

Technology, Institutions and the Transformation of Small-scale Agriculture: Welfare and Inequality in a study from India

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Social Work

My dissertation examines the political ecology of watershed development in western India. The project is located in the neoliberalization of development policy, village-level democratic decentralization and the transformation of social and economic relations in semi-arid areas. The dissertation uses data collected during eighteen months of fieldwork in Dahod district, eastern Gujarat bordering the states of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. While my project investigates the unprecedented intensification of agriculture in semi-arid areas using hybrid seeds and chemical inputs to shift subsistence communities to market-based production, it begins by unpacking the categories of 'subsistence' and 'market-based' production. I argue on the basis of archival data that small-scale communities have been market producers at least since the colonial period, if not before that; and what is problematic about watershed development is not the 'shift' from subsistence to market-based production, but the enduring, and arguably increasing discrepancy in the terms of trade between agriculture and industry.

What is remarkable about watershed development is that the enactment of agricultural extraction (extraction of land, labor, water, soil and biodiversity) is not by private corporations but by the 'new' Indian state to claim a place in the new industrial global order. Watershed development is implemented by village-level elected bodies called panchayats since 2003. My dissertation examines how panchayats distribute watershed benefits; the role of kinship, caste and tribe in shaping panchayat leaders' decisions; and the changing contestation between panchayats and traditional village councils to shape sovereignty over development in an era of rising panchayat power. I contend that the duality of panchayats' role as popularly elected bodies taking action against the majority of people's interests is the most telling form of neoliberal state-making in India.

My project examines the forms of this new colonization in semi-arid areas and small-scale farmers' practical and aesthetic responses to the new technology through evidence drawn from the field. I am examining small and marginal farmers' response to cash crop agriculture by examining field practices and interview data, focusing on the differential capacity of wealthy and less well-off farmers to undertake commercial agriculture for inequality in the drylands. I examine the increasing burden on women's work induced by the transformation of agriculture and contrast this with the neoliberal state's celebration of gender equality in its new discourse, which serves it well by crafting women into new female 'producers'. I am also examining peoples' aesthetic response to *consuming* hybrid seeds and shifting from flavorful indigenous seeds; a theme ignored by otherwise well-crafted research on the Green Revolution by Francine Frankel (1971), Akhil Gupta (1998) and Vandana Shiva (1991).

My findings at this stage are preliminary, tentative and broad and I am still analyzing and thinking through the data. I will probably not have a lot to present but look forward to a fruitful discussion.