Lubricating a Patronage Democracy: Political Fixers and the rise of Hindu-Nationalism in Gujarat, India¹

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Abstract

Political fixers are intermediaries who use political contacts and knowledge of official procedures to facilitate the interaction between citizens and state institutions. Fixers have become a prominent feature of India's democracy as facilitators of clientelistic exchanges between voters and politicians. Through a discussion of the functioning of political fixers in Gujarat's main city Ahmedabad, this article argues that changes in voting behavior can be explained by looking at (changes in) the way political fixers provide access to state resources. I argue that Hindu-nationalist organizations managed to gain popularity among backward castes in Gujarat because of the dependence of these communities on political fixers. As the networks of older political fixers collapsed, Hindu-nationalist organizations could win a local following by offering political fixers from backward castes new channels to access state resources.

Keywords: Clientelism, Democracy, Local State; Corruption, Dalits, Hindu-Nationalism, India, Gujarat

Political fixers are intermediaries who use political contacts and knowledge of official procedures to help citizens, particularly the poor, deal with state institutions. Various referred to as *dalal*, *pyraveerkar*, or denigratingly, *chamchas* or *tapori*, these brokers have acquired a key role in the flow of information and resources between state

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institutions and India's citizens. They have been described as 'lubricants' and 'enablers' of India's democracy²: while the often lucrative nature of their mediation earns them denigrating comments about the selfish nature of their *seva* ('service'), political fixers are generally indispensable for both power holders and citizens. They channel the demands of citizens to alien and often unresponsive state institutions. They supply government officials with the necessary information to implement policies and to uphold regulation. And they help politicians to trade the access to state resources for electoral support. While such brokers are a central feature of many post-colonial democracies, it has been argued that political fixers are more prominent in India than elsewhere³. Although this is beyond the scope of this article, quite a number of interesting parallels could be drawn between India's political fixers and the functioning of 'brokers' observed in countries like Brazil, Argentina or Italy⁴.

Given the central role of political fixers in the everyday functioning of India's democracy, it is surprising that there are relatively few studies devoted to them. Political fixers regularly make appearances in studies on other topics: they figure in the literature on India's political parties, which highlights how, in India's 'patronage democracy', these brokers help politicians to organize the exchange of state resources for electoral support⁵. Fixers also appear in the literature on governance and service delivery which discusses how, through the meddling of networks of politicians and political fixers the actual

² See G. Ram Reddy, & G. Haragopal, 'The Pyraveekar: "The Fixer" in Rural India', in *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXV, no.11 (1985), p.1154; James Manor, 'Small-Time Political Fixers in India's States: "Towel over Armpit"', in *Asian Survey*, Vol. XL, no.5 (2000), p.817.

³ Manor, 'Small-Time Political Fixers in India's States', p.817.

⁴ For Argentina, see the outstanding account of the functioning Peronist networks of brokers in Javier Auyero, *Poor People's Politics: Peronist Survival Networks and the Legacy of Evita*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). See also Jeremy Boissevain, *Friends of Friends: Networks, Manipulators and Coalitions*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974); Anton Blok, *The mafia of a Sicilian Village 1860-1960. A study of Violent Peasant Entrepreneurs*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974); Luis Roniger, 'Caciquismo and Coronelismo: Contextual Dimensions of Patron Brokerage in Mexico and Brazil', in *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. XXII, no.2 (1987), pp.71-99.

⁵ Kanchan Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed: Patronage and Ethnic Head Counts in India*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); F.G. Bailey, *Politics and Social Change: Orissa in 1959*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963); Myron Weiner, *Party Building in a New Nation: The Indian National Congress*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Steven Wilkinson, 'Explaining changing patterns of party-voter linkages in India', in H. Kitschelt & S. I. Wilkinson (eds.), *Patrons, Clients and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 110-141.

outcome of development policies can differ greatly from its stated objectives⁶. These networks of politicians and political fixers have been referred to as a 'shadow state' or 'political society'⁷. Thirdly, authors engaged in an 'anthropology of the state' discuss the role of political fixers in shaping the way common Indians 'see', 'imagine' and experience the 'everyday state'⁸.

There are, to my knowledge, few studies that focus on the phenomenon of India's political fixers *itself*. After a paper by Reddy and Haragopal inaugurated the study of this topic, Manor has written an excellent comparison of political fixers in different Indian states. His 'invitation to more thoroughgoing research'⁹ has only recently been taken up by others¹⁰. This paper aims to build on their work by focusing in particular on the interaction between (elected) politicians and political fixers. I aim to highlight the importance of studying political fixers by showing how attention for (changes in) the way political fixers provide access to state resources, can help to explain and understand changes in voting behavior: I will use a description of everyday functioning of political fixers in a dalit-dominated locality in Ahmedabad (Gujarat's main city) to explain why

⁶ Isa Baud, & de J. Wit (eds.), *New forms of urban governance in India: shifts, models, networks and contestations*. (New Delhi: Sage, 2008); Jos Mooij, 'Food Policy in India: the Importance of Electoral Politics in Policy Implementation', in *Journal of International Development*, Vol. 11, (1999), pp.625-636; René Veron, Stuart Corbridge, Glyn Williams, & Manoj Srivastava, 'The Everyday State and Political Society in Eastern India: Structuring Access to the Employment Assurance Scheme', in *The Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 39, no.5 (2003), pp.1-28.

⁷ See Barbara Harriss-White, *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

⁸ See Stuart Corbridge, Glyn Williams, Manoj Srivastava, & Rene Veron, *Seeing the state: Governance and governmentality in India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Thomas Blom Hansen, & Finn Stepputat, 'Introduction: States of Imagination', in T. B. Hansen & F. Stepputat (eds.), *States of Imagination: Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State* (pp. 1-41). (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Thomas Blom Hansen, 'Sovereigns Beyond the State: On Legality and Public Authority in India', in R. Kaur (ed.), *Religion, Violence and Political Mobilisation in south Asia* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), pp. 109-144; Akhil Gupta, 'Blurred boundaries: the discourse of corruption, the culture of politics, and the imagined state', in *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 22, no.2 (1995), pp.375-402; C.J. Fuller, & Véronique Bénéï (eds.), *The Everyday State & Society in Modern India*. (London: Hurst & Co, 2001).

⁹ James Manor, 'Small-Time Political Fixers in India's States', p.818.

¹⁰ Reddy, 'The Pyraveekar: 'The Fixer' in Rural India'; Anirudh Krishna, 'Politics in the middle: mediating relationships between the citizens and the state in rural North India', in H. Kitschelt & S. Wilkinson (eds.), *Patrons, Clients and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 141-159; Gregory L. Simon, 'Geographies of Mediation: Market development and the Rural Broker in Maharashtra, India', in *Political Geography*, Vol. XXVIII, no.3 (2009), pp.197-207.

since 1980's *dalits* (lower caste communities) left the Congress party in favor of the Hindu-nationalist party, BJP.

That has been one of the main 'open questions'¹¹ in the literature on contemporary Gujarati politics: what drew the lower castes to a Hindu-nationalist movement that had campaigned against caste-reservations and defended caste-hierarchies? While in the early 1980's anti-reservation riots still pitched upper-castes (and the BJP) against Dalits (who then largely supported the Congress party), by 1985 the BJP seemed to have wooed *dalit* voters with visible success. Dalits started to side with upper-caste Hindus against Muslims (often their neighbours) during outburst of communal violence (in 1985/86, 1990, 1991, 2002)¹²¹³, and the BJP could – thanks to an increased vote-share from *dalits* - establish a political dominance that lasts until today. Some have related this important shift to a 'politics of recognition'¹⁴: according to this argument Dalits turned to the BJP out of a desire for social recognition, since through the Hindu-nationalist movement and the 'Hindu-identity' that this movement promoted *dalits* hoped to gain respectability and social mobility. Others have related this political shift to the informalisation of the labour market after the demise of Gujarat's textile industry in the 1980's: Jan Breman¹⁵ in particular has argued that the resulting scramble for jobs and resources enabled the BJP and its affiliates to tap into increased Dalit-Muslim tensions.

¹¹ See Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, 'Ahimsa, identification and sacrifice in the Gujarat pogrom', in *Social Anthropology*, Vol. 18, no.2 (2010), p. 665. In this article Ghassem-Fachandi gives a short overview on the literature dealing with the support of Dalits for the BJP, arguing that the available explanations are unsatisfying.

¹² In fact, during the 2002 riots the violence was actually centred on areas where *dalits* live in the vicinity of Muslims. Dalit youths seemed to have been the main executioners of the violence, egged on and supported by often upper caste leaders (see Asghar Ali Engineer (ed.). *The Gujarat Carnage*. (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003); Dionne Bunsha, *Scarred: Experiments with Violence in Gujarat*. (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006);

¹³ For an analysis of the relation between political mediation and communal violence, see Ward Berenschot, 'Rioting as Maintaining Relations: Hindu-Muslim Violence and Political Mediation in Gujarat, India', in *Civil Wars*, Vol. XI, no.4 (2009), pp.414-434, as well as Ward Berenschot, *Riot Politics: India's Hindu-Muslim Violence and the Everyday Mediation of the State*. (London: Hurst & Co, Forthcoming 2011).

¹⁴ See Ornit Shani, *Communalism, caste and Hindu nationalism: the violence in Gujarat*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 155; Achyut Yagnik, & Suchitra Sheth, *The shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva and Beyond*. (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005); Ghanshyam Shah, 'BJP's Rise to Power', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 13, no.2/3 (1996), pp.165-167+169-170.

¹⁵ Jan Breman, *The Making and unmaking of an Industrial Working Class: Sliding Down the Labour Hierarchy in Ahmedabad, India*. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004). See also Ghanshyam Shah, 'Contestation and Negotiations: Hindutva Sentiments and Temporal Interests in Gujarat Elections', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 37, no.48 (2002).

While taking these perspectives on board, I will argue in this article that Dalits could be wooed by the BJP because of the way many *dalits* depend on political fixers to gain access to state resources: when in the early 1980's the BJP opened up its patronage channels to Dalits – at the time when other, older channels were fading away – BJP-affiliated political fixers could lure the Dalit community by offering a much-needed access to public services. In the context of an omnipresent but inaccessible state, this lure is sufficiently enticing to overcome concerns over BJP's (reservation-) policies.

I will illustrate this argument by discussing the functioning of political fixers in (mainly) Isanpur, a dalit-dominated locality in the eastern part of Ahmedabad that was at the centre of the 2002 Hindu-Muslim violence in Ahmedabad. After the textile mills in the area closed in the 1980's, the area still suffers from high unemployment and acute poverty. This article is based on fieldwork conducted between January 2005 and March 2006, when I lived close to Isanpur and for two months in the area itself. The names of the locality and its inhabitants have been changed.

Social Workers and Party Workers

Jagdishbhai has a small office inside his *chawl* ('housing block'), made of loosely stacked bricks, decorated with flags and posters of Congress' politicians. Above the door a small signboard identifies Jagdishbhai as a social worker. Jagdishbhai is sitting inside on a large bed that is almost always covered with papers. I am sitting on the chair where usually the neighbours sit. Throughout the week people drop in to present their difficulties to Jagdishbhai, to ask for his help to solve a clogged gutter, to arrange for treatment in the hospital, to get someone a job or to prevent an arrest by the police. Many come to settle a dispute; Jagdishbhai arbitrates in fights between neighbours, he performs marriage counseling, and when a boy and a girl elope together he gets the two families together to see if the two sides can agree to a marriage. And often people come to request their help to deal with the police.

Today I have come to discuss Jagdishbhai's handling of a recent conflict about a wall. A relatively well-off resident had been renovating his house, and in the process he

had moved one wall five inches on the land of his poorer neighbour. The poorer neighbour felt offended, and demanded that the wall be removed. As his richer neighbour declined, the dispute had led to a complaint at the police station. That is when Jagdishbhai got involved. 'The police has called me. If we can reach a compromise it is much less work for them. They regularly call me for these disputes so that they have less work. Earlier, I had told the poorer man that it would be stupid to go to the police. I told him not to spoil relations.' Together with a local politician and a few other *aagal padato manaso* ('prominent people') Jagdishbhai had gone over the case, and they had proposed a compromise to both sides: the wall can stay, but the richer inhabitant should give a written promise that the remaining construction work would be done properly.

But the poorer neighbour had refused this compromise. 'He is just jealous of his neighbour, I think', Jagdishbhai tells me. Now the case will go to court, under article 107 of the Indian Penal code. As Jagdishbhai explains, 'when there is a fight, the case should have been registered under article 151. Now [since there was no fight] it is registered under 107, which means the case goes directly to court without any arrest. The police would have asked for money to decide under which article the case is registered. They [the complainants] called me because they know I would complain about the police. It is my area so I would come to know. Without people like us, they would simply lock them up'.

That is a sure way to recognize a social worker: social workers generally have detailed knowledge about the intricacies of the Indian Penal Code. The article under which a case is booked is extremely important, as it specifies how much scope both police officers and social workers have for negotiations to settle an issue once an FIR ('first information report') has been registered with the police. If there has been a fight, if somebody got injured, if the injury led to bloodshed: the Indian Penal code specifies in what instances an arrest has to be made and when a case has to go to the courts. The local constables can complicate matters by booking a case under a 'heavier' article, or they can alleviate worries by booking a case under a 'lighter' article or by writing down that an arrest has been made – if the applicable article requires this – without actually making the arrest. In such instances both police officials and inhabitants prefer to involve a social worker to smoothen their interaction: a social worker can help inhabitants by preventing

excessive harassment, while the police relies on people like Jagdishbhai to settle local issues and, occasionally, to arrange the bribe they require for their cooperation.

In a neighbourhood like Isanpur, public authority is effectively shared by a wide range of local actors. Local sovereignty is ‘fragmented’¹⁶ as the capacity to implement injunctions, or to regulate social life, is shared between state officials and non-state actors like Jagdishbhai. It is tempting to see the prominence of such neighbourhood leaders as an indication of the ineffectiveness and weakness of the state: in this view it is due to the limited capacity of the state that neighbourhood leaders can still ‘keep the state out’ in certain spheres. Such a view would miss the point that Jagdishbhai’s local authority is also a product of the presence of the state and its capacity to deliver various services. Jagdish could gain local authority thanks to the services that the state is providing: local inhabitants need someone like Jagdishbhai because he can help them gain access to state resources and facilitate their interaction with the police. Inhabitants come to Jagdishbhai’s ramshackle office because he is capable of pressurizing state officials into delivering various services. It is thus in the context of a ‘weak-strong state’¹⁷ that political fixers thrive: the need for political fixers is the result of the combination of the state’s omnipresence and ambition to regulate many spheres of life (as this makes state-access valuable) *together with* its limited capacity to meet the demand for its services (as this makes state-access exclusive).

The second contextual factor that boosts the prominence of local fixers like Jagdishbhai is the relatively large role that the state plays in the local economy. Both the lack of secure alternative livelihoods (particularly after the demise of Ahmedabad’s textile industry) and the discrimination that Dalits experience when searching for private sector jobs, make governmental jobs and resources very sought after. The limited, and often precarious, sources of income, and the relative importance of state resources like jobs, loans, welfare schemes, contracts etc. for local livelihoods have thus contributed to the prominence of political fixers. In this way the gradual liberalisation of Gujarat’s economy since the 1980’s has contributed to the pervasiveness of social workers and

¹⁶ Cf. Thomas Blom Hansen, ‘Sovereigns Beyond the State: On Legality and Public Authority in India’, in R. Kaur (ed.), *Religion, Violence and Political Mobilization in South Asia*. (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005) pp. 109-144.

¹⁷ Cf. Lloyd I. Rudolph, & Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *In the Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

party workers, since the relentless pressure to reduce labour costs has boosted the dependence on the state as a lucrative source of income. This dependence on state resources has made the provision of access to these resources an attractive activity for political fixers.

Observers have conceptualized political fixers as operating outside of political parties. Manor writes for example that ‘fixers (...) have tended to maintain only loose and temporary associations with any single party’¹⁸. Such a conceptualization of political fixers would hide from view the fact that much of the ‘fixing’ – the facilitation of access to public services – is also done by party operatives¹⁹. Some political fixers are more closely allied to a political party than others. As the character of such political alliance has a considerable impact on the self-presentation and *modus operandi* of fixers, I would propose a (somewhat stylized) distinction between two types of political fixers: ‘social workers’ and ‘party workers’ – terms that Isanpur residents also regularly use. Both are political fixers in the sense that they make use of political contacts to help people interact with state institutions. The difference between the two types lies in their self-presentation and the terms of their exchange with politicians. Party workers are open supporters of political parties who develop their preferential access to political leaders by performing all sorts of organizational tasks for them. Social workers, like Jagdishbhai, present themselves as neighbourhood leaders (*stanik neta*) and community representatives, whose support for a political party is less open and more conditioned on (promises of) the provision of access to state resources²⁰. Party workers, in contrast, develop their access of state resources and their capacity for ‘fixing’ by putting elected politicians in ‘debt’ through a repeated performance of organizational services. A party worker is expected to attend various party functions and to perform all sorts of organizational tasks, while politicians only call upon social workers for support at election time.

To capture this contrast between social workers and party workers, consider the everyday routine of Mahesh Varma, a party worker for the BJP. Every morning

¹⁸ Manor, ‘Small-Time Political Fixers in India's States’, p. 823.

¹⁹ See also Joop De Wit & Erhard Berner, ‘Progressive Patronage? Municipalities, NGOs, CBOs and the Limits to Slum Dwellers’ Empowerment’, in *Development and Change*, Vol. XL, no.5 (2009), p 933.

²⁰ Krishna used the term ‘*naya neta*’ for political fixers operating in villages in Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh. His ‘*naya neta*’ seem comparable to the social workers I describe here (even though in Gujarat I never heard this term being used). See Krishna, ‘Politics in the middle: mediating relationships between the citizens and the state in rural North India’.

Maheshbhai can be found at the side of one of the main roads of Maneknagar, a lower middle-class locality in the old city of Ahmedabad. He sits next next to Pravin Dalal, the local municipal councilor, and four other party workers. At this roadside they receive a daily flow of local inhabitants, who come to ask for Pravin Dalal's help to deal with governmental institutions – for, for example, getting a loan, repairing broken paving, settling a police case, getting a proof of residence or reducing one's hospital fees²¹. The party workers help Pravin Dalal in this process, each in his own way: one party worker is in charge of handling (almost) all of Dalal's incoming phone calls – this is Dalal's PA ('personal assistant') – the second is charged with passing on the complaints about sanitation and basic amenities to the concerned officials, a third helps filling out official forms while the fourth deals particularly with requests that involve welfare schemes like widow pensions.

Mahesh is in charge of making 'true copies': the visitors of the roadside office give him copies of exam-results, death- and birth certificates, tax receipts etc., which he turns into 'official' copies by putting Pravin Dalal's stamp on it. During elections he helps to organize rallies, he tours the neighbourhood – 'I go from home to home and I tell people to vote for BJP, because of the work they have done' – and at election day he oversees the voting as BJP's 'booth representative'. Maheshbhai's cheerful manner and somewhat jerky movements make him likeable, while also somehow denying him the charisma that his age – he is nearing fifty – might have conferred on him. His stamping of the papers for Pravin Dalal is hardly the most prestigious task, which is an indication of his rank in the fluid and subtle but nevertheless existing hierarchy among party workers. Despite having served his party, the BJP, for 25 years, he has never captured an official position, not even a membership of the BJP's local ward commission. There is a hint of bitterness about that when he talks about his work for the BJP: 'There is much competition within BJP because the party is big. It is the high command who decides [to give a ticket, i.e. to make someone a candidate for elections], they call the workers and ask what work they have done. If I want to get a ticket I need the support of a bigger leader, or get people together and show the support I have'. But Mahesh is able to get

²¹ For more on Pravin Dalal's early morning 'mediation of the state' at the roadside, see Ward Berenschot, 'Everyday Mediation: The Politics of Public Service Delivery in Gujarat, India', in *Development and Change*, Vol. 41, no.5 (2010), pp.883-905.

small things done, as he regularly conveys problems from his neighbours and family members to Pravin Dalal and the area's MLA. In this way he, like Jagdishbhai, functions as a democratic 'lubricant', in the sense that he facilitates the flow of information between elected politicians and their constituents.

Mahesh said he started to work for the BJP in order to help his neighbours: 'I joined because I wanted to help people, to get people services, water, gutter and to get work for young people. When there is a vacancy [for a government job] somewhere, we give reference'. This desire might be genuine, but often gets mixed with more selfish aims: the party-workers with more charisma than Mahesh also develop a certain closeness to politicians with the aim of starting a political career of their own, and furthermore they are regularly tempted to exploit that closeness to make money, by asking for a fee for solving various bureaucratic hurdles.

Clientelistic exchanges

This distinction between party workers and social workers – while stylized, as many political fixers fall in between these two ideal-types – helps to capture the clientelistic²² exchanges that take place between fixers and politicians. Both type of fixers perform favours for politicians in order to develop their access to state resources: while a party worker develops his access to state resources by performing various organizational services, a social worker can make use of political channels because of his capacity to deliver votes – a capacity that an influential politician can decide to build up by deciding to respond to his requests. Jagdishbhai can pressurize state officials on behalf of his neighbours because of his closeness to the local municipal councilor, Vinodbhai. As he says of his efforts to arrange a budget to improve paving and water provision in the area: 'Poor people do not get help from officials. The officials will say, we'll come and see' but they do not come. Without *laagvag* ('influence') the work does not get done. When we go directly to the officers, we can use the letterhead of Vinodbhai. If they don't listen

²² In this essay I am using the term clientelistic exchanges to refer to the exchange of electoral support – whether direct (votes) or indirect (e.g. organization support or money) – for access to state resources. For a recent excellent overview on the literature on political clientelism, see Herbert Kitschelt, & Steven Wilkinson, 'Citizen-politician linkages: an introduction', in H. Kitschelt & S. Wilkinson (eds.), *Patrons, Clients and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition* (pp. 1-50). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

then we go the corporator [municipal councilor]. The officer solves the problem of politicians quickly'. The backing of a politician increases the capacity of a social worker to deal with government officials: social workers can use the influence of politicians over the bureaucracy to further their own agenda. They use this influence directly and indirectly: social workers ask local politicians to deal with uncooperative government officials or to secure the budget for the improvement of local amenities, but social workers may also deal with bureaucrats themselves by using the name or the letterhead of a politician to pressurize local bureaucrats. Mentioning the association with an influential politician conveys an implicit threat to a civil servant: if you do not cooperate fully, I might get you transferred or I might arrange some complaints against you. It is this implicit threat that enables a political fixer to pressurize a bureaucrat or to prevent harassment at the police station.

That is the crux of the daily exchanges between social workers and politicians: by supporting a social worker, a politician can boost the local status of this social worker, which in turn gives social workers the authority to influence the voting of their neighbours. The mechanism of this exchange is reflected in the commonly used expression 'to have a hold' (*'prabhav chhe'*) as used in these remarks of two inhabitants about the work of social workers: 'You get a hold if you are forthcoming, if you organize religious events etcetera. (...) If he can solve problems with water, or when the gutter is overflowing, then he becomes a leader. So people start to think that what this person says is true. So they follow the opinion of this person'. The expression 'to have a hold' refers to the authority of a person, and to the power to condone or sanction behavior of inhabitants. Having a hold implies political importance, since this 'hold' implies the capacity to influence a sizable number of voters.

For this reason social workers can be seen as facilitators of a clientelistic exchange between politicians and voters: he can convey demands of his neighbours to politicians, while his local 'hold' ensures politicians that a response to these demands will also translate into votes. These exchanges can help interpret the frantic campaigning activity that can be observed at election time. At election time every social worker (and party worker) needs to show his support for a candidate, because this support for a candidate will – if the social worker has backed a winning candidate – in the future

translate into preferential access to state resources. So during elections Jagdishbhai accompanies Vinodbhai on neighbourhood rounds (*lok sampark*, 'meet the people'), he delivers speeches praising his virtues, he attends the rallies and, at election day, he makes sure his neighbours turn out to vote. After elections both the candidates and the social workers study the results in great detail²³: if a social worker has indeed managed to deliver a large contingent of votes from 'his area', then this will strengthen any future demands for help from the elected politician. A proven 'hold' over a large group of people can, in the long run, enable a political fixer to make the career-move that most of them desire: to get a ticket to fight local elections and become a politician in his own right. Once a political fixer has considerable standing in his area and a record of having done favors for others, he could cash in on these favors for the necessary financial, organizational, and electoral support to contest elections. In this sense the cooperation between elected politicians and political fixers is a bit uneasy: while politicians need to respond to the requests from political fixers to maintain their own support-base, they risk propping up their own competitors.

Such exchanges between politicians and social workers is not so unequal and exploitative as the patron-client relationships described in the older literature on clientelism²⁴ – where the client seems much more dependent on the patron than the other way around. In the studied localities a social worker needs the backing of a politician to develop a capacity to solve local issues, but once this social worker has established his 'hold', a politician is also dependent on such a local leader to deliver the votes. If a politician does not deliver on his promises, the social worker can switch loyalties and support an opposing candidate. This possibility gives a social worker leverage over politicians. Similarly, one cannot say that Jagdishbhai's neighbours are hapless bystanders in this system: when interviewing his neighbours about their voting behaviour, most inhabitants said they voted for the person 'who did the work', implying that their vote is contingent on a proven capacity to provide access to state resources. They base

²³ Vote monitoring is a central element of clientelistic exchange relations between voters and politicians because this monitoring allows politicians to ensure that an effort on their part (e.g. to deliver public services) translates into votes. See Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 'Citizen-politician linkages: an introduction'.

²⁴ See for example Jeremy Boissevain, *Friends of Friends: Networks, Manipulators and Coalitions*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974); James Scott, 'Patron-client Politics and Political change in Southeast Asia', in *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 66, no.1 (1972), pp.91-113.

their vote on the perceived capacity of the candidate to deliver services *as well as* on the access that, through their local political fixers, they perceive to have to this candidate: they will be inclined to heed Jagdishbhai's voting advice only if he has been successful in getting power holders to do their work, and if another fixer is not likely to be more successful). In this sense their vote is also an expression of trust or distrust in the political fixer who promises to provide access to the candidate. As De Wit and Berner have argued this kind of patronage might be a more attractive avenue to gain access to state resources for poorer citizens than the more 'civic' forms of collective action, because demonstrations, rallies or letter writing (etc.) are time-consuming and often perceived to be less effective²⁵.

Compared to the way the 'Congress system' was functioning up until the 1980's, the available material on political fixers suggests that there are two important changes in the way political fixers are facilitating the exchanges described above²⁶. Firstly, the contemporary political fixers as described in this paper differ from the class of 'local notables' that the Congress party used to rely on to deliver the votes. Earlier, the political fixing was mainly done by traditional upper-caste patrons, village strongmen and other 'big men' while by now these older political fixers seem to have made way for actors whose influence is based more on a proven capacity to get things done than on non-political forms of prestige. The need of common Indians to gain access to state resources is creating a breed of 'naya neta' ('new leaders'), who derive their status not from personal attributes like age, wealth or prestige of the family (like more traditional leaders such as caste leaders or respected elders), but from a capacity to 'get things done' for their neighbours. Secondly, the increased intensity of party competition since the demise of the 'Congress system' has allowed for the proliferation of political fixers, enabling

²⁵ See De Wit & Berner, 'Progressive Patronage? Municipalities, NGOs, CBOs and the Limits to Slum Dwellers' Empowerment'.

²⁶ On the Congress system, see Rajni Kothari, 'The congress 'System' in India', in *Asian survey*, Vol. 4, no.12 (1964), pp.1161-1173; Paul R. Brass, 'National Power and Local Politics in India: A Twenty-Year Perspective', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 18, no.1 (1984), pp.89-118; Atul Kohli, *Democracy and discontent: India's growing crisis of governability*. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1990); Weiner, 'Party Building in a New Nation: The Indian National Congress'.

inhabitants to choose between workers, to use those fixers who actually live up to their promises²⁷.

This has made the system of exchanges also inherently pragmatic, as considerations about ideology or policies take a back seat to more pragmatic considerations about a capacity to arrange a streetlight, a hospital bed or admission in a college. As we now turn to the career of another political fixer, the BJP-supporter Jayent Parmar, I will argue that it was this pragmatism that enabled Hindu-nationalist organizations to gain a following among Dalits. It was because of the dependence of Dalits on political fixers - as described in this section – that they could be swayed to support a movement that in terms of its ideology (its defence of caste-hierarchies) as well as its policies (its opposition to reservations for backward-castes) seemed to have little to offer to Dalits.

BJP will help you

In the daytime Jayent Parmar works as a lab assistant at Gujarat University, but in the evenings he can often be found on a *charpoy* outside his home in Isanpur, where he receives guests or holds meetings with the local youth. His visitors sometimes call him ‘professor’, which slightly overvalues his position at the university, but the name does attest to the learning and thoughtfulness that he exudes. As the chairman of a city-level BJP-committee for *dalits*, he is one of the most prominent BJP-workers in the area. At his charpoy Jayentbhai busies himself with the problems of his neighbours: ‘people come to me because of my political connections. And people believe that an educated and a good person should solve these issues’.

One of these issues was a form that one of the neighbours had filled in for taking the 12th grade board exam – *the* exam that determines whether a student can enter a good college or university. According to the boy, the clerk who had filled in the form had made a mistake, and his form was rejected – as a result he could not take part in the exam. His

²⁷ These arguments can be found in Anirudh Krishna, ‘Politics in the middle: mediating relationships between the citizens and the state in rural North India’, in H. Kitschelt & S. Wilkinson (eds.), *Patrons, Clients and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition* (pp. 141-159). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). See also Atul Kohli, *Democracy and discontent: India's growing crisis of governability*. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1990).

parents went to Jayentbhai for help. He offered to meet the upper-caste principal of the school ('a very influential man') to solve the matter. 'I went there and talked with a lot of respect that 'sir, it is your mistake, you should help make arrangements for this person to take exams'. The conversation ended up in a shouting match and the exchange of caste-related curse words, and the police was called. 'So the police came and asked me first 'what is the matter Jayentbhai?', because – the entire police staff knows me. They know that I would not do *babaal* ('shouting') just like that.' This made the principal calm down, but he still refused to let the boy do the exam. The next day Jayentbhai filed an FIR ('first information report') with the police. The principal was not amused and managed to get some political leaders to ask Jayent to withdraw the complaint. But as the principal still did not change his stand, Jayentbhai refused and even organised a small demonstration with other party workers which got some news coverage. In the end a compromise was reached: the boy's family received INR 25,000 (about \$550) as compensation, while the boy had to wait another year to do the exam. Jayentbhai said he did not get any part of this money.

Jayentbhai could book this minor success because of his good connections, and his experience in putting pressure on unwilling civil servants: the boy's family depended on him because they lack his connections with the police and his capacity to mobilise people. Jayentbhai might not have received any financial compensation, and it even led to the souring of relations with an influential principal – something which fixers generally avoid since their livelihood depends on the quality of such relations – but still the case offered ample rewards: since the dispute was well-known, and since it could be presented as a fight of a lower-caste student against an oppressive upper-caste bureaucrat, the dispute enlarged Jayentbhai's image as a defender of his community. Political fixers need to jump on issues like this exam-form, because it offers opportunities to acquire local fame and to strengthen the 'hold' as discussed above (apart from opportunities to make money). As Jayentbhai put it: 'when there is a water problem, an educational problem, [you have to] take an active part. This is what makes a person popular: If I can solve a problem in 24 hours, people will think 'he is an active person, he is efficient.' According to his neighbours, due to this day-to-day involvement Jayentbhai seemed destined to become a prominent politician: 'at every small issue he would be in front and

he was very well known. He could have become an MLA but somehow he could not use his political power’.

Jayent Parmar joined the BJP in the 1980’s. He was still in college, when a BJP worker approached him. As Jayentbhai later recalled, the worker had said to him ‘our party believes in nationalism. You are a Hindu although you are an SC [Scheduled Caste]. From now on there will be no more untouchability. We will help you’. Before 1985 the BJP in Gujarat was largely an upper caste party that mobilised voters around the issue of reservations for scheduled caste members in government and educational institutions. This made it difficult to capture Dalit voters: there are still stories going around in Isanpur of how in the early eighties leading BJP politicians garlanded an Ambedkar statue with shoes during such an anti-reservation rally. But in the mid 1980’s the BJP seems to have shifted its strategy as it attempted to gain support among Dalits. In 1985 the VHP asked its youth members to dedicate themselves to the abolition of untouchability²⁸. The riots of 1985 and 1986 illustrate this shift dramatically: while the fighting during the first days was between upper castes and Dalits, in the latter phase of the rioting Dalits and upper caste groups fought together against Muslims.

Shani describes the strategy of upper-caste politicians to ally with Dalit leaders as a more or less conscious strategy to suppress the antagonism between upper and lower castes that, by the 1980’s, was starting to threaten existing social hierarchies²⁹. As her analysis is largely focused on how upper-castes - anxious over Dalits’ increased social mobility and their reserved government jobs and college-seats - came to support ‘ethno-Hinduism’, this analysis is less convincing in explaining why *dalits* – who did not share a similar anxiety - could be drawn to support an ideology and a political party that had often opposed the reservations for their community.

We cannot understand this support of Dalits by looking at ideology or anxieties about identity and recognition alone. We also need to see their shifting alliances – away from Congress, towards the BJP - as a result of the way Dalit-communities depend on political fixers to gain access to state resources. This dependence is fostering a highly

²⁸ A. Nandy, Shikha Trivedy, Shail Mayaram, & Achyut Yagnik, *Creating a nationality: the Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self*. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.103.

²⁹ See Ornit Shani, *Communalism, caste and Hindu nationalism: the violence in Gujarat*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

pragmatic attitude towards politics. As politicians are relied upon to provide access to state resources, promises of tangible, short-term gains – like an electricity connection, a repaired gutter, a hospital bed etc. - feature more prominently in the considerations of voters than abstract policy-proposals or misgivings about an ideology. Take, for example, the way these Isanpur residents reasoned about their vote: “I vote for the active worker, and the person who understands people and somebody who solves problems for people, who can pass on the problem to top level people and solve it for them. It does not matter which party [the candidate belongs to]”. Another resident said: “We see who does the work, we roam around a lot so we know what work people have done. If the politicians do not do the work, we will vote for someone else”. And a third: “ideally you should vote for the person you does the work. If that person is clean, there is always the question if he will do the work or not. For example if there is some problem in the street, like if the stones have come out (...) then a corrupted person will send someone and that person will do work for 50 rupee and show work of 200 rupee. But in the end our work will be done, no?”

When access to state resources is mediated by political intermediaries there is little scope for considerations about ideology, policy or even corruption; what matters is being able to ‘bring a problem to the top people’ to ‘do the work’. That means that when the older political fixers belonging to Congress lost their capacity to contact ‘the top people’, BJP could start to woo Dalit-voters by offering them - through new workers like Jayent Parmar – a much-needed alternative channel to get things done.

Changing Patronage Channels

This is how Jayent Parmar described the beginning of his political career in the late 1980’s:

They [the BJP] thought that if we are to come to power we need to have the support of these low castes. So they took more interest in this area. They started contacting people, the educated persons who know the political situation. They told me ‘we will help you if you join’ and then they did help. Even [a leading

Gujarati BJP politician] I could call in the middle of the night. I remember I called him at 1:30 in the night once and he immediately helped me to get blood for a patient in the hospital. At that time BJP took interest in educating people, and it slowly became popular in Isanpur. We told the people ‘BJP will help you’, that was the strategy. For 5 years [after that] they did work for us. Then the communal problems started and this led to more support. Now they do not respond as much to our requests³⁰.

The expectation of workers like Jayent Parmar that BJP might be more willing than Congress to ‘do their work’ should be related to gradual changes in Gujarat’s political economy. Up until the late 1970’s many inhabitants of textile mill-areas like Isanpur interacted with state institutions with the help of the Textile Labour Association (TLA, *Majoor Mahajan Sangh*). At that time the TLA formed the main channel for local political fixers in textile-mill localities to secure access to state resources. This labour union, set up by Gandhi in 1918 to represent the textile labourers vis-à-vis the owners of the textile mills, played a prominent role in Gujarati politics because of its large membership – said to be close to 100,000 in the 1960’s. With this large membership the TLA helped Congress win elections and in return the TLA could use the elected Congress politicians to gain access to the state: the TLA was for the Congress a useful vehicle to capture the votes of the working classes while, through the Congress party, the TLA acquired useful contacts to help their members deal with the expanding municipal institutions. The TLA and Congress set up ‘worker-voter associations’ with both Hindus and Muslims as members. During elections these committees actively campaigned for the Congress candidates, and after elections these committees lobbied for the improvement of the facilities in their localities³¹.

³⁰ Jayent Parmar’s complaint about the recent unhelpfulness of BJP was voiced by a number of other BJP-workers as well. It seems that after BJP gained its present electoral strength, the party felt less compelled to take up the requests and complained coming from grassroot workers like Jayentbhai. In the line of the argument that I am making in this article, this unresponsiveness could in the long run bring Dalit-voters back into Congress’ fold – that is, if Congress succeeds in rebuilding its grassroot network to the extent that it can respond more effectively to local daily problems.

³¹ Howard Spodek. ‘Ahmedabad: Shock City of Twentieth Century India’, Unpublished manuscript, p. 217; Breman, ‘The Making and unmaking of an Industrial Working Class’.

This political deal enabled the TLA to help its members by taking up various public and private problems. The TLA set up an 'area department', the *latta khatu*, to relay various problems and requests to the relevant authorities. People could come to report disputes with the management of the mill, problems with basic amenities, police harassment, paperwork requests, etc. The TLA tried to solve these issues using TLA's contacts with leading Congress politicians and influential officials within government departments. For this purpose the TLA had appointed representatives – *pratinidhi* in Gujarati – in every textile mill-locality. Up until the 1970's the *pratinidhi* were the main political fixers in localities of textile labourers like Isanpur – as it was their task to communicate the complaints and requests in their area to the main office. The important difference with the present-day political fixers was that the *pratinidhi* were not directly dependent on politicians since their access to public services and politicians was mediated through the TLA and its *latta khatu*.

These patronage channels began to collapse in the 1970's. The split of the Congress' party that Indira Gandhi engineered in 1969, badly affected Congress' grass-root network. As many local Congress workers had supported Congress (O), the faction that ultimately lost out to Indira Gandhi's Congress (R), this episode greatly damaged the once strong grass-root network of Congress in Gujarat³². Subsequently, in the 1980's, Ahmedabad's textile industry also went into decline, as many mills were closed or reorganized into smaller units. The retrenchment of thousands of workers, and the failure of TLA to properly represent them, greatly weakened the TLA, to the point that it lost its once prominent role in Gujarat's politics. As the TLA lost its credibility with the textile-workers, its membership numbers dwindled and the TLA lost its privileged access to key politicians. The network of *pratinidhi* disappeared and the *latta khatu* became ineffective. Isanpur residents could no longer rely on Congress' and TLA's patronage channels to solve their daily problems: the decline of the TLA and Congress' grass-root network deprived localities of textile labourers (like Isanpur) of an effective channel to gain access to the resources of the state. This was precisely the period when BJP and its affiliates, the VHP, RSS and the Bajrang Dal, started to adopt strategies to gain the

³² See Kohli, 'Democracy and discontent: India's growing crisis of governability', pp. 238-267 and Yagnik & Sheth, 'The Shaping of Modern Gujarat'.

support of Dalits. These organizations realized that they would not be able to win elections and ward off the threat to upper-caste dominance without winning Dalit support. Despite its dwindling number of grass-root networks, Congress had up to then succeeded in winning elections by targeting its patronage to a strategic mix of caste- and religious groups – a mix referred to as KHAM, an acronym of Kshatriya's, Harijan's (Dalits), Adivisi's and Muslims. The BJP and its affiliates realised that it could break this coalition by gaining support among Dalits.

Not only did these organizations make efforts to proclaim they were fully committed to ending caste discrimination, they also actively recruited lower caste leaders into their fold. Hindu-nationalist organizations had, by then, much to offer: gradually the RSS, the VHP and its many affiliates had managed to put their members in government institutions, universities, local panchayats and municipal councils as well as the broad range of para-statal organizations that play an important role in everyday life: they gradually developed a hold over co-operative banks, farmer cooperatives, educational institutions, credit societies, milk cooperatives and agriculture produce market committees³³. A membership of the VHP or the RSS is nowadays very useful to secure a new job posting, arrange a licence, solve a tax-dispute etc, since through these organizations influential people at various levels of government may be contacted³⁴.

These changes in Gujarat's political economy – the decreased capacity of Congress grass-root network to provide access to state resources and the increased strength of the patronage channels of Hindu-nationalist organisations - gave lower caste leaders like Jayentbhai good reasons to respond to the flirtations from the BJP and its affiliates. The many social workers and party workers in Isanpur who joined the BJP did so because they could benefit from this opening of BJP's increasingly strong patronage channels in the late eighties and early nineties. To further illustrate this argument, I will quote one of the oldest BJP workers in Isanpur, Harjivan, at some length about his reasons to join the BJP:

³³ See Pravin Seth, *Political Development in Gujarat*. (Ahmedabad: Karnavati Publications, 1998), p. 28; Nikita Sud, 'Secularism and the Gujarat State: 1960–2005', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.XLII, no.6 (2008), pp.1251-1281.

³⁴ For a more elaborate discussion of the way Gujarat's patronage channels have changed, see Berenschot, 'Riot Politics', chapter 4.

So we used to take work [to the offices of the municipality] as ordinary citizens. We had to go back and forth to the municipal officials (*'dhakka khaava padta hata'*). But the work would not get done. Till weeks, months, years the work would not get done. For example if we wanted to get benefit from the welfare schemes for us people of the backward and scheduled castes. The officers did not give the benefit. They would not even answer. But if some political party or some well-know social worker, who can put some pressure, if he goes then he will quickly get a form. His work will get done. As an ordinary person we had to face this difficulty from different state departments. That is why it seemed to me that if I do not want to suffer all these difficulties and if I want to do the work of the people properly, I have to be with a party. So in the coming days, whichever party is coming to power so why should we not do the work of that party? *Barabar* [ok]? So that if that party [which we have supported] comes into power then our work will get done. A friend of mine told me that in the coming days, this party [the BJP] will come into power. So you catch such a party and your work will get done.

Harjivan decided that, in order to get things done for his neighbours, he needed to support whichever party had the capacity to respond to his requests. Harjivan thus illustrates the mechanism that led to BJP's popularity among *dalits*: as local political fixers succeeded in boosting their status and effectiveness by associating themselves with the BJP and other Hindu-nationalist organisations, they could convince their neighbours that by supporting these organisations they could improve their access to state resources. As I have discussed in the first part of the article, due to the important role that local political fixers play in solving various everyday problems, these local leaders have a strong 'hold' in their localities with which they can sway large numbers of voters. As local workers like Harjivan and Jayentbhai developed their potential to solve daily problems for their neighbours (through their BJP contacts), they build up their local authority and status – and thus increased their capacity to convince their dalit-neighbours to vote for BJP. Simultaneously the older political fixers affiliated to Congress lost some

of their local influence: as broader political and economic changes weakened their access to state resources, they could offer fewer incentives with which to court Dalit-voters.

Conclusion

In this article I have discussed the way political fixers help citizens deal with state institutions, with the aim of highlighting the role that political fixers play in ‘lubricating’ India’s patronage democracy. In particular I have argued that a focus on political fixers can help explain changes in voting behaviour. I have argued that it was due to a dependence of poorer citizens on political fixers that a party with an upper-caste image and outlook like the BJP could attract lower-caste voters in Gujarat. With this perspective I aimed to complement existing explanations for the way lower-caste voters have turned to the BJP over the last 25 years. This shift cannot be merely attributed to status-anxiety and a desire for social recognition among Dalits. Nor can this shift only be attributed to the way the liberalisation of Gujarat’s economy has intensified competition for jobs and increased Dalit-Muslim tensions. In this article I have argued that it was due to the changing character of Gujarat’s patronage channels that BJP succeeded in attracting *dalit* voters. As older political fixers lost their efficacy and influence when, since the 1970’s, the patronage channels around the Congress’ party collapsed, the expansion of Hindu-nationalist patronage channels offered inhabitants of poorer localities like Isanpur a much-needed alternative channel to access state resources. As new local political fixers like Jayent Parmar or Harjivan started to use the Hindu-nationalist patronage channels to secure hospital beds, jobs, loans (etc.) for their neighbours, these fixers gradually acquired the necessary influence and local fame to draw their neighbours into BJP’s fold. The capacity and willingness of the BJP and its affiliates to provide access to state resources meant much more for the daily life of its inhabitants than BJP’s social conservatism or its opposition to reservation policies. For inhabitants who depend on the mediation of political fixers to gain a water connection or a college-admission, such short-term benefits can appear more tangible and more alluring than the more abstract and more long-term benefits that reservation- or educational policies might bring. These

observations lead to the sobering conclusion that the dependence of poorer citizens on political intermediaries severely limits the capacity of poorer citizens to affect the overall distribution of power within society: the dependence of poorer citizens on political mediation limits their capacity to act on policy-related considerations that go beyond the need to secure a channel to access state resources.