



PArtecipazione e CONflitto
* *The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*
<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>
ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)
ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)
PACO, Issue X(X) 20XX: XX-XX
DOI: 10.1285/i20356609vXiXpXX

Published in Xxxxx 00, 20XX

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE SABARMATI RIVERFRONT'S 'MISSING CONFLICT' Cross-scalar Neoliberalism, Water and Fear in Ahmedabad, India

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ABSTRACT

Though the liberalization of the economy in 1991 affected India as a whole, the state of Gujarat and the city of Ahmedabad have been undergoing the most dramatic changes in the country. The Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project in Ahmedabad, one the largest urban regeneration projects in India, was conceived in its final shape in that context, soon becoming the flagship project of the new ruling party. The article engages with the evolution of the project, reflecting on the apparent absence of a conflict that many observers would have expected to occur given the scale of the intervention, as well as its social and environmental consequences. Some episodes of contention related to a few controversial issues are identified in the article, which highlights on the other hand the presence of a consolidated system of power, as well of dissent (or potential conflicts) management at multiple scales. A strong ideological system which combines different narratives (development, global competition, fear and security, purity and cleanliness) underpins the Sabarmati riverfront development in Ahmedabad. Such narratives proved to be particularly appealing for the rising local middle-class that identifies itself with the message of the far-right Hindu government: a mix of respect of religious traditions, alongside with an effort to conform to international standards of development.

KEYWORDS: Development, Gujarat, Neoliberalism, Politics of Fear, Urban Regeneration

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1. Introduction

On December 12th, 2017, the ‘first ever sea-plane in India’ carries the Prime Minister Narendra Modi from the Sabarmati river in Ahmedabad (Gujarat, India) to the artificial lake contained by the Dharoi Dam, 150 kilometres to the North¹. From the dam, the Prime Minister reaches the Ambaji temple, one of the main pilgrimage destinations for Hindus in Gujarat, to pray and bring offers. It is election time for the state government and Modi is showing support to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu nationalist party to which he belongs. The flight of the Prime Minister on the new sea-plane is filmed by several local and national televisions and broadcasted across the nation as a breaking news. People standing on the upper and the lower promenade of the Sabarmati Riverfront in Ahmedabad and yelling in support of the Prime Minister are also included in the videos. By the end of December 2017, the BJP is confirmed once again as the winning party in Gujarat under the guidance of Chief Minister Vijay Rupani, with a declining majority with respect to the past elections.

This brief episode contains some of the most relevant elements that will be at the core of this article: the charismatic figure of the current Prime Minister of India, the cross-scale political continuity between the state of Gujarat and the national government, the strong religious connotation of the current ruling party, the emphasis on development and innovation, the symbolic value of specific urban and rural infrastructures, the role of the media in divulging images and narratives able to sustain the spectacle of politics. Last but not least, water.

The article elaborates on the empirical materials and the theoretical framework of the PhD thesis “The Necessary Risk: Water, Fear and Development in Western India. The Case of the Sabarmati River Front Development Project” defended by the author in 2015. The research was based on an extensive empirical work, conducted in different periods of time between 2010 and 2013. The author collected thirty-five in-depth interviews to experienced witnesses able to recall the main transformations of Ahmedabad and of Gujarat in the last three decades². The interviews focused to a great extent on practitioners (Schön 1983) and in particular on the architects involved in the design of the new projects, the public officials in charge of the management of the main urban transformations, the journalists devoted to the narration of the change and the lawyers engaged in the main controversies in the city of Ahmedabad and across the

¹ <https://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 The interviews were conducted mainly in Ahmedabad, as well as in other locations of Gujarat (Gandhinagar, construction site of GIFT City, construction site of Shantigram), in New Delhi and in Mumbai.

state of Gujarat. Few activists were interviewed in Ahmedabad, since most of them, especially those related to environmental struggles, moved outside Gujarat around the end of the Nineties and were met by the author in New Delhi and in the UK. Academics active in the fields of sociology, economy and urban planning were also interviewed and helped the author to reflect with a '(passionate) detachment' (Haraway 1988) on the opinions of the practitioners and of the activists. Guided by the suggestion of some experienced witnesses and academics, the author attended also official events organised by the state government, such as the Vibrant Gujarat Biennial Summit³.

Moreover, with the help of a Gujarati translator, the author carried out a survey on fifty households in some of the areas, which underwent the most dramatic transformations in Ahmedabad⁴. A wide range of secondary data obtained from official government documents promoting the ongoing transformations, technical reports, newspaper articles and TV programme recordings were also collected. Eventually, the practice of systematically walking across the city (Sennet 1990; De Certeau 1984 [1980]) and the exploration of the main transformations in the urban and peri-urban areas by feet, rickshaw or motorbike characterised the approach of the author throughout the fieldwork and helped her to gain a much deeper understanding of the materiality of the transformations and their consequences on everyday life (Mahadevia 2007).

³ The fifth (2011) and the seventh edition (2013) of the Summit were attended by the author. On December 21st 2010, the author participated also in the event organised in Ahmedabad by the Government of Gujarat on the occasion of the release of the book "Convenient Action. Gujarat's Responses to Climate Change" written and presented by the then Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi.

⁴ The survey was conducted through questionnaires in one of the few remaining slum pockets along the river at the time of the research (2012-2013), Shahpur, and in two relocation sites for former slum dwellers in Southern Ahmedabad, Bhata Gam (West) and Vatwa (East). The questionnaire was structured in four parts: data about the interviewee person and her/his family, including caste and community; trajectory of displacement, both in geographical and in work-related terms; information about the Sabarmati and the daily experience of the interviewee (memory of floods, various uses of the river, religious practices related to the river, quality of water etc.); indication of further families, groups, NGO or other relevant persons to be interviewed. The author was helped in the preparation for fieldwork by Prof. Lyla Mehta (Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK), in the selection of the cases and in the definition of the questions by Prof. Renu Desai (Centre for Urban Equity, CEPT University, Ahmedabad) and eventually on the field by Dr. Tejas Patel (Centre for Urban Equity, CEPT University, Ahmedabad), who translated the questions, interacted with the interviewees and properly introduced the author to the field, who had the chance to do an extensive participant observation of the selected cases. The translations and the transcriptions of the recorded audios of the interviews were done by Dr. Devika Mankotia (CEPT University).

2. The object of the research

The critical assessment of Gujarat's trajectory of development and of the related 'dynamics of contention' (Mc Adam, Tarrow, Tilly 2001) in the last decades are the core concerns of the research and are considered from the vantage point of one of the most recent and relevant urban regeneration projects in Ahmedabad, the main city of the state: the Sabarmati Riverfront Development project. While individuating some relevant controversies related to specific issues of the project, the article questions the lack of convergence of the different episodes of contention and the apparent absence of an organised conflict against the project as a whole, as it happened in the case of other riverfront developments in India (Baviskar 2011; Coelho, Raman 2013; Follmann 2015), as well as in several urban regeneration projects in most of the contemporary cities around the world (Gualini 2015).

Reflections on the causes of such absence include the influence of neoliberalism and marketization on weakening social movements and fostering 'post-political' attitudes (Swyngedouw 2007; Burawoy 2017), the rhetorical power of a 'developmental state' (Ferguson 1990; Escobar 1995; Mehta 2005; Baviskar 2007; Desai 2012b; Luxion 2017), the intertwining of politics and religion in Gujarat's recent history (Yagnik, Sheth 2005; Bobbio 2012) and eventually, the evidence of episodes of repression of activists (Baviskar 1995; D'Souza 2002; Mehta 2010) and on violence against specific ethnic or religious groups (Human Rights Watch 2002; Rajagopal 2011).

In the article, I contend that the combination of such factors allows researchers to identify also in the case of Gujarat some traits of 'authoritarian governance' that scholars usually refer to contexts of reduced democracy, and even military regimes (Gerschewski 2010; Della Porta 2016; Sika 2017).

The focus on a water-related project, considered at multiple geographical scales, could hence easily lead to the individuation in Gujarat of a form of 'despotism' typical of the so-called 'hydraulic societies' (Wittfogel 1957), but such approach has been already widely criticised for its excessive 'ecological determinism' (Boelens 2015). Nevertheless, especially through the political ecology approach (Worster 1985; Cronon 1992; Castree, Braun 2001; Swyngedouw 2004, 2009; Kaika 2006; Zimmer 2015), it is still possible to identify some significant relations between the control of water and the control of societies by governments, as it seems to happen in Gujarat (Luxion 2017). Eventually, the symbolic power of water and its capacity to promote the 'forgetfulness'

of traumatic events (Illich 1985) is investigated in the article, since the 'politics of forgetting' and of 'erasure' seem to have characterised also Ahmedabad's recent developments (Desai 2012b).

3. Episodes of contention in Gujarat, a model state for India

Located in the North-western part of India, at the border with Pakistan and to the South of the Indian state of Rajasthan, Gujarat, once a peripheral portion of the ancient Hindus civilization, is a semiarid region that looks over the Arabic Sea. Traditionally at the crossroad between major trade routes (Yagnik, Sheth 2005), even today is at the centre of major infrastructural developments (GIDB 2009) in particular in its centre-eastern part, where Ahmedabad is located. The central portion of Gujarat, traditionally richer than the western arid parts of Saurashtra and Kutch (Mehta 2005; Yagnik, Sheth 2005; Ibrahim 2007) and of the easternmost part inhabited by tribal populations, hosts the largest cities, as well as the majority of new industrial poles, Special Economic Zones and Special Investment Regions of the state, which are under development along the so-called Delhi-Mumbai industrial corridor (GIDB 2009; Vibrant Gujarat 2014).

The rapid and intense industrial development happening since the end of the Nineties (Spodek 2001) is having uneven effects on the various parts and on the different populations of the state (Hirway, Mahadevia 2004; Mahadevia, Sarkar 2012). The ongoing industrial development seems to be strongly bound to the presence of a state-managed infrastructure for the distribution of water: the Narmada Canal (Mehta 2005) and the related Pipeline Project (Luxion 2017). Tracing a brief chronology of such water infrastructure is a tool to investigate Gujarat's trajectory of development in the last decades and its 'dynamics of contention' (Mc Adam, Tarrow, Tilly 2001), as well as a way to introduce the reader to the 'missing conflict' around the Sabarmati Riverfront Development project in Ahmedabad.

On 1961 the foundation stone of the Sardar Sarovar Dam (SSD), soon known as Narmada Dam, is laid. The dam, located along the Narmada river at the intersection between the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, is justified by the national and regional authorities as a necessary infrastructure for the irrigation and the uplift of the arid and poor territories of Saurashtra and especially Kutch in Gujarat (Mehta 2005). Nevertheless, the dam will soon become one of the most contested and controversial infrastructures in the world for its impact on the populations under threat of eviction for the construction of the SSD (Cullet 2007). In the same year, the creation of a riverfront along the Sabarmati river in Ahmedabad is imagined by the

French architect Bernard Kohn (Shah 2010). At the time, Ahmedabad is the most relevant city from the monumental, economic and social point of view of Gujarat, even though the capital is located few kilometres away, in Gandhinagar.

The struggles against the realization of the Narmada Dam were promoted by peasants, activists and intellectuals in solidarity with the tribal populations threatened of forced eviction from the Narmada Valley. The activists, united under the umbrella of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) movement, were critical of the whole model of development pursued by the government and tried to oppose it with different forms of contestations since the beginning of the Sixties (Baviskar 1995; D'Souza, 2002; Cullet 2007). In 1969 the Narmada Water Dispute Tribunal was created, even though the conflicts continued through the following decade. In 1979 the Tribunal, through its operational arm, the Narmada Control Authority, made a decision regarding the allocation of water between the different states and the allowed uses, i.e. mainly for irrigation for the arid areas, such as Kutch and Saurashtra. It is also recognized the need to create adequate housing as compensation for people forced to leave their land to make room for the dam (Cullet 2007).

1979 marks also the year of the second proposal for the Sabarmati Riverfront in Ahmedabad, designed by a group led by architect Hashmuk Patel. In the meantime, following the great flood of 1973, the Sabarmati course was regulated by a dam (Dharoi Dam) built around 150 kilometers north of Ahmedabad, and by a barrier to the south of the city (Vasna Barrage) (Choudhuri 2009; Pessina 2012). The two interventions profoundly alter the ecology and use of the non-perennial river, whose irregular course had coexisted rural and urban populations for centuries (Pradhan 2014). By the end of the Seventies, the crisis of the textile industry in Ahmedabad is irreversible, a large part of the population once employed in the cotton mills and mostly belonging to the lower casts of the society, both Hindu and Muslim, become jobless and enter the informal economy market, often leaving also their homes and moving to slums along the Sabarmati river (Bremar 2004).

In 1985 the NBA protest movement against the dam led by the activist Medha Patkar organizes a march in solidarity of the populations affected by the construction of the dam and strongly criticize the World Bank for its involvement in the financing of the project. In 1991, following the hunger strike by many members of the movement, the World Bank stops funding the Narmada Dam (D'Souza 2002; Cullet 2007). 1991 is a watershed date for the whole Indian nation, since the International Monetary Fund requires India to shift to a free-market economy and to open to international investments, while cutting public expenditures and deregulating the business activities, in order to be able to pay off international debts (Spodek 2011). It is the start of the

process of liberalization for India, during which new small and medium enterprises start popping up in the outskirts of Ahmedabad and in other parts of central Gujarat (Yagnik, Sheth 2005).

In 1992 the Government of Gujarat discloses to the public its "Eighth Five Years Plan", which declares that "the highest priority in investment is given to the Sardar Sarovar (Narmada) Project", that is to say that around 25% of the total budget for the Eighth plan would have been devoted to "this single project which is the lifeline of Gujarat" (GoG 1992), consisting, according to the plan, in a main canal and a network of branch canals for the irrigation for the state (Mehta 2005; Luxion 2017). In 1994 several activists of the NBA movement are arrested or punished for their struggle: it is the end of the movement in Gujarat, which will continue, to a lesser extent, in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Activists and intellectuals from Gujarat previously involved in the NBA movement start migrating to the neighbouring states or even abroad to be able to continue to freely express their opinions (Cullet 2007; Mehta 2010). In 1995 the BJP party, actively promoting a Hindu-centred politics in Gujarat at least since a decade, wins for the first time the state elections against the Congress party. At that time, Narendra Modi is the General Secretary of the party (Yagnik, Sheth 2005).

In those years, the first conflicts around the use and the quality of water in Gujarat arise, especially promoted by farmers fighting against the reduced quantities of water since the growth of industries after 1991 and the consequent pollution of the waterbodies (Ballabh, Singh 1997). Also in some areas at the periphery of Ahmedabad the agitations increase, since a canal meant for the irrigation of the fields to the South East of the city⁵ turned into a sewer for extremely polluted industrial waste produced by the new factories⁶, urging the High Court of Gujarat to foresee a Common Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) (Interview to the founder of an environmental NGO in Ahmedabad, 17.1.2013).

In the meantime, the Sabarmati River Front Corporation Limited (1997) is created in Ahmedabad and in 1998 the definitive project for the around 9 kilometers of the riverfront is designed by the architecture firm HPC/EPC, which envisages the narrowing of the Sabarmati bed, up to that moment of variable amplitude, to a constant width of around 250 meters, thus reclaiming ca. 185 ha of land (EPC 1998). The project foresees also the eviction and relocation of the large number of slum dwellers living on the riverbanks, the construction of retaining walls to protect the city from floods, the

⁵ The Kharikut Canal

⁶ The factories were mostly located in the areas of Vatwa, Naroda and Odhav.

dredging of the riverbed, the creation of interceptor sewers to divert the domestic wastewater to water treatment plants, the creation of a lower and an upper promenade on both banks of the river, and eventually the development of private residential, commercial and tertiary activities (Desai 2012a; Mathur 2012; Pessina 2012).

Following the tragic earthquake of 2001, work is accelerated for the start of the operations of the Narmada Dam, in order to transfer water for irrigation to the driest area of Gujarat, Kutch, heavily affected and further depleted by the natural disaster. In 2002 the water is released from the Narmada Dam for the production of hydroelectric power and the Narmada Main Canal is opened (Mehta 2005). In the same year, the interreligious conflict between Muslims and Hindus⁷ in various parts of Gujarat, including Ahmedabad, exploded after numerous incidents of violence happened during the last twenty years of economic crisis and sustained by the rising pro-Hindu ideology, often referred to as *Hindutva* (Yagnik, Sheth 2005; Bobbio 2012; Desai 2012b). In the same year, Narendra Modi (BJP) becomes Chief Minister of Gujarat and presents himself to the public as a charismatic man whose priorities are social order, development, major hydraulic works and the respect of Hindu traditional values (Luxion 2017). The “Vibrant Gujarat” Biennial Summit is also promoted by the new Chief Minister in order to ease national and international investments in Gujarat. In the meantime, International organisations for the protection of human rights investigate on the “state participation and complicity in communal violence in Gujarat” (Human Rights Watch, 2002).

In 2004 Ahmedabad is declared as one of the seven Indian “megacities” by the national government and is therefore entitled to receive the funds of the Jawarlalal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission 2005-2012 for the creation of large scale urban infrastructures and resettlement policies for slum dwellers (Desai 2012a). Around 2004-2005 more than 150 Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are foreseen around Gujarat, mostly for industrial activities with a “ten years’ income-tax holiday” (Spodek 2011).

2005 marks the start of the construction works for the Sabarmati Riverfront, soon followed by the opening of the Narmada Syphon, a connection between the Narmada Canal and the urban portion of the Sabarmati. Although the intervention was not foreseen among the decisions of the Narmada Water Dispute Tribunal of 1979, in 2006 the water of the Narmada began to be released regularly in the Sabarmati (Interview to a lawyer involved in the NBA struggle, 3.12.2010). Ahmedabad, for the first time since the creation of the Dharoi Dam, is crossed by a permanent body of water (Pradhan

⁷ Usually referred to as “communal violence” (Yagnik, Sheth 2005)

2014). In 2005 the Sabarmati Nagarik Adhikar Manch, an NGO representing more than 20.000 slum dwellers along the Sabarmati river, together with other local NGOs and with the support of a local newspaper, presents to the High Court of Gujarat a Public Interest Litigation against the State of Gujarat, the Sabarmati Riverfront Corporation Limited, the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation and the Ahmedabad Urban development authorities. The petitioners request information around the displacement, urge the competent authorities to provide adequate resettlements to all the affected families, underlining the importance of the location of the new housing to avoid to negatively affect the livelihood chances of the poor families (SNAM 2005). The struggle is joined also by academics active in the fields of economics, sociology and urban planning (Desai 2012a; Mathur 2012).

On December 31, 2006, the construction of the Narmada Dam is officially completed, reaching a height of 121 meters. In 2007 Narendra Modi, elected Chief Minister of Gujarat for the second time, announces the project for a Gujarat International Finance Tech city (GIFT), a new smart city near the capital, Gandhinagar, and on the banks of the Sabarmati River, a few kilometers further north of Ahmedabad. The GIFT city too will have a riverfront, following the example of the one in Ahmedabad (Interview to a landscape architect in charge of the GIFT city project, 20.3.2013).

In the meantime, in Ahmedabad the evictions of the inhabitants of the shanty towns that crowded the banks and the riverbed begin. The first public housing units are assigned to replace the demolished houses, often at considerable distances and in areas that are not easily accessible and sometimes contaminated (Desai 2012a, 2017; Mathur 2012). Some critiques on the overall project for the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project start to be advanced at the CEPT University in Ahmedabad also from the planning and environmental perspectives through thematic workshops and special lectures (School of Architecture – CEPT 2009), but at the end of 2010 the same academy hosts the first official exhibition on the future of the Sabarmati. In the same year, a group of concerned citizens and experts writes a letter to Narendra Modi, requesting to leave more green areas along the riverfront, instead of covering it completely with built up areas and infrastructures (Shah 2010).

In 2010, major industrial developments occur in the central part of Gujarat: the Tata Nano Motors automotive systems are inaugurated, followed by those of Ford and Peugeot in Sanand, a small municipality in the Ahmedabad district. The plants draw water for production from a side branch of the Narmada Canal and the irrigation has not yet reached the arid Kutch area (Luxion 2017). In the same year, the Government

of Gujarat announces its intention to build the “Statue of Unity”, a 182-meter statue dedicated to Vallabhai Patel in front of the Narmada Dam and begin the work of GIFT City.

In March 2011, Modi is elected Chief Minister of Gujarat for the third time and promotes the project for a Special Investment Region (Dholera SIR) and for further SEZs to be served by the Narmada canal (Luxion 2017) or by a sea dike in the Gulf of Kambath, as foreseen by the Kalpsar Project (Interview to a senior urban designer involved in the Dholera SIR project, 9.3.2013). In 2011 several Public Interest Litigations are filed in the High Court of Gujarat, mainly by farmers requesting an equal distribution of water from the Narmada canal and from the Dharoi Dam, instead of favouring large scale farmers and industrial developments (Pandit 2011; Luxion 2017).

In 2011 a request for “a fact-finding mission into the socio-environmental concerns and Environmental Clearance of the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project” is presented by a small environmental NGO in Ahmedabad (Pandya 2011), but remains without answer. In 2013, the lower boulevards of the Sabarmati Riverfront are completed, while the works continue on the upper ones and the foundations are laid for the first buildings. A few kilometers from Ahmedabad, along the Narmada Canal, begins the construction of a luxury gated community with golf courses irrigated with the water from the Narmada Canal.

On October 31, 2013 Narendra Modi lays the foundation stone of the Statue of Unity at the Narmada Dam and in 2014 becomes the Prime Minister of India. In the meantime, several conflicts were promoted mostly by farmers and fishermen affected by large developments, such a cement plant and a nuclear power plant in the Bhavnagar district and a Special Economic Zone in Mundra, in the coastal area of Kutch. Conflicts occurred also around the chosen area for Dholera SIR, as well as in the surroundings of Sanand around the plants of the automotive industries (Interview to the founder of an environmental NGO in Ahmedabad, 17.1.2013; interview to a lawyer in charge of several Public Interest Litigations in the rural areas of Gujarat 23.4.2013). On February 2018, the Government of India informs the farmers of Gujarat that there will be shortages in water provision from the Narmada canal and one month later several farmers unions and association gather in Gandhinagar to protest against the state. In spring 2018, a group of NGOs from Gujarat and Maharashtra start several actions in order to resist the foreseen Mumbai-Ahmedabad High-Speed Rail (bullet train) project (IDS 2018). Among them there are several farmers from Gujarat asking for right compensations in case their land will be taken for the grand infrastructural project.

On September 5th, farmers and workers from various parts of India march together across Delhi and protest against the current government that will face the General Elections in Spring 2019 (Bolazzi 2018).

4. Some controversies around the Sabarmati Riverfront Development project

The events recalled in the previous section in chronological order were selected with the aim to give an overview of the major developments occurred in Gujarat on the infrastructural, economic, social and political level. The proposed timeline aspires to show the interconnectedness between several dimensions of development in Gujarat, as well as to give the tools to investigate the dynamics of contention of the state in the last decades. Focusing on the case of the Sabarmati River Front Development Project, it is apparent that a number of controversies have emerged, especially at the beginning of the implementation of the project, but it can be argued that the different controversial issues remained quite separated and did not converge towards a larger conflict against the project as a whole.

The controversies can be broadly grouped into issues related to the environment (the effect on the ecology of the river of the transfers of water from the Narmada canal, of the restriction of the river bed and of the extensive use of concrete) and to social concerns (the effect of the project on the urban poor). Alongside with these topics, other controversial issues emerged with minor intensity, such as a reflection on the changing nature of public spaces and green, as well as a preoccupation for the preservation of symbolic aspects (cultural and religious) of the river.

The transfer of water raised harsh criticisms in some engaged citizens and experts of Ahmedabad, but no actions were conducted to avoid the spill of Narmada water into the Sabarmati: "Now they want to beautify the Sabarmati, therefore they want to take water from the Narmada. Legally speaking they cannot use Narmada water for Sabarmati [...]. The [Narmada Water Dispute] Tribunal 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 project is based on the Narmada water which is really 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” (Interview to a lawyer involved in the NBA and in the SNAM movements, 3.12.2010).

The then Chief Minister of Gujarat, on the contrary, praised the presence of the water coming from one of the seven sacred rivers of India as a wondrous event for Ahmedabad: “When you people have seen that the Narmada water was put in the Sabarmati, you must have been thinking that the Sabarmati looks so beautiful, but there is another thing that you people don’t know: that through this new water we are also finding a solution for climate change. Before, the water that was supplied to Ahmedabad was between 450 to 500 TDS⁸, now it’s 100 to 150 TDS, and as good as *Bisleri*⁹ water. When I talk about climate justice, I say it in this context” (Presentation of the book “Convenient Action” by Narendra Modi, 21.12.2010). The designer of the Sabarmati River Front Development Project simply comments that “it’s Ahmedabad’s luck to receive water from the Narmada canal” (Interview to the designer of the project, 18.12.2010).

Further environmental issues such as the erosion of the riverbanks, the high cost of de-silting of the river, the heavy pollution and the increased risks of floods downstream of Ahmedabad have been mentioned by experts, tackled by the newspapers and sometimes have been the object of specific Public Interest Litigations by the farmers in the outskirts of Ahmedabad, but no major protest occurred around those topics in Ahmedabad.

On the other hand, the issue of the displacement of the slum dwellers turned into a large movement, the Sabarmati Nagrik Adhikar Manch, able to include most of the affected slum dwellers, as well as other NGOs dealing with housing rights and with issues of religious unity. The movement was successful since “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 ashikar* (housing rights) as *nagrik* (citizens) in their meetings” (Desai 2012). The variety of actions promoted and the capacity to include different issues, such as the relevant contribution of the slum dwellers to the local economy through their informal activities, proved to be successful, at least partially, since the relocation project was often revised in response to the requests of the SNAM movement.

The partiality of the controversies shows that the dissent is rather internal to the logic of the project, rather than against it as a whole. The lack of convergence of the different controversial issues is accompanied by the weakness of the system of actors to be mobilized and by the difficulty to extend the dissent and create a movement,

⁸ Total Dissolved Solids (TDS) indicate the presence of contaminants in the water.

⁹ Name of a popular brand of bottled water in India.

especially across topics, classes and geographical scales. This is made clear also by the fact that a large part of the debate and of the controversies have been limited within the academia and among professionals and intellectuals (mostly in form of open letters and articles on newspapers).

Beyond the mere description, the apparent absence of conflict calls for at least three explanations strongly bound to the context: a) a consolidated system of power and of interests able to manage also the dissent or the potential conflicts; b) a strong communication capacity by the state and local authorities, insisting on development and security from various threats; c) the absence of the most critical voices in terms of development and environmental issues as a result of the suppression of the NBA movement.

5. Water games of Gujarat

In the case of Gujarat and of Ahmedabad in particular, there seems to be a consolidated system of power and of interests, as well of dissent (or potential conflicts) management, supported by "a propaganda machinery used by the state" alongside with "decades of political promises" that "have succeeded in 'manufacturing' perceptions or myths that reinforce that bounty" (Mehta 2005). The absence of a conflict around the Sabarmati Riverfront Development project is hence not only due to a lack in organizational capacity of some actors (but not all of them, as it is clear from the SNAM movement for housing rights), but reflects also the existing governance structure.

It can be noticed a strong public direction, especially by the State, which is supported by a powerful pro-growth ideology, shared by real estate developers and industrialists (Luxion 2017). Such discourse is articulated through the need to grow in economic terms, as a way to get out of the crisis which followed the closure of the textile mills and to bring Gujarat back to its traditional wealth.

A powerful communication tool is represented by the Vibrant Gujarat biennial summits introduced in the State since 2003. The declared aim for such summits is the "strategic promotion of Gujarat by integrating the economic and the cultural, the city and the region" (Desai, Sanyal, 2012). The choice of the location, as well as the timing for the event also have a highly symbolic value: as a matter of fact, the first Vibrant Gujarat summits (2003-2007) were promoted in the city of Ahmedabad on the site of the future Sabarmati River Front Development Project and on the occasion of the most

popular traditional festivities (Navratri, the festival of dance and Uttarayan, the kite festival). The narrative promoted through the first Vibrant Gujarat event – “blend culture with commerce, trade with tradition, enterprise with entertainment” (Government of Gujarat, 2003) – was articulated in the following years, with more emphasis on industrial and urban development opportunities for both Indian and foreign investors.

Alongside with the narrative around development, a powerful public discourse stressed also the need for Gujarat and for the city of Ahmedabad to be up to standard in order to be able to compete at the global level, in economic and environmental terms, as well as in terms of quality of life and of image. The comparison with other regions and cities is a tendency which has always been present in the history of Gujarat and Ahmedabad: from ancient times to the present such area has been recognized across the Subcontinent and beyond as an extremely important trade centre, a laboratory of political innovation, as well as a land for industrial experimentation (“Manchester of India”, “Detroit of India”).

Such trends have become even more present in the age of globalization, stressing the emphasis on the competition at the global level, which would be possible through the conformation to international standards (performances, image, social dynamics and more). The tradition of competition is hence reformulated in a new historical phase, where the memory of the previous challenges faced by the state and the city of Ahmedabad in the past somehow encourages to embark in new ones.

The issue of global competitiveness is made clear in several official and non-official documents referring to the current commitments of the Government of Gujarat. The recent BIG 2020 agenda presented at the Vibrant Gujarat Summit 2015 expresses well this concern in the section dedicated to the key strategies to guide the development of Gujarat in the near future:

- “Developing seamless, efficient and high speed integrated transport networks conforming to global standards”
- “Accelerating industrialization by developing world class and globally competitive industrial infrastructure”
- “Making Gujarat a global tourist destination”
- “Creating good healthcare infrastructure to achieve healthcare indexes and to reach UMI benchmarks”
- “Creating widespread network of educational institutions to make Gujarat a globally recognized knowledge society” (Vibrant Gujarat 2014).

Within such logic of competition for the State of Gujarat, the city of Ahmedabad has a promotional role: “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 in: Desai, Sanyal, 2012). After being recognized as a Mega-City at the national level (2005), Ahmedabad saw the flourishing of a number of initiatives for the promotion of city-branding, such as the seminar to launch the 'Brand Ahmedabad Initiative' organized by the Ahmedabad Management Association (AMA):

"The keynote talk at the public seminar was given by a well-known figure from India's advertising world who had lived in Ahmedabad for many years. After explaining what branding is and how various countries and cities around the world, particularly Dubai, have been branded successfully, the speaker presented a series of arguments to explore how and why Ahmedabad needed to be branded" (ibidem: 46).

While a number of similar initiatives and studies started taking place in the city since the beginning of the XXI century, what contributed most significantly to the branding of Ahmedabad at the national and international level were the images for the proposed Sabarmati River Front Development Project as a symbol of the new course of development of both the city and the state. The relevance of such project for the global benchmarking of Ahmedabad was also recognized by external observers a few years later: "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, Scheffer, 2009: 44). As the Senior Principal of EPC/HCP Design and Project Management Pvt. Lmt. put it, "We want to give a memorable identity to Ahmedabad. That is our goal and our vision" (Interview to Shirley Ballaney, 25.12.2010)

According to Luxion, "[...] 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" (Luxion 2017: 225).

Desai agrees on such view reflecting on the specific case of Ahmedabad: "In Ahmedabad, the state has often pursued entrepreneurial strategies independently without entering into institutionalized partnership with institutionalized capital. This is not to say that private capital interest does not influence the state and the restructuring of the city [...]. What is also important here is that these entrepreneurial strategies – whether pursued by the state or by capital interest – have symbolically often reproduced the power of the existing political regime in Gujarat" (Desai, 2012:35).

The existing power relations and the governance structure of Gujarat foster a reflection on the current changes of the Gujarati society at large, with particular attention to the expanding urban middle class, not only in terms of number, but also in terms of political weight. The traditionally strong presence of traders within the Gujarati society since very old times seems to have reached a point in which the merchant community opens up to newcomers both from other sections of the Gujarati society and from other states. Such middle class, which is much broader and diversified than the past and can hence be considered a “new middle class” identifies with the dream(s) of development (of the West, of the Emirates, of the “Asian Tigers”), while stressing the importance of local identity, mainly through the reference to religion (Hinduism, Gandhi considered as a prophet and, less evidently, Jainism).

A large part of the urban middle class seems to identify itself with the message of the government composed by a combination of respect of religious traditions, alongside with an effort to conform to international standards of development. Such middle class has interest in sustaining a specific political group, as well as traditional values, as long as its privileges are preserved: “Thus, in new Hinduism, the journey of the Hindu middle class becomes smooth as they keep Western knowledge in one hand and the ‘great’ heritage of Hindu civilization in the other without any contradictions and simultaneously support and sustain the Western development model” (Yagnik, Sheth, 2005: 292). The role of the dominant narratives which developed especially after 2002 seems hence to be very important in order to gain consensus from the expanding middle class, especially in order to promote “a creative shift away from the city and region as violent and unsafe to the city and region as a culturally dynamic developmental space [...]. These narratives have involved a ‘politics of forgetting’ and a ‘politics of erasure and denial’ vis-à-vis the experience of marginalized groups” (Desai in: Desai, Sanyal, 2012: 36).

The effectiveness of such narratives for the rehabilitation of the image of the State is confirmed by the rising amount of foreign investments, accounting to more than 10% of India. The image of Ahmedabad and Gujarat promoted by the contemporary narratives is described by Desai (2012b) as “historical, vibrant, scintillating, multi-cultural and lively”, an undoubtedly appealing image for the new Hindu middle class, while spatial and religious segregation is deepening in the city.

According to contemporary observers of the history and society of Ahmedabad, “the march towards greater urbanization and industrialization would continue and the middle-class will become more powerful in the coming decades; but their outlook and future action is likely to be shaped by global-local linkages expressed through market

forces. They would support Hindu nationalism as long as this ideology supports their aspirations" (Yagnik, Sheth, 2005: 293).

In such context, it becomes quite clear the difficulty for an 'environmentalism of the poor' (Martinez Alier, Guha) to take place and probably should not surprise the defamation of intellectuals and scientists promoting environmental protests, while a 'bourgeois environmentalism' (Baviskar, 2011) which is not contesting the main form of development, but cares about cleanness, order and beautification can easily emerge.

According to some local scholars, "it appears that Gujarati Hindu society in the post-2002 phase is not ready to look within. A majority of them, particularly the middle class, think that 'the outsider' – English media and academia and the so-called 'pseudo-secularists' – are out to malign them and tarnish the image of Gujarat. The Gujarati media, most university teachers and literati are also not ready to look at or critically examine the issues related to development models or ecological degradation or steady marginalization of the bottom 20 per cent of Gujarati society" (Yagnik, Sheth, 2005: 293).

In conclusion, the ideological system, made of a combination of very convincing narratives (development, global competition, fear and security, purity and cleanliness), explains the strength of the Sabarmati River Front Development Project. In addition to such factors, there is also a very centralised governance system characterized by a strong religious connotation and an interest in the votes of the emerging middle class. In a context of this kind, after all, the absence of a structured and vocal form of contestation should not surprise.

Conclusions

What emerged is a strict relationship between urban development, transformation of the industries, claims from the rural populations, religion, politics and water. One would be tempted to define 'despotic' (Wittfogel 1957) such government that made major investments in large scale infrastructural projects for water management, but such definition of the government wouldn't be correct. It would not take into account, for example, the pervasive and shocking action already introduced long time before by the British colonization (D'Souza 2006) or the role previous governments had in defining and starting projects that would have become at the core of Modi politics (Luxion 2017).

It cannot be denied, however, that the government of the Hindu right wing did not leave space to contestations of the chosen development model, also in relation to the water management, condemning for 'betray' anyone who tried to oppose it (Mehta 2010) and charging with symbolic and religious meanings the projects, leading to the marginalisation of the Muslim portion of the population (Bobbio 2012). A natural resource, water, became a political object even more than in the past (Baviskar 2007) and the creation of narratives on its scarcity (Mehta 2005) or its excess (Pessina 2012) became fundamental to justify the urgent needs of the infrastructural choices by the government.

If 'despotism' is excessive or not useful as a definition, it is still possible to consider the Gujarat of the last fifteen years as a state with a neoliberal and development-oriented government (Mitchell 1988; Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1990; Sinha, 2003; Baviskar 2007; Luxion 2017), in which a charismatic figure progressively centralised the power, declaring himself directly responsible of various projects (Sabarmati Riverfront, Narmada Canal, Narmada Pipeline Project, Kalpsar Project) and, more in general, of the activities of the ministries of Industries, of the Ports and of the Information (Luxion, 2017). The effects of such centralization of power are evident in the infrastructural choices and in their celebration by the media, not only at the local, but also at the national level. From such narratives, the BJP appears as a concrete and efficient party, able to bring wellbeing and strongly respectful of traditional religious values. The dominant ideology, that crossed different geographical scales, is hence made of convincing narratives (development, global competition, fear and related safety measures, purity and religiosity) that put at the centre water.

Such ideology is sustained by the emerging middle class in the urban centres, in particular in Ahmedabad, that seems to identify itself with the dream of the neoliberal development and simultaneously to sustain the importance of the local identity and of the religion (Yagnik, Sheth, 2005). In Ahmedabad, it is possible to identify a form of 'entrepreneurial urbanism' (Desai 2012b), combined with 'sentimental capitalism' (Da Costa 2015). Drawing on Harvey (2001), Da Costa contends that also in the case of Ahmedabad "capitalism cultivates uniqueness, authenticity, even opposition in search of monopoly rents" (Da Costa 2015: 78).

There are nevertheless several proofs of the uneven effects of the developmental state model in Gujarat (Mahadevia 2007; Desai 2012, 2017), which might compromise soon the 'dream machine' (Baviskar 2007) put in place by the state, also with the aid of the sacred 'waters of forgetfulness' (Illich 1985).

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