On the Usefulness of Goondas in Indian Politics: Moneypower and Musclepower in a Gujarati Locality

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Abstract

This article discusses the cooperation between small-time criminals (or goondas) and politicians in a locality in Ahmedabad, Gujarat (India). Based on an ethnographic study of local political networks, this article argues that the regular co-operation between politicians and goondas is a product of the inaccessibility of the Indian state to its poorer citizens. The ‘criminalisation of politics’ is not a sign of moral decay, but a product of the difficulties of (poorer) citizens in dealing with state institutions and the specific nature of the local political competition that these difficulties engender. As local politicians need to develop their capacity to ‘get things done’ for voters, they need both the ‘moneypower’ and ‘muscelpower’ of goondas to settle local issues, enforce their authority and manipulate voting.

Introduction

Sitting on his bed with only a towel wrapped around him, Mohanbhai shows me scars of knives and even a sword on his aging body. With a subdued voice he directs my attention to these scars with almost nostalgic fondness: ‘I used to be very dangerous. When there were riots, when there were fights, I was always in front’. Mohanbhai has
served three jail sentences for his part in Ahmedabad’s violent recent history. He was already there in 1956, when large crowds fought the police to demand the creation of a separate Gujarat state within newly-independent India. Mohanbhai sold illegal cinema tickets at the time, and often fought to keep others out of his business. As his fame spread, he gathered a group of boys around him and started making money by offering his services as a muscleman to politicians and traders.¹

He was not there in 2002, when large-scale rioting again rocked the state of Gujarat. Nowadays his health does not allow him to go out much, which leaves him plenty of time for reminiscing. As we sit on his bed discussing his life, Mohanbhai seems somewhat melancholic, especially when he takes out a box of pictures. With enormous pride he shows me numerous photographs of him taken with prominent politicians. There are pictures with local municipal councillors, with local members of the state assembly, with a former chief minister and even with the local MP. ‘They all came here’, Mohanbhai comments. ‘I did many favours for them and I advised people to vote for them. They came as long as they needed me. Now I don’t have any expectations from them. They would not even recognise me on the street now’.

People like Mohanbhai have their counterparts in a great number of Bollywood movies, where they are almost invariably a threat to the heroes of the movie: goondas,

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¹ This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Ahmedabad between January 2005 and March 2006. During this period I lived in two localities in the eastern part of the city. The article is based on interviews as well as on a great deal of socialising which is usually referred to as ‘participant observation’: as I lived in the areas I studied, I had the opportunity to befriend many of the informants quoted below. To protect the anonymity of my informants, all names in this article have been changed, as well as the name Isanpur.

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also referred to as *dadas* (grandfathers), *dons*, ‘number two people’ or ‘anti-social elements’, are the proto-typical bad guys whose activities are threatening as well as intriguing. The supposedly immense power and extravagant lifestyles of famous *goondas* like Dawood Ibrahim, Chotta Rajan or Arun Gawli are a popular topic of discussion: a constant stream of newspaper articles bemoans their power and the increased ‘criminalisation of politics’ while simultaneously catering to the widespread fascination with these larger-than-life characters. A recurring element in the stories about *goondas*—whether in movies such as *Satya* or *Sarkar*, in investigative reportage like *Maximum City* by S. Metha, or in novels like Vikram Chandra’s *Sacred Games* or David Roberts’ *Shantaram*—is the co-operation between *goondas* and politicians.

In commentaries on Indian politics one can find, roughly, three types of arguments about this co-operation. In newspapers and magazines, it is bemoaned as a sign of the moral decay of India’s politics. Politicians employ *goondas* because they have lost their commitment to the old Gandhian values of service and self-sacrifice; now it is only the lust for power and money that drives electoral politics. A second approach sees the nexus between politicians and *goondas* coming about as a result of the erosion of India’s political institutions. As the grassroots networks of the once-powerful Congress Party fell apart in the 1950s, the older networks that were used to channel demands and discipline political competition fell into disarray. This ‘authority vacuum’ at the local level led to intensified political competition, a decreased attachment to democratic procedures and institutions, and an increased use of violence to settle political disputes. In the literature on the recurring Hindu–Muslim riots in

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India, one regularly comes across observations such as ‘without a nexus between politicians and criminals, big riots are highly improbable’. A third and related approach comes from anthropologists, who argue that changing patterns of local authority have generated a ‘dada culture’, especially in poorer localities; masculine, assertive and violent conduct is being seen as a sign of leadership, as a basis for local authority. As goondas are seen locally as role models, political leadership and an aggressive assertiveness are closely tied together: ‘it is the performance of a certain style of public authority—generous but also with a capacity for ruthless violence—that determines who can define and represent ‘the community’, defend neighbourhoods, punish and discipline’. These three approaches all consider crime and politics to be increasingly interconnected—despite evidence that co-operation between politicians and criminals has a long history.

This article discusses the various ways in which politicians and small-time goondas like Mohanbhai collaborate in a locality in eastern Ahmedabad that I will call Isanpur.

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Isanpur houses a mixed population of dalits (lower-caste Hindus) and Muslims. Many inhabitants used to work in Ahmedabad’s now largely-defunct textile mills. Nowadays they earn a small income in construction or factory work. Using material gathered during an ethnographic study of local political networks in Ahmedabad, this article argues that co-operation between goondas and politicians and the related ‘dada culture’ should be understood in the context of the role that local politicians perform as mediators between state institutions and citizens. The prominence of local goondas is a product of the way that the state has come to be embedded in Gujarat’s society. The dependence of citizens on politicians to facilitate their interaction with state institutions generates a political arena in which political success is difficult to attain without connections to local goondas.

We cannot grasp the usefulness of goondas to Indian politics if we see the state in India as a Weberian ideal-type of state, a goal-oriented, unitary institution discrete from society with undisputed sovereignty over its spheres of jurisdiction. In practice, the Indian state has to share sovereignty with numerous non-state actors who shape the impact of its laws and policies. In particular the hold of politicians over the daily operations of the bureaucracy makes it hard to see the state as an actor discrete from society, since through these political mediators different interests can manipulate the operations of the state. This makes it difficult if not impossible to draw a demarcation line between ‘state’ and ‘society’: scholars have used terms like ‘blurred boundary’

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7 For a discussion of how our attachment to a Weberian ideal-type distorts our view on the actual functioning of states, see Joel Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
and ‘spongiform interface’ to capture the interpenetration of state and society through various mediating actors.8

This blurred boundary is populated by a great number of brokers, fixers and mediators, mostly enjoying (covert) political affiliations, who make a living by facilitating the interaction between state officials and citizens. Poorer citizens especially rely on complex networks of political actors who pressurise the bureaucracy on their behalf. Partha Chatterjee coined the term ‘political society’ to capture the sphere in which these networks operate. Although Chatterjee stressed some positive aspects of the operations of political society—he argued that through this bending and stretching of the rules the poor could build coalitions that could go against the distribution of power in society as a whole—he also signalled the need for more research on ‘the dark side’ of political society to investigate whether there is ‘a strategic use of illegality and violence here, on the terrain of political society’?9

The fieldwork material I discuss below answers this question in the affirmative. I will try to show how the intermediary role that local politicians play—as mediators between citizens and state institutions—makes control over the use of violence a vital element of the strategies that politicians need to employ to win elections. The specific

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embeddedness of the state in Gujarat’s society—in particular the way that political networks facilitate state–society interactions—creates conditions that are favourable for local criminals, not unlike the way that the limited penetration of the Italian state in southern Italy facilitated the growth of the Mafia.10

The ‘blurred boundary’ between state and society can then be seen as a ‘field of power’11 marked by an intense competition for access to state resources. The various strategies that politicians employ to develop their control over governmental resources can be seen, following Bourdieu, as a product of (their perception of) the nature of the political game in which they are involved. The structuring principle of this particular political game is the limited capacity of state institutions to uphold legislation and to provide access to state services. As a result of these limitations, citizens have come to rely on political actors to secure admission to a school, get a discounted treatment in a hospital, settle a police case, and so on. The electoral (and financial) success of politicians is therefore largely premised on their capacity to provide access to state resources and to provide alternative resources. Developing the capacity to get things done—as well as the capacity to credibly promise to get things done12—are thus essential strategies for electoral success.13 In that context, the local goondas’ capacity for violence is useful for politicians, since control over the use of force gives local

13 For a more complete elaboration of this argument, and its application to understanding the mobilisation that takes place during communal violence, see W. Berenschot, Riot Politics: Communal Violence and State-Society Mediation in Gujarat, India (London: Hurst & Co, forthcoming 2011).
politicians the necessary leverage to solve local problems, arbitrate disputes, intimidate rivals, gather a campaigning budget, and so on. As my informants put it: the moneypower and musclepower of the *goondas* helps politicians win elections.

While elaborating this argument I will use the word *goonda* loosely, to denote those individuals who rely on the use, or threats, of force to protect their illegal livelihoods. Such a definition does not make ‘*goonda*’ a clear-cut category. Not only can *goondas* become politicians and vice versa, but in the locality I studied there were many individuals who presented themselves as ‘social workers’ or ‘politicians’, but who seemed to operate as *goondas*.

**An Investment**

The career of Mukeshbhai can provide us with a starting point to illustrate the exchanges between politicians and *goondas*. Mukeshbhai used to be an alcohol supplier in Isanpur, an illegal occupation in dry Gujarat. In the following (abridged) excerpt from an interview, he speaks about his relationship with BJP politician Shailesh Macwana (name changed), the MLA (member of Gujarat’s Legislative Assembly) for the area:

Mukeshbhai: In the 2002 elections [for the State Assembly] I had captured a booth, I told people to move away, and I enjoyed it. I gave full votes to Shaileshbhai. I had given Shaileshbhai Rs25,000 for propaganda, because if he won he would help me in my business. So I captured the booth for him. I came with my gang, and I fought with a police officer, I made him go away.

Booth-capturing is done especially at the last hour and the beginning hours [of voting]. I told the staff of the booth: ‘I will frequently add some votes’. If I were to add 500 votes every hour people would doubt it, so I infrequently put down some votes. My gang was there with me
all day, with their hockey sticks. To accept the votes, I gave the staff some money, and they easily accepted it.⁴

Shaileshbhai had come to me before the elections. He said: ‘Mukeshbhai, I will appear in the next elections. If I win I will help you. So if you help me first to win the elections, then I will help you later.’

And he did help me. Once, a huge consignment of liquor was caught by the police. He came immediately and he told the police officer in the den not to start any legal procedure against me. And the last time, when I stopped that business, plenty of my liquor was caught. I surely would be sent to jail for one year. So for two months I was in hiding. I called Shaileshbhai, I asked him to help me. He said: ‘Don’t worry, come with me to the police and nothing will happen to you’. So I went to the police station, and the police dropped the case.

WB: So the money you spent on Shaileshbhai’s election was a good investment?

Mukeshbhai: It was a very good investment. If I had not helped him, I would have been in jail for one year. Shaileshbhai wants to be re-elected, so he knows he must help me.

*Goondas* like Mukeshbhai are individuals who acquire an image of heavy-handedness in their neighbourhood which make people fear them. The word that Mukeshbhai uses to describe himself is *matabhare*, literally ‘heavy-headed’, which implies he is headstrong and prone to fighting. This image as a *matabhare* man makes the *goonda* useful to politicians, during, as well as after, elections. *Matabhare* people can have an impact on the results of the elections as a result of the ‘musclepower’ that they add to electoral campaigns: they can support candidates by capturing booths, like Mukeshbhai, or simply by intimidating voters. Their local standing enables them to influence voters, and their violent image makes *matabhare* men like Mukeshbhai useful in protecting candidates during the elections. They make sure election meetings

⁴ Despite claims by politicians to the contrary, booth-capturing does take place in Gujarat. I have been present on one such occasion, where supporters of one party overwhelmed the few supporters of the other party, and where the election officials seemed to have been bribed. ‘Now even the dead people will vote’, a party worker told me at the time as he went in to stamp several ballots. Outnumbered, the supporters of the opposing party tried to limit the damage by proposing a three to one division of the ‘bogus-votes’. After half an hour the police came in to end this form of ‘voting’.
are not disturbed by *goondas* from opposing candidates, and they can prevent these *goondas* from harassing their candidate.

The need for *goondas* to perform these services is such that informants deemed it near impossible to win elections without the support of the musclepower of *goondas*. As a candidate for the 2005 municipal elections in Isanpur confided to me: ‘Every chali [housing block] has two–three anti-social elements. I would also need those elements, even if I do not want it. Even people like me need them, also on the day of election. I need them to stop the disturbance of such elements’. This candidate seemed genuinely opposed to the co-operation between politicians and *goondas*, but he saw no other option but to employ them. He thought that ‘the system has gotten worse’.15

*Goondas* are also indispensable for the money that they bring in. Mukeshbhai described how he contributed to Shailesh Macwana’s campaign budget. In a locality like Isanpur, where thriving businesses are scarce, there are only a few alternative sources of money. The budget to contest elections in these neighbourhoods necessarily comes in large part from liquor traders and the owners of gambling dens. A large part of this money is collected throughout the year in the form of *hapta* (*hafta* in Hindi), the regular payments that owners of illegal businesses make to the police and politicians to prevent arrest and harassment. Although the money also helps to support the relatively luxurious lifestyles of politicians, a considerable part of it is needed to maintain local support and to finance campaigning during elections.

Politicians also benefit from the services of *goondas* after the elections. A *goonda* can help to solve a dispute by pressurising one of the disputants, for which both the

politician and the *goonda* might receive a fee from the other disputant. And a *goonda* can help to deal with issues that need musclepower to solve, for example, the clearing of squatters from land wanted for a building project, the intimidation of businessmen who want to start new businesses in the area and who are unwilling to go along with the ‘legal extortion’ of party workers, or the collection of *hapta* from hawkers (sometimes as an intermediary between the hawkers and the police).

Especially in the real estate business, the services of *matabhare* people can be valuable. By intimidating renters or owners of buildings, they can coerce inhabitants into vacating their premises. This can help to speed up new building projects by ‘settling’ ownership issues that would otherwise linger in the courts for years. This is how a local builder described his handling of encroachments on his land:

> The first way, which we prefer, is that we try to free the land by giving money to the people on the land, we try to give them cash so that they will leave. If that does not work, we sometimes go to court to free the land. But this takes a long time and it is expensive. The third way is that we employ *goondas* to pressurise the residents. He tortures them, threatens them so that they want to leave by themselves. Sometimes we do not want to engage him [a *goonda*], but he intervenes. Then we sit at the table and decide how to work on the problem. He will take some money from us and sometimes he is used to clear the land.

In this sense, *goondas* are the progeny of the limitations of Gujarat’s state institutions: *goondas* can operate relatively openly and undisturbed because they help people overcome the difficulties of dealing with government institutions and regulations. Their political contacts, as well as their local support, is to a large extent premised on the way they help others deal with the limited capacity of government institutions to provide basic services and to uphold laws and regulations. One can discern both a direct and an indirect relationship between the local standing of *goondas* and the
difficulties of dealing with state institutions. A direct relationship lies in the *matabhare* people’s capacity to provide an alternative to the overburdened courts and unco-operative police. *Goondas* profit from the fact that court cases take a very long time to settle, and that both police officers and the courts require considerable bribes to register and deal with cases: thus it is often more profitable to involve a local *goonda* to recover money, settle a dispute or force vacation of occupied land.

Local politicians need to employ *goondas* to indirectly increase their capacity to deal with the demands of the residents of their constituency. Inhabitants in localities like Isanpur face various difficulties (unresponsiveness, corruption, harassment and so on) when dealing with the governmental officials. As a result, many residents approach politicians to solve such problems. Local politicians like Shailesh Macwana spend most of their days pressuring governmental officials on behalf of residents to arrange admission to schools, to install new water pipes, to clean gutters, etc. This dependence on politicians is greater in poorer localities. Middle-class citizens use various personal means to deal with—or circumvent—the state: they have the money to buy private facilities or to bribe officials, or the contacts to pressurize influential bureaucrats, or the capacity to exchange favours with these officials. Poorer citizens, unable to avail themselves of these means, can only use their votes and their local politicians to pressure the bureaucracy. This dependency of citizens on politicians to provide access

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16 In 2006 the Gujarat High Court had a backlog of 3 million cases. *Indian Express* (10 April 2007), p.7.
17 Suketu Mehta’s *Maximum City* offers various fascinating examples of how *goondas* in Mumbai function as an alternative to the overburdened judiciary. In a conversation with Mehta, one Mumbai-based *goonda* advertised his services as follows: ‘If someone is sitting on your property, whatever is pending for ten or twenty years in the courts, we *goondas* will resolve [it] in ten days. Whatever the police, the politicians, the courts can’t do, we *goondas* do. When people are tired of the courts, when they are ruined, when they are looking for a way out, they come to us and say, “Do something”. What you have forgotten is yours, we will restore to you’. See S. Mehta, *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004), p.191.
(and alternatives) to state services shapes the political contest in these poorer localities: electoral success in these localities is largely premised on a capacity to provide access, and alternatives, to state services.

That is why the connections between politicians and goondas are more visible in poorer localities: when people rely on politicians to solve various personal issues, politicians can make effective use of the co-operation of matabhare people to improve their capacity to solve these issues. Goondas can help politicians to settle disputes by threatening one (or both) of the disputants, and a goonda can help in ‘policing’ a locality and upholding the authority of the local politicians. In this way the political usefulness of a goonda is particularly related to the need for local politicians to develop a capacity to provide alternative avenues for dispute settlement. Since inhabitants with a matabhare image can help politicians to get things done, local politicians can profit from their relationships with these people.

The relationships between politicians and goondas are facilitated by the considerable control that politicians exert over the bureaucracy. The hold politicians have over governmental officials—especially police officers—creates the scope for goondas to run their illegal businesses. Politicians’ influence over the postings and promotions of government officials enables them to prevent the police from taking action against ‘their’ goondas. Political actors are even able to transfer unco-operative government officials to so-called ‘punishment postings’; by threatening them with unpalatable transfers, or by sharing the hapta, police officers can be dissuaded from intervening in businesses that goondas run. As Isanpur’s PI (police inspector) confided to me: ‘In

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10–15 percent of the cases we have to listen to the will of politicians. These politicians decide our postings and our transfers, so we are dependent on them; I feel bad but it is not in our hand. I cannot change it, nothing else can be done’.

One can therefore argue that the dependency of politicians on goondas, and the limited capacity of state institutions to uphold laws and regulations, are mutually reinforcing: the limited capacity of the police and the courts to dispense justice creates incentives for local politicians to make use of goondas as alternative enforcers of authority, which again poses obstacles for the police and the judiciary to uphold government laws and regulations. This dialectic illustrates the necessity as well as the complexity of surmounting a state–society dichotomy. On the one hand the forms of social control that exist in localities like Isanpur limit the capacity of state institutions to expand the authority of the state, while on the other hand the operations of state institutions—their laws as well as the availability of various state resources—also shape these local patterns of authority.19

To capture the dialectic between the strategies that individual actors employ, and the underlying structure of the political game within which they compete, I use Bourdieu once again. Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of ‘field’ enables an understanding of how the structure of the relationship between individuals shapes the strategies that individual actors employ (as they fashion their strategies according to their perception of this structure of relationships), while the ‘field’ itself is simultaneously being shaped by the strategies that these individuals employ. The arena in which individuals

19 I have elaborated this argument about this dialectic between the capacity of the state to deliver public services and the strategies of various political actors elsewhere. See W. Berenschot, ‘The Everyday Mediation of the State: The Politics of Public Service Delivery’, in Development and Change, Vol. 18, no.1 (2010), pp.885-905.
compete for control over state resources can be seen as a ‘field of power’: ‘the
collection of the state proceeds apace with the construction of a field of power,
defined as the space of play within which the holders of capital (of different species)
struggle in particular for power over the state’.  

The difficulties that citizens face when attempting to gain access to state resources structures this political arena—the ‘space of play’—in which political actors compete for control over the state. The dependence of citizens on politicians to deal with state institutions structures the competition and co-operation between political actors. This dependence shapes the possible strategies that political actors employ to gain support and win elections. In the context of a state that on the one hand has enough authority to brand certain activities as illegal, but on the other does not have the capacity to fully implement such injunctions, politicians and goondas need to rely on each other to establish their local authority as well as their livelihoods. In the process they reinforce the limited capacity of the state to uphold its laws and legislation.

**Violence as Performance**

In order to effectively perform various services for their political leaders, goondas need to develop a certain public image: they need to be recognised as a matabhare person. This is why I hesitate to translate the word ‘goonda’ as ‘criminal’: while a criminal is commonly assumed to be as secretive as possible about his or her illegal activities, a small-time local goonda needs to be relatively open and even boastful about his involvement in criminal acts. Consequently the pressures that shape goondas’ behaviour are very different from those acting on a criminal whose success depends largely on the capacity to keep his or her activities secret.

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20 Bourdieu, ‘Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field’, p.58.
One obvious reason for the relative ‘public’ status of goondas is that their activities in localities like Isanpur, be it as extortionists, liquor traders or owners of gambling dens, need to be relatively well-known to the public in order to attract clients. Because of this unavoidable openness, only political backing can stop the police and the broader public from interfering in the illegal activities of goondas. This relates to a second reason: in order to attract the necessary political support, an aspiring goonda needs to develop an image as a dangerous and violent person, because such a mathabare image makes him a useful partner for local politicians.

In this light, consider the following recollections of Hasmukh, a neighbourhood leader in the area:

Mr. Gupta, a doctor, was approached by a goonda called Shaidev who had been arrested for rape and extortion. Shaidev went into his office, and emptied a gun on his table. He put the six bullets on the table and asked: ‘Which one do you want in your head?’, and he demanded Rs50,000. Dr. Gupta came to me, but he did not want to involve the police, he was afraid for his security, and that of his children. I explained that if you as a doctor will not do anything, then who could? I said I was willing to lose my life for this, and that I had some friends who would also help. That gave the doctor some confidence. Then I went to Shailesh Macwana [the local MLA] to talk about it, who just told me: ‘He is a very mathabare person, I know him from the jail, he is also in the Vishwa Hindu Parishad [a Hindu nationalist organisation]’. Then I went to another goonda called Samir, and since he saw I was with Mr. Gupta, he said: ‘Okay let us do some compromising’. [When that did not work] then I went to people from my organisation [Hasmukhbhai was involved with a small labour union], and asked them about Shaidev. They said he was a mathabare person, but not for them. So they gathered 25 people and went for him. After that he fled and only after a month the police caught him.

A large part of Hasmukhbhai’s strategy consisted of checking how strong people considered Shaidev to be. He checked with the politician Shailesh Macwana, who indicated his unwillingness to tackle Shaidev, suggesting that he had political backing.
from the VHP. This made it difficult and even dangerous to lodge a police complaint against Shaidev as he might use his contacts to prevent incarceration. It was only when Hasmukhbhai found enough musclepower himself that he could tackle Shaidev: he could stop Shaidev’s activities by mustering a group of people who were not afraid of him.

Hasmukh’s strategy illustrates how important political support is for the local position and career of a goonda. As most businesses in which goondas are involved, for instance alcohol and gambling, need to be sufficiently well-known to attract customers, a goonda needs protecting by local politicians; without political support it would be more difficult (and require more hapta) to prevent arrest by the police, since the police are generally well aware of their activities. Once an understanding has been reached with an influential politician, the business can flourish: then the local alcohol trader can import liquor with only a limited risk of getting caught, and the owner of a gambling den can come to an understanding with the police about the hapta that needs to be paid to keep his place open.

This political support is premised on the image that the goonda has in his local area. This creates a need for displays of masculinity and unruly behaviour. Having a heavy-handed, dangerous (mathabare) image gives the goonda a certain hold over the inhabitants of his area, which in turn makes the goonda useful to politicians. This violent image also prevents other people from protesting against their activities.

\[21\] It is in that light that I would interpret the macho behaviour and whisky drinking of the ‘political caste’ of Yadavs that L. Michelutti described in her “‘We are Kshatriyas but we behave like Vaishyas’: Diet and Muscular Politics Among a Community of Yadavs in North India”, pp.76–95.
Mukeshbhai described one such instance when he used violence to protect his business:

There is a person here called [Rajesh]. He started saying to people: ‘I am a social worker’. He did some things, like getting a loan, and then he forced people to give a commission. He does not have many political contacts, but people are afraid of him. He once came up to me. He told me: ‘Give me Rs1,000 every month, otherwise I will complain against you’. He wanted hapta. I slapped him right there, and with my right-hand [-man] Kanu I kicked him, in front of a lot of people. ‘I will sell liquor at your home’, I told him.

We should be hesitant about viewing the violence of people like Mukeshbhai as merely pathologically deviant behaviour. Their violence has a very instrumental aspect as well, since it is needed to develop the necessary matabhare image. Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar once psychoanalysed four notorious Hyderabadi gangsters who all had a history of violence during Hindu–Muslim riots. In an impressive mix of psychology and ethnography, Kakar offered vivid descriptions of the communal ideologies of the four men as well as some general conclusions about their psyche:

There is also a notable depressive tendency in their underlying mood, a threatened depression against which various defences are employed…. Perhaps the need to defend against an emptying and fragmenting self, the inner experience of depression, contributed to the building up of a defensive hyperactivity wherein the cohesiveness of the self is restored and most immediately experienced through an explosion in violent action. The excitement of violence becomes the biggest confirmation that one is psychically still alive, a confirmation of one’s very existence.22

Such an analysis downplays the rational and calculating side of the violent behaviour of such goondas, which is grounded in the political context in which they operate. In that context, violence is also a means to establish a very useful image. Hasmukhbhai

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used to be a small-time alcohol seller. This is how he describes the career of a *goonda*:

First you need to fight a lot. You should be ready to be beaten, and to go to jail. Then you develop a certain image. Then you can start a business, then you meet influential people, and politicians. With these contacts you can get smaller *goondas* to do things, and you can start different businesses. So there are three levels. I beat up and was beaten up 2–3 times a day. I had no respect for ladies.

The violence of a *goonda* is a performative act: its main target is not just the victim of the beating, but also the audience that watches the spectacle. The violence of the *goonda* serves to make future violence unnecessary, as this violence helps to command the obedience of the audience. The violence instils fear in the audience, which allows *goondas* to develop a certain hold over their neighbourhoods. The Gujarati word ‘*dhaak*’, which translates as ‘fear’ or ‘awe’, captures the emotive character of the authority that *goondas* exert. The word denotes an authority based on intimidation. In the words of another Isanpur inhabitant: ‘They always pick up fights. This is in order to get *dhaak*, to create fear, which is why they fight. They get *dhaak* through fighting and contacts with the police. So people stay away, they are afraid of the *matabhare* people. People are afraid to be beaten up, so we cannot do anything’.

This image can be accidental; some of the *goondas* I met did not start their careers with the intention of becoming a *goonda*. Mohanbhai developed his image through his business as an illegal seller of cinema tickets: the brawls that accompanied the illegal sale of tickets established his image as a dangerous person. This image brought him into contact with politicians. Similarly, even a fight over a sister’s illicit relationship might establish a violent image, bringing the ‘defender’ of his family’s honour to the attention of local politicians.
Goondas as Politicians

Once a person has instilled dhaak in his neighbourhood the mere threat of violence can be enough to settle a dispute; a simple command might be enough to compel a neighbourhood into voting for a particular candidate under the threat of violence. In turn the public stature of a local goonda can grow as his violent image helps to develop political contacts. A group of boys might gather around him, adding to the capacity of such a local goonda to settle issues and intimidate rivals.

In this way goondas can gradually become important political actors in their own right. With their money and their political contacts, goondas can become very helpful in solving local problems. Although goondas are frequently referred to as ‘anti-social elements’, the people of the area where they live often consider them to be very ‘social’: they help them solve problems, offer opportunities to earn money, and arrange improvements of basic facilities. As one of my informants put it: ‘Many people do not interfere in the activities of matabhare persons. The matabhare person is harmless in his own area. The mentality of people is this: if he is not harmful to us, that is enough, so why protest against him? It is because the matabhare person is helpful to people in his area’.

Their local usefulness contributes to the ‘hold’ that goondas can exert over entire neighbourhoods: their local influence is not just based on fear or intimidation, but on their capacity to do favours for people. The word prabhav—‘hold’ in Gujarati—was often used to describe the authority of a local goonda and his capacity to influence day-to-day affairs (including voting) in a locality. This makes goondas important
political actors: in areas like Isanpur, local people with a *matabhare* image are expected to sway a large number of voters.

Because of their ‘hold’, *goondas* can alter the balance of power between themselves and their political contacts. When a *goonda* has developed some local fame, local politicians cannot easily forego his support. The following, where a municipal councillor speaks about his relationship with local *goondas*, illustrates this uneasy interdependence:

I will explain to you the difficulty of people involved in politics and social workers. I am a corporator [a municipal councillor]. I know that Ashokbhai is in alcohol business, that he does ‘number two work’ [meaning illegal work]. My difficulty is this: if Ashokbhai is taken away by the police and if his brothers come to me, then I know that Ashokbhai is wrong. Still I need to go to the police station in his favour. Because this is politics. If I want to go to Ashokbhai’s *chali* (block) and if he comes along then people would vote for me. Then they will respect me. It is such a mentality. If I do not go [to the police station] for Ashokbhai or if I tell his brother clearly that your brother is doing wrong and I will not come, then they will create disturbances during elections and mess around. Then the good people who should stand by me would not stand by me. The times are very bad. In the beginning I used to say ‘No’ but I looked wrong to people. I saw that [people] are doing *wah wah* (praising) in the favour of all the ‘number two people’. Now those people are against us and the good people stay on their side.

This ‘hold’ enjoyed by *goondas* makes policing them difficult: not only are residents generally unwilling to file a complaint against ‘their’ *goonda*, politicians often feel the need to dissuade the police from taking action. As the above shows, the local hold of *goondas* forces local politicians to intervene on their behalf.

If they manage to develop their ‘hold’ over a bigger area, *goondas* can become popular politicians themselves; they can use their local authority, and the money gained through their businesses, to launch a successful electoral campaign. One of
Gujarat’s most famous *goondas, don* Latif, managed to get elected from three of Ahmedabad’s municipal constituencies simultaneously in the 1980s even though he was in jail! In this way there is a constantly shifting balance of power between politicians and *goondas*: in some areas and some periods politicians are very dependent on local *goondas* for local support, moneypower and musclepower, while on other occasions local politicians can develop their own power base, forcing local *goondas* into a more subservient role. Several informants commented to me that over the last decade the balance of power in the neighbourhoods I studied has shifted in favour of local politicians. According to them, the hold the local *goondas* had seems to have diminished; politicians are rumoured to feel less obliged to intervene with the police on behalf of ‘their’ *goondas*, resulting in an increasing number of arrests. It is a common perception that there are nowadays no more ‘big’ *goondas* like *don* Latif in the city. It is difficult to ascertain the truthfulness of these claims: they may be inspired by politically-motivated propaganda, intended to boost the image of the ruling party.

Further comparative analysis may shed more light on the conditions that influence this shifting balance of power between local politicians and *goondas*. On the basis of my fieldwork I can only tentatively propose three conditions that seems to affect the local standing of *goondas* in the localities I studied. A first condition that seems to favour the position of *goondas* in Isanpur is the relative absence of legitimate businesses that are profitable enough to help finance election campaigns. As most of Isanpur’s inhabitants derive their income from daily wage labour, hawking or small-scale cottage industries, there are few alternative sources of funding for political campaigns. This lack of alternatives forces local politicians to ask for campaign contributions from the profitable ‘number two’ businesses, such as gambling or the sale of alcohol.
A second condition, my fieldwork suggests, is the close competition between two political parties: when, as in Isanpur, the electoral competition is very tight, candidates cannot easily forego the support of local goondas. The Congress Party was the dominant political party in this Dalit-dominated area until 1985, when major communal riots helped the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) break the Dalit–Muslim coalition behind Congress’ electoral successes. The implosion of Ahmedabad’s once-powerful labour union, the Textile Labour Association (Majoor Mahajan Sangh), and the gradual weakening of Congress’ local networks, enabled the BJP—traditionally perceived as an upper-caste party—to gain a foothold in Isanpur after 1985. As the BJP managed to build its own patronage network, elections became closely-contested events. While the BJP has now become the dominant party in Gujarat, the Congress sometimes manages to secure a small victory in Isanpur. This local, close struggle for power can account for the prominence of goondas in Isanpur: where candidates can count on a large majority of the votes, politicians have less need to nurture the support of local goondas.

A third condition is the lack of alternative channels to deal with state institutions. As mentioned above, inhabitants of poorer neighbourhoods generally encounter more difficulties when dealing with government institutions. In poorer localities residents therefore have a greater need to make use of the patronage channels and the alternatives for dispute settlement that goondas can provide, thus boosting the standing of these local matabhare people. Furthermore, when these localities also lack alternative channels through which the people can access the state and settle

23 For a discussion of these two key developments in the political history of Gujarat, see Achut Yagnik and Suchitra Sheth, The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva and Beyond (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005); and Breman, The Making and Unmaking of an Industrial Working Class: Sliding Down the Labour Hierarchy in Ahmedabad, India.
disputes—such as the networks that the now largely-ineffective Textile Labour Association once offered in textile-worker localities like Isanpur—inhabitants have no choice but to rely on the services of politicians and their goondas.24

Goondas and Rioting

An analysis of the interdependencies between goondas and politicians can help to illuminate their often-observed co-operation during riots. When in 2002 large-scale rioting erupted again in Ahmedabad,25 politicians were often seen co-operating with local ‘anti-social elements’.26 Inhabitants of Isanpur observed that during the riots local politicians made active efforts to get local goondas to lead the mobs. This is what a member of a political party from Isanpur observed about the co-operation between politicians and goondas:

[Shailesh Macwana] would call some matabhare person [a person with a violent image] and tell him to kill two Muslims. He would say: ‘Just kill and then move’. Then four Hindus would be killed, and this is how the riots would start. Shaileshbhai has good contacts with anti-social elements. He uses them during elections. They are paid for, generally they get boys from outside to do it, and then they help to get them released. They use business people to get them, and they tell them to kill four Muslims, for example. They would say: ‘Come at different times, and each time kill one Muslim, shoot them, or use your knife’. If

24 Jan Breman has argued this point succinctly: ‘Having lost their mediated access to the municipal corporation and other state agencies as members of a powerful trade union, the former mill workers are now dependent on slumlords for the representation of their interests. To that extent the collapse of the textile industry has been a major cause in the criminalization of local level politics’. See Breman, The Making and Unmaking of an Industrial Working Class: Sliding Down the Labour Hierarchy in Ahmedabad, India, p.211.
someone gets caught, it depends on the party in power if this person is used to fix the blame. And it will be used to release political anger, as a way to frame your opponent in politics.

In this way local goondas can be seen as ‘riot specialists’, as such local criminals are generally among the small group within a mob that commits most of the actual physical violence. Most people in a mob are just there to watch; they might be attracted by the spectacle or they are curious to find out what is happening. As this informant observed: ‘Ordinary people cannot use weapons. But when anti-social elements step in their strength [of ordinary people] increases. The impression that the public has of him [the ‘antisocial element’, goonda] is that he is not afraid of dying. So the public is right behind him and the dadas [goondas] lead’.

This co-operation between politicians and goondas during riots can also be seen as a product of the interdependencies I have illustrated above. Because of their dependence on politicians, it is not easy for small-time goondas to resist the exhortations of politicians to participate in rioting: neglecting the requests of politicians to contribute to the ‘defence’ of the locality (meaning attacking other localities) could endanger important relationships. Conversely, by performing these ‘services’, by taking the lead in the burning, looting and killing, such local goondas gain the gratitude of people who can help them to stay in business after the riots. As one informant observed: ‘In the time of riots they [goondas] become leaders. If they do not take part, they will spoil their image. In normal times, these people do dadagiri [illegal activities – but didn’t you say earlier that they can’t be thought of as illegal

27 On the role of ‘riot specialists’ within ‘institutionalized riot systems’, see Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*. I have argued elsewhere that institutionalised riot systems are in fact local patronage networks, and their operation during riots can be understood as an extension of their everyday functioning as mediator between state institutions and citizens. See Ward Berenschot, ‘Rioting as Maintaining Relations: Hindu–Muslim Violence and Political Mediation in Gujarat, India’, in *Civil Wars*, Vol.11, no.4 (Dec. 2009), pp.414–34.
because the police etc were complicit?]. So he feels that if he does not take leadership in riot times, he would suffer for his misbehaviour in normal times. People will say [if he does take leadership] you helped us, so you can go ahead with your dadagiri’. The active participation of local goondas during riots is an exercise in maintaining relations: their contribution to the riots allows them to cement their relationships with people who are essential to maintaining their livelihoods.

Secondly, riots provide (aspiring) goondas with a stage to perform their capacity for violence. The riots are an opportunity to inspire fear and awe among their neighbours; the active or tacit support of the police allows them to acquire a violent image without too much risk of arrest or retribution. This makes riots a very valuable opportunity: such a display of violence can serve in acquiring the image of being ‘prone to violence’. As discussed above, this image can be used to generate income, since it gives an aspiring goonda the leverage to settle disputes, engage in extortion, intimidate rivals and so on. The riots provide an opportunity to establish the image that makes local goondas attractive partners for politicians; once local residents become fearful of an aspiring goonda, he becomes useful to politicians as their local enforcer. Riots thus provide local mathabare people with an opportunity to establish (or protect) their livelihood; riots are, as Paul Brass asserts, street theatre productions.28

The now-elderly goonda Mohanbhai illustrates the connection between rioting and the need to maintain relationships in his own way. As we sat on his bed talking about his life, he mentioned his Muslim friends. ‘I fought with Muslims a lot, still they respect me a lot’, he said. ‘These people [his Muslim friends] are a lakh times better than the

28 Brass, The Production of Hindu–Muslim Violence in Contemporary India, p.231.
Hindu community. Our people are trying to get us killed, but they give their life for you’. I could not conceal my surprise. Was this famous Hindu rioter now presenting himself as a great friend of Muslims? His answer came again in that subdued and melancholic tone: ‘The [political] party workers make the riots happen when they want, and they can prevent it when they want. I have to defend my own area. Everyone goes to the street, so I have to be there’.

The reader may decide whether this is a lame excuse for participating in rioting, or an authentic reflection on the pressures that shaped the old man’s life, or both.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have interpreted the regular co-operation between local *goondas* and politicians in the light of the way that politicians function as intermediaries between state institutions and citizens. As (poorer) citizens face various difficulties—delays, corruption, unresponsiveness—in dealing with state institutions, they rely on political actors to gain access to, or alternatives for, state services. The intermediary role that local politicians thus come to fill—as mediators between citizens and state institutions—creates a political arena in which the support from *goondas* is an important political asset. In the context of a mediated state, the electoral (and financial) success of politicians is largely premised on their capacity to provide access to state resources and to provide alternatives: developing a capacity to ‘get things done’ for supporters is an essential precondition for electoral success. The moneypower and musclepower that *goondas* provide can boost this capacity: their ‘musclepower’ can help to solve disputes, to provide security and to establish one’s local authority, while their ‘moneypower’ enables politicians to reward supporters and
to arrange expensive election campaigns. In this way the limited capacities of state institutions to uphold legislation and provide access to state resources engenders a political field in which courting the support of *goondas* is nearly indispensable.

At the same time there are powerful incentives for the local *goondas* to comply with the wishes of powerful politicians, since political connections are vital to prevent police intervention in their illegal (but generally well-known) activities. This exchange of favours between politicians and *goondas* undermines the capacity of the police to take action against *goondas*: in return for their moneypower and musclepower, politicians are forced to safeguard the illegal businesses of *goondas* from too much police interference. The ‘criminalisation of politics’ is thus not so much a sign of moral decay, but a product of the difficulties that (poorer) citizens encounter in dealing with state institutions and the specific nature of local political competition that these difficulties engender.