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**MONEYPower AND MUSCLEPOWER IN A GUJARATI  
LOCALITY:  
On the Usefulness of *Goondas* in Indian Politics**

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the cooperation between small-time criminals (or *goondas*) and politicians in a locality in Ahmedabad, Gujarat (India). Based on fifteen months of ethnographic investigation, this article argues that the regular cooperation between politicians and *goondas* should be understood in the manner in which local politicians mediate between state institutions and citizens. As inhabitants of especially poorer localities depend on politicians to provide access to (and alternatives for) state services, political success is largely premised on the capacity to ‘get things done’ for voters. Goondas are very useful in such a political contest: local politicians need both ‘moneypower’ and ‘musclepower’ of *goondas* to settle local issues, enforce their authority and manipulate electoral success. At the same time local *goondas* need to collaborate with politicians to prevent police intervention in their illegal activities. Such cooperation sheds new light on the functioning of ‘political society’ in India, enabling the understanding of difficulties involved in policing *goondas*, as well as the nexus between politicians and *goondas* during riots. The paper concludes that the ‘criminalization of politics’ is not a sign of moral decay, but a product of the difficulties of (poorer) citizens to deal with state institutions and the specific nature of local political competition that these difficulties engender.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

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

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

This article discusses the various ways in which politicians and small-time *goondas* like Mohanbhai collaborate in a locality in Ahmedabad that I call Isanpur. This locality housed a mixed population of *dalits* (low caste Hindus) and Muslims. Many inhabitants used to work in Ahmedabad’s now largely defunct textile mills; nowadays they earn a small income in construction or factory-work. This paper argues that cooperation between *goondas* and the related ‘*dada* culture’ should be understood in the context the role that local politicians perform as mediators between state institutions and citizens. The prominence of local *goondas* is a product of the way the state has come to be embedded in Gujarat’s society: the dependence of citizens on politicians to facilitate their interaction with state institutions generates a political arena in which political success is difficult to attain without connections to local *goondas*.

People like Mohanbhai have their counterparts in a great number of Bollywood-movies, where they are almost invariably a threat to the heroes of the movie: *goondas* (also referred to as *dadas* (‘grandfather’), *dons*, ‘number two people’ or ‘anti-social elements’) are the proto-typical bad guys whose activities are threatening as well as intriguing. The supposedly immense power and extravagant lifestyles of famous *goondas* like Dawood Ibrahim, Chotta Rajan or Arun Gawli are a popular topic of discussion: a constant stream of newspaper articles bemoans their

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in Ahmedabad (Gujarat) between January 2005 and March 2006. During this period I lived in two localities in the eastern part of the city. The article is based on interviews as well as on a great deal of socialising which is usually referred to as ‘participant observation’: as I lived in the areas I studied, I had the opportunity to befriend many of the informants quoted below. Most of the information I present here has been gathered over cups of *chai* at tea stalls or during late-night conversations at street corners. To protect the anonymity of my informants, all the names in this article have been changed, as well as the name of the localities.

power and the increased ‘criminalization of politics’ while simultaneously catering to the widespread fascination with these larger-than-life characters. A recurring element in the stories about *goondas* - whether in movies (like *Saatya* or *Sarkar*), in investigate reportage (like *Maximum city* by S. Metha) or in novels (like Vikram Chandra’s *Sacred Games* or David Roberts’ *Santaram*) - is the cooperation between *goondas* and politicians.

In the commentaries on Indian politics one can find, roughly, three types of arguments about this cooperation. In newspapers and magazines the cooperation between politicians and *goondas* is bemoaned as a sign of the moral decay of India’s politics. Politicians employ *goondas* because they have lost their commitment to the old Gandhian values of service and self-sacrifice; now it is only the lust for power and money that drives electoral politics. A second approach sees the nexus between politicians and *goondas* as a result of the erosion of India’s political institutions. As the grass-root networks of the once powerful Congress party fell apart since the 1950’s, the older networks that were used to channel demands and discipline political competition fell into disarray. This ‘authority vacuum’ at the local level led to intensified political competition, a decreased attachment to democratic procedures and institutions and an increased use of violence to settle political disputes (Kohli 1990, Kothari 2001, Brass 1984). In the literature on the recurring Hindu-Muslim riots in India one regularly<sup>2</sup> comes across observations that “without a nexus between politicians and criminals, big riots are highly improbable” (Varshney 2002: 47, see also Brass 2003). A third and related approach comes from anthropologists, who argue that changing patterns of local authority have generated a ‘*dada* culture’: in especially poorer localities a masculine, assertive and violent conduct is being seen as a sign of leadership, as a basis for local authority. As *goondas* are locally seen as role-models, political leadership and an aggressive assertiveness are closely tied-up: “it is the performance of a certain style of public authority – generous but also with a capacity for ruthless violence – that determines who can define and represent ‘the community’, defend neighbourhoods, punish and discipline” (Hansen 2005: 136, Hansen 2001, Lucia 2007).

We cannot grasp the usefulness of *goondas* in Indian politics if we see the state in India as a Weberian ideal-type of the state, a goal-oriented, unitary institution discrete from society with an undisputed sovereignty in its spheres of jurisdiction (Migdal 2001:13-15). In practice the state has to share its sovereignty with a great number of non-state actors (Hansen 2005) and the hold of politicians over the daily operation of the bureaucracy makes it difficult to see the state as an actor discrete from society, since through these political mediators different interests can manipulate the operations of the state (Fuller and Harris 2001: 22). Indeed the terms ‘state’ and ‘society’ already suggest a false dichotomy of two bounded entities in opposition to each other (Nugent 1994): seen from up close it becomes very difficult impossible to describe one as external to the other as they are demarcated by a ‘blurred boundary’ (Gupta 1995) or a ‘spongiform interface’ (Harriss-White 1997, 2003) made up of ‘twilight institutions’ (Lund 2006).

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<sup>2</sup> For descriptions of the 2002 riots and the participation of local *goondas* and politicians in various incidents, see for example Human Rights Watch (HRW): 2002, "We have no orders to save you": State Complicity and Participation in Communal Violence in Gujarat; People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR): 2002, 'Maaro! Kaapo! Baalo!': State, society and Communalism in Gujarat. Delhi.; Concerned Citizens Tribunal (CCT): 2002, Crime against humanity, volume 1 and 2. Citizens for Justice and Peace, Mumbai.

This blurred boundary is populated by a great number of brokers, fixers and mediators, most of them with (covert) political affiliations, who make a living by facilitating the interaction between state officials and citizens. Especially poorer citizens rely on complex networks of political actors who pressurize the bureaucracy on their behalf. Partha Chatterjee (1998, 2001, 2004) coined the term ‘political society’ to capture the sphere in which these networks operate. Although Chatterjee (2004: 76) stressed some positive aspects of the operations of political society – he argued that through this bending and stretching of the rules the poor can build coalitions that can go against the distribution of power in society as a whole – he also signalled the need for more research on ‘the dark side’ of political society, asking “Is there then a strategic use of illegality and violence here, on the terrain of political society...?”

The fieldwork material I discuss below suggests that the answer to this question is affirmative. I will try to show how the intermediary role that local politicians fulfil - as mediators between citizens and state institutions - makes the control over the use of violence a vital element of the strategies that politicians need to employ to win elections. The specific embeddedness of the state in Gujarat’s society (in particular the way political networks facilitate state-society) creates conditions that are favourable for local criminals, not unlike the way the limited penetration of the Italian state in southern Italy facilitated the growth of the Mafia (Blok 1974).

The ‘blurred boundary’ between state and society can be seen as a ‘field of power’ (Bourdieu 1999), marked by an intense competition for access to state resources. The various strategies that politicians employ to develop their control over governmental resources, can be seen, following Bourdieu (1991, 1992, 1999) as a product of (their perception of) the nature of the political game in which they are involved. The structuring principle of this particular political game is the limited capacity of state institutions to uphold legislation and to provide access to state services. As a result of these limitations, citizens have come to rely on political actors to secure admission in a school, get a discounted treatment in a hospital, settle a police case etc. The electoral (and financial) success of politicians is therefore largely premised on their capacity to provide access to state resources and to provide alternative resources: developing a capacity to get things done – as well as the capacity to promise credibly to get things done (cf Keefer 2004) – are thus essential strategies for electoral success<sup>3</sup>. In that context the capacity for violence of local *goondas* is useful for politicians, since a control over the use of force gives local politicians the necessary leverage to solve local problems, arbitrate disputes, intimidate rivals, gather a campaigning budget etcetera. As my informants put it: the money power and muscle power of *goondas* helps politicians to win elections.

While elaborating this argument I will use the word *goonda* in a loose way, to denote those individuals who rely on (the threat of) the use of force to protect their illegal livelihoods. Such a definition does not make ‘goonda’ a clear-cut category: not only can *goondas* become politicians and vice-versa, in the studied locality one could also find many individuals who presented themselves as social workers or politicians, but who seemed to operate as *goondas*.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more complete elaboration of this approach, and its application to the study of communal violence, see my PhD thesis ‘Riot Politics: Communal Violence and State-Society Mediation in Gujarat, India’ (University of Amsterdam, 2009)

## 2. AN INVESTMENT

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

In the 2002 elections [for the State Assembly] I had captured a booth, I told people to move away, and I enjoyed it. I gave full votes to Shaileshbhai. I had given Shaileshbhai 25000 rupees for propaganda, because if he would win he would help me in my business. So I captured the booth for him. I came with my gang, and I fought with a police officer, I made him go away.

Boothcapturing is especially done at the last hour and the beginning hours [of the voting]. I told the staff of the booth 'I will frequently add some votes'. If I would add 500 votes every hour people would doubt it, so I infrequently I put down some votes. My gang was there with me all day, with their hockey sticks. To accept the votes, I gave the staff some money, and they easily accepted it<sup>4</sup>.

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

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

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

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

Goondas like Mukeshbhai are individuals who, sometimes unwontedly or unexpectedly, get an image of heavy handedness in their neighborhood, which make people fear them. The word that Mukeshbhai uses to describe himself is *matabhare*, literally 'heavyheaded', which implies he is headstrong and prone to fighting. This image as a *matabhare* man makes the *goonda* useful for politicians, during as well as after elections. *Matabhare* people can have an impact on the results of the elections because of the 'muscle-power' that they add to electoral campaigns: they can support candidates by, like Mukeshbhai, capturing booths, or simply by intimidating voters. Their local standing enables them to influence voters, and their violent image makes *matabhare* men like Mukeshbhai useful to protect candidates during the elections. They make sure election meetings are not disturbed by *goondas* from opposing candidates, and they can prevent these *goondas* from harassing their candidate.

The need for *goondas* to perform these services is such that informants deemed it near impossible to win elections without the support of the muscle power of

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<sup>4</sup> Despite claims by politicians to the contrary, booth capturing does take place in Gujarat. I have been present on one such occasion, where supporters of one party overwhelmed the few supporters over the other party, and where the election officials seemed to have been bribed. "Now even the dead people will vote", a party worker told me at that time as he went in to stamp several ballots. Outnumbered, the supporters opposing party proposed a 3 to 1 division of the 'bogus-votes'. After half an hour the police came in to end this form of 'voting'.

*goondas*. As a candidate for the 2005 municipal elections in Isanpur confided: “Every *chali* [‘housing block’] has two-three anti social elements. I would also need those elements, even if I do not want it. Even people like me needs them, also on the day of election. I need them to stop the disturbance of such elements”. This candidate seemed genuinely opposed to the cooperation between politicians and *goondas*, but he saw no other option but employing them, adding that “the system has gotten worse” (cf Kohli 1990: 57).

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

Politicians also benefit from the services of *goondas* after the elections. A goonda can help to solve a dispute by pressurizing one of the disputants, for which both the politician and the goonda might receive a fee from the other disputant. And a *goonda* can help to deal with issues that need muscle power to solve, e.g. the clearance of encroached land for a building project, the intimidation of businessmen who want to start a new business in the area (and who were unwilling to go along with the ‘legal extortion’ of party workers), and the collection of *hapta* from hawkers (sometimes as an intermediary between these hawkers and the police).

Especially in real estate-business the services of *matabhare* people can be valuable. By intimidating renters or owners of buildings, they can pressurize inhabitants to vacate their premises. This can help to speed up new building projects by ‘settling’ ownership issues that would otherwise lingered in the courts for years. Similarly, *matabhare* people can be used to vacate land encroached upon by squatters. This is how a local builder described his handling of encroachments on his land: “The first way, which we prefer, is that we try to free the land by giving money to the people on the land, we try to give them, cash so that they will leave. If that does not work, we sometimes go to court to free the land. But this takes a long time and it is expensive. The third way is that we employ *goondas* to pressurize the residents. He tortures them, threatens them so that they want to leave by themselves. (...) Sometimes we do not want to engage him [a *goonda*], but he intervenes. Then we sit at the table and decide how to work on the problem. He will take some money from us and sometimes he is used to clear the land.”

In this sense *goondas* are the progeny of the limitations of Gujarat’s state institutions: *goondas* can operate relatively openly and undisturbed because they help people overcome the difficulties of dealing with governmental institutions and regulations. Their political contacts as well as their local support is for a large part premised on the way they help others to deal with the limited capacity of governmental institutions to provide basic services and to uphold laws and regulations. One can discern both a direct and an indirect relation between the local standing of *goondas* and the difficulties of dealing with state institutions. A direct relation lies in the capacity of *matabhare* people to provide an alternative for the overburdened courts and uncooperative police. *Goondas* profit from the fact that court

cases take very long to reach its conclusion<sup>5</sup>: since the courts take a long time to settle disputes and since both police-officers and the courts require considerable bribes to register and deal with a case, it is profitable to involve a local *goonda* to recover money, settle a dispute or vacate occupied land<sup>6</sup>.

An indirect relation lies in the need for local politicians employ *goondas* to increase their capacity to deal with the demands of residents in their constituency. Inhabitants in localities like Isanpur face various difficulties (unresponsiveness, corruption, harassment etc.) when dealing with the governmental officials. As a result many residents approach politicians to solve their daily issues; local politicians like Shailesh Macwana spend most of their days pressurizing governmental officials on behalf of residents to arrange admission in schools, new water pipes, the cleaning of the gutter, etc. This dependency of citizens on politicians to provide access (and alternatives) to state services shapes the political contest in these localities: electoral success in these localities is largely premised on a capacity to provide this access (and alternatives) to state services. In that context politicians can make good use of the cooperation of *matabhare* people to maintain their authority and improve their capacity to solve local issues: *goondas* can help politicians to settle a dispute by threatening one (or both) of the disputants, and a *goonda* can help ‘policing’ a locality and uphold the authority of local politicians. In this way the political usefulness of a *goonda* is related to the need for local politicians to develop a capacity to provide alternative avenues for dispute-settlement. Since inhabitants with a *matabhare* image can help politicians to get things done, local politicians can profit from their relations with these people.

The relations between politicians and *goondas* are facilitated by the considerable control that politicians exert over the bureaucracy: the hold of politicians over governmental officials – especially police officers - creates the scope for *goondas* to run their illegal businesses. The influence of politicians over the posting and promotion of governmental officials enables them to prevent the police from taking action against ‘their’ *goondas*. Political actors can transfer uncooperative governmental officials to so-called ‘punishment postings’ (see Wade 1985, Zwart 1994); by threatening with transfers – and by sharing the *hapta* – police officers can be dissuaded from intervening in the businesses that *goondas* are running. As Isanpur’s PI (police inspector) confided: “In 10-15 percent of the cases we have to listen to the will of politicians. These politicians decide our postings and our transfers, so we are dependent on them; I feel bad but it is not in our hand. I cannot change it, nothing else can be done”.

One can therefore argue that the dependency of politicians on *goondas* and the limited capacity of state institutions to uphold its laws and regulations are mutually reinforcing: the limited capacity of the police and the courts to dispense justice creates incentives for local politicians to make use of *goondas* as alternative enforcers of authority, which again poses obstacles for the police and the judiciary to uphold governmental laws and regulations. This dialectic illustrates the necessity as well as the complexity of surmounting a state-society dichotomy: on the one hand the forms

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<sup>5</sup> In 2006 the Gujarat high court had a backlog of 3 million cases. Indian Express 10-4-2007

<sup>6</sup> Suketu Mehta’s *Maximum City* (2004: 191) offers various fascinating examples of how goondas in Mumbai function as an alternative for the overburdened judiciary. In a conversation with Mehta, one Mumbai-based goonda advertises his services as follows: “If someone is sitting on your property, whatever is pending for ten or twenty years in the courts, we goondas will resolve [it] in ten days. Whatever the police, the politicians, the courts can’t do, we goondas do. When people are tired of the courts, when they are ruined, when they are looking for a way out, they come to us and say, “do something”. What you have forgotten is yours, we will restore to you.”

of social control that exist in localities like Isanpur limit the capacity of the state institutions to expand the authority of the state, while on the other hand the operations of state institutions – their laws as well as the availability of various state resources – also shape these local patterns of authority.

To capture the dialectic between the strategies that individual actors employ, and the underlying structure of the political game within which they compete, I invoke Bourdieu once again. Bourdieu's conceptualisation of 'field' enables the understanding of how the structure of the relations between individuals *shapes* the strategies that individual actors employ (as they fashion their strategies according to their perception of this structure of relationships), while the 'field' itself is simultaneously *being shaped* by the strategies that these individuals employ. The arena in which individuals compete over control over state resources can be seen as a field, a 'field of power': "the construction of the state proceeds apace with the construction of a *field of power*, defined as the space of play within which the holders of capital (of different species) struggle *in particular* for power over the state" (Bourdieu 1999: 58). The difficulties that citizens face when attempting to gain access to state resources, structures this political arena - the 'space of play' - in which political actors compete for control over the state. The dependence of citizens on politicians to deal with state institutions structures the competition and cooperation between political actors. This dependence shapes the possible strategies that political actors can employ to gain support and win elections. In the context of a state that on the one hand has enough authority to brand certain activities as illegal, but on the other hand does not have the capacity to fully implement such injunctions, politicians and *goondas* need to rely on each other to establish their local authority as well as their livelihoods. In the process they reinforce the limited capacity of the state to uphold its laws and legislation.

### 3. VIOLENCE AS PERFORMANCE

In order to effectively perform their various services for political leaders, *goondas* need to develop a certain public image: they need to be recognized as a *matabhare* person. This is why I have hesitated to translate the word 'goonda' with 'criminal': while a criminal is commonly associated to be as secretive as possible about his or her illegal activities, a small-time, a local *goonda* needs to be relatively open and even boastful about his involvement in criminal activities. Consequently the pressures that shape their behavior are very different from a criminal whose success depends for a large part on his capacity to keep his activities secret.

One obvious reason for the relative 'public' status of *goondas* is that their activities in localities like Isanpur, be it as an extortionist, a liquor-trader or as an owner of a gambling-den, need to be relatively well-known to the public in order to attract clients. Because of this unavoidable openness, only some political backing can restrain the police and the broader public from interfering in the illegal activities of *goondas*. This relates to a second reason: in order to attract the necessary political support an aspiring *goonda* needs to develop an image of being a dangerous and violent person, because such a *mathabare* image makes him a useful partner for local politicians.

In this light, the following recollections of Hasmukh, a social worker in the area, are relevant:

Mr Gupta, a doctor, was approached by a goonda called Shaidev who had been arrested for rape and extortion. Shaidev went into his office, and emptied a gun on his table. He put the six bullets on the table and asked ‘which one do you want in your head?’, and he demanded 50,000 Indian rupees. Dr Gupta came to me, but he did not want to involve the police, he was afraid for his security, and that of his children. I explained that if you as a doctor will not do anything, then who could? I said I was willing to lose my life for this, and that I had some friends who would also help. That gave the doctor some confidence. Then I went to Shailesh Macwana [the local MLA] to talk about it, who just told me “he is a very *mathabare* person, I know him from the jail, he is also in the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (a right wing Hindu political party)”. Then I went to another *goonda* called Samir, and since he saw I was with Mr. Gupta he said ‘ok let us do some compromising.’ [When that did not work] then I went to people from my organization [Hasmukhbhai was involved with a left wing group], and asked them about Shaidev. They said he was a *mathabare* person, but not for them. So they gathered 25 people and went for him. After that he fled and only after a month the police caught him.

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

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

This political support is premised on the image that the *goonda* has in his area. The image of being a heavy-handed, dangerous (*‘mathabare’*) person gives the *goonda* a certain hold over the inhabitants in his area, which makes the goonda interesting for politicians: such a *goonda* can help settle disputes, influence the voting, prevent disruptions of meetings etc. This violent image also prevents other people from protesting against their activities. Mukeshbhai described one such instance when he used violence to protect his business:

There is a person here called [Rajesh]. He started saying to people ‘I am a social worker’. He did some things, like getting a loan, and then he forced people to give a commission. He does not have many political contacts, but people are afraid of him. He once went up to me. He told me ‘give me 1000 rupees every month, otherwise I will complain against you’. He wanted *hapta*. I slapped him right there, and with my right hand Kanu I kicked him, in front of a lot of people. ‘I will sell liquor at your home’, I told him.

We should be hesitant about viewing the violence of people like Mukeshbhai as merely pathologically deviant behaviour. Their violence has a very instrumental

aspect as well, since this violence is useful to develop the necessary *matabhare* image. Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar (1996: 81) attempted to psychoanalyze four notorious Hyderabad gangsters, who all had a history of violence during Hindu-Muslim riots. The result was an impressive mix of psychology and ethnography, which offered vivid descriptions of the communal ideologies of the four men as well as some general conclusions about their psyche: “There is also a notable depressive tendency in their underlying mood, a threatened depression against which various defences are employed. (...) Perhaps the need to defend against an emptying and fragmenting self, the inner experience of depression, contributed to the building up of a defensive hyperactivity wherein the cohesiveness of the self is restored and most immediately experienced through an explosion in violent action. The excitement of violence becomes the biggest confirmation that one is psychically still alive, a confirmation of one’s very existence”.

Such an analysis underplays the rational and calculating side of the violent behaviour of such *goondas*, which is grounded in the political context in which these *goondas* operate. In that context, violence is also a means to establish a very useful image. Hasmukhbhai used to be a small-time alcohol seller before he devoted himself to social work. This is how he describes the career of a *goonda*:

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

Such displays of violence of *goondas* are performative acts in its spectacular effects. Thus, apart from the targets who are beaten mercilessly, the audience that immediately gathers to watch the spectacle, is equally crucial. The violence of the *goonda* serves to make future violence unnecessary, as this violence helps to command the obedience of the audience. The violence instils fear in the audience, which allows *goondas* to develop a certain hold over their neighbourhoods. The Gujarati word ‘*dhaak*’, which translates as ‘fear’ or ‘awe’ captures the violent image of *goondas* in the state. The word denotes an authority based on intimidation. In the words of another local social worker: “They always pick up fights. This is in order to get *dhaak*, to create fear, which is why they fight. They get *dhaak* through fighting and contacts with the police. So people stay away, they are afraid of the *matabhare* people. People are afraid to be beaten up, so we cannot do anything”.

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

#### **4. GOONDAS AS POLITICIANS**

Once a person has instilled this *dhaak* the threat of violence can be enough to settle a dispute; a simple command might be enough to pressurize a neighbourhood into voting for the preferred candidate. The threat of violence suffices. Then the public

stature of a local goonda can grow as this violent image helps to develop political contacts. A group of boys might gather around him, adding to the capacity of such a local goonda to settle issues and intimidate rivals.

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

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

Because of their ‘hold’ *goondas* can alter the balance of power between them and their political contacts. When a *goonda* has developed some local fame, local politicians cannot easily forego their support. The following quotation can illustrate this uneasy interdependence. This is how a municipal councillor spoke about his relation with local goondas:

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

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

If they manage to develop their ‘hold’ over a bigger area *goondas* can become popular politicians themselves; they can use their local authority, and the money gained through their businesses, to launch a successful electoral campaign. One of Gujarat’s most famous *goondas*, *don* Latif, managed to get elected in the 1980’s from three of Ahmedabad’s municipal constituencies simultaneously while he was in jail. In this way there is a constantly shifting balance of power between politicians and

*goondas*: in some areas and some periods politicians are very dependent on local *goondas* for local support, money-power and muscle-power, while on other occasions local politicians can develop their own power-base, forcing local *goondas* into a more subservient role. Several informants have commented to me that over the last decade this balance of power in the studied neighbourhoods has shifted in favor of local politicians: according to them the local hold of *goondas* seems to have diminished, and politicians are rumored to feel less obliged to intervene with the police on behalf of 'their' *goondas*, resulting in an increasing number of arrests. It is a common perception that there are nowadays no more 'big' *goondas* (like *don* Latif) in the city. It is difficult to ascertain the truthfulness of these claims: they might also be inspired by politically motivated propaganda, intended to boost the image of the ruling party.

A more comparative analysis might shed more light on the conditions that influence this shifting balance of power between local politicians and *goondas*; on the basis of my fieldwork I can only venture to tentatively propose three conditions that seems to affect the local standing of *goondas* in the studied localities. A first condition that seems to favor the position of *goondas* in Isanpur is the relative absence of much alternative businesses: lacking substantive financial support from bonafide businessmen, local politicians are forced to turn to alcohol traders and gamblers for the financing of their electoral campaigns. A second condition, my fieldwork suggest, is the close competition between two political parties: when, as in Isanpur, the electoral competition is very close, candidates cannot risk foregoing the support of local *goondas*. Where candidates can count on a large majority of the votes, politicians have less need to nurture the support of local *goondas*. A third condition is the lack of alternative channels to deal with state institutions: inhabitants of poorer neighborhoods generally encounter more difficulties when dealing with governmental institutions, which makes them more dependent on the mediation of local *goondas* for security or for the access to basic amenities. In poorer localities residents have a greater need to make use of the patronage channels and the alternatives for dispute settlement that *goondas* can provide, thus boosting the standing of these local *matabhare* people.

## 5. GOONDAS AND RIOTING

Such an analysis of the interdependencies between *goondas* and politicians can help to understand their often-observed cooperation during riots. When in 2002 large-scale rioting erupted again (in 1969, 1981, 1985-86, 1990, 1992-93 there were earlier large outbursts of violence in Ahmedabad), politicians were often seen cooperating with local 'anti-social elements'<sup>7</sup>. Inhabitants of Isanpur observed that during the 2002 riots local politicians made active efforts to get local *goondas* to lead the mobs. This is what a social worker from Isanpur observed about the cooperation between politicians and *goondas*:

[Shailesh Macwana] would call some *matabhare* person [a person with a violent image] and tell him to kill two Muslims. He would say 'just kill and then move'. Then four Hindus would be killed, and this is how the riots would start. Shaileshbhai has good contacts with anti-social elements. He uses them during elections. They are paid for, generally they get boys from outside to do it, and then they help to get them released. They use business people to get them, and they tell them to kill four

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<sup>7</sup> See note 1

Muslims, for example. They would say ‘come at different times, and each time kill one Muslim, shoot them, or use your knife.’ If someone gets caught, it depends on the party in power if this person is used to fix the blame. And it will be used to release political anger, as a way to frame your opponent in politics.

In this way local *goondas* can be seen as ‘riot specialists’ (Brass 2003) as such local criminals are generally among the small group within a mob that commits most of the actual physical violence. Most people in a mob are just there to watch; they might be attracted by the spectacle of it or they are just curious to find out what is happening. As this informant observed: “Ordinary people cannot use weapons. But when antisocial elements step in their strength [of ordinary people] increases. The impression that the public has of him [the ‘antisocial element’, *goonda*] is that he is not afraid of dying. So the public is right behind him and the *dadas* [gangsters, *goondas*] lead.”

This cooperation between politicians and *goondas* during riots can also be seen as a product of their interdependencies that I have illustrated above. Because of their dependence on politicians it is not easy for small-time *goondas* to resist the exhortations of politicians to participate in rioting: neglecting the requests of politicians to contribute to the ‘defence’ of the locality (meaning: attacking other localities) could endanger important relationships. Conversely, by performing these ‘services’, by taking the lead in the burning, looting and killing, such local *goondas* can incur the gratitude of people who can help them to stay in business after the riots. As one informant observed: “In the time of riots they [*goondas*] become leaders. If they do not take part, they will spoil their image. In normal times, these people do *dadagiri* [‘criminal behaviour’: illegal activities]. So he feels that if he would not take leadership in riot times, he would suffer for his misbehavior in normal times. People will say [if he does take leadership] you helped us, so you can go ahead with your *dadagiri*.” The active participation of local *goondas* during riots is an exercise in maintaining relations: their contribution to the riots allows them to cement the relations with people who are essential to uphold their livelihood.

Secondly, riots provide (aspiring) *goondas* with a stage to perform their capacity for violence. The riots are an opportunity to inspire fear and awe among their neighbors; the active or tacit support of the police allows them to acquire a violent image without too much risk of arrest or retribution. That makes riots a very valuable opportunity: such a display of violence can serve to acquire a useful image of being ‘prone to violence’. As I discussed in the above paragraphs, this image can be a source of income, since such an image lends an aspiring *goonda* the leverage to settle disputes, engage in extortion, intimidate rivals etcetera. The riots provide an opportunity to establish the image that makes local *goondas* attractive partners for politicians; once local residents become fearful of an aspiring *goonda*, he becomes useful for politicians as a local enforcer of their authority. Riots thus provide local *mathabare* people with an opportunity to establish (or protect) their livelihood. We can read in this light Brass’ assertion (2003: 231) that riots are street theatre productions.

Mohanbhai, about whose life as a *goonda*, I started this paper with, illustrates the connection between rioting and the need to maintain relations. As we sat on his bed talking about his life, he started talking about his Muslim friends. “I fought with Muslims a lot, still they respect me a lot”, he said. “These people [his Muslim friends] are a *lakh* times better than the Hindu community. Our people are trying to get us killed, but they give their life for you”. I could not conceal my surprise: is this famous Hindu-rioter now presenting himself as a great friend of Muslims? His answer came

again in that subdued and melancholic tone: “The [political] party workers make the riots happen when they want, and they can prevent it when they want. I have to defend my own area. Everyone goes to the street, so I have to be there”.

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

## 6. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have interpreted the regular cooperation between local *goondas* and politicians in the light of the way politicians function as intermediaries between state institutions and citizens. The intermediary role that local politicians fulfill - as mediators between citizens and state institutions – forces them to maintain close relations with local *goondas*. In the context of a mediated state the electoral (and financial) success of politicians is largely premised on their capacity to provide access to state resources and to provide alternative resources: developing a capacity to get things done is an essential precondition for electoral success. The moneypower and musclepower that *goondas* provide, can boost this capacity: their monetary contributions important to help people and to organize election campaigns, and the threat of violence from local *goondas* can be useful means to settle local issues and establish one’s authority as a local leader. In this way the limited capacities of state institutions to uphold legislation and provide access to state resources engenders a political field in which courting the support of *goondas* is a beneficial political strategy.

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

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