy should look like (Khanum and Hussain 2022; Lall and Anand 2022; Shah et al. 2018; Tiwari et al. 2022). The BJP government is driven by a Hindu nationalist and populist agenda (Jaffrelot 2021), which has not only seen a narrowing of space for some religious minorities to experience equal citizenship, Muslims in particular, but also a sharpening of Hindu identities defined by the nationalist ideology that authentic Indian culture and religion is synonymous with Hinduism. This agenda, otherwise known as Hindutva (Jaffrelot 1996, 2021; Jaffrelot and Tilin 2017). Modi has been particularly skilful in aligning his Hindu Nationalist agenda with his vision for market-driven development, strategising to ‘consolidate a broader support base and stimulate economic growth and job creation by bolstering the corporate sector and recreating the middle and “neo-middle” classes’ (Chacko 2019: 377, 2023). Entrepreneurialism is promoted and, despite a populist ‘pro-poor’ political discourse, the state avoids stepping up to deliver tangible investment in schemes that address the poverty of the most marginalised (Chacko 2019; Jaffrelot 2021). Thus, those supporting the BJP and buying into its development discourse have been recast as what Chacko (2019: 402) has called ‘virtuous market citizens’, ‘circumscribed within “culturally” defined (Hindu nationalist) social frameworks and whose purpose is to strengthen the Hindu nation’ (see also Chacko 2023; Mawdsley 2023; Nartok 2023).

The first contribution of this paper is to elaborate how LNOB operates as a form of ‘doublespeak’ in India where it is used not only to promote market-driven development, at the expense of other livelihoods, but also a right-wing nationalist agenda underpinned by Hindu Nationalism, in ways that exacerbate inequality. In section one, we illustrate this through an examination of two mobile pastoralist communities in the State of Gujarat - Rabaris, who are Hindu, and Fakirani Jats, who are Sufi/Muslim. Although the marginalisation of mobile pastoralists is a product of longer-term dynamics relating to urbanisation, industrialisation and wider social change (Agrawal and Saberwal 1994; Dyer 2014; Köhler-Rollefson 2018), we are interested in how they

view/experience being 'left behind' where a model of 'development' predicated on the 'Gujarat model' (Simpson 2006), now refined and being rolled out across India by the BJP (Jaffrelot 2021), increasingly dispossesses them from the land, delegitimises this livelihood, and further constructs them as 'left behind'. Our aim is not to suggest a return to some romanticised past, but, instead, to draw attention to the need to reconstruct pastoralism and other marginalised livelihoods as modern and dignified, deserving of policies and representation.

The justification of the BJP's parochial agenda in terms of the commitment to LNOB is at odds with the positioning of the SDGs as 'important symbols of the value of the transformational capabilities of multilateralism...At a time of increasing nationalism and populism' (Carius et al. 2018: 2). Nonetheless, despite these high ambitions for the Agenda 2030 framework, established through wide-ranging processes of consultation (Dodds et al. 2016), in practice its LNOB agenda is narrowed by its embeddedness in a neo-liberal model of development (McClosky 2015; Weber 2017). This reflects member state interests where consensus on the focus of the Agenda 2030 framework was reached via a political process where some issues and voices were elevated, and others marginalised (Fukuda-Parr 2019; Pogge 2015). As such it has been criticised for failing to challenge the power differentials that exist between the richest and the poorest, both within and between countries, that give rise to vertical inequality, and the differences in wealth and income that reflect the current global economic system (MacNaughton 2017; Weber 2017).

This then begs the question: if the concept of LNOB is equally liable to elite capture by the narrow interests underpinning Agenda 2030 and its SDGs, and by populists such as Modi, is it simply too vague to be of any use in directing social change and ending all forms of inequality? In addressing this question, a second contribution of this paper is to argue for reclaiming the radical potential of the LNOB agenda. In section two, we argue that a comprehensive, political response to the Agenda 2030 call to end extreme inequality, illustrated not only through LNOB but also in SDG 10 ('reduced inequalities'), requires facilitating what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) have called the 'hegemonic struggle' (Dyer and Rajan 2021; Haustein and Tomalin 2021). While 'left-behind' might be seen as 'an inherently value laden term with too much normative baggage to be used fairly or neutrally...be it in assigning blame to a

perpetrator, valorising communities as “victims”, or condescending to them as nostalgic and backward’ (Wraight 2018: 7, 9), drawing on Laclau (1994), we will argue instead for seeing it as an ‘empty signifier’ (Haustein and Tomalin 2021). As such, it has neither a fixed meaning nor a privileged position of truth (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) but acquires meaning through the hegemonic struggle in which different actors engage to promote their interpretation. The radical potential of Agenda 2030, as a broad policy framework, to counter narrow populist visions and to eliminate inequality, depends on how it ‘manage[s] to mobilise a plurality of actors under a common demand or signifier...to enable a broad hegemonial struggle – a “radical democracy” – as to what symbolises and encapsulates this common demand’ (Haustein and Tomalin 2021: 298).

There is an emerging literature arguing that, to succeed, the SDG framework, including its LNOB commitment, not only has to be ‘localised’ (Steiner 2017) but also ‘contextualised’ in terms of the values, priorities and worldviews of communities, thereby shaping a struggle for LNOB that is not merely about catching people up to a dominant norm (Li-Ming Yap and Watene 2019; Sterling et al 2020; Tiwari et al 2021). We support this position, but also want to draw attention to the role of religion in people’s lives and how this shapes local responses to, and experiences of, LNOB. Religion is not only significantly under addressed within scholarship on localising and contextualising the SDGs, but within Agenda 2030 itself, where as Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler (2020: 47) note, ‘Religion is mentioned only in passing in the “leave no one behind” clause, as well as in SDG 10.2 on reducing inequalities, which recognises religion as a possible ground for discrimination’. Beyond this, there is complete silence on the topic of religion. A third contribution of the paper is, thus, to examine the implications of the remarkable absence across Agenda 2030 of any mention of religion as a relevant factor in people’s lives, including as a dimension of (rising) global inequalities; yet religion is at the same time being leveraged by populists, such as the BJP, to bolster an exclusivist nationalist agenda. We will argue that religion is an important factor to be considered/incorporated in the hegemonic struggle that the LNOB agenda should, in our view, be enabling. We return, in the conclusion, to the matter of a radical politics of development, and its potential to mobilise the LNOB call to address religious and other inequalities as well as the way

that non-materialist epistemologies and ontologies play a role in framing understandings of progress/development (Wilson 2017).

Constructs of being ‘left behind’ and pastoralist communities in Gujarat

The BJP was already an eager adopter of the idea of ‘left behind’ communities and people before the SDGs. Modi made use of it in the ‘no Indian left behind’ election slogan that propelled him to power in 2014, and thereafter, in his government’s post-election development commitment – *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas* (together with all, development for all) - (Haustein and Tomalin 2021; Jaffrelot 2021; Malhotra 2020). After the SDGs were born in 2015, the slogan *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas* became aligned with the SDG framework. India has so far submitted two Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) of its progress towards the SDGs, in 2017 and 2020, with the 2020 report noting even more strongly than the earlier one that ‘India’s commitment is reflected in the *complete convergence* of the national development agenda with SDGs, whose core principle, to leave no one behind, perfectly mirrors in our motto’ (NITI Aayog 2020: 3; emphasis added).

Mobile pastoralism finds no mention in India’s first SDG Voluntary National Review (VNR) of 2017, reporting progress towards achieving the global goals, and just one in the 2020 VNR (NITI Aayog 2020: 150). This reflects its generally poor visibility in Indian policy frameworks; although where it does appear, it is largely seen in deficit terms that reflect dominant hegemonies of ‘development’ in their characterisations of mobile pastoralism as unproductive, destructive, or marginal (Sharma et al. 2003) and of pastoralists themselves as ‘backward’ and ‘hard to reach’ (Dyer 2014). Pastoralists’ contributions to India’s regional rural economies go largely unrecognised, in contrast to the disproportionate attention paid to the ecological destruction they are inaccurately presumed to cause (Jitendra 2019; Sharma et al. 2003: iii). Unrecognised too, is their capacity to derive benefit from dryland environments by drawing on traditional knowledge systems that are rooted in their rich religious and cultural heritage (Jobbins 2018; Gannon et al. 2020). While the national development agenda of *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas* thus constructs pastoralists as ‘left behind’ by omission, we contest this as a normative categorisation that masks both the lack of attention to the possibility of mobile pastoralism as a modern, productive and dignified livelihood,

and the failure of policies to support it. It is these deficits that render pastoralist communities 'left behind', rather than the livelihood itself.

Mobile pastoralism – the practice of moving livestock to pastures that become seasonally available – is widespread across India. Pastoralists are found in the arid and semi-arid ecozones up and down the entire country (Sharma et al. 2003) but efforts to enumerate them have been sporadic; the most recent report estimates a national total of 13 million (Kishore and Köhler-Rollefson 2020). Exacerbating earlier dynamics promoting urbanisation and industrialisation, the BJP's regime of land governance (Levien 2018) means that pastoralist communities are everywhere in India being dispossessed from the land and made vulnerable to material poverty and state-driven pressures to sedentarise (Dyer 2014; Kishore and Köhler-Rollefson 2020). They face increasingly constrained access to the grazing resources on which their livelihoods depend, for a range of reasons that are embedded in pro-market practices, particularly in relation to land use (Sud 2020), and discourses of 'development' which undermine not only the viability of their livelihoods, but also their geo-spatial and religious connections with land and animals (Dyer and Choksi 2022).

We focus here on the experience of pastoralists from the Hindu Rabari community, and from the Sufi/Muslim Fakirani Jat community, who live in the semi-arid region of Kachchh in Gujarat. Both are classified by the state as 'behind', reflected in being listed as among Gujarat's Other Backward Classes (OBC) as well as in the state's list of Socially and Economically Backward Communities (Dyer 2014). Both communities are traditionally herders of camels, an occupation that is firmly rooted in their religious traditions. Rabaris believe they were created by Lord Shiva to tend the camels that his wife Parvati had fashioned from the dust and sweat that covered Shiva's body as he meditated in the Himalayas (Dyer 2014: 58-60). The story of how the Fakirani Jats came to herd camels is interlinked with that of Rabaris. There was a dispute between two Rabari brothers, which Sawla Pir, their most revered Sufi saint, stepped in to resolve. Using his magical powers, he gifted some camels to the younger brother, instructing that in future, only members of the Fakirani Jat community should graze them, and forbidding them to sell their milk - an injunction they follow to this day. While both communities have diversified into keeping other animals, and some have moved out of mobile pastoralism altogether, they retain religious connections to the land and

animals. These are expressed through Hindu and Sufi beliefs and religious practices that strongly reflect local geography, with sacred sites in ancestral villages and along migration routes; and are now undergoing transformations that reflect the Hindu nationalist development agenda.

In earlier work with Rabari pastoralists in Gujarat (e.g. Choksi and Dyer 1999; Dyer 2014), we had heard talk of ‘progress’, and - well before the global development industry came up with Agenda 2030 and its LNOB terminology - some Rabaris spoke of being ‘left behind’. Over time, a much stronger self-identification as being ‘left behind’ in pastoralism has emerged, along with significantly diminished confidence of a future within their traditional occupation and an active search for alternatives (Dyer and Choksi 2022). This is a seeming convergence with the view in wider society of pastoralists’ skills and knowledge, material culture, morals and spirituality as being associated with a livelihood and way of life that is ‘backward’. We investigated these issues in a study of dignity, heritage and sustainable development among pastoralist women in three States of India,¹ carried out from 2018-2020. Women’s voices are rarely heard in the existing literature on mobile pastoralism in India (Köller-Rollefson 2018) and we wanted to better understand women’s experiences of being ‘left behind’, against the backdrop of the Agenda 2030 LNOB pledge as well as Modi’s emphatic endorsement of it.

This paper draws on qualitative data generated in Gujarat, as part of the larger project. Local researchers established initial contacts with the communities, with the help of project partner NGOs, and undertook scoping interviews to identify participants. We carried out participant observation, staying with pastoralists on migration to observe their daily routines, engaging in discussions with groups of men and women over many hours in the field as we accompanied them. We held more structured interactions in formally convened focus group discussions and 75 semi-structured interviews with members of Rabari and Fakarani Jat communities, mostly talking with women, but speaking with men too. We also developed oral histories of specific women, drawing on long-ranging discussions held with each individual over several sittings; and we

¹ See <https://cqd.leeds.ac.uk/research/political-economy-of-global-development/british-academy-herding-project/> for details about the HERDING project.

interviewed partner NGO workers. We draw on all of these forms of data generation to inform our discussion of what it means to be 'left behind'. The interviews were carried out in Gujarati and Kutchi by local researchers and the UK-based research team. We recorded the discussions where possible, alongside making notes, keeping field diaries and taking photos to document the research. The data were later uploaded into NVIVO and thematically coded; processes of thematic coding and emerging interpretations were discussed to ensure analytical rigour.

In what follows, we begin by tracing the contours of the changing materialities of pastoralism, linked to the 'Gujarat' development model; then the impact of Hindu nationalism on the relationships between the religious identities of Hindu and Sufi pastoralists; and then we look more specifically at the impact of these changes on women's experiences of being 'left behind' from their traditional patterns of religious and cultural participation.

The 'Gujarat model' and erosion of pastoralist livelihoods in Kachchh

In 2001, a devastating earthquake resulted in extensive loss of livestock and the deaths of over 33,000 people in the Kachchh region of Gujarat (Dyer 2014). The reconstruction that ensued was conceived in the image of the then emerging 'Gujarat model' of market-orientated development, facilitated by a corporate-state alliance (Simpson 2006; Sud 2020) which Narendra Modi, as Chief Minister of Gujarat from 2001-14, established. This model, now being rolled out across the country (Jaffrelot 2021) has embraced Kachchh in its grip (Simpson 2006), giving rise to an extensive reconfiguration of land value and use (Sud 2020) in ways – legal and otherwise - that are combining to squeeze pastoralists off the land. Reconstruction ushered in an era of land enclosures and marketization, along with establishing heavy industries - of mineral extraction and salt - in units that occupy land that pastoralists had used, and often emit polluting dust. All these changes impact on pastoralism by reducing both the quantity and quality of available fodder:

Earlier, no one knew this land. After the earthquake, people came here and they came to know about land and land was covered. People had started getting money for *maal* [animals] and land and they sold it. They also sold

grazing land. They made papers and sold it (Interview with Rabari woman, January 2019).

The grass was very good and when they ate it, it nourished them... But with the use of chemicals - it's no good for animals (Interview with Rabari woman, January 2019).

The factories have occupied all the space. Earlier there was no scarcity of land and nobody was bothered about the land. Now, there are factories and nurseries, we are now helpless, where should we go? Everyone has parents. Who are parents of land? (Interview with Fakirani Jat women, January 2020).

We used to look after the land and our animals. No one would ask us to leave the place. The owners of factories ask us to leave the place. The farmers ask us to leave their area (Interview with Fakirani Jat women, January 2020).

The shrinking of available pastures in Kachchh has prompted many pastoralists to settle; as one participant put it, 'We have nowhere to go' (Interview with Fakirani Jat woman, January 2020). As a result, households often reduce animal holdings and/or seek alternative livelihoods within the sedentary economy. Adoption of a sedentary life enables families to embark on becoming socially, economically and politically 'included' (Dyer 2012, 2014): owning a house, being settled, having a job and sending children to school have all come to be seen by many pastoralists as tangible indicators of 'progress'. This notion of 'progress' reframes the geo-social place of pastoralism, which they know as the 'jungle', constructing it as a marginalised space, rather than as a place apart and suited to their livelihood specialism: and so being 'jungli' changes from being a neutral descriptor to a 'pejorative label of being "left behind" in a place of backwardness by the nature of their livelihood' (Dyer 2014: 138).

Settling was further facilitated by the reconstruction process because it allocated housing in affected areas, which served to promote a view of sedentary, village-based living as 'progress', and to facilitate a shift towards a normative view of the nuclear family:

Because of the destruction during the earthquake, people established new villages. Many people did not own a house, they all got support from government to get a house. Some have got extra houses even! Before the earthquake my son used to live with me, he also got a new house after the earthquake. Later my younger son also got a new house (Interview with Rabari man, February 2020).

Since the needs of pastoralists have been entirely overlooked in the changing regional economy, there is now a widespread feeling among both Rabaris and Fakirani Jats that their traditional occupation has, at best, a difficult future. Successful occupational diversification for the next generation then becomes a new aspiration. As one of our collaborators, who works for a local NGO, put it, people are 'made to feel that if you keep animals, you are backward. If you choose to work in a factory or have a shop or something, people look at you favourably' (Interview January 2019). Pastoralists would themselves say that pastoralism is the only place for the 'uneducated' (Dyer and Choksi 2022) and were reluctant to marry daughters to men who are still active in this occupation. Rabaris told us, for example: 'Now people have started thinking "we should not give our daughters to those who keep animals"' (Interview January 2019). This appraisal of being 'left behind', in the endogamous marriage traditions of both communities, further undermines pastoralism.

For those who stay in pastoralism, feeling 'left behind' by the government is inevitable when, in times of need, the state steps in to support farmers but not them: 'Government give subsidies of Rs 1-2 lakh to farmers when there is a drought so why doesn't it give it for *maal* [animals]?' (Interview with Rabari man, January 2019). The state may not see pastoralists when it comes to policies that would facilitate sustaining their livelihood, but politicians find them readily enough when it comes to elections and making promises:

When the government wants your vote, they say come and vote. They send vehicles for us but after that they don't inquire...Milk prices will rise, grassland will be open... then they'll do something to help us to get some lands but instead they are banning us from going into the grazing land (Interview with Rabari man, January 2019).

State officials are also failing to take action against thieves who harass pastoralists and try to steal their animals, a problem that has intensified with the opening up of Gujarat since the earthquake – ‘If we are going with the jeep full they harass us so much - why aren’t they doing anything about these thieves?’ (Interview with Rabari man, January 2019). Land encroachment, a different form of theft, is widely practised, and we heard from both Rabaris and Fakirani Jats that pastoralists-turned-farmers are no less prone than others to encroach and fence off land, making it inaccessible to pastoralist users.

While a livelihood in mobile pastoralism is becoming difficult to sustain, diversifying, too, is hard. Alternative options are limited, and without a school education, good quality work is difficult to access. The entrepreneurial stance within the market driven economic orientation that Modi promotes does not necessarily fit with the identity of those who have grown up in their traditional occupation, and who lack business experience: ‘Now we cannot sustain in this [pastoralism]. We don’t have an alternative otherwise we won’t be doing this for a minute more. We don’t know about any other business. Where can we go?’ (Interview with Rabari man, January 2019). Leaving pastoralism to work in the industrial plants (companies) has poor economic returns: ‘Company people ask us to work day and night and will say we will pay you Rs 2000-3000 or 5000... but how can we fill our stomach for Rs 5000?’ (Interview with Rabari man, January 2019). Sedentary living is also expensive: ‘Those who have left the business say that their expenses are increased like expenses of gas cylinder, electricity, soap, shampoo. We can’t cope with the expenses’ (Interview with Rabari man, January 2019).

While these are elements of adverse incorporation in the mainstream economy for those who step out of pastoralism, they are not only the challenges associated with finding possible alternatives that speak against leaving pastoralism. Pastoralism is a pious occupation for both communities, but among the Fakirani Jat participants the concepts of leaving pastoralism and even owning a ‘pakkha’ (house with solid walls) directly conflict with the moral teachings of their historical religious leader Sawla Pir. Remaining true to his teachings means staying in an occupation for which associated skills and knowledge, material culture, morals and spirituality constitute an idea of ‘being left behind’ in the modern (Hinduised) market economy.

So far we have provided evidence of the ‘hegemonic struggle’ through examining pastoralists’ experience of what it means to be ‘left behind’ with respect to land struggles, housing and family norms, the lack of alternative livelihood options and weak policy support for pastoralism, against the backdrop of pastoralism as a pious occupation and not merely a job. Next we will examine how religious identities are changing in ways that are being shaped by the norm that Modi’s invocation of LNOB is projecting, and how this exacerbates religious inequalities.

Growing religious inequalities

The BJP government is driven by a Hindu nationalist and populist agenda (Jaffrelot 2021), where Brubaker (2017: 359) describes populist movements, figures and regimes as claiming ‘to speak in the name of “the people” and against various “elites”’. In the case of Hindu Nationalism, the oppositional elite comprises the ‘English-speaking, Westernized—uprooted—elites who defend secularism at the expense of the authentic, Hindu identity of the nation’ (Jaffrelot and Tilin 2017: 5) and ‘the people’ are the Hindu community, under threat from this secular liberal class and the threat of Muslim sectarianism. Gujarat, as well as being the state where Modi, as its then Chief Minister, promoted a corporate and entrepreneurial model of economic development and engaged in broadening the neo-middle class support base for the BJP, was the bedrock of the growth of the Hindu nationalist movement in the 1980s and 1990s (Jaffrelot 1996, 2012; Shani 2007). In addition to the aspects of socio-economic change in Kachchh that we described above, the 2001 earthquake also escalated religious change. Both Hindu Nationalists and Islamic revivalists seized opportunities to expand their impact and presence as part of the reconstruction process – the housing programme we mentioned earlier, for example, created new villages that were segregated along religious lines, rather than the earlier religiously integrated villages (Simpson 2006). The religious changes that they helped to catalyse here reflect broader tensions between Muslim and Hindu communities across India under the pressure of Hindutva politics.

Reflecting the joint heritage described in their myth of origin, Hindu and Sufi/Muslim pastoralists often share sacred sites, and their deities and religious figures are part of each other’s religion. In Kachchh, as elsewhere in India, under the pressures of

modernisation and religious nationalism, this kind of hybridity is being lost, and religious traditions are becoming more sharply differentiated. For the local forms of Hinduism practised by pastoralist communities, such as the Rabari, this has meant an escalating 'Sanskritisation' (Srinivas 1952) as vernacular deities and narratives become incorporated within pan-Indian Hinduism; there is a new presence of Hindu shrines and iconography in their homes; and religious practice and identity shift towards the Hindu mainstream that offers political representation and inclusion in Modi's *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas*. Local Muslim practices and identities, such as those of the Fakirani Jat, are shifting under the influence of Islamic revivalist groups, responding to forms of nationalism that have been rising since the pre-Independence period, including Deobandi, Tablighi-Jamaat and Ahl-i Hadith movements, which seek to unite all Indian Muslims into their own version of a uniform Islam.

A worker for a local NGO, himself a Muslim, talked about the 'fight between Hindu and Muslim communities' where 'these types of fights/difference of opinions have increased a lot in the past few years', in contrast with the earlier time when 'Kachchh was an example of unity for others'. Pastoralists too had stories about increasing religious tensions and divisions, between and within communities. A Fakirani Jat woman explained that it had been traditional for her community to worship together with Rabaris at a site where Sawla Pir's boat had been washed up. A sacred place was established there where the planks had lain on the shore to mark the Hindu goddess *and* Sawla Pir. However, she too comments on the new religious differentiation:

They made a high hillock with soil and people of every community used to worship it. In those days, people didn't have this kind of *uchhrat* [differentiation] (Interview with Fakirani Jat woman, January 2020).

Three years earlier, she told us, the Hindu community had decided to build their own separate temple on the site - which meant that the Fakirani Jats had to move somewhere else:

We brought one wooden plank from there and a second one from the village and established a sacred place here. Now, we are praying here and our community gathers here. We do our *niyaj* [food offerings] by tying religious

flags here and those people follow their practice on the other side (Interview with Fakirani Jat woman, January 2020).

Another example of decreasing hybridity came from an elderly Hindu Rabari woman, who told us how the people of her village take care of the Abhramshah *Dargah* (a *dargah* is a shrine built on the burial ground of a Sufi *pir*, in this case Abhramshah), where they perform rituals to the Sufi *pir* despite being Hindu. Talking about rituals to ensure the protection of their animals, which also illustrates the deep religiosity of pastoralism, she explained that:

We believe that if we devote a flag to this *dargah*, he [the *pir*] protects our *maal* [animals]. He protects our *maal* from disease. So, we cut one ear from a sheep and offer it to him. We take a *mannat* [vow] that we will offer an ear, and all our flock should be protected. They do it, those who have a flock. When that sheep is sold, whatever amount you get out from it is devoted to the *dargah* (Interview with Rabari woman, May 2020).

While older generations of Rabaris continue to worship the Sufi *pirs*, alongside their Hindu deities, the younger generation is less interested in maintaining this plurality, particularly as they move out of pastoralism. Hindu nationalism has not only led to tensions and divisions between Hindu and Muslim groups but also within those religions, where the new norms of religious identity that have been established lead to the marginalisation of those still practising other styles that do not conform to modern nationalist influenced versions. This also has implications for how the viability of the continuation of pastoralism as a livelihood alongside nationalist identities is assessed. Among the Hindu Rabaris, pressure to move away from pastoralism comes not only from the government (often indirectly), but also from community leaders, including religious leaders. Hindu religious teachers (*pandit*) increasingly teach that the sale of goat and sheep for meat is a sin (*paap*), which intersects with socio-economic pressures to reinforce the idea of pastoralism as outdated. A Rabari woman explained that, after the earthquake, their local religious teachers became influenced by Hindu nationalism, and its disapproval of selling animals for human consumption:

Our *sadhus* and *sants* [preachers/*pandits*] told us after the earthquake to send our children to the school and get them educated and also to sell off

the animals as this business gets *paap* [sin] money (Interview with Rabari woman, September 2020).

This new ethic of pastoralism is part of the wave of Hinduisation that is spreading across Gujarat and the rest of India. In December 2018, the Government of Gujarat banned the export of animals to the Gulf, which impacted the pastoralist economy and explains something more about the hassling of vehicles we noted earlier: ‘When government declared that animal export is banned in Gujarat, the messages started spreading, “if you see any truck loaded with animals, please call on this toll-free number”’ (Interview with Rabari man, January 2019). Later quashed by the Gujarat Supreme Court, this ban was widely interpreted as a move that reflected wider Hindu nationalist concerns about the protection of animals/vegetarianism and the ‘sinfulness’ of occupations that involve animal slaughter, directly or indirectly – of which pastoralism is one. The anti-communalist on-line platform Sabrang interprets this as ‘How Gujarat govt imposed curbs on livestock export for “fear” of losing BJP vote share’ (Misra 2019).

In this section we have demonstrated a decline in hybridity between the livelihoods and religious practices of Rabari and Fakirani Jat communities. We have shown that this leads to increased religious inequalities where those who do not, or cannot, aspire to the new Hindutva-inspired model of economic progress, which includes an overt small animal livestock rearing ban as a moral concern, become ever more ‘left behind’ as a result of both their livelihood and their religious identity. Next, we look more closely at how these changes have impacted women’s lives, whose narratives are rarely heard either in literature on pastoralism (Köller-Rollefson 2018) or within state-led development discourse.

Women’s experiences of being ‘left-behind’ from religious and cultural participation

For women, shifts towards new forms of religious identity are most clearly playing a role in their marginalisation from cultural and religious participation when they move away from pastoralism towards settled occupations. This is leading to becoming ‘left behind’ from some of their traditional activities that they valued and that gave meaning to their lives; and increasing religious inequality between men and women.

As noted, the post-earthquake reconstruction opened up a reconfiguration of religio-political space. Urdu-speaking Maulvis of the Ahl-i Hadith movement moved to the Kachchh villages from the northern State of Uttar Pradesh, bringing with them their revivalist brand of Wahabi Islam. One middle aged Fakirani Jat woman we spoke to - who is still herding camels and lives in a traditional *pakkha* house – outlined how their local Sufi practices are becoming overwhelmed by the growth of mainstream Islam, and how this is affecting women. While her community's Sufi practices remain strong, the influence of the Ahl-i Hadith movement in the region, since the earthquake, has meant significant changes for women, bolstering earlier shifts to more legalistic styles of Islam since the early 1970s (Bond 2020: 106). She explained that each morning and evening she prays to Sawla Pir, the Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif Bhithai, the Prophet Muhammad and Allah. However, women are no longer permitted to go inside the Sufi shrines (*dargah*) and are not allowed to enter the mosque for *namaz* (prayer). They are nevertheless inventive in finding ways around this to meet their religious needs, strategically using traditional gender roles to enter the mosque undetected:

When we feel like going inside the mosque...we have a *manta* [vow] if someone is ill and we pray for them to get better. Then we go in with a broom to clean the mosque with the hidden intention and light an incense stick. We go on Friday to clean and then fill water from the mosque and come back (Interview with Fakirani Jat woman, November 2019).

This marginalisation of women from their religious spaces, she told us, had intensified over the last 20 years, since the earthquake. She explained that before this time there were few mosques, but now there is one in every village:

Earlier the mosque was far away so we read *namaz* at home. If some people were close to the mosque then they would go if it's far away, then they read *namaz* in their homes. The mosque was far away before now it is close by...I'll tell you what was there earlier. We used to clean the floor and keep a stone and that was our mosque. We used to read *namaz* there (Interview with Fakirani Jat woman, November 2019).

Prior to this, women had been at the centre of Sufi religious life, playing music and leading prayer. She told us on another occasion that they had come with the 'new

Quran of Ahl-i Hadith' (in Urdu) that had replaced their old Quran (which had been in Sindhi):

In the old book there was more respect...for women. According to the old book, the women could walk or go in the carts to *auliyas* [Sufi saints], they were free to attend four or five-days of fairs, and to distribute *prasad-niyaj* [food offerings] themselves. Now the number of *maulanas* [Islamic religious teachers] have increased. Now they have made such rules that the women cannot go to a *dargah*, they are forbidden. So, I feel in the new book, respect [*ijjat*] for women has gone down (Interview with Fakirani Jat woman, July 2019).

Several Rabari women also commented on changes in religious configurations that contributed to their experience of feeling 'left behind' both materially and spirituality. Some talked about pressure from around them to demonstrate religious adherence in public, with the increasingly visible Hindu materiality of religion in Kachchh following the earthquake where 'many temples which were small got destroyed so people built bigger ones' (Interview with Rabari man, August 2019). This adds a burden to their domestic finances, in the shape, for example, of contributing to temple building costs and purchasing offerings. With the shift from the worship of local pastoralist deities towards pan-Hindu Gods and their feasts and festivals, the ritual role of Rabari women has declined with the increasing dominance of the Hindu *pujari* (priest) who has knowledge of how to perform *puja* to the major Hindu temple deities. In pastoralist communities the communication with the divine as well as important rituals linked to pastoralism as a livelihood were carried out by the *bhopa*, a religious/traditional leader trusted by people who can also advise on issues around marriage, horoscopes and suggest spiritual cures for illness. While the *bhopa* is usually male and mid-lower caste, women can also perform this role; but the *pujari* is much more likely to be male and from the Brahmin caste.

These shifts towards women's marginalisation from their religious and cultural traditions are impacting particularly strongly on them with respect to the - still crucial - institution of marriage. Both Fakirani Jat Sufi women and Rabari Hindu women spoke to an emergent process of being 'left behind' by the increased involvement of

mainstream religious specialists, which is resulting in them being alienated from participation in and control of wedding ceremonies.

On marriage as a socio-political economy, further, there are clear trends of change among the Rabari. In contrast with the dominant Hindu practice of dowry in India, Rabaris have a tradition of bride price – where the groom’s family gives gifts to the bride’s (Dyer 2014). Bride price continues, and alongside high financial demands, there is an increasing disinclination for a young woman to see her future with a man who is active in pastoralism. These trends reflect a buy-in to the market-oriented Hinduised vision of a middle class. Being educated is a prominent feature of such status; and schooling is instrumental in socialising girls to avoid manual occupations – here, the hard, physical work of pastoralism – and aligning their social status to this vision of middle class belonging. A high bride price has, however, impoverishing effects on boys’ families – and ironically, it is easier for young men in pastoralism to afford its cost than it is for those in poor quality, low wage, jobs (Dyer and Choksi 2022).

The data presented in this section reveal a complex narrative with regard to women and their experiences of being left behind from their religious and cultural traditions. Female pastoralists are caught within the interstices of the market economy, the rise of the right wing and the consolidation of Hindutva, alongside movement towards institutionalised forms of both Hindu and Muslim religion.

Discussion

In the sections above, we have illustrated how the ‘hegemonic struggle’ for LNOB is playing out among our two pastoralist communities. The first section looked at the absence of policy support for pastoralism, dispossession from the land, changing housing and family norms, and the lack of alternative livelihood options for the unschooled/‘left behind’; and it highlighted that pastoralism is a pious occupation. The second examined changing practices of religion, where hybridity between the livelihoods and religious practices of Rabari and Fakirani Jat communities are in decline and religious inequalities are increasing. The third section examined how religious identities are marginalising women from their religious and cultural traditions,

which reflects both sedentarisation and the increasing differentiation between religious traditions.

We have shown that pastoralists feel increasingly 'left behind' because their skills and knowledge, material culture, morals and spirituality are associated with a livelihood and way of life that is portrayed as backward. However, while pastoralists feel 'left behind' in this environment, there is no unequivocal acceptance by them of pastoralism as intrinsically or essentially 'left behind'. Rather, it is the deficits that are projected onto this livelihood, and the increasingly aggressive ideological devaluation of it - both of which are expressions of a particular hegemony - that render pastoralist communities as 'left behind'. The contests, tensions and ambiguity here are illustrative of the larger struggle for hegemony over what counts as 'left behind'. Currently it is Modi's populist LNOB commitment, which combines socio-economic with religious aspirations, that has hegemonic ascendancy; and it not only serves to sever the link between the pastoralists and their traditional religious beliefs and practices, but also contributes to both inter- and intra-religious inequalities between and within pastoralist communities.

We noted earlier the growing literature on the need to not only localise but also to contextualise the SDGs in terms of the values, priorities and worldviews of communities rather than imposing them top-down (Steiner 2017; Li-Ming Yap and Watene 2019; Sterling et al. 2020; Tiwari et al 2021). We also pointed out that there has been little attention on the need to consider religion in this (Haustein and Tomalin 2021; Tomalin and Haustein 2020) and that, moreover, mention of religion is virtually absent in Agenda 2030 and the SDGs (Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler 2020: 47). While the secular framing of Agenda 2030 assumes that development will lead to a weakening of religion, the Modi-led project of inclusive development requires a strengthening of religious identities that, as we have illustrated, escalates social and religious inequality. This underscores the need for religion to be considered/incorporated in the 'hegemonic struggle' that Agenda 2030's LNOB commitment should be facilitating. Furthermore, we would argue that this contributes towards a broader critique of the global development paradigm as underpinned by a Northern-led secular neo-liberal agenda, where neo-liberal here is understood to 'refer to an economic system in which the "free" market is extended to every part of our

public and personal worlds' (Birch 2017 npn). For pastoralists, their experience of a non-material world shapes their relationship to their livelihood, including the land and animals. To ignore this amounts to both 'epistemological' and 'ontological' injustice that subordinates forms of knowledge and experience that is privileged in Euro-American perspectives (Wilson 2017: 1077; De Sousa Santos 2005, 2014; Viveiros de Castro 2013).

Conclusion

In this paper we have shown that the Agenda 2030 commitment to LNOB operates as a form of 'doublespeak' in India, where the promotion of market-driven development, at the expense of other livelihoods, as well as of a right-wing nationalist agenda underpinned by Hindu nationalism, combine to exacerbate inequality rather than to reduce it. The idea of 'left behind' has been criticised for its appeal to populist politics where it acquires a discursive capital that enables majoritarian leaders, such as Modi, who seek to represent the disenfranchised, to construct people and places as 'left behind' to suit their ideological goals (Wraight 2018). Modi's appeal to LNOB and his *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas* call mask the ways in which the BJP's development agenda has been constructed to further Hindu Nationalist goals, as well as to consolidate an enthusiastic turn to the market economy (Chacko 2019).

As our case study of two pastoralist communities in Gujarat showed, this paves the way to constructing those whose livelihoods exist outside, or on the margins of, the market, and/or are religious minorities or practitioners of non-mainstream varieties of the dominant Hindu religion, as 'left behind'. For groups whose livelihoods and religious beliefs are peripheral to the ambitions of the state, 'catching up' means moving away from their traditional occupation and its spiritual orientation, towards inclusion in the market economy. This, then, shapes an implied common ideology of what all people would naturally aspire to 'catch up to' under the right conditions, where LNOB is not only a shared 'political-economic concept' but also 'a more cultural-social term' (Wraight 2018: 9). Our case study showed that this is, for many (often already or soon to be ex-) pastoralists, highly likely to be a process of adverse incorporation (Dyer 2012), which creates a new precarity, even as it holds out the promise of

improved socio-economic status (Dyer and Choksi 2022) and neo-middle-class belonging projected in the BJP's discourses of development for all.

However, just as we are arguing that the BJP capture of LNOB falls far short of addressing inequality, following Weber (2017: 399; Fisher and Fukuda-Parr 2019), we also find that use of the phrase 'leave no one behind' in Agenda 2030 'rests on specific ideological premises: it is designed to promote and consolidate a highly contested neo-liberal variant of capitalist development'. While the SDGs do include targets and indicators that are directed at addressing and measuring inequality across different groups and socio-economic and cultural systems globally (including, tribal, pastoralist and indigenous livelihoods, cultures and traditions), these too are shaped by this global framing (and themselves reflect a neo-liberal proclivity towards measurement and numbers-driven policy making) (Choudhary 2023; Pogge 2015). This underlines the accuracy of a prominent criticism of the Agenda 2030 LNOB call: as Belda-Miquel et al. (2019: 388) write, 'the new global agenda has been criticised for reproducing the status quo and for not addressing the causes of impoverishment created by the existing dominant capitalist and developmentalist model'. State capture, and the neo-liberal framing of the SDGs, means that, as Weber (2017: 400) argues, they 'privilege the up-holding of commercial interests over commitments to universally ensure entitlements to address fundamental life-sustaining needs'. Our discussion contributes to the widespread criticism that, despite Agenda 2030's underpinning commitment to 'leave no one behind', the SDG framework does not go far enough in addressing both horizontal and vertical inequality (Fukuda Parr 2019). Moreover, it is not just that inequality is not adequately addressed in the SDG framework - but that it is getting worse within the lifespan of Agenda 2030.

The 'hegemonic struggle' for the normative claim as to what counts as 'left behind' is, therefore, a struggle for Agenda 2030 and its SDGs themselves as well as for recognised populist leaders such as Modi. Both seek to promote their vision of development and to establish their meaning for the 'empty signifier' of LNOB and the standard to which those 'left behind' must be 'caught up'. While the SDGs might be positioned as a universal and multilateral counterbalance to narrow populist visions that increasingly dominate global politics, the affinities between them are striking. Indeed, as Haustein and Tomalin (2021: 298) have argued, the SDG process is *de*

facto 'a form of development popularism...that stands in competition rather than in contrast with nationalist politics'. Here, we see LNOB's lack of fixed meaning as an 'empty signifier' in action, 'able to incorporate diverse agents...including traditional antagonists, under the pretence that they are all working on' the same issue (Brown 2015: 16); and functioning as a 'catchy rallying call' employed by advocates of the SDGs (Fukuda Parr 2019) as well as neo-populists, such as Modi, on the political right (Haustein and Tomalin 2021). The SDGs and Modi are similarly engaged in a hegemonic struggle to define 'left behind': who 'speaks for the "left behind"', how will they be "caught up" and to what "landmarks of progress"' (Haustein and Tomalin 2021: 300).

In the Introduction, we asked whether, if the concept of LNOB is equally liable to elite capture by narrow interests in the SDGs and by populists such as Modi, it is simply too vague to be of any use in directing social change and ending all forms of inequality. We have argued that diametrically opposed interpretations of an 'empty signifier', in this case LNOB, do not necessarily render them meaningless. Brown (2015: 115-116) argues that Laclau and Mouffe's use of 'empty signifier' 'reveals a more complex reality': it is the very nature of empty signifiers that 'holds potential as a tool for radical politics'. In our argument for seeing LNOB as an 'empty signifier' espoused by both Agenda 2030 and Modi to support different visions of what counts as 'development', we have highlighted that both are engaged in a 'hegemonic struggle' to fix its meaning. This struggle, however, is currently both circumscribed and narrowed by the neo-liberal and nationalist interests that have captured the LNOB agenda, with effects that we have, briefly, empirically explored.

As such, the Agenda 2030 commitment to LNOB holds the potential to spearhead a global social movement focused on 'radical democracy', but one that has been weakened by the capture of LNOB by neo-liberal and nationalist politics (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Following Laclau and Mouffe (1985), we conclude that a more radical and democratic politics of development is possible if the range of demands that are met by an empty signifier, here 'to leave no one behind', is broadened to challenge the hegemonic representations that dominate. Then, the Agenda 2030's call to LNOB can indeed realise its potential to become a 'catchy rallying call' (Fukuda Parr 2019) for a broad-based social movement consolidating different demands for equality

across the globe. In this endeavour, the omission of religion cannot continue. Our case study presented various facets of the 'hegemonic struggle' over what counts as being 'left behind' among two communities of mobile pastoralists in Gujarat, indicating the importance of considering both materialist and religious influences in thinking about what it means to be 'left behind', as well as the need to consider the role that religion can play in bolstering inequalities.

Acknowledgements

This project was funded by the British Academy grant no. SDP/2 100053.

We are grateful to Sushma Iyengar and Alka Jani for their contributions to the generation and interpretation of empirical data.

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