

**Of parks and politics: the production of socio-nature in a Gujarati town** Anna Zimmer, Natasha Cornea & René Véron  
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**Abstract:** Urban parks in India are often discussed as positive environmental projects, and their creation appears as unproblematic in public discourse. This paper presents the creation of a municipal park in a small city in Gujarat, India. Using insights from history and architecture, we stress the importance of reading parks as political and to some extent ideological projects in the larger context of city-making. The political ecology and history of the particular park studied here allow us to problematize the socio-ecological project of urban “beautification” via park creation. The municipal park, established in the centre of a small urban agglomeration after displacing a slum settlement from the site, is – as we argue – an integral part of a local geography of power. As such it expresses several registers of values upheld by local elites and brings into focus highly conflictive social relations. The case study contributes to further developing a situated urban political ecological approach that starts theorising cities from the South. It moreover offers a critical perspective on the understudied urban nature of small towns.

## Introduction

On a late sunny afternoon in October 2013, the first author of this paper decided to visit the Atal Bihari Vajpayee Park in Navsari with her husband and son.<sup>1</sup> They reached the park located next to a municipal shopping complex that housed mainly different eateries, from pizza restaurants to dosa stalls, and cappuccino with hot chocolate fudge cake cafes to Kathiawadi<sup>2</sup> specialities. The park was teeming with life: Older men<sup>1</sup> were on an early evening walk on the roundway. In the far right corner, ambitious parents were encouraging their

offspring to learn roller-skating. In the centre, families had settled on the lawn, eating snacks and kicking around balls with their children. In the far left corner, the playground hustled and bustled with a crowd of children. On the partly broken benches, parents were relaxing, shouting the eventual order: “Remove your shoes, you will fall!”, “Look after your brother!” Among them, several Muslim women were wearing the full body veil. Other mothers, dressed in tight jeans and T-shirt, were helping their small babies down the slides, talking to them in a mix of English and Gujarati. Among the crowd were a few kids on their own. With torn pants and without shoes, unkempt and skinny, it was easy to make out that they belonged to a different social class altogether. Mothers who made it a point to educate their children to let others go first, to not step into any water puddles, or to not pick up pebbles from the ground threw a disapproving glance sideward towards these children, and encouraged their wards to move on to some other ride.

While Atal Bihar Vajpayee Park was our local park, similar scenes play out in other gardens across the urban agglomeration.<sup>3</sup> This paper engages with the history of one such centrally located park, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Garden, opened by the municipality of Vijalpore in 2012. This park was created after the relocation (and partly displacement) of a slum colony that was co-financed by the local Rotary club. This paper will discuss the role of urban parks in constituting a particular socio-nature shaped by a local elite and its imaginaries at the heart of the city, rendered at the cost of displacing, and discursively marginalising, certain residents.

The visible urban landscape of parks and their uses described in the opening of this paper showcase a part of Navsari’s and Vijalpore’s society with its desires, aspirations and anxieties. Later sections will establish the importance of Navsari’s middle-class and its values for the case study; values that find expression in the language and clothing choices, the sports ambitions and health-supporting activities, as well as the social behaviour of some of the park users we met. Beyond the visible, various dynamics and narratives unfold: the history of parks in the small agglomeration with its entwined politics; the ideals of city life and amenities, or of “natural” spaces in the city that found their expression here; the meanings and values that residents, planners or politicians ascribe to urban space. The ways parks are made reveal local political and social processes and conflicts. Because urban green spaces express changing societal

ideals and values (Young 1995), parks act as arenas for struggles over identities and moralities, over values and meaning.

To address these dynamics in a study of urban green spaces, it is helpful to turn to the literature on urban political ecology (UPE). This academic field has argued since its inception that urban nature is the expression of larger political, economic, social and cultural processes and conceptions (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003), and reflects political and economic interests and conflicts (Gandy 2003). Urban nature, following Lefebvre (1991) and Smith (1990), is understood to be the historically specific product of social relations of power (Robbins 2004). As such, socio-environmental change is politically not neutral, and divides urban society along the lines of winners and losers (Bryant and Bailey 1997). Such an approach is broadened in this paper through insights from historical and archaeological studies of urban parks in India to investigate the role of urban socio-nature in the stabilisation of identities and the making of meaningful urban landscapes that embody urban imaginaries and ideologies.

This paper is organised in five parts. After this introduction, the second section presents insights into the production and meaning of urban parks from the literatures on UPE, history and architecture. The third section presents the case study. In the fourth section, park creation as a form of urban beautification is discussed in its particular form it takes in the small urban agglomeration of Navsari/Vijalpore. The conclusion then discusses the insights that this case study contributes to a situated UPE that aims at theorising from the global South (Shillington 2012, Lawhon et al. 2013, Zimmer 2015).

### **Parks and politics: perspectives from UPE, historical and architecture literatures**

Urban parks and urban green spaces have been studied within the field of UPE almost exclusively in Western countries, with a large proportion of studies centred on the USA. A recent edited book by Sandberg et al. (2015) features some perspectives from non-Western countries such as Turkey or Singapore. In general, however, a Southern perspective on urban parks within UPE is missing so far.

Existing works in UPE have importantly demonstrated how parks express struggles over values and morality in the urban society. Thus, parks have been part of political projects of government or non-governmental actors. Gandy

(2003) describes landscape architects' ambitions to contribute to the "education" and "civilisation" of marginalised communities perceived as morally corrupt, and foster a more democratic society through the creation of Central Park in New York in the second half of the 19th century. The work by Perkins (2010) shows how urban park creation at the same time in the USA more generally was a response to labour unrest. As such parks were part of an attempt of urban elites to assimilate working-classes to middle-class values and were inscribed in a moral reform movement aimed at discouraging alcohol consumption of working-class members during leisure time. More recently, park provision in the second half of the twentieth century has been equated by liberal think tanks with restoring civil order in Los Angeles (Byrne et al. 2007). In Ankara, parks were intended by the republican government to contribute to the goal of constructing a modern society (Oguz, 2000). All three case studies demonstrate how green spaces have been used in the attempt to produce new subjectivities related to categories such as citizenship, modernity and governability.

The disciplining of citizens has equally been one motive in Singapore's trajectory as "Garden City" and, more recently, a "city in the garden" (Gulsrud and Ooi 2015). However, this case is also an example for the ways parks become engaged in such diverse projects as nation-building and city image-making aimed at attraction of international finance and expertise.

While the above case studies highlight the governmental character of green spaces, a range of works at the intersection of UPE and environmental justice literatures has inquired into socio-cultural dynamics of exclusion surrounding parks (Byrne and Wolch 2009). Works by Gandy (2003) and Byrne (2012) have demonstrated forcefully how the idea of the park itself has developed within a moralist and racist discourse and has thus been useful in furthering marginalisation of certain urban groups. The unequal distribution of parks in the city related questions of the disparity between urbanites (Erkip 1997, Heynen et al. 2006, Pincetl 2007, Byrne et al. 2009), and access restrictions have been of interest in the USA (Solecki and Welch 1995, Gobster 1998, Brownlow 2006, Byrne 2007). Attention here has especially been on racial relations surrounding parks, though class issues are also recurring (Byrne and Wolch 2009, Dooling 2009). In this context, Byrne (2012, p. 597) has recently pointed out how "projects of nature-making [such as park-making] have historically been projects of appropriation and exclusion". The case of New York's Central

Park confirms this by documenting the displacement of poor communities in the making of the park (Gandy 2003). While access to parks is a factor not discussed herein, both appropriation and exclusion in park creation and class dynamics will show to be of relevance for our case study.

Nevertheless, the park studies carried out in the global North may not easily translate into Southern contexts. In particular, the ways race is mobilised to further the marginalisation of nonwhite US-Americans through urban park projects (Byrne 2012; cf. Heynen 2015) cannot be transferred to contemporary India easily. The next section therefore discusses parks in India to help us conceptualise how parks work as elite projects in India's postcolonial and highly divided urban societies and have recently become part of post-liberalisation restructuring in South Asia's dynamic urban areas.

### **Parks in India**

In India, a number of publications discuss urban parks in their relation with questions of class.<sup>4</sup> Kaviraj (1997) describes the changing class character of a park in Kolkata where evening strolls, Durga puja<sup>5</sup> celebrations and cricket games are replaced over time by clothes washing, shelters and football games. Baviskar (2003) analyses a conflict between slum residents and better-off people around appropriate uses of an urban park in Delhi where the open area offers some relief from the dearth of latrines for the former while providing beautiful surroundings for leisure and recreation for the latter. Zérah (2007) presents the case of Mumbai's Sanjay Gandhi National Park where middle-class environmentalism has led to the displacement of large poor communities. All these works confirm that urban parks hold very different meanings for urban residents as diverse as those described in the introduction. They especially show very important class tensions in India's larger metropolises; that some of these are apparent in small cities such as Vijalpore as well is something the case study will demonstrate.

As the aim of this paper is to understand the recent creation of a park, the analysis of the history of park-making in the Indian subcontinent is of particular interest. Such analyses have contributed much to an understanding of the role parks play in the display of power, the inscription of specific ideologies into urban space, and the consolidation of the identity of cities or their rulers. In colonial India public park creation and design were firmly embedded in larger

imperial discourses and governmentalities (Wescoat 1991, Herbert 2005, Glover 2008, Rehman 2014). In British Delhi, especially, parks formed part of a “post-Mutiny landscape of victory” (Sharma 2009, p. 39): the confiscation of privately owned Mughal gardens, their remodelling, or the creation of new parks were part of the colonial project and served as markers for British identity (Sharma 2007). The native population’s access to these parks was often restricted (Sharma 2009). Other green spaces in the city were also exclusionary: during the colonial afforestation of Delhi’s ridge, surrounding peasant communities were prohibited from grazing their cattle in the concerned areas. They were seen as “obstacles” (Mann and Sehrawat 2009, p. 553) to colonial plans of beautification and sanitation, and entire villages in Delhi’s periphery were relocated to “place [ ... ] New Delhi in a garden-like environment” (p. 558).

The powerful dynamics of overwriting city space, and with it, writing certain citizens out of it, that are demonstrated in these case studies raise questions as to how the postcolonial Indian state and society enrol green spaces in the making of contemporary cities. Studies on recent projects in India’s and Pakistan’s metropolises highlight that the exclusionary character of park-making continues well into the present while drawing important links between such dynamics and city elites’ economic aspirations and imaginaries. In Delhi, for example, parks and their related aesthetics have been crucial to increase the city’s attractiveness for possible foreign investors (Dupont 2011) and for creating an “image of a ‘world-class’ city” (Bhan 2009, p. 140). Working towards these goals entailed displacements of large slum populations (Dupont 2011). Rehman (2014) shows similar economic arguments put forward in favour of parks in Lahore where the title of “city of gardens” has been reapplied for city branding. Often, these and similar urban restructuring initiatives in South Asia have been executed under the banner of “beautification” (Fernandes 2004, Dupont 2011, Mathur 2012, Rehman 2014, Follmann, 2015) – a notion that plays an important role in the presented case study as well.

A different case is presented by Sinha (2010, p. 61) on Lucknow where urban parks have been used in “attempts to recover a cultural self founded upon a mythic pre-colonial past, and to carve out a party based political identity in the public realm”). A new local elite composed of historically disadvantaged castes and organised in the BSP political party aimed at the empowerment of Dalits<sup>6</sup> through creation of parks in the memory of Dalit leaders such as Ambedkar<sup>7</sup>

and introducing monumental statues of these leaders into urban parks and other public spaces (Sinha and Kant 2014), though the success of this has been questioned on several accounts. The Lucknow case pushes towards a reading of India's parks against the complex background of a society strongly divided along lines of caste among others. At the same time, as will be discussed in later sections, it presents a contrasting way Dalit identity and the figure of Ambedkar are entwined with urban park projects in India.

Based on these insights, the following case study aims to shed light on the question how nature and parks are enfolded in projects of city-making and urban identities in a small Indian city. As will be seen, urban actors discursively present park creation as urban beautification. Urban restructuring under the banner of "beautification" in India's large agglomerations has been discussed in the urban literature as seen above. Such beautification drives in small cities have, to our knowledge, not been studied yet; and just how they play out in the context of small city politics is unclear. Also, the specific role of urban parks in such drives – or their simultaneous inscription into other processes of urban politics – needs to be understood. This analysis thus allows addressing the significant knowledge gap that Robinson (2006), Bell and Jaynes (2009) and Véron (2010) have identified with regard to the processes shaping smaller urban agglomerations and their environment. The following case study begins by introducing the studied urban agglomeration to trace the history of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Garden in Vijalpore.

### **A park in the heart of a heterogeneous urban agglomeration**

The studied urban agglomeration is situated in the South of Gujarat and composed of two urban political-administrative entities, the municipalities of Navsari and Vijalpore, and a number of surrounding villages. Together, they have around 250,000 inhabitants and are part of one continuously built-up area (see Figure 1). Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Garden lies at the centre of this agglomeration, close to the administrative boundary between the two municipalities, on the territory of Vijalpore.

Navsari is said to be more than 2000 years old, and was part of the princely state of Baroda, whose rulers, the Gaekwad, invested early on in amenities such as schools and libraries. It is also an old municipality and has the political status of "nagar palika" (municipality) since 1886. Navsari is the birthplace of Jamsetji

Tata,<sup>8</sup> and features several schools financed by the Tata group of companies and trusts. Together, these factors are understood to have contributed to the early rise of an educated, cultured middle class. Today, a large number of residents of the area have migrated to Western countries. These non-resident Indians in many cases remain attached to their place of origin, often owning property here, returning for festivals, or opting for marriages with partners from the region. We will argue that the decidedly middle-class character of Navsari, in combination with global financial flows have contributed to the production of Vijalpore's urban green spaces.

The local economy is dominated by the diamond industry, which employs an estimated workforce of 35,000 labourers. According to an engineer of the municipality of Navsari, it represents the most important livelihood source of its residents. While this has contributed to the creation of a well-off and globally connected middle class, the labour market has attracted significant numbers of migrants from neighbouring Maharashtra, but also from the Saurashtra peninsula in Western Gujarat and Eastern states, such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Many of these migrants live in the municipality of Vijalpore. The large Marathi community in Vijalpore is manifest in the urban space by the statue of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj<sup>9</sup> on a major traffic square. Vijalpore received municipal status only in 1994 and has a smaller population than Navsari. It is, however, experiencing very fast growth.<sup>10</sup>

Navsari and Vijalpore together have seven small urban parks. As apparent in the introduction, most parks are developed with playgrounds to attract and cater to families with young children, reflecting the strong family orientation of Gujarati social life. Two parks feature a small rollerskating rink, a manifestation of middle-class parents' wish for their offspring to excel in sports and cultivate a habit of physical exercise. One park is reserved for senior citizens and is equipped with benches and the typical Gujarati swings (jhula). The parks are also central in Hindu religious festivals such as Divaso during which unmarried girls gather here and fast and pray for a good husband. Such practices inscribe these urban parks into the spiritual and cultural landscape of South Gujarat.

The case study investigates Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Garden in Vijalpore, located at the centre of the agglomeration next to the large water body Dudhiya talav, recently converted into Navsari's drinking water reservoir. While the pond itself is on Navsari territory, the border of Vijalpore is demarked in the South-Western part of the pond by the road that circles the water body.



Important religious, cultural and administrative institutions of both municipalities are concentrated around the pond; the Northern edge is furthermore occupied by the central fruit and vegetable market and is a major shopping area (see Figure 2).

Right next to this centre of agglomeration, several slums – which were in their majority inhabited by members of the Scheduled Castes<sup>11</sup>– existed in both municipalities. This was of concern to elite actors in both towns. While Navsari resettled two slums between 1999 and 2003, one slum settlement in Vijalpore, Indira Gandhi slum, was shifted in two separate waves in 2007 and 2014. The plot vacated in the first wave has been used to create Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Garden (see Figure 3), while the plot cleared recently was vacant at the end of 2014. The next sections will analyse the history of this park creation, the politics around it, as well as the meaning of this space for the city and its residents.

### **Park creation through public-private partnership**

The resettlement of the Indira Gandhi slum resulted from a shared interest of Vijalpore municipality and the Rotary Club Navsari Round Town that has members from both parts of the urban agglomeration. The idea for this project seems to have come up in informal interactions between Rotarians and municipal politicians that share social circles.<sup>12</sup> According to a Municipal Councillor, a Rotary club member who is the Vice-President of the Vijalpore Industrial Estate played a major role in initiating the

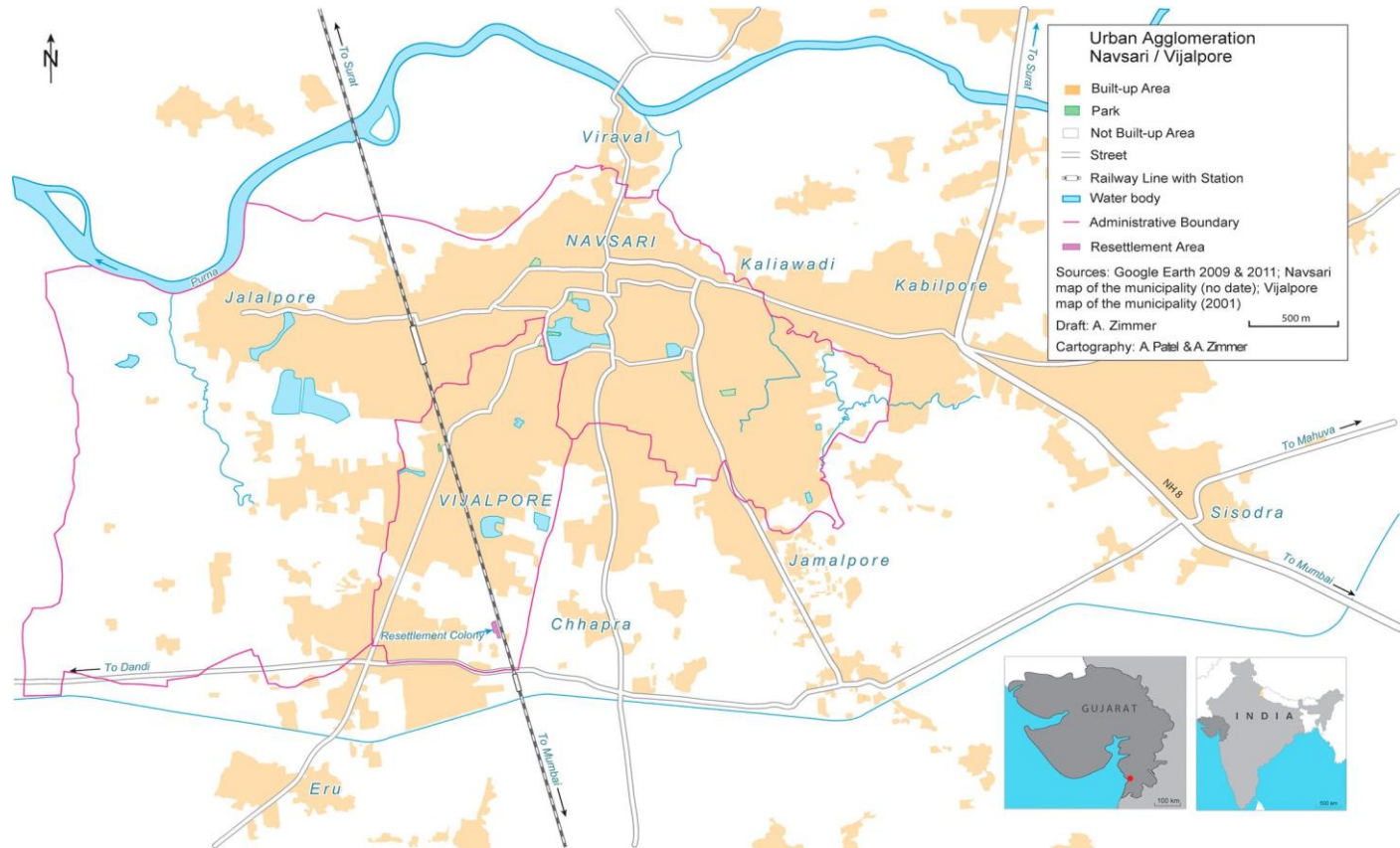


Figure 1. The urban agglomeration of Navsari and Vijalpure.

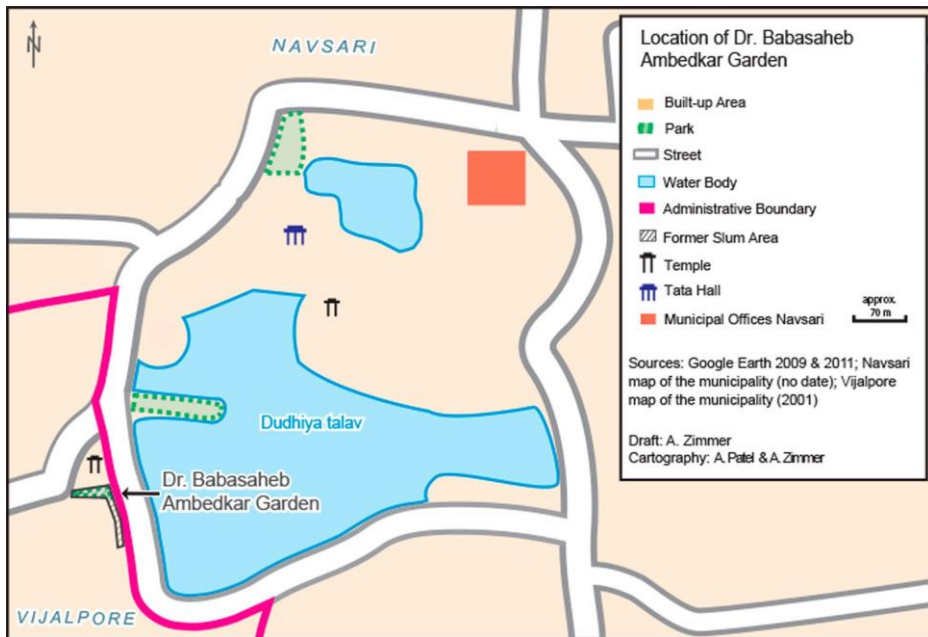


Figure 2. The centre of the agglomeration.



Figure 3. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Garden, Vijalpore (photo taken by Vipul Parekh).

project. However, some amount of pressure on the municipality came from the State government, as well, as the slum was located on State land. Moreover, the former

President of Vijalpore explained to us that the fact that Navsari had removed slums around the water reservoir earlier motivated Vijalpore to do the same. All these dynamics converged, and once Vijalpore municipality requested the State government to provide a piece of land for the resettlement, the local Rotary Club collaborated with a chapter from Livermore, California (USA), to raise 2,277,000 INR [\$49,500] to build 100 so-called low-cost shelters. The municipality, in turn, received ownership of a plot from the State government, and contributed basic road, water and electricity infrastructure. However, the local Rotary club withdrew half way through the project, for reasons detailed below. Therefore, only 45 houses were completed, and people were shifted in 2007 only from the Northern portion of the slum. Nevertheless, the local Rotary Club sees this project as a “huge success”, as one member explained to us.

The involved actors aimed at a fast reuse of the land vacated by the slum in the city centre: an interviewed Rotarian explained that the land was purposefully not left vacant to avoid settlement of a new slum on the site. The former President of Vijalpore municipality stated that the initial priority of the municipal board was the use of land for some “income-generating activity” like for a shopping centre. Yet, as the land is reserved for road widening, this was not permitted by the District Collector.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the stakeholders settled on a garden, which was eventually created with the financial support of the State government’s “Golden Jubilee of Gujarat”<sup>14</sup> scheme (Swarnim Gujarat Mukhiya Mantri Yojana) and was inaugurated on 25th August 2012. The remaining Eastern portion of the slum was resettled in 2014 on the grounds that a drainage line had to be completed adjacent to the road. This time, resettlement houses were provided by the municipality. Approximately five families were left out of this resettlement process due to missing documents proving that they pay house tax to the municipality; residents claim that two more families absent at the time of surveying the slum cluster were also excluded from the list of beneficiaries. Plans are on to extend the garden further, as the same reservation of the land for road widening applies to this stretch. At the end of 2014, however, the plot was still lying vacant.

Through this project, slum residents have been resettled at the edge of the municipality despite their protests (see Figure 1). This follows similar patterns of involuntary displacement of slum residents to urban peripheries in Indian metropolises (see e.g. Zerah 2007, Dupont 2008). While resistance to the shift seem to have been unorganised and ineffective during the first round of resettlement in 2007, residents of the new resettlement colony started protesting in a more organised manner once they discovered that the resettlement plot was used as solid waste dumpsite of the municipality. This situation prevailed from 2006 to 2010 when a new District Collector ordered the dump to be shifted. Due to the history of the plot, one resettled man used the expression that “[they] threw us [away] here” [hamko idhar fainkh diya]. Apart from obvious health

hazards, the locational choice for the resettlement colony has significant symbolic value: displacing residents from one of the most cherished and scenic place of the agglomeration to the waste dump expresses the disrespect for those who were shifted by the local elites. Yet, even the Rotary club withdrew from the project for this reason: “If you’re putting a person from dirt to dirt, there is no point”, a Rotary member we spoke to firmly stated. They however did not actively support the residents in their protests.

In contrast to the first wave of resettlement, the second round, executed in 2014, met with resistance at the outset. Slum residents sought political support and found it in the newly established Aam Admi Party (AAP).<sup>15</sup> This political backing, though useful, was concerned only with providing alternative housing in working condition at the resettlement site. After the new houses were finished, residents did not approach the party anymore. The party considered the matter closed as, in their view, the slum relocation was necessary “in the greater interest of the city” so that the drainage line could be completed.

### **Geographies of power**

This project of slum relocation and park creation rests on several interwoven sets of arguments, as becomes apparent when discussing the undertaking with municipal and private actors. A member of the Rotary Club Navsari Round Town described the motivation for the private initiative to have the slum displaced: According to him, the slum was especially objectionable due to its location near Dudhiya talav, a scenic location where older middle-class residents come for their evening walks or chat on benches.

Surpassing the simple fact of its centrality for the agglomeration, it is important to understand at the outset the significance of this place for the urban agglomeration. This importance rests on several registers of meaning. First, a myth, told to us by a local historian, exists around Dudhiya talav and another centrally located urban pond, Sarbatiya talav: According to this legend, a Hindu and a Muslim saint were fighting and decided to prove their power to each other. The Muslim saint therefore converted the water of one lake into milk [dudh]. The Hindu saint, not less powerful, subsequently converted the water of another lake to juice [sharbat]. This legend shows how the water bodies are enshrined in local memory and the identity of the city (Ernstson 2014), making them central features of urban “nature” in the town.

Second, the pond is lined on its Western and North-western shore by two major religious institutions: the Ram and Ashapuri temples. Both are famous landmarks in the vicinity and indicate the high religious value attributed to the area. These uses are likely to have sat uneasily with the former slum settlements. A trustee of the Ashapuri temple related in an interview how worshippers had complained to the temple management

about “the dirty place” opposite the road, and mentioned that these people had taken their complaint to the municipality, though the temple management itself did not. The proximity of labouring poor and their makeshift housing solutions to both the pond and the temples may have been offensive from a point of view of identity to the middle class as “cultural symbols of a nation” and “representative citizens” (Fernandes 2004, pp. 2415–2416) of their town.

Third, Dudhiya talav has been reengineered between 1999 and 2000 to become the drinking water reservoir of Navsari, as the municipality uses it to store water from the Ukai dam on the river Tapti that is released to it once a week. This makes the area important in terms of basic services and public health. Therefore, one interviewed Rotary Club member related how he and other members of the club had seen slum residents “climbing the fence [of the reservoir], going to the lake and polluting it”; that is, using the site for open defaecation as they did not have sanitary facilities. They deduced that “the health of whole Navsari was at stake”.

Finally, for Vijalpore, the road on which the Northern part of the slum was located represents one of its entrances, and a gate marks it as such. This gives the area an increased visibility and symbolic weight. As the former leader of opposition explained: “The objection was that right at the entrance of Vijalpore, the first thing you see is the slum. The entrance didn’t look good.”

This fourfold, cultural, religious, material and symbolic importance of the lake and its surroundings made this space the crucible for intervention by municipal and private local elites. This intervention was couched to a large extent in the language of beautification. An interviewed Rotarian remembered how he and other members of the club had discussed the matter and thought that “this area can be very beautiful if the slum is cleared”. This language was well received by the municipality. A member of the Vijalpore administration admitted “the municipality wanted a neat and clean place”. The then leader of the opposition party stated “the city should look beautiful”. He went on to explain how creating a garden matched the new aesthetics: “They thought of a garden as it is beautiful; the same way our houses should look beautiful, our city should also look beautiful.” Rotary members explaining the choice of the garden shared these views: “It’s the centre of town, so people go for morning walks, and the garden is visible during that time.”

This language of beautification obscures to some extent the fact that the garden creation was part and parcel of the further entrenchment of the geography of power existing around Dudhiya talav (cf. Zimmer et al. 2015). Initiated by the slum resettlements around the lake in both municipalities, this entrenchment operated through subsequent further developments of institutions such as the Ashapuri temple, Ram temple, an eye hospital and the Tata Hall, as well as extension of an existing park in Navsari, as an engineer

of the municipality of Navsari recollected. Very clear material benefits for local elites have been the result of this urban restructuring.

In this project, the residents of the informal settlement were constructed discursively as an impediment to the elite development of the city centre: The flipside of this new aesthetics and the geography of power elites aimed to establish, was, of course, the slum settlement and the visual and material “nuisance” it represented.<sup>16</sup> This unfavourable position rests on an interwoven set of marginalities: slum residents’ economic marginality, the belonging of many families to the Scheduled Castes and the fact that many households (several of whom self-identify as “Marathis”) have migrated to Vijalpore. This triple marginalisation is not unusual in Indian slums (Mitra 2003, Bijulal 2004, Bohle and Sakdapolrak 2008) and leads to further social and spatial exclusions. In Vijalpore and Navsari, this came forcefully into picture when discussing slum clearances around the water body with an engineer at the Navsari municipality:

[B]ackward people were creating nuisance and spoiling the place. The residents were bad. [ ... ] [The pond] was open earlier, so people went for toilet there. The place near Tata Hall, where the [Balkri Dangan] park got expanded, used to be a toilet ground; it got developed after they left. There was no meaning of developing it before as they used to spoil everything.

The notion of nuisance chosen here is particularly suited to simultaneously voice environmental and moral concerns (see also Sharan 2014). This, as well as the Rotary member’s statement on slum residents’ perceived “polluting” character, inscribes itself not only in religious beliefs of purity and caste (Michaels 1998), but also in the long history of a hygienist discourse on urban slums (see e.g. Gooptu 1996, Sharan 2006) and a more recent discourse in Indian cities that equate poor people with environmental degradation (Zérah, 2007, Ghertner 2011). These discourses make obvious how in the Indian context the lines between caste and class-related discrimination are blurred.

From the point of view of social class, the proximity of labouring poor and their makeshift housing solutions to both the pond and the temples may have been offensive to the middle classes who see themselves as “cultural symbols of a nation” and “representative citizens” (Fernandes 2004, pp. 2415– 2416) of their town. By displacing the slum and creating a park, the area has been utterly transformed. As another municipal engineer in Navsari, when presenting the project, formulated: “[the] area was called hell [and has] now become a heaven”. This “heaven” then seems to necessarily entail the segregation of the urban population by caste and class.

### **What's in a name? Scripting cultural landscapes**

The sections above have highlighted the role that urban parks play in creating a geography in which local elites inscribe their power. Apart from the physical creation of the park, the name chosen for it represents another, discursive, opportunity to do so, as this is never a politically neutral move. Alderman (2008, p. 197) reminds us that naming is an “active and contestable process of claiming and constructing” cultural landscapes that is used to fix the identity of places. Through the contested process of naming, groups struggle to impose meanings onto the landscape and often powerful groups are successful in this endeavour (Berg and Kearns 1996).

This becomes apparent in Navsari and Vijalpore: the names chosen for two newer parks indicate for example the dominance of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – after whose leader and former Indian Prime Minister the Atal Bihari Vajpayee park in Navsari was named – and the Hindu spiritual legacy, with the Swami Vivekananda having been chosen as patron for a park in Vijalpore.

With regard to the case study discussed here, the naming of the park reflects interesting ruptures within the urban elites. At the time of naming the newly created park, conflicts broke out between the ruling and the opposition party of Vijalpore. Both party leaders tried to downplay this fact in our interviews – one party perhaps for fear to appear overly power-driven; the other party may not have wanted to represent itself as the losers in a political tussle. Rather, the incidents were related in detail by a member of the administration, who laughed at the fact that “all this [was] not about a great garden, just about a pocket garden!” According to him, the (at that time) ruling Congress party of Vijalpore municipality wanted to call the park Indira Gandhi park, after the former Congress leader and Prime Minister of India. The (then) president of the municipality represented this as carrying on the legacy of the slum area that had been called Indira Gandhi slum, having been settled at the time of her rule. Although clearly motivated by party politics, this might also be read as a legitimising move: while destroying the slum, the party offered to inscribe its memory into the urban space, thus presenting itself as pro-poor.

But the then opposition party BJP took the opportunity to contest the inscription of the Congress legacy into the urban space. Emboldened especially by the fact that the funds for the park creation came from the State government which was BJP-led, the local BJP leader related how he refused to accept this naming and instead put forth Babasaheb Ambedkar, which he portrayed as someone “neutral”. The administration, knowing about the conflict, asked for police personnel to protect law and order at the date of inauguration. Nevertheless, as the administrator recollected, the inauguration by the president of the municipality was interrupted by the BJP, the prepared board of the park



was smashed and the BJP leader forcefully inaugurated the park as Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Garden (Figure 4).

Renaming a place can be read as a form of staking claim over a specific territory or in this case, plot (Berg and Kearns 1996). As such, it is closely linked to negotiations of urban citizenship or the question who rightfully belongs in the city (Jayaram 2009). It also acts as a practice that symbolically erases the past (Marin 2012). By suggesting a new name for the garden, independent of the legacy of the slum, the BJP party can thus be said to have asserted government ownership over the land and dispossessed the slum residents in a discursive way as well – a claim made particularly for the BJP and against the Congress party. It undermined the slum residents' ability to name a part of the city, and thus their claim to urban citizenship. Finally, it also appears to erase the slum from urban history discursively and to symbolise the beginning of a new kind of place-making: state-controlled, orderly and visually pleasant.

Apart from the act of renaming as such, the particular choice of name deserves further attention. It seems at first ironic, given the fact that Ambedkar fought for equality of scheduled caste citizens. Yet, a depoliticised (or de-casticised) image of Ambedkar seems to circulate, as the BJP leader explained his choice only by Ambedkar's role in writing the Indian Constitution. When asked about his fight against casteism, the politician put forward: "The BJP walks on his path regarding the SC [scheduled caste] community. He is the messiah of the SC people because he put laws that nobody can be poor if they follow the rules", showcasing a very poor understanding of Ambedkar's social and political legacy. In fact, Ambedkar is venerated by many of the displaced people (see Figure 5). Some have followed his advice and converted to Buddhism to avoid caste ostracism. One resident of the



Figure 4. The garden is named after Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar (photo taken by T. Kansara). resettlement colony put forward: “Here, everything works under the name of Ambedkar” [“Idhar sab Ambedkar ke nam se chalta hai”].

The choice of name, while foregrounding an allegiance to a national hero beyond party lines, might thus also be read from a strategic point of view: as an attempt to encourage the former residents to accept the new land use, and as a building block of a legitimising narrative that discursively turns the slum relocation in a pro-Scheduled Castes project. Finally, the inscription of the park into the national pantheon of venerated freedom fighters can be interpreted as an attempt to place Vijalpore on the “map” of locales that are linked through the common struggle for independence and thus on the larger national canvas – locating the agglomeration “within wider networks of memory” (Alderman 2008, p. 195).

Interestingly, the use of Ambedkar’s name here seems to contrast with the use of Ambedkar statues in urban parks in Lucknow. There, the statues have been erected by Mayawati’s Bahujan Samaj [Majority Society] Party in an attempt to assert Dalit presence in urban space and in national history (Sinha 2010, p. 68). In Vijalpore, however, it is the urban elites who use his name in a project of production of socio-nature that is deeply disempowering for members of the Scheduled Castes.

## Urban beautification in a small city

The case study has made it clear that park-making is a profoundly socio-ecological project. Motivations for such projects can only be understood when material as well as non-material benefits to local elites are analysed.



Figure 5. Babasaheb Ambedkar’s picture in one of the resettlement houses provided by Rotary Club (photo taken by A. Zimmer).

Cases from large Indian cities indicate that parks and their related aesthetics have been crucial to make, for example, Delhi conform to the “image of a ‘world-class’ city” (Bhan 2009, p. 140) and increase attractiveness for possible foreign investors (Dupont 2011). Rehman (2014) has also documented how the city of Lahore in Pakistan has hinged renewed urban imaginaries and its ambition to “regain place in history” on its identity as garden city. In a small town such as Vijalpore with modest global or historical aspirations, the motivation for park creation is likely to be different than in India’s large metropolises. Generally, while re-use of land as urban park is not one which directly promises high financial gains, parks are known to increase property values in their surroundings and are

thus often favoured by propertied residents (Kaviraj 1997). In Vijalpore, the creation of parks has certainly contributed to upgrading of the city centre. Together with the slum displacements and the enclosure of the urban pond as drinking water reservoir, it has enhanced the financial and symbolic value of the centre, and adjacent institutions.

But other dynamics seem to be at work at the same time. It is important to keep in mind that park creation was not the first choice of the municipality: Income-generating activities were preferred but not possible due to land-use restrictions. In this situation, the question arises why the park has been the option Vijalpore chose. To understand why small municipalities opt for park creation, one might turn to aesthetic arguments. Parks are perceived to increase a city's beauty and its "liveability" (Southworth 2003). At the same time, lack of urban parks has been interpreted elsewhere by urban elites as signs of cultural backwardness, as in the case of nineteenth-century USA (Gandy 2003). Parks therefore contribute to the symbolic value and perceived modernity of a (small) city as a whole. This benefit of parks also has to be read against the relationship between Vijalpore and Navsari outlined in the introduction. Vijalpore is perceived as a working-class town when compared to the more bourgeois Navsari, which enjoys an image as a very well-developed small urban centre. The District Collector, when comparing Navsari to the other towns of the district, explained: "It is one of the better *nagar palikas* [municipalities]; it is more like a city. The infrastructure; it is better planned; a liveable city, green." For Vijalpore, then, projects of park creation can act to compete, and positively compare, with its neighbouring municipality and to increase its prestige. This includes increasing its image to its own citizens. A local politician mentioned that the park-cum-playground was established as there was no playground in the municipality and people used the Navsari facilities instead. The discussed garden creation might have helped in enhancing Vijalpore's image vis-à-vis Navsari in its residents' minds.

Park creation in Vijalpore importantly took place after the displacement of an established slum. Slum displacements are of course not new to India: In large cities, slums have partly been replaced by high value infrastructure or residential developments (Follmann 2014). In the majority of cases in Delhi, however, slums have in fact been replaced by parks and green spaces (Dupont 2008).<sup>17</sup> The discussion of park creation above has highlighted the importance of aesthetics. Arguments of aesthetics have played a role in slum relocations in India's metropolises (Bhan 2009, Dupont 2011), and have been combined with metropolitan environmental projects. Ghertner, in a string of publications (2010, 2011, 2013), explains how slum residents in Delhi are equated with dirtiness, pollution and nuisance by middle-class citizens, motivating the latter to prompt their eviction on aesthetic as well as environmental grounds. The middle class, while acting as "environmental subjects" (Agrawal 2005, p. 1) that see it as their responsibility to protect the urban environment from what they perceive to be a risk, displays a "bourgeois

environmentalism” (Baviskar 2003, p. 90) that combines such interests with their desires to ban the urban poor from sight and upgrade centrally located urban land. This leads to a preference for “spatial management” (Sharan 2014, p. 4) of such perceived social and environmental problems, i.e. their displacement to the urban periphery.

In Vijalpore, this combination of arguments is visible in the point of view of the Rotary club members who are worried about the public health threat of open defaecation near the drinking water reservoir, but who also wanted to create a beautiful space at the city centre. Yet, other aspects come to the fore as well: the displacement of the slum from the city centre speaks to questions around urban identities and the cultural and historical importance of places. The slum was especially objectionable due to its proximity to the city centre, which expresses the identity of the urban agglomeration in historical, cultural, religious as well as political terms. This place is thus of major importance as a geography and urban landscape in which local elites want to inscribe their presence and identity, and thus have to exclude others. This exclusion worked at two levels: material as well as symbolic-discursively. While the houses of slum residents were destroyed, the name of the slum, Indira Gandhi slum, has been erased from the mental map and replaced by the name of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. While this acted as a marker for elite control over the urban space, it also asserted claims to power of the BJP against the Congress party at the level of the municipality.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has applied, and further developed, an UPE approach to the study of a park in a small urban agglomeration of Gujarat, India. In doing so, it has attempted to shed new light on Southern urban political ecologies that have received limited attention so far, and especially on those of an “ordinary” (Robinson 2006) small city.

The political ecology approach brings to the fore that the history of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Garden reflects class, political and economic conflicts within Vijalpore’s and Navsari’s urban society. With the involvement of the Rotary Club, the case study importantly exposes the relevance of global financial flows even for smaller urban centres and thus underlines the fundamental connectedness of all cities – and their urban political ecologies – to “multiple elsewheres” (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004, p. 348).

The history of the park illustrates how changes in urban nature “(re)configure [ ... ] social and economic disadvantage” (Byrne et al. 2007, p. 157). The case study indicates that a new ordering of social value in the urban space (Rapoport 2007, p. 60) has taken place in Vijalpore. On the one hand, it then appears to reflect the broader trends in “cleaning up” (Chatterjee 2004, p. 131) and restructuring the “socio-spatial urban order” (Bhan 2009, p. 140) found in larger metropolises (Fernandes 2004, Mehra 2011). But, and this is an aspect

that finds less attention in urban literature, it forcefully shows on the other hand how new urban landscapes are created – and how, in this project, urban nature and society are co-produced. It demonstrates that, in fact, every neighbourhood in the city is “social and natural from the bottom to the top” (Wachsmuth 2012, p. 516 emphasis in original). Urban restructuring and the making of urban landscapes are environmental as well as a social practices: (Financially or symbolically) higher valued uses and urban natures deemed clean and healthy are now clubbed together at the centre of the agglomeration; lower valued uses, people whose social identity is extremely precarious (and who are understood to be “polluting”), and urban natures that are polluted and unhealthy have been thrown together at the city periphery.

Expanding the UPE perspective, this paper has used insights from history and architecture to uphold the importance of reading parks as political and to some extent ideological projects in the larger context of city-making. These literatures bring to the fore that parks are cultural and social landscapes and as such are a document to dynamic negotiations around middle-class values supported by local elites. The discussed case study shows that these values combine economic as well as social and cultural aspects: property values and the potential to develop central institutions; local identities and histories; and Hindu religious values. The case study therefore speaks to the recent discussion in UPE around the role of identities in shaping urban nature. As Lawhon et al. (2013, p. 13) suggest, “the processes that stabilize identities” are essential for urban political ecologies. The practices described above of beautifying the city centre point to such a process of identity stabilisation of local elites. At the same time, parks act as artefacts through which different urban elites try to inscribe their identity in the urban space. The choice of names for urban parks has shown how conflictive this process is, and cautions against an over-simplified, homogenising reading of the role and identities of urban local elites. It however also documents the ongoing exclusion of poorer, Scheduled Caste, migrant residents from the centre of town in discursive terms – their inability to name, and thus confer meaning onto urban space and claim urban citizenship.

To sum up, this case study has shown four important points: First, local elites attempt to restructure urban agglomerations and landscapes not only from a social point of view, but rather through a thoroughly socio-natural process of reordering urban natures and people. Second, spatial reordering serves a multiplicity of purposes for a heterogeneous urban local elite: next to direct economic benefits, actors aim at other forms of gains through processes of stabilising identities and inscription of the own identity into urban space. Third, this process depends, even in smaller, supposedly less “globalised” cities, on global flows and connections. Finally, the practice of naming places in the urban space is an important component of the circulation of urban imaginaries and of city-making that feed into the discursive dimension of producing of uneven environments.

Together, these aspects point to the need to formulate a more situated UPE of India's small cities that takes local particularities and politics seriously in its attempt to understand the process of production of urban socio-natures in a diversity of places. The case study has shown how the exclusionary tendencies in the making of parks found in Northern cities (Gandy 2003; Byrne 2012) are found in India as well, though the dynamics of exclusion work using different registers of meaning and identity here. Importantly, exclusion in India has shown to work through dimensions of class, caste and regional identity. Such differences make it difficult to transfer insights gained in one geographical context to another. Nevertheless, the findings that indicate how identities, aesthetics, global entanglements and middle-class values come together in the production of socio-nature in a highly dynamic urban society show how (non-universalising) comparisons across geographical contexts are potentially enriching for theory-building (Robinson 2011) in UPE and other fields.

## Notes

1. In the course of this project, the first author stayed in Navsari with her family for 8 months in 2013. Fieldwork by the first author has taken place during 8.5 months between March 2013 and November 2014. In total, 96 interviews in English, Hindi and Gujarati were held with different actors, not all of which centred on urban parks. Gujarati interviews were translated orally by an interpreter. Interview notes (which included direct quotes), personal observations, grey literature and map material form the basis of the analysis.
2. This refers to food from the Saurashtra peninsula of Western Gujarat.
3. The UN defines urban agglomeration as comprising "the city or town proper and also the suburban fringe or thickly settled territory lying outside, but adjacent to, its boundaries. [...] In some cases, a single large urban agglomeration may comprise several cities or towns and their suburban fringes" (UN Statistics Division 2013). The agglomeration mentioned here is made up of two municipalities, Vijalpore and Navsari as well as their surrounding villages, see Figure 1.
4. Urban parks in India have been studied for biodiversity conservation (Singh et al. 2010, Nagendra and Gopal 2011), their importance for promoting domestic tourism (Chaudhry and Tewari 2010) and the link between park use, human well-being and sociality (Sinha 2010). Access restrictions have received only limited attention although Swamy (2013) describes how park use by poorer residents is inhibited by the fact that poorer neighbourhoods are not as well equipped with parks as more affluent areas.

5. This major festival in West Bengal celebrates the goddess Durga.
6. Dalits are those communities formerly known as “untouchables” or “casteless” who face discrimination in large parts of the Indian society and suffer from historical and structural deprivation until today. Dalits include the communities known under the administrative terms of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (see also footnote 11 on Scheduled Castes).
7. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, known as Babasaheb Ambedkar (1891–1956), India’s first law minister and prominent social reformer. He is considered as the main architect of the Indian Constitution of 1950. Ambedkar belonged to a Dalit community and later converted to Buddhism.
8. Jamsetji Tata (1839–1904) was the founder of what became today’s Tata group of companies, a multi-national conglomerate.
9. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj (1627–1680), founder of the Maratha empire in central India that lasted until 1818.
10. Decadal growth rates have been 82.8% and 53.3% in the decades between 1991 and 2011(Census of India 2011).
11. Scheduled Castes are historically deprived Castes (Government of India 1950), formerly known as “untouchables” or “casteless”.
12. The Rotary club has no member that is on a municipal political or administrative post.
13. The District Collector is the representative of the state government and chief administrative officer of the district with wide powers. Among others, he or she is responsible for assessment and collection of land revenue, preparation and maintenance of land records and land acquisition.
14. In 2013, Gujarat celebrated the 50th anniversary of the creation of the state of Gujarat.
15. This party, “The party of the common man”, founded in Delhi in November 2012 as an offspring to the Anna Hazare anti-corruption movement, quickly captured the imagination and hopes of millions of Indians in the run towards the Delhi state elections, which surprisingly led to AAP forming a minority government in December 2013. As this government lasted only 49 days, new elections were held in February 2015, which AAP won with an overwhelming majority.
16. See Ghertner (2013) for a discussion of the notion of nuisance in the context of slum displacements in Delhi.
17. Parks and green spaces were the most common reuse of slum land, excluding sites that were left vacant after slum demolition.



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