RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE 'MISSING CONFLICT' OF THE SABARMATI RIVERFRONT
Authoritarian Governance, Neoliberalism and Water in Ahmedabad, India

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ABSTRACT: Though the liberalization of the economy in 1991 affected India as a whole, the state of Guja-rat and the city of Ahmedabad have undergone the most dramatic changes in the country. The Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project in Ahmedabad, one of the largest urban regeneration projects in India, was finalized in this context, and soon became the flagship project of the new ruling party. The article en-gages with the evolution of the project, reflecting on the apparent absence of a conflict that many observ-ers would have expected to occur given the scale of the intervention, as well as its social and environmen-tal consequences. Though some episodes of contention, related to a few controversial issues, are identi-fied in the article, it highlights the presence of a consolidated system of power and dissent management on multiple scales. A strong ideological system combining different narratives (development, global com-petition, fear and security, purity and cleanliness) underpins the Sabarmati riverfront development in Ah-medabad. These narratives proved to be appealing to the local middle-class, which identifies with the message of the far-right Hindu government: respect for religious traditions, alongside an effort to conform to international development standards.

KEYWORDS: Authoritarian Governance, Contained Contention, Gujarat, Neoliberalism, State Rescaling

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1. Introduction

On December 12th, 2017, the 'first ever sea-plane in India' carried the Prime Minister Narendra Modi from the Sabarmati river in Ahmedabad (Gujarat) to the artificial lake contained by the Dharoi Dam, 150 kilometres to the North of the city. From the dam, the Prime Minister travelled to the Ambaji temple, a major pilgrimage destination for Hindus in Gujarat, to pray and make offerings. The state government was up for re-election and Modi was showing support to the local section of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu nationalist political organisation he leads at national level. The Prime Minister's flight on the new sea-plane was filmed by several local and national television stations and broadcast as breaking news. People standing on the upper and lower promenades of the Sabarmati Riverfront in Ahmedabad yelling their support for the Prime Minister were also included in the videos[1]. By the end of December 2017, the BJP was confirmed once again as the victorious party in Gujarat under the guidance of Chief Minister Vijay Rupani, albeit with a smaller majority compared with past elections.

A few months later, on February 12th 2018, the Government of India informed the farmers of Gujarat that there would be water shortages from the Narmada canal[2], the so-called "lifeline of Gujarat" that should provide the state with the water for agricultural needs from the Sardar Sarovar Dam, also known as the highly contested "Narmada dam". In March, several farmers' unions and associations gathered in Gandhinagar, the administrative capital of Gujarat, to protest against the state government. In June, a group of NGOs from Gujarat and the bordering state of Maharashtra launched a number of actions against the planned Mumbai-Ahmedabad High-Speed Rail ("bullet train") project. Among them there were numerous farmers from Gujarat asking for fair compensation should their land be requisitioned in the grand infrastructure project[3].

On October 31st 2018, Prime Minister Modi unveiled the tallest statue in the world exactly five years after he laid its foundation stone as Chief Minister of Gujarat. The so-

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[1] "PM Narendra Modi takes first-ever seaplane flight; watch amazing video of Quest Zodiac aircraft", *Financial Express*, 12.12.2017, accessed 4.1.2019, available online at: www.financialexpress.com/india-news/gujarat-assembly-elections-2017/pm-narendra-modi-takes-first-ever-seaplane-flight-watch-amazing-video-of-quest-kodiac-aircraft/970334/

[2] "Gujarat can utilise water from Narmada dam till March only", *DNA*, 12.2.2018, accessed 4.1.2019, available online at: www.dnaindia.com/ahmedabad/report-gujarat-can-utilise-water-from-narmada-dam-till-march-only-2583724

[3] "Farmers in Gujarat oppose Modi's Bullet Train project", *The Hindu*, 22.6.2018, accessed 5.1.2019, available online at: www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/farmers-in-gujarat-oppose-modis-bullet-train-project/article24234145.ece

called Statue of Unity, located in the south-eastern part of Gujarat along the Narmada river, represents Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, a Gujarati politician at the forefront of the movement for Indian independence and who played a major role in the organization of non-violent farmers' protests against the British Empire during the unification struggle. The event was covered not only by the Indian media, but also by most of the international media[4]. One month later, on November 31st 2018, the state police of Gujarat began to release almost 300 activists, mostly belonging to the indigenous population (*Adivasis),* who had been arrested after protesting against the statue and related tourist activities on their land[5]. Meanwhile, around 8000 farmers belonging to more than 200 organizations from different parts of India, including Gujarat, marched towards the Parliament in New Delhi in protest against the government in the run up to the elections of Spring 2019[6].

These events serve to introduce the object of the research and to illustrate how it exists in relation with a number of issues at different geographical scales currently in the spotlight not only in local debates, but also in the international press. This selection of events highlights the presence of specific physical spaces in the "model state" of India that function as stages for the "spectacle" of politics and development (Luxion 2017) on the one hand, and, on the other, stresses the rise of recent episodes of contention, mostly in the rural areas of Gujarat.
Stimulated by these recent events and drawing on extensive research conducted between 2010 and 2015, in this article I reflect on the large-scale development of the Sabarmati Riverfront in Ahmedabad and question the apparent lack of conflict over this urban transformation - an unexpected absence in comparison with other river- and waterfront developments in Indian cities (Baviskar 2011a; Coelho and Raman 2013;

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[4] "India unveils the world's tallest statue", *BBC*, 31.10.2018, accessed 7.1.2019, available online at: www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-46028342; J. Bouissou, "L'inde inaugure la plus haute statue du monde", *Le Monde*, 31.10.2018, accessed 7.1.2019, available online at: www.lemonde.fr/asie-pacifique/article/2018/10/17/l-inde-s-apprete-a-inaugurer-la-plus-haute-statue-du-monde_5370396_3216.html; A. Mártinez, "India inaugura la estatua más grande del mundo con un mensaje nacionalista", *El País*, 2.11.2018, accessed 7.1.2019, available online at: https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/10/31/actualidad/1540983135_349959.html
[5] A. Johari, "Statue of Unity tourism zone will displace us from lands': Why Adivasis protested Modi event", 1.11.2018, *Scroll.in*, accessed 7.1.2019, available online at: https://scroll.in/article/900473/drowned-dreams-why-nearly-300-adivasis-were-detained-before-modi-could-unveil-the-statue-of-unity
[6] S. Dwivedi, "Mega Farmers' March to Parliament in Traffic-Stopping Protest: 10 points", *NDTV*, 30.11.2018, accessed 7.1.2019, available online at: www.ndtv.com/india-news/thousands-of-farmers-walk-to-delhi-mission-parliament-tomorrow-10-facts-1955565

Follmann 2015) and in other urban areas around the world (Desfor and Keil 2004; Grubbauer and Čamprag 2018; Islar 2013).

Existing studies of conflicts related to river- and waterfront developments mostly draw their theoretical inspiration from the literature around water-related struggles in political ecology (Worster 1985; Cronon 1992; Castree and Braun 2001; Swyngedouw 2004, 2009; Kaika 2006). Considering water as a socio-political product manipulated and appropriated in different ways by multiple actors with varying access to power is the usual starting point for much of this scholarship.

In the Indian context, the topic of environmental struggles related to water and development has been the focus of a vast body of literature on Indian Environmentalism and the "environmentalism of the poor" (Gadgil and Guha 1995; Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997), deeply influenced by the large-scale movement of the 1960s against the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam (Narmada Dam) between the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. While the anti-dam movement known as *Narmada Bachao Andolan* has been widely studied by several scholar-activists (Baviskar 1995; D'Souza 2002; Mehta 2010) and researchers interested in understanding the different power relations in the controversy (Wood 2007), other environmental conflicts, such as those in urban or coastal areas, have long been overlooked (Baviskar, Sinha and Kavita 2006), thus underestimating the emergence of a "bourgeois environmentalism" often at odds with the urban poor (Baviskar 2011b) and, more subtly, the occurrence of a variety of forms of middle-class activism engaged in inclusive environmental struggles (Follmann 2016).

Studies of environmental conflicts and power relations in contemporary Indian cities (Rademacher and Sivaramakrishnan 2013), a major contribution to the literature on urban political ecology "beyond the West" (Zimmer 2015), often focus on water, but mostly in terms of supply and wastewater management (Mehta 2005; Karpouzoglou and Zimmer 2012; Graham, Desai and McFarlane 2013). Some research has focused on the environmental criticalities of large scale urban river- or waterfront development projects and related conflicts, mostly in the cases of New Delhi (Baviskar 2011a; Follmann 2015, 2016) and Chennai (Arabindoo 2010; Coelho and Raman 2013).

Ahmedabad and the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project have also been studied in a critical perspective, in analyses of the development-induced displacement of the urban poor formerly living in the riverbed slums and the increasing segregation and unequal provision of basic services such as drinking water or wastewater facilities in the relocation sites of former slum dwellers, especially Muslims (Mahadevia 2007; Mathur 2012; Desai 2012a, 2014, 2018; Sato 2017).

While these extensive and empirically sound studies highlight the conflicts related to housing and relocation issues among the urban poor as a consequence of the riverfront development, several studies of the same period focus on a broader issue in Ahmedabad and Gujarat: the rise of an authoritarian form of governance based on Hindu nationalism and development (Bobbio 2012, 2015; Jaffrelot and Thomas 2012; Rajagopal 2011; Spodek 2011; Yagnik and Sheth 2005, 2011). Within this framework, some scholars investigate the role of place-marketing and branding in Gujarat and Ahmedabad in particular (Da Costa 2015; Desai 2012b; Ibrahim 2007), especially after the Muslim carnage perpetrated in the city in 2002 by Hindu radicals soon after Modi's election as Chief Minister of Gujarat (Human Rights Watch 2002; Yagnik and Sheth 2005).

2. Research questions

Despite this rich critical literature about the Sabarmati riverfront and Ahmedabad, a gap emerges in relation to the urban political ecology literature on other Indian cities and, more generally, to the international debate about the social production of urban nature and related conflicts among different sections of city societies. Although environmental conflicts around the creation of the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project and the permanent alteration of the ecosystem are mentioned in some of the studies mentioned, dedicated research on the environmental criticalities of the project and the apparent absence of a holistic critique combining social and environmental issues is missing.

Hence, a study is needed to fill this gap in the existing literature and answer a broad research question which applies but is not confined to the case of Ahmedabad:

RQ1 - *Is there a relation between large-scale urban projects in fast developing urban areas and authoritarian regimes in the global context of state rescaling?*

The hypothesis behind this question is that episodes of contention (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001) around the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project are expressions of dissent over the logic of the project, rather than against it as a whole. Drawing on work by Tilly and Tarrow (2007), I contend that such conflicts can be considered as "contained" forms of contention, i.e. tolerated by the existing regime, rather than "transgressive" forms. This hypothesis is supported by a consolidated body of literature in political studies about urban (Stone 1989) and autocratic regimes (Gerschewski 2013), combined with contributions from geographers and urban studies scholars dealing with the issues of state rescaling, globalisation and authoritarian governance (Brenner 2004; Swyngedouw 2000, 2007).

Stone's (1989) study about Atlanta in the 1980s, a city then affected by a high pace of development and a racially fragmented society, is a fundamental reference for this hypothesis. Stone identified a highly compact urban regime governing the city and highlighted relations with those outside the official governing group, included by the regime through the promise of increasing influence in local public life, and thereby reducing the risk of criticism.

Political studies of the main actions taken by autocratic regimes to ensure their stability, i.e. the "three pillars of stability" (Gerschewski 2013), are also useful to analyse the behaviour of the governing coalition in Ahmedabad and Gujarat. Gerschewski focuses on the phenomena of regimes; "co-optation" of different sectors of society, of the "legitimation" accorded to the governing coalition by large sections of the population, and, as a last resort, the "repression" of critical voices. The existence of such phenomena will be investigated for the case of the Sabarmati Riverfront in Ahmedabad.

A final theoretical contribution that supports the hypothesis comes from geography scholarship that argues the rhetoric of globalisation and development is not at odds with the emergence of authoritarian forms of governance, but goes hand in hand with it, thus making resistance difficult, especially where environmental issues are concerned (Swyngedouw 2000, 2007). On this point, Brenner (2004, 1) argues that "subnational scales, particularly those of major urban regions, represent strategic institutional arenas in which far-reaching transformations of state spatiality are unfolding", supporting large scale capital investments (Harvey 2001).

The initial research question and related hypothesis are operationalized through two additional sub-questions referring to the specific case of the Sabarmati Riverfront in Ahmedabad:

RQ2 - *Which episodes of contention have taken place around the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project in Ahmedabad?*

RQ3 - *Why did the different episodes of contention and the various groups supporting them fail to converge into a comprehensive movement against the project as a whole?*

Drawing on recent reflections on the field of contentious politics which innovate on the basis of consolidated approaches to the topic (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001), I propose to bridge the existing streams of literature about the Sabarmati Riverfront project and Ahmedabad, considering the context of the (partial) mobilization (Sika 2017) and the repertoires[7] of collective action (Tilly 2005; Sika 2017) proposed by various groups against (elements of) the Sabarmati Riverfront development.

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[7] In the chapter "New Approaches to Contentious Politics", Sika recalls Tilly (2005) and defines repertoires of contention as "the claims that activists make against the regime" (Sika 2017: 23).

The research questions are addressed in the following through an analysis of empirical material collected between 2010 and 2013 in Ahmedabad, other localities in Gujarat, and in New Delhi and Mumbai. The analysis will start with a chronological overview of the project and a description of its content and context. This will be followed by an analysis based on 35 in-depth interviews conducted with experienced witnesses (practitioners, public officials, journalists, lawyers, academics, activists). Particular attention will be devoted to interviews with environmental activists, both in Ahmedabad and New Delhi. Secondary data and official documents (Public Interest Litigations, Right to Information Acts, planning briefs, reports etc.) are also included in the analysis, while other research materials will remain in the background, since they fall outside the scope of this article[8].

3. The Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project and its context

Located in the north-west of India at the border with Pakistan and to the south of the Rajasthan, Gujarat is a semi-arid state that overlooks the Arabian Sea. Traditionally at the crossroads of major trade routes, the state is today still the focal point of large infrastructure developments, in particular in its central-eastern part where Ahmedabad is located, known as the "golden corridor". The central portion of Gujarat, historically richer than the arid western areas of Saurashtra and Kutch and the easternmost area inhabited by tribal populations (Mehta 2005; Yagnik and Sheth 2005), hosts the largest cities, as well as the majority of the state's new industrial centres, Special Economic Zones and Special Investment Regions, under development along what is known as the Delhi-Mumbai industrial corridor[9].

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[8] I carried out a survey of 50 households in some of the areas of Ahmedabad that underwent the most dramatic transformations between November 2012 and April 2013 with the help of a Gujarati translator. The survey was conducted using questionnaires in one of the few remaining slums on the river at the time of the fieldwork, Shahpur, and in two relocation sites for former slum dwellers in southern Ahmedabad: Bhata Gam (west) and Vatwa (east). The questionnaire was structured into four parts: 1) data about the interviewee (age, caste, religion, community group, family); 2) trajectory of displacement; 3) information about personal experiences of the Sabarmati river (memory of floods, uses of the river, religious practices, water quality); 4) relevant networks and contacts. Systematically taking notes during explorations of the main transformations in the urban and peri-urban areas by foot, rickshaw or motorbike helped me to gain a much deeper understanding of the materiality of the transformations and their consequences for everyday life.

[9] See also: GIDB - Gujarat Infrastructure Development Board (2009), *Review of Blueprint for Infrastructure in Gujarat (BIG 2020) – Final Report*, accessed 20.12.2018, available online at: www.gibd.org/big-2020-

The rapid and intense industrial and infrastructure developments that have taken place since the end of the 1990s (Spodek 2011) have affected the diverse areas and populations of the state in different ways (Hirway and Mahadevia 2004). Ongoing industrial development is tightly bound to the state-managed infrastructure for the distribution of water, the Narmada Canal (Mehta 2005) and the related Pipeline Project (Luxion 2017) whose primary function is to supply agriculture in the driest parts of the state. Irrigation was the core motivation behind the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam across the Narmada river (hence the Narmada Dam) at the borders of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. The dam, and the movement against its construction (*Narmada Bachao Andolan*), which began in the 1960s and was repressed in 1994, have been the object of extensive in-depth studies by scholar-activists and researchers from various fields in the last twenty years (Baviskar 1995; D'Souza 2002; Gadgil and Guha 1995; Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997; Mehta 2010; Wood 2007) as already mentioned.

The Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project in Ahmedabad is also connected to water and development issues in Gujarat, though this became clear only decades after it was first conceived. Initially proposed by the French architect Bernard Kohn as a sequence of recreational spaces along the non-perennial Sabarmati river in 1961, the project long remained nothing more than that. In 1979 a second proposal for a riverfront development was presented to the public by a local group led by Arch. Hashmuk Patel. Technically, a project now seemed more feasible due to the presence of a dam 150 kilometres north of Ahmedabad (Dharoi Dam) and a barrier to the south of the city (Vasna Barrage), created to regulate the flow of water in the river after the 1973 flood. But the socio-economic conjuncture was not favourable: by the end of the 1970s, crisis had settled into the once successful textile industry in Ahmedabad, affecting the livelihoods of many people of the lower castes, both Hindu[10] and Muslim, employed in the cotton mills. The role of the union created by Gandhi in Ahmedabad some decades earlier, the Textile Labour Association, had declined, and by the 1980s when many of the mill workers lost their jobs it had lost its credibility (Mahadevia 2007). These ex-workers entered the informal labour market, often leaving their homes and moving to slums on the Sabarmati riverbed (Breman 2004), which remained mostly dry throughout the year with the exception of the monsoon season.

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summary; Vibrant Gujarat (2014) "Megaprojects: Avenues for investment in Gujarat", Government of Gujarat, accessed 20.12.2018, available online at: www.slideshare.net/vibrant_gujarat/large-project-opportunities-in-gujarat-profile-41341184

[10] The Hindu workforce also included a large number of members of the "Scheduled Castes" (SC), considered the lowest strata of Hindu society (Mahadevia 2007).

The project for a riverfront in Ahmedabad came up again a few years after the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991, a response to a request by the International Monetary Fund to open its market to foreign investments and deregulate business activities so that India could pay off international debts (Spodek 2011). The local context had changed profoundly: several small and medium enterprises had popped up on the outskirts of the city and other parts of central Gujarat (Yagnik and Sheth 2005), while agricultural activities were affected by the increase in water demand and polluting industries (Ballabh and Singh 1997)[11]. The socio-political situation had changed too: in contrast with the agenda of the socialist party (Congress), which had aimed to support an alliance between lower castes and non-leading religious groups[12] by reserving places for them in educational and political institutions, the right-wing Hindu party in Gujarat had since the early 1980s been wooing the lower strata of Hindu society (Scheduled Castes/*Dalits* and Scheduled Tribes/*Adivasis*), giving them assurances on complete integration within the Hindu world if they supported the party.

Following several episodes of inter-religious violence related to the "anti-reservation movement", "the BJP decided to play an exclusively rabid Hindu card in corporation/municipal elections and succeeded in winning elections in Ahmedabad, Vadodara, Surat, Rajkot, Bhavnagar, Jamnagar – the major cities in Gujarat" (Patel 2002, 4833). Having won in the most important urban areas, in 1995 the BJP party won the state elections. At that time, Narendra Modi was General Secretary of the party.

It was in this context that in 1997 the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) established a dedicated body, also known as a Special Purpose Vehicle, for the implementation of an updated version of the riverfront project: the Sabarmati River Front Development Corporation Limited (SRFDCL). Following a feasibility report written by the Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology (CEPT) in 1997, the definitive proposal for the development of 9 kilometers (later extended to 10.5) of the Sabarmati river in Ahmedabad was designed in 1998 by a local consultant, the Environmental Planning Collaborative (EPC), composed of several members of the local HCP[13] architecture firm. Promoted for reasons including the repletion of the city's groundwater aquifers, the elimination of flood hazards, the improvement of living conditions of slum

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[11] As one of the members of an environmental NGO recalled during an interview, agitation also increased in some areas at the periphery of Ahmedabad, since a canal intended for the irrigation of fields to the south east of the city, the Kharikut Canal, had been turned into a sewer for extremely polluting industrial waste produced by the new factories in the areas of Vatwa, Naroda and Odhav. The High Court of Gujarat was urged to plan a Common Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP).

[12] Known as KHAM, an alliance between Kshatriyas, Harijans, Adivasis and Muslims (see: Mahadevia 2007).

[13] Architecture office founded by Hashmuk C. Patel, the architect who proposed the 1976 version of the riverfront project. The leadership of the office later passed to his son, Bimal Patel.

dwellers through relocation, and the beautification of the river, the project envisaged the following actions (EPC 1998):

- the narrowing of the Sabarmati bed, naturally of variable breadth, to a constant width of around 250 meters, thus reclaiming approximately 160 hectares (later increased to 200 hectares) of land;
- the construction of concrete retaining walls to protect the city from floods;
- the dredging of the riverbed;
- the creation of interceptor sewers to divert domestic wastewater to water treatment plants;
- the creation of a lower and an upper promenade on both banks of the river;
- the sale of around 20% of the land to private developers for residential/commercial/tertiary activities, making the project financially sustainable.

While the SRFDCL was acting as an allegedly diverse "coalition of stakeholders" (Bhatt 2016, 262) comprising members of both the majority and the opposition of the AMC as well as experts, the EPC was nominated as a "development manager for the initial stages of project planning and implementation of the Sabarmati Riverfront development" in 1999 (ibid, 266). Hence, under the guidance of Arch. Bimal Patel, the EPC supervised the elaboration of technical studies until 2003 and managed the land transfer process from the Irrigation Department of the State of Gujarat, which owned the riverbanks, to the AMC in order to allow the subsequent sale of land to private actors.

During this process, a major "shock" (Spodek 2011) occurred in Ahmedabad and across Gujarat. In February 2002, less than one year after the tragic earthquake in Kutch in the westernmost part of the state, tensions between the Hindu and Muslim populations exploded across Gujarat after the burning of two train carriages occupied mostly by Hindus in Godhra. The violence escalated to a massacre of the Muslim population and the widespread destruction of their properties by Hindu extremists. In Ahmedabad, more than 1000 Muslims were killed and 100.000 were moved to relief camps (Mahadevia 2007). Even though the 2002 *pogrom* was widely documented by local authors and external observers, emphasizing the rise of a strong Hindu ideology (*Hindutva*) and questioning the state's complicity in the massacre (Bobbio 2012; Human Rights Watch 2002; Patel 2002; Yagnik and Sheth 2005; Desai 2012b), these events are not included in texts tracing the history of the Sabarmati Riverfront development as a successful case study of urban regeneration (Bhatt 2016).

A few months after the 2002 carnage, Narendra Modi (BJP) became Chief Minister (CM) of Gujarat with an agenda focused on re-establishing social order and promoting development (Desai 2012b; Luxion 2017). One of his first public actions was the official

announcement of the Sabarmati Riverfront project in 2003, after the land transfer from the Irrigation Department to the AMC was completed. In the same year, the Chief Minister inaugurated the "Vibrant Gujarat" Biennial Summit to attract national and international investments in Gujarat.

In 2004, after the funds for the Sabarmati Riverfront project had been secured through loans from the AMC and the HUDCO (Housing and Urban Development Corporation) national funding agency[14], a pilot project started in one parcel of the future development land. In 2005 a syphon was created north of Ahmedabad to connect the recently inaugurated Narmada Canal to the Sabarmati river. In 2007 construction work started and in 2010 the EPC organized the first public exhibition at CEPT showing images of the future riverside, in which traditional (Hindu) elements and modern and clean public spaces coexisted (Pessina 2012). The relocation of affected slum dwellers living along the riverbanks was scheduled in the same year.

In 2011, some stretches of the riverfront opened to the public. Most of the lower and upper promenades were accessible by 2014, the year of Narendra Modi's election as Prime Minister of India. After this point, sales of land necessary to repay the loans and the construction of various facilities slowed down. In 2017, the historical centre of Ahmedabad, located on the eastern side of the river and dating back to the early XV century, was added to the list of UNESCO sites.

4. Episodes of contention around the Sabarmati Riverfront

A number of controversies emerged around the project for the Sabarmati Riverfront, mostly related to social concerns including the displacement of the urban poor. Other episodes of contention around environmental issues also emerged, but to a lesser extent, along with preoccupations about the changing nature of the public spaces and the preservation of the cultural aspects of the river. Following the research questions set out earlier, this section will investigate the nature of these episodes of contention and discuss the lack of convergence among the different issues into a consolidated movement against the project, like those that have emerged around other river- and waterfront projects in India.

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[14] According to recent data, the SRFDCL received Rs 417 crores (US$69 million) from HUDCO and Rs 445 crores (US$74 million) from AMC, while the remaining 240 crores (US$40 million) were sold by the SRFDCL in share capital (Bhatt 2016).

The issue of the displacement of slum dwellers raised a widespread protest from 2004 on, and led to the formation of the Sabarmati Nagrik Adhikar Manch (SNAM), an NGO representing more than 20.000 of the affected inhabitants and moving to include other NGOs dealing with housing rights and issues of religious unity after the 2002 massacre. As Desai (2012a) recalls, "the leaders articulated a powerful discourse of *adhikar* (rights) in their meetings as well as in their letters to bureaucrats and politicians and in the protest rallies they organised. They invoked *awaas adhikar* (housing rights) as *nagrik* (citizens)". In the Public Interest Litigation (PIL) against the State of Gujarat, the SRFDCL, the AMC and the Ahmedabad Urban Development Authority (AUDA) presented to the High Court of Gujarat, the petitioners requested information about displacement, and urged the authorities to provide adequate resettlements for all affected families - not just a proportion of them as intended in the initial version of the relocation plan. They also underlined the importance of the location of the new housing, which should avoid negative effects on the livelihood chances of poor families mostly engaged in informal activities in the proximity of the river and/or the city centre[15].

The movement, supported by human rights activists, academics and intellectuals (CEPT 2009), was partially successful since the SRFDCL relocation strategy was revised a number of times in response to the requests of the SNAM. Nevertheless, several relocation sites were constructed at a considerable distance, and some in contaminated areas, demonstrating different treatment for Muslims and Hindus (Desai 2012a, 2018; Mathur 2012), who were now to be separated having lived side-by-side for decades (Mahadevia 2007).

Environmental concerns did not provoke the same level of protest, though they were present in the minds of some of those fighting for the slum dwellers, among some academics and the few environmental NGOs of Ahmedabad. Among the main issues of concern were the effects on the ecology of the river from the transfer of water from the Narmada canal, the restriction of the river bed, the increased speed of water currents, the extensive use of concrete and the effects on the villages downstream of Ahmedabad when water discharged during the monsoons. In fact, the authors of the Sabarmati riverfront project themselves stated the necessity to increase the availability of water in the river in order to recharge depleting groundwater reserves, but did not specifically acknowledge that this water was to come from the Narmada canal (EPC 1998), opened in 2005 allegedly to connect the highly contested Narmada Dam and the driest agricultural lands in Gujarat (Mehta 2005), nor that this would create a permanent stagnant waterbody in the middle of the city.

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[15] SNAM, "Special Civil Application n. 6280 of 2005", Public Interest Litigation presented to the High Court of Gujarat, District: Ahmedabad City.

As the lawyer of the SNAM, who authored the PIL and had been previously involved in the *Narmada Bachao Andolan,* stated in an interview: "Now they want to beautify the Sabarmati, therefore they want to take water from the Narmada. The [Narmada Water Dispute] Tribunal[16] has allotted a certain amount of water to Gujarat. It was mainly meant for agriculture, but can be used in minimal part also for the supply of drinking water to towns and cities. But in the map Ahmedabad is not in the picture, because Ahmedabad gets water from Dharoi Dam. So, this Narmada water was not meant for Ahmedabad. The real problem is not central Gujarat, it's Kutch. So, what I want to point out, is that this whole [Sabarmati Riverfront] project is based on the Narmada water, which is really something against the award of the Tribunal. Technically speaking such transfer is not illegal, but neither proper nor justified. People need water for agriculture, not for beautification" (3.12.2010).

Similar observations were expressed during a workshop organized in 2009 by the Head of the School of Architecture and Planning of CEPT University in collaboration with the architect who designed the first proposed project in the 1960s. Asked about the reasons for the delay in the School of Architecture and Planning's involvement in the issues related to the riverfront, the Professor told me: "By that time CEPT was not connected with the Sabarmati River Front Development Project. We realized that so much had happened and that it was not possible to revise the project for sure. Too much had happened. As an institution, we thought we should have tried to understand what were the gains and what the losses. Coincidentally, Bernard Kohn came to Ahmedabad. We talked about interdisciplinary study methods: a dialogue needs to be built and each student has to understand that there are many different ways to understand cities. It was not in any way a counter-proposal" (11.12.2010).

Interestingly, the most vocal critics of the Sabarmati Riverfront on environmental grounds were not resident in Ahmedabad, but active in national level environmental NGOs based in New Delhi, such as the South Asian Network for Dams Rivers and People (SANDRP), which also counts Gujarati members who left their state after the repression of the NBA movement. Critique from these groups described the misuse of the Narmada water not only for the riverfront, but also for luxury residential developments along the Narmada canal and for industries in central Gujarat. They also demonstrated the erosion that would be caused on the riverbanks, the high cost of de-silting the river and the increased malaria risk that would result from the wide, stagnant body of water cre-

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[16] The Narmada Water Dispute Tribunal was created in 1969 and in 1979 decided through its operational arm (Narmada Control Authority) on the allocation of water between the different states (Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh) and allowed uses.

ated contained by the Vasna Barrage south of the riverfront[17]. Moreover, they pointed to the risks of devastating floods downstream of Ahmedabad, just south of the riverfront, if the Vasna Barrage ~~were~~ was to be opened to discharge water during the monsoons, as had already happened in 2006: highly polluting effluents from several chemical plants are discharged in the river in this area, and would spread over a wide rural territory in this scenario. While these warnings had strong influence in New Delhi, and provided support for the opponents of a possible Yamuna riverfront following the Sabarmati model, they were not the subject of much debate in Ahmedabad. A well-known environmental activist in New Delhi commented briefly on this phenomenon: "Gujarat has become a very quiet state, in which you cannot protest so loudly" (18.1.2013).

Although Ahmedabad hosts several centers for environmental education and conservation, at the time of the research there was only one politically active environmental NGO. The founder of this small NGO agreed with the opinion of the activist from New Delhi: "I fully agree with him. Those who do environmental awareness and similar things in Ahmedabad are not people of movement, they are not ready to protest. They just want to play in a safe corner, doing environmental awareness, environmental education and so on, because they are scared of the government and don't want to take risks with the industries and the developers. Most of them made a profession out of the environment, but when there is the moment to fight, they never come up" (26.3.2013).

The aims of this environmental NGO are mainly to advocate for the poorest strata of the population, threatened by pollution and development-induced displacement, especially in rural areas, and to study how far development projects conform with environmental regulations. In the specific case of the Sabarmati riverfront, the NGO contested the absence of environmental clearance for the whole project, as is required by law. Quoting one of the numerous letters the activists had written to the Government of Gujarat, to the National Government and/or the Ministry of Environment and Forests, "we would like to raise a number of concerns on the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project […]. What was conceived to be a project to 'revivify the city centre by reconnecting it to the river' in 1997 has become another non-descript commercial venture marred with controversy […]. In the words of our Hon'ble Chief Minister Sri. Narendra Modi, SRFDCL *'required my direct intervention to cut through the bureaucratic*

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[17] See for example: Pradhan A., "Riverfront Development Project in India: Cosmetic Make Up on Deep Wounds", *SANDRP*, 17.09.2014, accessed on 7.1.2019, available online at: www.google.it/amp/s/sandrp.in/2014/09/17/riverfront-development-in-india-cosmetic-make-up-on-deep-wounds/amp/

web of transfer of 202.79 ha of land' [...]. However, none of its project documents are being brought forth in public domain. The official website has been under construction for the last three months and none of the other linked websites e.g. neither Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation nor AUDA carries a copy of the […] Environmental Clearance that ought to have been obtained in the past 14 years!" [18].

Alongside the difficulties of approaching and obtaining convincing responses from public institutions, the environmental activists were also frustrated that they had not been able to build a larger movement with those fighting on housing issues: "We submitted our technical materials to those who were filing the case in the High Court about the slums, but they couldn't get convinced and didn't put them in their own petition. So, they fought a separate battle, holistically nobody acted" (26.3.2013). Finally, they noted that the situation was very different in the rural areas of Gujarat, where most socio-environmental struggles take place due to the rapid pace of development of highly polluting industry and infrastructure since the end of the 1990s. Most of these struggles are supported by environmental NGOs based outside Ahmedabad (e.g. Vadodara), often created after the suppression of the *Narmada Bachao Andolan*. These NGOs share in the concern for an "environmentalism of the poor" and act through both legal channels and contentious actions (Prajapati 2010), as in the case of the *Adivasis* protest against the tourist area around the "Statue of Unity" described in the introduction here, and in which these groups were involved.

5. Concluding remarks: "contained" contention under an authoritarian governance regime

The types and reasons of the controversies in the case of the Sabarmati Riverfront in Ahmedabad show that dissent is internal to the logic of the project, i.e. it is "contained" (Tilly and Tarrow 2007) rather than against it as a whole. The lack of convergence among the different controversial issues is explained by the difficulty to extend dissent and create a movement stretching across topics, classes, and geographical scales. Moreover, the actor networks that needed to mobilize demonstrate some weaknesses, especially around environmental struggles.

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[18] Paryavaran Mitra, "Need for a fact-finding mission into the socio-environmental concerns and Environmental Clearance of the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project", Letter to the Minister of Environment and Forests, 19.2.2011.

The absence of an organised movement against the project as a whole prompts at least three context-specific explanations: a) a consolidated system of power and interests able to manage dissent and potential "transgressive" forms of contention; b) strong communication capacity of the state, local authorities and specially appointed bodies, including the capacity *not* to communicate the details of the project; c) the difficulty experienced by those critical of the development model and its environmental implications, mainly related to the suppressed NBA movement, to deal with the urban environmental struggles in Gujarat.

Most of these factors relate to the type and ideology of the governing coalition in place at the time of the proposal and start of the project, i.e. a very compact regime, sharing common goals and visions for the development of the city, able to gain the support of those outside the official governing group through promises of increased influence in political and economic life, in line with Stone's findings in Atlanta (1989). Moreover, the governing coalition had strong trans-scalar relations at the local, state and national level, promoting a combination of development, global competitiveness and traditional values attached to a specific religion.

According to Luxion (2017, 225), "although the disproportionate benefits to certain sectors of society were not necessarily intentionally planned, they nonetheless reflect a context which includes more deliberate efforts to optimise government intervention in the service of industry and GDP growth, to cultivate popular identification with and support for Mr. Modi and the BJP, and to promote a vision of Gujarat that centres south/central Gujarati Hindus and Jains above others". The study of Gujarat and the ideological power of its governing coalition (Mehta 2005; Baviskar 2007) could hence add to existing scholarship about the power of the "developmental state" discourse (Ferguson 1990; Escobar 1995).

The city of Ahmedabad had a specific role within this logic of development and global competition, especially after the 2002 violence: "Ahmedabad thus served a particular utility for promoting Gujarat [...]. As a gateway for pursuing investment and profit opportunities in Gujarat, Ahmedabad's re-imagining became an integral part of re-imagining and promoting Gujarat" (Desai 2012b: 56). In Illich's (1985) words, water served as a powerful element to forget the past and create a new identity. This view of the transformation of the city was supported by a growing urban middle class that identified with the dream of neoliberal development while simultaneously craving safety, cleanliness, local identity and religion (Yagnik and Sheth 2005).

It comes as no surprise then that critique of the project, mostly related to the displacement of the slum dwellers, did not find support among many members of the emerging middle class: individuals who had the tools to criticize the project as a whole,

including its environmental implications. Yet there was no interest, leaving the single environmental NGO in existence without support. Middle-class intellectuals limited their criticism to seminars and open letters to newspapers asking for more trees on top of the riverfront, in line with what Baviskar defines as "bourgeois environmentalism" (2011b). Hence, the branding of Ahmedabad promoted by the governing coalition and its media can be considered successful, since it convinced both external observers[19], including numerous Gujarati Non-Resident Indians (NRI) living abroad, but investing in the city to an increasing extent[20] (Joshy and Seethi 2015), and those in local society with the most influence.

Some scholars of the phenomenon of "city branding" compared across several cities have observed a direct relation between brand success and the presence of authoritarian forms of governance: "branding helps to showcase the positive neoliberal elements of the city while also keeping the control of the image in the hands of the authoritarian regime" (Struxness 2013: 3). From this perspective, Ahmedabad may have more in common with Dubai or Singapore than Mumbai or New Delhi. Large-scale urban projects such as the Sabarmati Riverfront in Ahmedabad, which was supported by the governing coalition, promoted by the Chief Minister of Gujarat, and entirely paid for by loans from local and national authorities, show the power of an authoritarian regime facing no substantial challenges from any "transgressive" form of contention (Tilly and Tarrow 2007) of the type that could have resulted from a convergence between social and environmental struggles, or between urban and rural episodes of contention.

Drawing on Gerschewski's "three pillars of stability" in autocratic regimes (2013), we can say that for the case of the Sabarmati riverfront and, more generally, for the case of the development of Ahmedabad and Gujarat, the robust authority of the governing coalition relied on the *co-optation* of different sectors of the population, particularly the most influential parts, and on the *legitimation* accorded to the governing coalition by a large part of the urban population, especially the middle class. The third pillar (*repression*) did not occur in the case of the Sabarmati riverfront, as no real challenge was posed, but the memory of violence remained vivid in the minds of the Amdavadi and Gujarati at large after the 2002 *pogrom* and the collective "shock" that followed (Spodek 2011).

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[19] Praise for the project also came from unexpected sources, such as an internationally acclaimed journal of landscape architecture based in Germany: "following the city's tradition of visionary projects, the Sabarmati Riverfront Development is to be seen as a first-of-its-kind urban renewal project in India" (Fenk and Scheffer 2009, 44).
[20] R. Sinha, "NRIs fuelling luxury housing in Ahmedabad", housing.com, 29.11.2017, accessed on 7.1.2019, available online at: https://housing.com/news/nris-fuelling-luxury-housing-ahmedabad/

Recalling the debate on the relationship between authoritarian forms of governance and globalisation, "this ideology [of globalisation] becomes a vehicle for suppressing the possibilities of resistance and the formulation of alternative trajectories. As any good historical geographical analysis would easily point out, resistance and the construction of alternative visions and strategies have always been profoundly geographical affairs" (Swyngedouw 2000: 67). This interpretation could also lead the western reader to reflect on the development of spaces more familiar to his or her experience and knowledge, and to question the democratic nature of the governing coalitions that promote them.

The transformation of the spaces of Gujarat (Special Economic Zones, Special Investment Regions, Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project etc.) is strongly bound up with the image the state wants to create, as well as with its direct involvement in easing the development. Hence, it is possible to define such forms of spatial development as "new state spaces" (Brenner 2004). Nevertheless, the current attitude of the state leads to risks not only in terms of well-known spatial and social inequalities across Gujarat (Hirway and Mahadevia 2004; Luxion 2017; Mehta 2005; Spodek 2011; Yagnik and Sheth 2005), but also in terms of growth. As Jaffrelot (2013) notes, "the Gujarat growth pattern relies on indebtedness. The state's debt increased from Rs 45,301 crore in 2002 to Rs. 1,38,978 crore in 2013, not far behind the usual suspects, Uttar Pradesh (Rs 1,58,400 crore) and West Bengal (Rs 1,92,100). In terms of per capita indebtedness, the situation is even more worrying, given the size of the state: each Gujarati carries a debt of Rs 23,163 if the population is taken to be 60 million. In 2013-14, the government plans to raise fresh loans to the tune of Rs 26,009 crore. Of this amount, Rs 19,877 crore, that is 76 per cent, will be used to pay the principal and the interests of the existing debts. Gujarat would fall into the debt trap the day this figure reaches 100 per cent".

These figures could be more convincing for the expanding middle class compared to the environmental concerns, which are sometimes difficult to grasp, though nevertheless intimately related to a financially undisciplined (Jaffrelot 2013) yet authoritarian form of growth governance. Reflecting again on the reactions of local civil society and environmental NGOs to the riverfront project in Ahmedabad, and on other cases such as New Delhi, it is necessary to bear in mind, with Nair (2005:1), recalled by Desai and Sanyal (2012), the fact that the city has only recently become "a legitimate object of attention, investigation and research, and as a site that recasts the meanings of citizenship, democracy and indeed modernity in contemporary India". India's capital, with its 11 million citizens within municipal boundaries and 16 million citizens in the metropolitan area according to the last Census (2011), cannot then be compared with Ahmeda-

bad, which has grown rapidly, especially between 2001 and 2011, to its current size of more than 5 million inhabitants in the city and almost 6.5 in its metropolitan area.

The scale and severity of the environmental issues in each case are very different, as is the history of environmental NGOs devoted to dealing with them, whether from a "bourgeois environmentalist" perspective (Baviskar 2011b) or a more varied form of environmental activism bringing together some members of the middle class, the urban poor, and part of the rural population (Follmann 2016). In this perspective, I contend that Ahmedabad, and Gujarati society at large, may in the longer run be able to develop an original and effective environmental movement, drawing on the experience of the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* and struggling against specific issues of the "model state", thus crossing geographical scales and bridging the urban with the rural. This could only happen if or when influential individuals and groups look critically at the current governing coalition and start taking action. Ahmedabad and Gujarat could then contribute to a political ecology debate "beyond the West" (Zimmer 2015).

Acknowledgements

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