Slow Violence, Agrarian Distress and the Liberal Democratic State in Marathwada, India

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John Campbell

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This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma.

Signature:

Abstract

Situated within the field of political ecology, this thesis explores the relationship between liberal democratic governance and the phenomenon of agrarian distress and farmer suicide in Marathwada, India. Agrarian distress is the result of multiple developments beginning in the 1990s: the deregulation and integration of the economy into global markets; the expansion of groundwater irrigation in a semi-arid hydrogeological region; and the unresponsiveness of government to its devastating effects. The consequence has been an increase in rural poverty, and tragically, a rise in (and now persistence of) farmer suicides.

This thesis argues that agrarian distress in Marathwada is a particular form of slow violence, produced and sustained by the state under successive governments, and represents a failure of liberal democratic governance. According to liberal theorists and the Constitution of India, liberal governance is designed to steer the state towards rational and just decision-making. The tragedy unfolding in the semi-arid countryside of Maharashtra casts doubt on the its ability to achieve this. Ideas from critical political ecology, environmental justice, and green political theory are engaged with to understand the government's unresponsiveness to harm.

The thesis develops a three-part operationalisation of slow violence, conceptualising it as a form of harm that is not recognised as violence, continues unchecked over the long durée, and is spatially diffused. The thesis responds to debates on decoloniality and extractive research, arguing that critical social science has a vital role to play in exposing environmental injustice and that decoloniality has been weaponised by the far right in India as a way to shut down government critique. The thesis then explores the idea of slow violence in three chapters focusing on liberal governance in Maharashtra: the media as part of the public sphere (to consider the 'visibility' of slow violence); interviews with farmers in Hingoli District (to expose the lived experience of slow violence); and an analysis of the Marathwada Water Grid, the latest state project that politicians claim will 'end drought'.

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[1] Name of the research assistant has removed from publicly available thesis as a precautionary measure. They are referred to throughout as RA.

List of Abbreviations

ACWADAM	Advanced Centre for Water Resources Development & Management
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
EJ	Environmental Justice
HVY	High Yield Variety
INC	Indian National Congress
JSA	Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan (the Village Water Scheme)
KII	Key Informant Interviews
MLA	Maharashtra Legislative Assembly
NCP	Nationalist Congress Party
PAR	Participatory Action Research

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1: Introduction

1.1 Project Development: Political Ecology from Afar

This thesis attempts to understand how and why the state has failed to deal effectively with agrarian distress in Maharashtra, India. It critiques state approaches to agricultural modernisation and water management, using political theory and Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence (Nixon 2011) to understand the persistence of ecological degradation, poverty and farmer suicides over the last three decades. The object of the study is liberal democratic governance, which, according to liberal theorists and the Constitution of India, is designed to steer the state towards rational and just decision making. This has been chosen in spite of the rise of Hindutva right and postcolonial and development theory, as democracy remains the de facto system of governance (both materially and discursively). This project started due to an interest in the incongruity of liberalism and effective management of the climate crisis. The tragedy unfolding in semi-arid Maharashtra casts doubt on liberal governance's ability to achieve this for rural communities, in an age of populist politics, technocracy and economic deregulation.

This PhD did not turn out as I expected it would. I started studying in Lancaster in October 2020 in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. During my interview for funding in May 2020 it was still assumed that travel to India would be possible in my first year of study. I planned to base myself with the Advanced Centre for Water Resource Management in Pune, Maharashtra. Whilst there, I would work with the ACWADAM, complete ethnographic research and conduct interviews with farmers and water practitioners. As we now know, the pandemic and travel restrictions were far from over and it wasn't until spring 2022 that I began planning my trip. Sadly, other factors then intervened; six months after submitting my research visa application at the Indian consulate in Edinburgh, my passport dropped back through my letterbox without visa approval.

As discussed in chapter three, visa rejections are becoming more common for international researchers trying to complete work in India. This rejection occurred despite my application being sponsored by the head of ACWADAM, a major research organisation that has worked with government on water management issues across India. My application did not explicitly mention politically sensitive issues, only that I was interested in researching the government's water management programmes (although perhaps this was enough). I was advised by the consulate to reapply with a letter of invitation from the

Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) but this pathway was uncertain too, I did not have the funds to be a visiting scholar there and this would not have given me direct access to the region of study which was hundreds of kilometres from Mumbai.

Speaking with friends and colleagues, I have learned that since the BJP came to power in 2014 there has been a drop in the number of research visas being issued and even deportations of successful applicants. Anecdotally, I have learned that academics who have worked in India for thirty years have been blacklisted. While some still travel on tourist and business visas, this poses risks for researchers, partner organisations and research participants. One friend researching urban development in Delhi described getting a research visa as 'placing a target on your back'; given that my work was in rural areas where international visitors are rarer, the risk of drawing attention to my work would have been more heightened still.

The closing down of public debate has been a feature of Modi's premiership. News organisations have been forced to close, journalists have become victims of violence and abuse, and funding for policy institutes have been cut (Lewis 2023). In September 2024, TISS, one of the major centres of critical social science in the country, revised its student code, banning them from participating in 'anti-establishment' demonstrations or 'unpatriotic discussions' (Smart 2024). The effect is a de facto ban on government criticism, implemented across the country by institutions who fear the Hindu nationalist right. This is a sad and dangerous state of affairs. Slow violence, which describes unseen and ignored forms of social and environmental injustice is the concept I use to analyse agrarian distress in Maharashtra; the idea of invisibilising also resonates with the political culture in India. My experience is of course nothing compared to that of Indian researchers and activists who face censorship and threats every day. I write this thesis in solidarity with them.

These travel restrictions have impacted this project in many ways. It has made the research difficult to complete - practically in terms of data collection, but also mentally as a feeling of illegitimacy has lingered. It is ultimately a project about a place (Maharashtra) that I have never visited, that aims to highlight the experiences of people I have never met. Debates about 'extractive' and neocolonial research practices by global north scholars working in the south have been at the forefront of ethical and methodological discussions since the Rhodes Must Fall Movement began in 2015, and well predate this. The pandemic gave researchers even more reason to reflect on their practices and positionality. My own

wrangling (and reconciliation) with these issues is detailed in chapter three. Remote research is the new norm for researchers for reasons beyond travel bans and authoritarianism, including the environmental consequences of long distance travel, antiquated theories of fieldwork and the internet making collaboration with local researchers and activists increasingly easier and often more productive. What felt exceptional in the first two years of this project now feels commonplace. Disturbing political times have precipitated innovation and adaptability, but also raise new challenges for PhD students at the start of their research careers..

Consequently, the interviews with farmers in Hingoli district (discussed in chapter 5) were completed by a research assistant, RA . Other data was collected online from media sources and policy documents, in interviews with NGOs, bureaucrats and journalists as in chapter 4 and 6, whilst some secondary information was collected the Centre for South Asian Studies at the University of Cambridge. I am exceptionally grateful to RA for his work. In the winter of 2023/4, he spent several weeks in Hingoli locating farmers who were willing to share knowledge for a project being conducted thousands of miles away. This gave paid work experience to RA who has since been granted doctoral funding in the UK, and financial compensation to farmers for their time. As a result of this collaboration, this thesis to contain the experiences and perspectives of people too often sidelined and ignored in agrarian and water policy. I hope this thesis does justice to everyone involved.

1.2 Political Ecology and Critical Water Studies

This thesis approaches the subject of agrarian distress in Marathwada from the discipline of political ecology. Developed as part of geography and anthropology in the 1970s and 1980s, political ecology's role has been to 'provide analyses of how and why structural forces, such as capitalist economic processes and power relations, drive environmental change in an increasingly interconnected world' (Roberts 2020: 1). Initially, the discipline developed in reaction to the changes to agricultural production brought about by the Green Revolution and initiatives of the World Bank, before also critiquing large scale development projects across the global south (Roberts 2020:1). It subsequently expanded and diversified to investigate the power relations underpinning human-nature relations in urban and rural environments around the world, bringing critical and post-structuralist approaches and perspectives into its repertoire. In the 1970s, questions based on materialist ontological positions were joined by those such as 'whose use of, claims to,

and/or perceptions of the environment prevail, and why?' (Karlsson 2015: 350). Benjaminsen and Svarstad (2021) and Cederlof and Loftus (2023) have written works that capture recent trends in political ecology. The second of these texts attempts to broaden the Anglo-American canon which typically frames the discipline in order to include perspectives from Asia, Africa and South America. Agrarian distress and groundwater depletion (a classic case of a mismanaged common pool resource), examined through the lens of slow violence (concerned with epistemic justice and resource governance), places this thesis squarely in the realm of political ecology. A common pool resource is one which is 'a natural or man-made resource system that is large enough to make it costly to exclude potential users, and where one person's use subtracts from what is available to others' (Ostrom 2013). This concept is an extension of the concept of 'commons' which has been at the centre of political ecology for many decades (Hardin 1968).

The subdiscipline of critical water studies has also influenced my work. Critical water studies refers 'to the area of scholarship that looks at water use, management and governance, with a 'social' perspective that is broader than the longer-established technical water sciences, including hydrology, hydraulics and other specialisations' (Mollinga 2008). Borrowing the term 'critical' from critical theory[2], it 'explicitly [addresses] the social relations of power that are inherent to water use, management and governance' (Mollinga 2019: 789). In the critical water studies tradition, I take an explicit normative stance, committed to producing research that promotes social and environmental justice; in my case, in solidarity with small scale farmers in semi-arid Marathwada[3], whilst critically assessing the development, implementation and impact of government policy. This endeavour is attempted in an ethical, appropriate, sensitive and reflexive manner, based on my reading of decolonial methods and practices.

In my attempt understand the complex and multifaceted nature of liberal democratic governance, ideas have been drawn from across the political and social sciences. An interest in green transitions, discourse and political transformations led me to Eckersley (2004) and Torgerson (2013); a lecture on slow violence from Brickell led me to geographies of violence (2023), and then into Marxist political economy (Tyner and Inwood 2014). Literature from Science and Technology Studies (Weinberg 1978, Hess 2007) had

[2] Which encompasses Marxist, Frankfurt School, Feminist and Postcolonial theory
[3] Justification for the use of the term semi-arid in relation to Marathwada can be found in Pawar et al (2025)

clear resonances with the Marathwada Water Grid (discussed in chapter 6) too. I hope to have brought them together in a coherent and compelling way which provides a new lens on the causes and precipitation of long term, repeated cycles of harm either not seen, or ignored, by the institutions of liberal democratic governance.

1.3 Conceptual Introduction: Slow Violence and Liberal Contradictions

From a theoretical perspective, this thesis is an exploration of the institutions of liberal democracy and the way the liberal democratic state has dealt with socio-ecological challenges in Maharashtra. Fukuyama famously claimed that liberal democracy was the best and last form of governance; re-articulating the political philosophy of John Locke, the modern liberal democratic state was said to be the end of a historical process of institutional development where autocracy had given way to rational decision making in the public interest (Fukuyama 1989). Huntingdon's The Third Wave (1991) is also associated with this wave of post-Cold War liberal triumphalism. These thinkers believed modern liberal democracies had institutions which gave them strength, legitimacy and ultimately supremacy in governance over other political models: fair elections, the right to protest, an independent judiciary, a free press and scientific innovation combining to create an accountable and responsive government. I am very much aware that Fukuyama has been the straw man for liberalism since at least 9/11 and the subject of undergraduate politics essays ever since. His work is cited because the 1990s and early 2000s saw debates emerge about the relationship between liberal democracy and climate change/environmental sustainability as it became a mainstream political issue.

In response to the liberal triumphalism of the early 1990s, political ecologists questioned whether liberal democracies were equipped to deal with the serious environmental challenges in what Crutzen later popularised as the Anthropocene (2000). Val Plumwood argued that 'radical inequality' and 'ecological denial' are 'structured into liberalism in multiple ways' (Plumwood 1995:1). This was owing to the limited form of democracy that representative democracies offer, liberalism's neglect/relegation of the importance of the non-human (nature), and its focus on individual rights over collective needs (for example through its protection of private

property) (Plumwood 1995:1). According to this critique, underpinning modern liberalism's incompatibility with ecological sustainability is Cartesian dualism, a philosophical tenant of modernity which positions humans as separate from, superior to, and with the right to exploit, nature (Kureethadam 2017).

In her 2004 book the Green State, Eckersley argued that the liberal state 'thwarts the development of a genuine public morality and associated notions of collective interest' because it seeks reconciliation between economic actors in order to nurture economic activity which it can tax (Eckersley 2004: 84). Here we arrive at one of the main critiques of liberal governance: that liberal democracies are ill-equipped to tackle the climate emergency and its associated crises due to their attachment to (neoliberal) capitalism. Put simply, the freedom to exploit nature and labour under capitalism prevents liberal democratic states from acting in socially and ecologically just ways. This would be incompatible with the fiscal strategy on which they rely for survival. In summary, these scholars argue that (neoliberal) capitalism and environmental sustainability are irreconcilable under liberal democratic governance.

It is important here to clearly state the kind of neoliberalism I am discussing, given the confusions over the term. In some instances, neoliberalism has been inappropriately conflated with neoclassical economic policy, while in others it has emerged as a meaningless by-word for everything that the 'left' hates, and as such has become so broad and amorphous as to cease being a useful analytical category (Mirowski 2014). Harvey's idea that neoliberalism is the 'withdrawal' of the state from society, a politics 'deeply opposed to state [interventionism]' (Harvey 2005: 20) is in my view also misguided. This is because laissez fairism is itself a political choice (or intervention), with markets and associated infrastructures being created and maintained by the state (Mirowski 2014)[4].

I conceptualise neoliberalism as a political doctrine, implemented through an economic system of markets. This is how Friedman articulated neoliberalism in his foundational text Capitalism and Freedom (1962). He believed that in order to achieve a free society, governments should hand over the provision of basic

[4] This is shown in chapter five where state action to transform markets and dictate loan procedures is shown, and again in chapter six where the state continues to intervene in the economy through large scale infrastructure projects like the Marathwada Water Grid.

services to markets - markets which it should create, maintain and protect. This doctrine has been hegemonic in global political economy over the last half century, engrained into international financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF. Neoliberalism emerged in India later than in western democracies, beginning with the reforms in 1991 which escalated under Singh in 2004 (Joseph 2007). Like Friedman, I use neoliberalism to describe a politics achieved through markets.

Opponents of neoliberalism within political ecology argue that the state's 'parasitic' reliance on the market prevents liberal democracies from properly protecting (certain) citizens (and the natural environment) from exploitation (Bailey 2015). According to Eckersley and Plumwood's work, and feminist, queer theorists, post-colonialists and subaltern studies scholars (Eckersley 2004: 89), the equation of economic freedom with political freedom is incorrect. These libertarian views about the role of government dismiss collective interests in societies, the structural inequalities that neoliberal capitalism creates (and requires to function) and the overexploitation of natural resources on which this system is predicated. Neoliberal capitalism imagines a world of producers and consumers, not citizens, and it is this misalignment which creates an ideological contradiction in neoliberal capitalist-liberal democracies. A question then emerges: if political freedom fundamentally comes from markets (the freedom to produce, buy and sell), (how) can collective issues like social inequality and natural resource management be resolved? This is a recurring question in my work. As we enter deeper into the climate crisis, it becomes clearer that neoliberal capitalist-liberal democracies face a crisis of purpose, functionality and legitimacy. Not only do these competing, contradictory logics create damaging policy outcomes and governments that are unresponsive to harm, they arguably also present opportunities (as in India) for far-right movements with divisive and superficial solutions to flourish. The new dominance of far right authoritarianism, and alternative frameworks of the postcolonial state from development studies, may even lead researchers to abandon the liberal democratic framework of analysis altogether. These critiques are explored in this chapter. Despite this, I situate agrarian rural policy and the consequence of farmer suicides and agrarian distress within this lineage of liberal democratic development and norms even as they are challenged and undermined by malign political forces.

Slow violence, the conceptual framework for this thesis, refers to forms of violence that occur gradually and out of sight, unfolding over long periods rather than being immediate or spectacular (Nixon 2011). This idea is unpacked in chapter 2. Geographers have sought to redefine violence to make it more appropriate to the kind of political-economic and environmental crises unfolding in the contemporary world (Tyner and Inwood 2014, Davies 2020). This thesis argues that agrarian distress in Maharashtra is a particular form of slow violence, produced and sustained by the state under successive governments. The apparent incompatibility between liberal democratic ideals and neoliberal capitalism is at the heart of this analysis. Indeed, the overlapping timelines of the neoliberal shift in India suggests the contradiction has a significant role to play in explaining the emergence of farmer suicides and the entrenchment of rural poverty in Marathwada, connected to intersectional issues around technological optimism, authoritarianism, class and caste inequalities.

1.4 Liberal Democratic and Neoliberal Economic Changes in Post-Independence India

The history of the Indian postcolonial state is the subject of a vast historiography; this section points to just a few ways in which the state has developed in India, with scholarship suggesting it has increasingly failed to live up to the role outlined in the constitution.

After the violence of British colonial rule and Partition, India became an independent nation. On 26 November 1949, the Constituent Assembly of India adopted the Constitution of India, written by the Dalit scholar, lawyer and activist Dr BR Ambedkar. This document created a secular republic designed to serve the interests of the whole country, no matter a person's ethnicity or religion. Reservations (a form of positive discrimination) were put in place to give those from Dalit ('untouchable'), 'other backward castes' and indigenous tribes (adivasis) places in education and jobs in the public sector (Guha 2007:1). This was a concerted (if flawed) effort to end the discriminatory caste system, a feature of Brahminic South Asian culture which underpins Indian society. Under Congress, the party of Mahatma Gandhi and the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the Indian

state positioned itself as a force of progressive social and economic change influenced by European social democracy and Fabianism. India aspired to be an independent, self-governing and self-sufficient nation, playing a leading part in the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War which forged solidarity between newly independent countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America (Ali 2004).

India became a liberal democracy (famously and to this day the 'largest democracy in the world'), influenced by the values of the European Enlightenment, with a state-centric development model, and a mission to help the poorest and most marginalised in society. This purpose is encapsulated in the words of Dr Ambedkar: 'political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life' (Ambedkar 1948). The postcolonial Indian state was designed by Ambedkar as a mediator between different class interests[5], caste groups and as an agent of 'progress' and emancipation. From the Republic of India's founding, there were vast state development projects at both the Union and State level.

In 2025, the political and economic landscape of India is far removed from that imagined by the founding fathers; the state-centric, protectionist economic model has been challenged; economic inequality is greater than at any time since 1947 (Chancel and Piketty 2017, Oxfam 2023); and the secularity of the Indian Republic is under pressure. The enormous balance of payments crisis in 1991 led to macroeconomic changes in the Indian economy. As replicated across the global south, India was required to undergo Structural Adjustment in order to access loans from the World Bank and IMF. This was the moment that India's neoliberal era exploded into life, and the term 'New India' was born (D'Costa 2010). Publicly owned companies were floated on the stock exchange, strict import quotas were dropped, and foreign direct investment (previously limited) was encouraged: India's economy was deregulated and integrated into the international economy. While the Indian economy grew at unprecedented rates during the 1990s and early 2000s, creating an urban, high-consumption middle class, economic inequality spiralled and 'the euphoria of the nineties economic revolution simply skipped large parts of

[5]Class in the classic Marxist sense of the word; Nehru and his allies in the Congress Party were social democrats who spoke of the state as a vehicle for inclusive, socially just development.

the country' (Iyer 2021). Concurrently, tensions between India's Hindu majority and large Muslim minority resurged, as the demolition of the Babri Masjid Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 by Hindu nationalists and communal violence in Gujarat in 2002 attest to (Hansen 2019).

These developments culminated in the election of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the national elections of 2014. This was the moment Hindu nationalist populism became fully mainstream. Modi's government has been backed by a raft of Hindu nationalist organisations including the hardline paramilitary RSS, and together they have clamped down on freedom of speech. Criticism of his party's government has been labelled 'anti-Indian' and anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence has become normalised. Developments in economic and social policy since 1991 have shown an increasing 'inability [of the state] to abide by the progressive character of its Constitution, conceived as an instrument for radical social transformation' with government '[failing] to uphold secularism, social justice, welfare, minority rights and affirmative action in the face of rising Hindu nationalism and pro-capitalist economic agendas' (Barbican 2024). The state has been reimagined in multiple ways, and liberal democracy has come under great pressure. Joseph's paper argues that while the neoliberal agenda appears to align with democratic principles such as choice and participation, it often undermines these processes by reinforcing existing power imbalances, with political leaders, influenced by global capitalism, making decisions that prioritise market interests at the expense of the broader public's welfare (Joseph 2007). The neoliberal economic shift has therefore produced huge inequality: this has played out in agrarian Maharashtra, the focus of this thesis.

1.5. Limitations of the Liberal Democratic Framework

While this thesis situates agrarian distress in Maharashtra within the framework of the liberal democratic state, this choice warrants critical reflection. I have chosen to use normative ideas of liberal democracy as a way to critique political decision making and state action. Critiques of this framework relate to the development of the postcolonial state as it transitioned away from British colonialism as in Chatterjee's 'passive revolution' theory which emphasises the continuation of elite governance from the

colonial to postcolonial eras. His idea of the division between 'political society' and 'civil society' provides the most notable critique of the idea that India should be considered a liberal democracy. His bifurcation of Indian democracy is reprised in chapter 4's analysis of a/the public sphere. Further critiques of the strength of Indian democracy might be suggested by the recent slide towards illiberalism linked to the rise of Hindu Nationalism and democratic backsliding, and older notions of a paternalistic developmental state. This section engages with these critiques, but argues my choice of framework still holds value in highlighting malpractice and hypocrisy where the language of justice and public interest given its continued predominance in political discourse.

While India retains key institutional features associated with liberal democracy, recent scholarship has pointed to processes of democratic backsliding, majoritarian nationalism, and the centralisation of executive power, particularly under Narendra Modi (Jaffrelot 2021; Chatterji et al. 2019). These developments complicate the normative assumptions embedded within liberal democratic theory, raising questions about whether the Indian state can meaningfully be analysed through this lens in its contemporary form. However, such tensions are not entirely new; rather, they reflect deeper contradictions within the postcolonial state, which has long combined formal democratic institutions with highly uneven social and economic realities.

A key limitation of the liberal democratic framework lies in its tendency to posit a relatively clear distinction between state and society, and to conceptualise the state as a coherent, rational actor operating in the public interest. Postcolonial scholarship has consistently challenged this assumption. Partha Chatterjee (2004), for instance, distinguishes between "civil society" and "political society," arguing that large sections of the population in postcolonial contexts engage the state not through formal rights-bearing citizenship, but through negotiated, informal, and often extra-legal practices. In rural India, access to state resources is frequently mediated through local elites, caste networks, and political brokers, blurring the boundary between state and society. Similarly, Akhil Gupta (2012) demonstrates how the state is experienced not as a unified entity but as a dispersed and often contradictory set of practices, shaped by everyday bureaucratic interactions and localised forms of power; Anand discusses this in relation to water access in Mumbai through the notion of 'hydraulic citizenship' (Anand 2017).

These insights are relevant in the context of agrarian Maharashtra, where governance operates through a complex assemblage of actors, including sugar cooperatives, local

politicians, bureaucrats, and non-governmental organisations. As Amita Baviskar (2007) and Stuart Corbridge et al. (2005) have shown, development interventions in India are deeply embedded within existing social hierarchies, often reinforcing rather than alleviating inequalities. The allocation of irrigation resources, for example, is not simply a matter of policy design or institutional capacity, but is shaped by entrenched relations of caste and class power. A systematic class analysis can reveal that agrarian distress cannot be understood solely as a failure of liberal democratic governance, but must also be situated within a political economy characterised by unequal access to land, water, credit, and state support. This class based analysis indicates certain limitations in the empirical applicability and analytical sufficiency of a liberal democratic analytical framework. These critiques are particularly salient in light of contemporary political developments, as well as longer-standing structural inequalities shaped by caste, class, and uneven ecological transformation.

These arguments resonate with broader debates on the nature of the postcolonial state and its developmental trajectory. Atul Kohli (2004) conceptualises the Indian state as a form of 'pro-business' developmental state, in which economic liberalisation has strengthened the position of capital while weakening redistributive capacities. Similarly, Kalyan Sanyal (2007) argues that postcolonial capitalism produces a persistent 'need economy' alongside the formal market economy, requiring ongoing state intervention to manage surplus populations without fundamentally transforming underlying inequalities. These perspectives suggest that the failures observed in agrarian Maharashtra might be seen as intrinsic to the form of development pursued by the Indian state.

An alternative and more radical line of critique emerges from post-development scholarship, which questions the desirability of the development project itself. Arturo Escobar (1995) famously argues that 'development' operates as a discourse that constructs the Global South as deficient and in need of intervention, while legitimising forms of economic and ecological transformation that often exacerbate inequality and dispossession. James Ferguson (1990) similarly critiques development as an 'anti-politics machine' that depoliticises structural inequalities by framing them as technical problems to be solved through policy. Within this framework, the shift towards cash cropping and market integration in Maharashtra can be understood not simply as a policy choice within a liberal democratic system, but as part of a broader project of neoliberal development that reconfigures rural livelihoods in ways that increase vulnerability and dependence.

Building on these insights, the notion of a post developmental or post-development state offers a potential alternative to the liberal democratic framework employed in this thesis. Such an approach would move beyond evaluating the state in terms of its adherence to liberal norms of accountability and welfare provision, and instead interrogate the historical and structural conditions under which development itself produces differentiated forms of harm. From this perspective, agrarian distress and farmer suicides are not merely the result of policy failure or institutional weakness, but are constitutive outcomes of a development model predicated on market integration, ecological extraction, and social differentiation. The state, in this reading, is both an active participant in the production of uneven development.

However, while these alternative frameworks offer important insights, they also present certain limitations in relation to the analytical objectives of this thesis. They are alternative and valid ways into understanding the intractability of agrarian distress, but do not make a liberal democratic framing less valid. Postcolonial and post-development approaches, in particular, tend to foreground structural and discursive critiques at the expense of detailed engagement with institutions, policy processes, and questions of accountability. As a result, they are less well suited to analysing the specific mechanisms through which agrarian policy is formulated, implemented, and experienced at the local level. Moreover, a fully developed post-development critique would require a more fundamental rethinking of the normative basis of the analysis, shifting the focus away from questions of state responsibility and reform towards a broader critique of modernity and development itself. I argue that the post-structuralist approach of post-developmentalism is less effective in holding governments accountable or for understanding the material outcomes and experiences of affected communities experiencing the slow violence enabled by liberal democratic governance.

For these reasons, this thesis retains the liberal democratic state as its primary analytical framework, while recognising its limitations. The concept is used not purely an empirical description of the Indian state, but as a normative and institutional lens through which to analyse state action and inaction. It enables an evaluation of agrarian distress in relation to the state's own constitutional commitments to social justice, equality, and welfare, and foregrounds questions of responsibility, accountability, and governance that are central to the phenomenon of farmer suicides and agrarian distress. At the same time, the alternative perspectives discussed above are used as relevant to contextualise these failures within a broader set of historical and structural dynamics, highlighting the ways in

which liberal democratic institutions are themselves embedded within—and constrained by—relations of caste, class, and ecological inequality. The turn towards authoritarianism has been enabled by democratic politics – the BJP and Shiv Sena are elected parties, who are themselves a response to the inefficacy of democratic decision making. Neoliberal reforms, as stated in sections 1.3 and 1.4, have been managed and negotiated by democratic leadership too.

In this sense, the framework adopted in this thesis is partial but equally valid amongst a field of alternatives. I argue that liberal democracy - despite all these warped realities and alternative framings - remains the de facto governance structure in India and it is from democracy that political mandates and discourses arise. The discordant relationship between liberal democracy and the climate crisis, as highlighted by Eckersley and Plumwood in particular, was the reason for wishing to engage with liberal political theory, slow violence and agrarian distress to begin with.

1.6 Introduction to the Case: Agrarian Distress and Groundwater Overextraction in Marathwada

1.6.1 The History, Geography and Economy of Marathwada

This thesis uses slow violence to conceptualise agrarian distress in Marathwada, where high rates of poverty and farmer suicide linked to drought and debt are found. Marathwada is a region in the central and eastern area of the state of Maharashtra, western India. It comprises the districts of Aurangabad, Beed, Hingoli, Jalna, Latur, Nanded, Osmanabad and Parbhani[6], and as of 2011 had a population of 18,731,872 (GoI 2011). These districts were incorporated into the modern-day state of Maharashtra (‘the nation of Marathi people’) when a reorganisation of Indian states occurred in May 1960. Bombay State was divided (the southern part forming part of Maharashtra while the north joined Gujarat) as postcolonial India was reorganised along historical, cultural and linguistic lines.

[6] While the area comprising Hingoli was a part of Marathwada from 1960, it only became an administrative district in 1999.

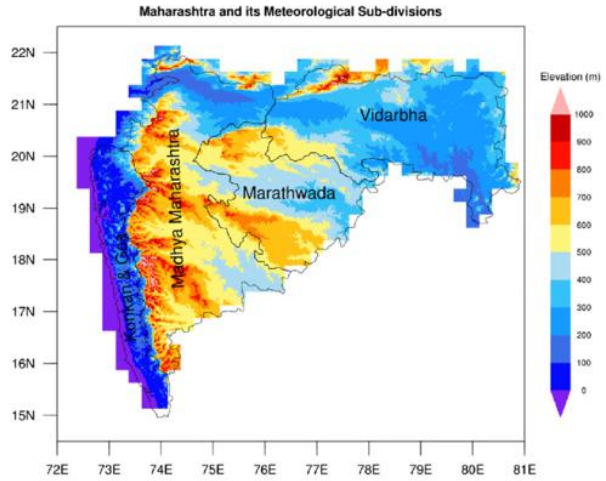

***Figure 1**: Topographical Map of Maharashtra, showing Marathwada in the 'rain shadow' of the Western Ghats in Madhya ('middle') Maharashtra (Takle and Pai 2020)*

***Figure 2:** Map showing the Districts of Maharashtra – Marathwada is made up of Beed, Hingoli, Jalna, Latur, Nanded, Osmanabad and Parbhani in the central region of the state (Maps of India 2025, Copyrighted)*

Marathwada is an overwhelmingly agrarian region situated on the Deccan plateau, a 422,000 km^2 geological region of central and western South Asia created by volcanic eruptions 60,000 years ago (Seth 2006). The land is largely made up of igneous, basalt rock, which contain small, low-capacity aquifers. As Iyer explains, 'Marathwada's geography has always challenged farmers … the terrain is mostly tableland and broad plains… the plains are alluvial[7] only where they run close to the Godavari[8] or its tributaries' (Iyer 2021:10). Marathwada's farmers try to make a living with only two or three spells of

[7] More fertile, with nutrients and also moisture from rivers
[8] The major river in the region

rain per cropping season, relying on groundwater taken from the low storage aquifers. Dryland subsistence agriculture dominated at the turn of the 20th century in Maharashtra, with colonial commercial agriculture being developed along new canal networks; as the current Marathwada Water Grid proposal illustrates, these overground water channels remain overwhelmingly outside of Marathwada. Until the 1960s, coverage was mostly cotton–jowar and millet and pulse dryland agriculture – evidenced in Gazetteer records of the time (GoM 1976/2006). There was gradual commercialisation of black soil regions with an expansion of cotton production and cash crops, which expanded after the borewell revolution.

While culturally and historically rich (as the history of the Deccan Sultanate and the caves at Ajanta demonstrate) (Behl 1998), Marathwada is now the poorest region in the richest state in India. It is far poorer than India's financial capital Mumbai, and poorer than the more rain abundant agricultural region of Western Maharashtra which sits between the Arabian Sea and Western Ghats mountains (Jadhav 2015, Gangan 2024). Marathwada has five of the eight districts in Maharashtra with Human Development Indexes below the national average (Rizwanullah 2013); it has a per capita income 60% below the state's average, and some of the worst levels of nutrition, education, sanitation and healthcare in the state (Iyer 2021 xiii).

Water availability and management has been identified as a key cause of deprivation in Marathwada and its broader economic failures since its incorporation into Maharashtra in 1960. Researchers highlight in particular the mismanagement of dams built at Jayakwadi, Penganga, Purna and Yeldari, which mean that Marathwada has only 7% of the state's overall reservoir storage capacity, and has only 26% of its land irrigated by overground infrastructures (i.e. rivers, dams and canals) (Suryawanshi in Rizwanullah 2013). Despite 52 major political agitations for irrigation to be improved since 1951, the 'main reason for the [continued] backwardness[9] is linked to water' (Suryawanshi 2013). In summary, rural poverty is linked to poor water management, and research indicates that political leadership has failed to respond to calls for better irrigation (Sainath 2009, Rizwanullah 2013, Iyer 2020).

[9] A common term in India to describe economic underdevelopment and high poverty rates

1.6.2 Agrarian Distress: Watershed Schemes, The Borewell Revolution and the 'Drive Towards Corporate Farming'

Agrarian distress describes the consequences of intersecting political, economic and technological changes in the rural economy since the early 1990s, which have particularly impacted small scale, land owning farmers (Suri 2006; Kandlur et al. 2022). From the perspective of Marxian political economy, agrarian distress is caused by 'neoliberal policies [which are] primarily seen as a project of consolidating and furthering the interests of the capitalist class' (Mishra 2020: 183). While the overlapping timeframes of agrarian distress and the emergence of neoliberal reforms is not coincidental, but the crisis must be situated within a longer trajectory of agrarian and environmental change, including water management and cropping pattern changes since the 1970s have restructured the rural economy in ways that have intensified vulnerability.

In the pioneering 2009 film *Nero's Guests*, directed by Deepa Bhatia, P. Sainath—then rural affairs editor of *The Hindu*—argued that the cause of agrarian distress in semi-arid Maharashtra can be summarised in five words: 'the drive towards corporate farming' (Sainath 2009). High Yield Varieties (HYVs) were introduced during the Green Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, but their widespread adoption in the Deccan plateau occurred only from the 1990s onwards. The increasing use of non-traditional seeds and the shift toward cash crops such as sugarcane and soy which were not viable for most small farmers until the borewell explosion of the 1990s.

According to the Minor Irrigation Censuses, the number of borewells in India increased fourfold between 1976 and 2007, from 500,000 to over 2.1 million (Sheikh 2016). The Easements Act of 1882, which grants landowners rights to groundwater beneath their property, facilitated this expansion by allowing private extraction without significant regulation (Shah 2008). The result was what has been described as a 'groundwater revolution', which enabled even relatively small farmers to access irrigation and participate in agricultural commercialisation. However, as groundwater is a common pool resource, this apparent democratisation has been deeply uneven. Those with greater landholdings and capital have been better positioned to exploit aquifers, often at the expense of others. The consequences have been severe: groundwater levels in Marathwada declined by approximately 70% between 2005 and 2016 (Sheikh 2016), while water quality and soil health have deteriorated. As Sainath notes, access to water has become 'the single most explosive political issue in India' (in Iyer 2021: xi).

Shah's *Taming the Anarchy* (2008) provides a critical account of this process, describing the unregulated expansion of groundwater extraction as a form of institutional failure. While the spread of borewell irrigation has been celebrated as a form of farmer-led development—particularly because it extends irrigation beyond canal command areas—it has also produced a fundamentally unstable system. As Shah argues, 'even as groundwater development and use have experienced runaway growth, no strategy to sustain this laissez-faire economy is apparent' (Shah 2008: 122). The agrarian crisis in regions such as Marathwada is therefore inseparable from a crisis of groundwater governance, in which technological expansion has outpaced institutional regulation.

Parallel to the groundwater revolution, the state pursued a series of watershed development programmes from the 1980s onwards, particularly under the Drought Prone Areas Programme (DPAP). These interventions aimed to stabilise rainfed agriculture through soil and water conservation measures such as contour bunding, check dams, and percolation tanks. Government assessments suggest that watershed development improved groundwater recharge, increased soil moisture, and enabled the expansion of well irrigation in treated areas (Government of Maharashtra, *State of Environment Report*; Government of India, DPAP guidelines). In many villages, this led to higher cropping intensity and the possibility of cultivating a second (rabi) crop, planted between October and December and harvested in spring. Evaluations across semi-arid India similarly report gains in water availability and agricultural productivity (Joshi et al. 2005; Kerr 2002).

However, as with the groundwater revolution, the benefits of watershed development have been unevenly distributed. Access to recharged groundwater depends on ownership of wells and land, which tends to favour larger and more capitalised farmers. Empirical studies show that watershed programmes have often reproduced existing inequalities rather than alleviating them, as local institutions are frequently dominated by rural elites (Kerr 2002; Shah 2001). While participatory governance is central to official programme design, in practice smallholders and landless households have limited control over resource allocation. As a result, the gains from watershed development have been captured disproportionately by those already advantaged within the agrarian structure (Government of Maharashtra, *State of Environment Report*).

These transformations in water access have been closely linked to changes in cropping patterns. The most striking long-term shift since the 1970s has been the collapse of traditional dryland cereals including in Marathwada, particularly jowar and bajra.

Historically, these crops formed the backbone of subsistence agriculture across Marathwada. However, district-level data now shows that even where jowar persists—such as in Beed and Parbhani—it is no longer dominant. Studies based on government statistics indicate that both the area and yields of low-water crops have declined across districts including Nanded, Jalna, and Hingoli. This reflects a structural transition away from subsistence-oriented agriculture toward market-linked production, driven by both policy incentives and changing consumption patterns. The decline of millets marks a fundamental break with the agrarian system of the 1970s.

In place of cereals, the dominant crops in Marathwada today are soybean and cotton. Their rapid expansion from the 1980s onwards reflects a broader state-led push toward oilseeds and commercial crops, as well as the increasing integration of Indian agriculture into national and global markets. District-level data shows soybean dominating in Latur, Nanded, and Hingoli, while cotton is particularly prominent in Aurangabad, Jalna, and Parbhani. These crops offer higher potential returns than millets but are also more dependent on market conditions and input use. Evidence from government data shows that both the area under cultivation and productivity of cotton and soybean have increased significantly across the region. The result is a transition toward what can be described as commercial dryland agriculture, rather than a shift to fully irrigated farming.

Sugarcane has also expanded in parts of Marathwada, particularly in districts such as Latur, Beed, and Parbhani. However, its importance is often overstated. While sugarcane is highly visible due to its association with irrigation infrastructure and cooperative politics, it occupies a relatively small share of total cultivated area compared to soybean and cotton. Its significance is therefore disproportionately political rather than statistical. Moreover, sugarcane is an extremely water-intensive crop, requiring far greater water inputs per hectare than other crops. This creates a tension between its symbolic role as a marker of development and its ecological unsustainability in a drought-prone region. As such, sugarcane should be understood as one component of a broader agrarian transformation dominated by dryland commercialisation, rather than its primary driver.

These changes in cropping patterns have had profound implications for ecological sustainability and drought vulnerability. Approximately 85–90% of agriculture in Marathwada remains rain-fed, making it highly sensitive to rainfall variability (Government of Maharashtra, *State of Environment Report*). The shift toward crops such as cotton and soybean, which are more sensitive to rainfall timing and variability than traditional millets,

has increased exposure to climatic risk. At the same time, the decline of drought-resistant crops has reduced the resilience of the agrarian system. Evidence suggests that high water-demand crops have expanded even as water scarcity has intensified, creating a structural mismatch between ecological conditions and agricultural practices.

Watershed development has played an ambivalent role in this process. While intended as a drought-proofing measure, its success in increasing groundwater availability has often led to intensified extraction, particularly in the absence of effective regulation (Shah 2001; Kerr 2002). This has contributed to declining water tables and increased dependence on uncertain rainfall. In this sense, watershed development has not simply mitigated drought risk but has restructured it. Short-term gains in water availability have enabled shifts toward more commercially oriented cropping systems, but these systems are also more vulnerable to both climatic and market fluctuations. The result is a paradox in which agricultural modernisation has proceeded alongside increasing ecological fragility, with the promise of increased water availability from Integrated Watershed Management (IWM) propelling a transition to commercialised agriculture which has outpaced material improvements in water security. IWM may account for the absence of a major drought between 1972 and 2012, but as figures on the erosion of the water table show, it merely postponed drought from resurfacing.

The consequences of these intersecting transformations—groundwater extraction, watershed development, and cropping change—are evident in the persistence of agrarian distress. One of the most tragic manifestations of this crisis has been the high incidence of farmer suicides in Maharashtra. These have been linked to rising levels of indebtedness associated with input-intensive agriculture, including the costs of seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, and irrigation infrastructure (Ghosh 2005; Menon 2006). The removal of subsidies and price supports in the 1990s further exacerbated these pressures. As yields have become more variable and market prices more volatile, many farmers have found themselves trapped in cycles of debt. According to data from the state Relief and Rehabilitation Department, 2,851 farmers died by suicide in Maharashtra in 2023, of whom 1,088 were from Marathwada (Markpakwar 2024). These figures have remained consistently high over the past two decades, attracting national and international attention (BBC 2015; *Guardian* 2017).

Responding to this crisis, farmer activist Kishore Tiwari has attributed agrarian distress to ‘the indifferent attitude and anti-farmer policies of government’, arguing that ‘we lack [the]

political will to tackle the agrarian crisis' (Markpakwar 2024). This claim can be understood in light of the broader transformations discussed above. Rather than representing a failure of development, the crisis in Marathwada can be seen as the outcome of a particular model of development—one that has prioritised commercialisation, technological intensification, and market integration, while neglecting questions of ecological sustainability and social equity.

Conceptualising agrarian distress as a form of slow violence helps to capture this dynamic. The cumulative effects of groundwater depletion, changing cropping patterns, and policy reforms are not immediately visible but unfold over time, gradually eroding the viability of rural livelihoods. These processes are not accidental but are produced and sustained through state policies and institutional arrangements. The expansion of borewell irrigation, the promotion of commercial crops, and the implementation of watershed programmes have all been framed as development interventions. Yet their combined effect has been to generate new forms of vulnerability, particularly for small-scale farmers.

The case of Marathwada thus illustrates the limits of technocratic approaches to agricultural development. Water management interventions such as watershed development and groundwater extraction have been central to efforts to modernise agriculture, but they have also contributed to ecological degradation and social inequality. Similarly, shifts in cropping patterns have increased integration into markets but have also heightened exposure to risk. Understanding agrarian distress therefore requires moving beyond narrow explanations focused on individual factors and instead situating the crisis within a broader political economy of development.

In this context, the lack of political will identified by Tiwari is not simply a matter of policy failure but reflects deeper structural constraints. Addressing agrarian distress would require confronting entrenched interests, rethinking models of agricultural development, and developing more sustainable approaches to water governance. As the experience of Marathwada demonstrates, without such changes, efforts to promote agricultural growth may continue to reproduce the very conditions that generate crisis.

1.8 Thesis Overview

Having introduced political ecology, my conceptual framework and case study, I now provide a sketch of my thesis. It begins with a conceptual framework that develops the concept of slow violence, before making the case for its appropriateness in conceptualising agrarian distress in Marathwada. Then, in a deviation from a traditional thesis structure, chapter 3 responds to debates around colonialism and extractive research methods in the social sciences, which feel particularly important given my remote working practices. The specific research methods employed to collect data are detailed in the three data chapters. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are the data chapters, each analysing different aspects of liberal democratic governance and their responses to the slow violence of agrarian distress: chapter 4 conceptualises the media as a part of the public sphere, focusing on the 2012-3 drought; chapter 5 uses interviews with farmers completed in the winter of 2023-4 in Hingoli District to understand the impact of agricultural commercialisation and related government interventions on rural livelihoods; chapter 6 analyses the Marathwada Water Grid and Konkan-Godavari water transfer scheme, a flagship proposal designed to 'end drought'. The chronology of these chapters enables discussion of whether the slow violence of agrarian distress in Marathwada has been addressed by the institutions of liberal democratic governance over this period, relating to the temporal aspect of slow violence.

1.8 Chapter Overviews

1.8.1 Chapter 2: Agrarian Distress in Marathwada: A Case of Slow Violence?

This chapter makes the case for employing the concept of slow violence in order to understand the relationship between liberal democracy and agrarian distress in Marathwada. It introduces Nixon's (2011) work and its subsequent application by other scholars (Davies 2022, Brickell 2023). It locates slow violence in the traditions of environmental justice and shows how it builds on older articulations of structural violence (Galtung 1969). Contrasting with the apathetic responses of government and the language of justice, I argue it appropriately draws on the rhetorical energy of violence to describe the degradation of the natural environment, lost livelihoods and farmer suicides. I then create and unpack a three-part definition of slow violence from Nixon's own summary: a

nominal dimension (that examples of slow violence are 'not considered violence at all'), a temporal dimension (that slow violence is drawn out and can be traced back across generations, and involves 'postponed action'), and a spatial dimension (that slow violence is dispersed within/across geographies). I tease out some initial ideas as to why slow violence is an appropriate concept for studying agrarian distress in Marathwada. Finally, I take issue with Nixon's idea that slow violence is 'unseen' and hard to communicate, agreeing with Davies (2019) that, put simply, the experiences of people affected by environmental injustice 'do not count'. They fail to motivate political action due to their socio-economic status, gender, caste, and subsequent lack of social capital.

1.8.2 Chapter 3: Decoloniality and Distance as Methodological Issues in Political Ecology

This chapter provides a methodological discussion in which I reflect on the experience of conducting a study on rural India remotely from a British university. It engages with arguments on decolonising academia, tracing its intellectual roots from mid-century postcolonial thinkers (Du Bois 1945, Fanon 1952) to contemporary writers (Connell 2007, Go 2017). While agreeing on the need for structural changes in higher education funding and for appropriate methods and concepts to be used in the analysis of case studies, I take issue with the conclusion that social science research and social theory are vanguards for colonialism (Go 2017). I argue that there is a rich tradition of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist literature located in the social sciences, produced by scholars around the world. It is argued that India's political institutions, economy and intellectual traditions[10] straddle northern/southern, or eastern/western forms of knowledge, challenging decolonial literature's simplified worldview. I argue that the essence of decolonial research is to expose the mechanisms of power, unjust practices, and foreground the experiences of marginalised and vulnerable people; all of which this thesis sets out to achieve.

The second half of this chapter explains how I tried to implement ethical research practices in the completion of remote fieldwork. It reflects on the experience of remote data collection in Hingoli District which was completed in collaboration with a research assistant. This data is analysed in chapter 5. This was undertaken because this practice has been characterised (by some) as depending on racialised power relations (Deane and

[10] India fits this description, but is not exceptional in this regard.

Stevano 2016: 217). I argue that, in the case of my project, there were positive outcomes for the RA and participants which sat alongside institutional challenges and personal anxieties. The chapter seeks to demonstrate the benefits of critical social science and critical political ecology, which can critique states policy and expose economic inequalities. The specific qualitative methodologies used to collect and analyse the data are presented in the data chapters (4, 5 and 6).

1.8.3 Chapter 4: Slow Violence Made Visible? The Media, Reflexivity and the Narration of the 2012-3 Maharashtrian Drought

This is the first of three empirical chapters which considers the relationship between liberal democracy and agrarian distress across three different arenas of governance. Here, I conceptualise the media as part of the public sphere. Media analysis of coverage of the 2012-3 drought was undertaken in order to answer two questions – how are the causes and solutions to drought discussed in the Indian media? And, are the long term, structural issues effecting rural communities (i.e. slow violence) being drawn to the attention of political leaders? Research on the public sphere has been conducted due to its potential for enabling critical public debate (Habermas 1989) and even green state transitions (Eckersley 2004). It is argued that the drought of 2012-3 was a moment where the slow violence of agrarian distress may have emerged into 'sensational visibility' (Nixon 2001:2). Media coverage has also been chosen because of Sainath's criticism of the Indian media's reporting on rural poverty (Sainath 2009). The data is an sample of elite, English language media which represents what Chatterjee (2004) calls 'civil' rather than political society.

Forty news articles are analysed using critical discourse analysis (Leipold 2019) to see what causes and solutions to drought were present in the texts. These framings were then assembled, and categorised using Eckersley's hierarchy of state reflexivity (Eckersley, 2004:80). I use the hierarchy as a framework for determining the kinds of critiques made about governance arrangements – from calls for a change in policies but not aims, through to radical calls for the transformation of the state from an environmental exploiter to an environmental trustee (Eckersley 2004:83).

Narratives 1 to 7 correspond to the former. They suggest that the Government of Maharashtra has failed, through a lack of investment and regulation, a lack of oversight on public investment, inappropriate technologies and political infighting, to perform its role as a facilitator of capitalist expansion in the region. These narratives represent the lowest

level of reflexivity according to Eckersley's hierarchy. Politicians with financial interest in the sugar industry defend it, and a raft of short-term measures that prop up this commericalisation model jump into existence including water tankers and debt relief. A smaller number of narratives demonstrate an awareness that Marathwada's geography is ill-suited for the input-heavy, water intensive agricultural practices prevalent in other regions of India, and advocate policies which would protect small-scale farmers, preserve soil and groundwater resources, and prioritise long-term sustainability. The second research question is then answered: the conclusion is reached that whilst many of the institutional failings of liberal democratic governance are highlighted by reporters (particularly the lack of oversight on government spending and the preference for delayed, short term action by politicians), the effect (rural poverty) only becomes visible and newsworthy when it is related to political scandal. This raises questions about the effectiveness of the media in highlighting environmental injustice in line with the normative theories of Habermas and Eckersley.

1.8.4. Chapter 5: The Market and the State: Past and Present Experiences of small scale farmers in Hingoli District

The second empirical chapter centres the experiences of small-scale, landowning farmers in Hingoli District in Marathwada as they operate in conditions of water scarcity and agricultural commercialisation. The aim is to understand, through group interviews, the impact of agricultural commericalisation and state interventions such as Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan (the Village Water Scheme). The geography of the three villages is introduced, as well as the crops grown, caste relations and land ownership patterns[11]. Hingoli was chosen because it suffers from the issues of water scarcity and the weak political leadership found across Marathwada. Furthermore, little research has been completed on this subject there since it became an administrative division in 2010[12]. The methodology for data collection - semi-structured interviews co-produced with a research assistant in Hingoli - is then explained. The chapter remains an important and insightful, a space where farmers are able to narrate their own lives. The findings section discusses three issues: the changes to the economy and finances of small scale farmers in their lifetimes; access to water and the impact of government water and land use

[11] To the best of my ability using
[12] According to correspondence with an Maharashtra based NGO

schemes on this access; and the opinions of farmers on political leadership in relation to agrarian distress.

Overall, the findings suggest a the continuation and entrenchment of the problems of commercialised agriculture raised by activists and scholars in chapter 3. Input reliant agriculture has led to debt traps and soil degradation that undermines the productivity of farms in Hingoli. It is shown that fair loans are hard to access for small landowners due to high levels of illiteracy and the MSP is not functioning to provide secure incomes. Given these challenges, loans have to be accessed through local landlords at high, unregulated rates, and without enough credit for investment in irrigation.

Respondents argue that water schemes, such as the JSA, have not been implemented effectively, with corruption and incompetence emerging as key themes. Land has been taken away from farmers to build dams with the farmers being unable to connect to these supplies. Respondents have little faith in the democratic process to overturn these injustices, as caste politics (fuelled by Hindu nationalists) fuel political debates which distract from agrarian issues. These dynamics intersect and reinforce one another, as small land-owners tend to be from lower castes, have poorer land quality and struggle to access reliable water sources. The recurrence of issues from the literature review and Fchapter 4[13], combined with a lack of trust in political leadership, reinforces the idea that agrarian distress is a form of slow violence enabled by liberal governance. This is encapsulated in many quotations taken from the transcripts, including 'our time [as farmers in Marathwada] is over now' (Respondent in Village 3).

1.8.5 Chapter 6: Technical Fixes and the Future of Agrarian Distress in Marathwada: Analysing the Marathwada Water Grid

This final empirical chapter provides a discussion of the Marathwada Water Grid (MWG), a vast infrastructure project designed in collaboration between the Government of Maharashtra and the Mekorot water company (Maharashtra Jeevan Pradhikaran 2018). Drawing on interviews completed online with experts in water management— an NGO leader, a journalist who has completed extensive research in Marathwada, and a former engineer with the GoM's Water and Land Management Institute— I argue that the MWG exemplifies a kind of technical fix, and displays many characteristics of Flyvbjerg's (2004)

[13] The reporting on drought and agrarian distress employed as data in chapter 4 was published 10 years prior to these interviews.

concept of ‘megaprojects’. The chapter answers the following research questions in two sections– firstly, what does the MWG set out to achieve, and what might the consequences of its implementation be? And secondly, why is the MWG a compelling option for policy makers? From this, a discussion is presented on what can be learned about the relationship between liberal democracy and slow violence in terms of policy making. Ideas from Science and Technology Studies scholars suggest that policy makers simplify complex policy problems, often overlooking their social, economic, and systemic roots in favour of technological or engineering solutions (Weinberg 1978). The chapter charts the development of technical fixes and their relationship with modern politics and future making, explaining their ‘hazardous’ role in decision making (Marx 2007), and the ways they depoliticise and mask the agendas of dominant political-economic regimes whilst serving these ends. The role of high modernism as an ideology, taken from Scott’s classic ‘Seeing Like a State’ is demonstrated.

Three points are made to answer question one. Firstly, that the policy targets overground water infrastructures rather than seeking to regulate the dominant groundwater economy (Shah 2009). Secondly, the project seeks to consolidate state control over water distribution for the purposes of unsustainable agricultural practices and the further commodification of water, which risks further excluding marginalised, low income farmers. Thirdly, the MWG creates new ecological risks by making huge water transfers which endanger both human and non-human actors. Flyvbjerg’s four ‘sublimes’ (technological, political, economic and aesthetic) of megaprojects (Flyvbjerg 2014) help to answer the second research question as to why the MWG continues to appeal in spite of its clear faults.

2. Agrarian Distress in Marathwada: A Case of Slow Violence?

2.1 Introduction

This chapter functions as a combined literature review and theoretical framework. Its aim is to establish slow violence, which destabilises traditional definitions of violence focused on events (Nixon 2011), as an appropriate and useful lens to understand the outcomes of agrarian change in Maharashtra for communities of small-scale farmers. The concept raises particular questions about the epistemology (knowledge) of human and environmental harm, and following this, about the responsiveness of political institutions to the existence of harm. While Nixon originally claimed that slow violence is 'out of sight' and hard to communicate, this chapter instead argues that slow violence is visible, but that knowledge of its existence is ignored by political leaders (Davies 2023), raising questions about the effectiveness of liberal democratic governance as a mechanism for policy problem solving and justice. This conclusion is reached by re-examining examples of slow violence found in Nixon's text, uses of the term by subsequent scholars, resonances with texts from political ecology and political economy, and also from the literature on agrarian change in western India. This chapter demonstrates that drought, desertification and farmer suicides are well documented issues. The problem arises from the representation of these issues in public discourse, and the lack of political will to address the impacts on affected communities.

From my understanding of the literature, previous researchers have chosen to focus on the production of slow violence by economic systems. Harvey and Tyner and Inwood draw on Marxist political economy to suggest that 'accumulation by dispossession' or 'primitive accumulation' is a violent process, the link to violence made more explicit in Feldman et al's 'Accumulating Insecurity: Violence and Dispossession in the Making of Everyday Life' (Feldman et al 2011). Elsewhere, Brickell conceptualises the cumulative financial (and personal) insecurities faced by textile workers in Cambodia during the Covid-19 pandemic as slow violence, focusing once again on capitalist development (Brickell 2024). However, this thesis makes liberal democratic governance the main object of study. This decision has been made because liberal democratic states are meant to regulate capital and govern resources in order to protect citizens (Polanyi 1944, Rawls 1971), and be accountable to their populations. Our reliance on liberal governance structures to

navigate the climate crisis in a just, sustainable and effective way, and the increasing evidence of their inability to do this, is the reason for wanting to focus on the disconnect between the reality of farmer's lives in rural India, and political narratives and policy responses[14].

The chapter starts by locating slow violence in the traditions of environmental justice and a burgeoning body of work on violence in human geography (Loyd 2012; Springer 2011; Woon 2011, 2013; Wright 2011). I then create and unpack a three-part definition of slow violence from Nixon's own summary (identifying a its nominal, temporal and spatial dimension), and then argue that it has clear resonances with the case study. I agree with Davies in his critique of Nixon's idea of 'out of sightedness': Davies contends that certain 'populations and geographies [might be rendered] vulnerable to sacrifice' (Davies 2019:441) under certain political and economic regimes. Green political theorists offer some insights into why this might be the case; the 'parasitic' reliance on capital for taxation (and thus survival) undermining the ability or willingness of states to be agents of social and environmental justice (Bailey 2015). As this thesis will demonstrate, the overlapping time periods of the 'neoliberal turn' in India with the advent of farmer suicides is not a coincidence, however this macro political-economic picture is underpinned by a complex interplay of further political, social, cultural and institutional factors, which contribute to the unresponsiveness of the Maharashtrian government to agrarian distress over several decades.

2.2 Introducing Slow Violence

Political geographers have responded to developments in social theory which destabilise traditional ideas of violence. The literary scholar Rob Nixon introduced the term, taking issue with the idea that violence is 'an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space … erupting into instant sensational visibility' (2011:2). This critique was made on the grounds that it excludes many of the most violent *processes* unfolding in the contemporary world. Two interrelated sets of processes are identified. On the one hand, environmental disasters are producing harmful outcomes including drought, famine and desertification, underpinned by anthropogenic climate change.

[14] I recognise that many scholars have chosen to employ Foucault's of governmentality and Foucault (1976) and Agamben's (1998) work on biopolitics, conceptualise and critique liberal governance (Anand 2017, Hellberg 2018, Vos & Boelens 2018, Sarmiento et al 2019). Slow violence is a different way into these issues and goes beyond the focus on water governance.

Concurrently and interconnectedly, political economists have argued the modern state has enabled 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2004) over generations. This has involved land and resource grabs by the state and capital which have impoverished and broken apart (certain) communities. Harvey argues that this trend has accelerated since the paradigm shift towards neoliberal economic policy as introduced in Chapter 1. Nixon argues that the climate and biodiversity crises, as well as certain political economic changes, should be called violence, but do not fit an established definition focused on events over processes.

Slow violence goes further in seeking to redefine what constitutes violence and harm, pushing back against the idea of violence as not only an immediate occurrence, but also a sensational or novel one. Slow violence is instead 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight… delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space… an attritional violence that is not typically viewed as violence at all' (2011:2). The biggest implication of Nixon's work is that by failing to label 'incremental … accretive' and 'calamitous' (2011:2) phenomena violent or violence, we are denying the realities of millions of people who then become acceptable casualties of capitalist development and environmental disaster - casualties in terms of their jobs, homes and communities which disappear, but also through death.

Nixon's examples of slow violence are diverse, covering different geographies and time periods. They include the institutional failings (leading to and in the aftermath of) the Union Carbide plant tragedy in Bhopal in 1984 (Nixon 2011: 63), the extended impact of chemical weapons in the Vietnam War (Nixon 2011: 227), and the treatment of climate refugees as a security risk by the US Pentagon (Nixon 2011: 282). Binding these examples together is the idea that political and economic institutions under the conditions of industrial capitalism are ignorant (or dismissive) of the damage they cause to the natural environment and poor, racialised people.

These ideas might not seem new or novel in and of themselves, and indeed Nixon's concept builds on ideas from environmental justice (EJ) studies and Galtung's concept of structural violence. Inspired by political agitations in the US in the 1980s (United Church of Christ 1987, Schlosberg 2007), EJ scholars argued that 'environmental risks are commonly placed in the path of least resistance, near communities with the smallest reserves of political, economic, and social capital' (Davies 2022: 417). This scholarly attempt to understand environmental injustice has become an established academic

school of thought (Bullard 1990, Foster 1998), with Schlosberg's three-part framework of environmental justice (2004) expanding the traditional focus on distributional equity by incorporating procedural justice and recognitional justice as key concepts. Clear links can be seen between the 'out of sightedness' of slow violence with Schlosberg's idea that for environmental justice to be achieved, there must be a 'recognition of the diversity of the participants and experiences in affected communities' (Schlosberg 2004: 517). Regarding structural violence, both Nixon and Galtung attempt 'to complicate conventional assumptions' about harm (Nixon, 2011: 3) and move beyond justice as a concept. They share the view that institutionalised forms of racism, sexism and classism 'not only restrict quality of life, but *are violent* in their outcomes' (Davies 2022: 431). They agree that violence is found within the routinised workings of the everyday, and both believe that the language of (in)justice (while true) underplays the devastating outcomes of these systems and processes.

Some scholars have gone as far as to argue that Nixon's concept rejects the structuralist analysis of Galtung, or Žižek's (2008) idea of systemic violence, both of which attempt to define systems that perpetuate harm in a repetitive way. They argue that Nixon 'refuses to define predetermined, static and external systems that continually reproduce violence and harm in repetition', and instead he 'captures the everchanging, kaleidoscopical and thus hard-to-recognise instances of violence perpetrated by various real actors in spatially and temporally dispersed ways' (Yetiş & Bakırlıoğlu 2023: 2). I would accept that Nixon himself is not attempting to define and interrogate structures in his own work – as a literary theorist, he draws on a more diverse range of sources than traditional social scientists would including novels, journalism, environmental science, and postcolonial studies. His work focuses on the experiences of victims of violence rather than the structures which create and sustain their suffering. This is completed by looking at disparate examples under heterogenous political and economic regimes. While Yetiş & Bakırlıoğlu reach a different conclusion, I argue that the concept of slow violence does provoke questions about the political and economic structures that create and perpetuate slow violence. These structures and institutions are frequently implicated by Nixon's work even if they are not the object of study. His derision of 'conventional neoliberal [responses]' (2011:265) point the way for structural analyses of political institutions and cultures which are the subject of this thesis.

Brickell's use of slow violence in her study on textile workers in Cambodia (2023) was an inspiration for my thesis. Brickell produced a film that reconstructed the experiences of

her research participants using actors. It showed the accumulative effects of lockdowns on their ability to work, their personal relationships, and their loan and rental payments (Brickell 2023). The film makes slow violence in authoritarian Cambodia 'seen', powerfully capturing how those employed in precarious labour lack financial security during economic crises. Her work speaks to both the experiences of research participants, and the difficulties of documenting them under repressive political regimes. For me, Brickell's work echoed Marcus Taylor's research on the indebtedness of small-scale farmers in Andhra Pradesh, which shares many features of Maharashtra's agrarian economy (Taylor 2013). Taylor labels semi-arid India a 'debtscape', adapting the idea of a 'waterscape' used in political ecological research on water management (Swyngedouw 1999, Linton and Budds 2014, Boelens et al. 2018, Flaminio et al 2022) to argue that debt rather than water is the defining characteristic of these arid landscapes (Taylor 2013). Combined, Brickell and Taylor's work led me to use Nixon's concept for this project on small scale farmers and agrarian distress in Marathwada. Having introduced the genealogy of slow violence, and the work it has done for other scholars, I now break down Nixon's 2011 definition into three parts, and link it to my case study.

2.3 The Three Parts of Nixon's Slow Violence

Nixon developed the concept of slow violence in his 2011 book 'Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor' (Nixon 2011). He defines slow violence as:

> 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight…
>
> a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space…
>
> an attritional violence that is not typically viewed as violence at all'
>
> (Nixon 2011:2)

I reformulate this definition into three parts: a nominal dimension, a temporal dimension, and a spatial dimension, each of which help to explain the causes of, and failed institutional responses to, harm, over long periods of time. I now unpack these three dimensions using Nixon and subsequent publications on slow violence, to suggest that agrarian distress in Marathwada is a form of slow violence, and that this conceptual framework is helpful for analysing the case study. The three elements are all explored in Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor. I choose to isolate them for the

purposes of analysis, whilst acknowledging that it is the intersection of these elements which combine to hide the production of harm.

2.3.1.1 Nominal Dimension: 'A Violence Not Typically Viewed as Violence At All':

Firstly, I identify a 'nominal' aspect of slow violence, given that Nixon argues that it is a violence 'not typically viewed as violence at all' (2011:2); as Tyner agreed in 2014, 'although seemingly self-evident, violence is not always as it appears' (Tyner and Inwood 2014:1). The proliferation of studies and reconceptualisations of violence in human geography are testament to the need to reimagine what constitutes violence (Loyd 2012; Springer 2011; Tyner 2012; Woon 2011, 2013; Wright, 2011). Nixon offers a traditional definition of violence: 'an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space … erupting into instant sensational visibility' (Nixon 2011:2). For Nixon, as with Galtung and Žižek before him, the exclusion of structural, systemic or 'slow' processes, instead with a focus on events, has made this definition redundant in articulating how harm is produced and responded to. While inequality or injustice may be the preferred term for others, Pain and Cahill state that violence more clearly articulates that harm is always the product of political and economic decision making (whether incidentally or intentionally), no matter how incremental or every day the effects appear (Pain & Cahill 2022: 362). They argue that the language of violence is ontologically appropriate and capable of injecting rhetorical energy and political urgency into proceedings, particularly when the political will to tackle these issues is absent.

In justifying a redefinition of violence, scholars argue that definitions of violence are not static or stable, 'neither transhistorical nor transgeographical' (Tyner and Inwood 2014: 776), but instead dependent on what is considered socially and morally acceptable at a particular time. It is argued that in the 18th century, acts we would now consider violence, such as the rape of a spouse, were not considered to be violent (Tyner and Inwood 2014: 776).

Precedents for redefining key concepts can be found in different social science disciplines, with debates around security in International Relations providing a particularly pertinent parallel. In the 1990s Critical IR scholars critiqued hegemonic state-centric definitions of security (Smith 2005, Shepherd & Weldes 2008). During the Cold War, the term exclusively referred to the maintenance of the international order and the protection of the nation state. The strategic development of nuclear weapons and military

capabilities was said to provide 'security' in a system of Hobbesian anarchy (Waltz 1979). Critical IR scholars shifted understandings of security in the discipline after the Cold War to include human and environmental security (Krause & Williams 1996), with this semantic shift having impact outside of academia, such as in the United Nations Development Programme's report of 1994 (UNDP 1994). The international community began to recognise security as a concept which existed at multiple scales and beyond the nation state and international order, with insecurity manifesting itself in different ways to different people, as well as to the non-human. An arguably more holistic and appropriate view of security emerged, with a legacy extending to the 2022 Special Report on Human Security ('New threats to human security in the Anthropocene: Demanding Greater Solidarity') (UNDP 2022). With the definition of security shifting to include economic and environmental factors in International Relations, it can be argued that *violence* in geography (and beyond) should be redefined to include phenomena produced by these factors too.

For Marxist political economists, violence is an appropriate term because it is produced and legitimated by dominant modes of production. Capitalism functions because of its class structure, which requires the exploitation of labour in order to produce profit for capitalists. Neoliberal capitalism in India, beginning in the 1990s, has involved the state withdrawing financial support for public social welfare programmes and ending the pursuit of economic equality for 'socially marginalized groups as well as of farmers, artisans and the working classes' (Mishra 2020: 183). Rather than the state acting as a mediator between capital and workers, it increasingly used its power to 'facilitate the accumulation projects of domestic and international capital' whilst withdrawing from social support (Mishra 2020: 183). An opinion piece by billionaire businessman Rahul Bajaj subtitled 'Government Should Favour the Strong to Help the Weak' (Times of India 2006) encapsulates India's trickle-down economic vision. 'You make the rich among us really rich, and … when the table gets that loaded, something has to fall off' Sainath mockingly summarises in Nero's Guests (Sainath 2009: 20:50). Political economists like Li (2009), Springer (2011), Tyner and Inwood (2014) and Mishra (2020) argue that neoliberal capitalism is a violent process as the state increasingly takes the side of capital at the expense of other groups. These scholars argue that the market then decides whose lives and livelihoods are valuable, who should be killed off or 'let die' (Li 2009)[15]. Whilst Nixon

[15] Clearly, () biopolitics is a useful category of analysis here, particularly Agamben's concepts of bios (mere life) and zoe (the good life) in articulating the ways that the neoliberal state decides who

himself is not a Marxist, his work has provided inspiration for others using this frame of analysis.

Antonio Gramsci's work is also useful for understanding the social construction of harm in capitalist societies. Gramsci explains the relationship between economic structures and the social construction of concepts, including determining what is *named* violence. Tyner and Inwood revisit Gramsci's work on the relationship between modes of production and the cultural superstructure (Gramsci 1971). Dominant modes of production (in this case neoliberal capitalism) is in a dialectal relationship cultural norms (Tyner and Inwood 2014:777). They influence one another, together creating societal understandings of right and wrong, acceptable or unacceptable socio-economic realities, and thus what constitutes harm and violence. The cultural hegemony of neoliberal capitalism creates a moral economy in its image, making instances of violence commonsense and normal, and not called violence at all. Redefinitions of violence, like security, are essential for calling out deeply harmful and violent processes enabled by political and economic regimes, and critical social scientists can play a role in reshaping mainstream understandings (UNDP 1994, UNDP 2022). In the context of India, subaltern studies scholars have also used Gramsci's work on cultural superstructure to understand the continued role of caste in South Asian society (Chatterjee 1989, 1993, Spivak 1988).

2.3.1.2 Resonances with the Case: The Nominal Dimension

I argue that it is justifiable to call agrarian distress, a product of agricultural commercialisation pursued on top of an already unequal class (and caste) structure, a form of violence. Tyner's work on violence and primitive accumulation sets a precedent for this. 'Primitive accumulation' (Glassman 2006; Harvey 2003; Li 2009; McIntyre 2011) describes the historical process of separating workers from the means of production. This goal is achieved by 'the usurpation of common property, enclosures of 'common' land, and the destruction of domestic, artisanal production' (Tyner and Inwood 2014: 777). In Marathwada it has led to cultural violence (the breaking up of communities), environmental violence (the degradation of land and water resources fundamental for human life), and (for want of a better term) *violent* violence (in the form of farmer suicides).

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is given access to a good quality of life or life itself. The relationship between slow violence and biopolitics may form the basis of a future research project.

Since 2000, thousands of people have been forced to leave their communities in search of new lives as land has been taken up by large landowners and corporations. Furthermore, richer landowners have dug deeper borewells to access water at the expense of others. Debts caused by input focused agriculture have led to thousands of farmers killing themselves as a consequence of these economic changes. If primitive accumulation is violence according to these authors, then it is justifiable that agrarian distress in Marathwada is a form of violence too. To be clear however, in bringing primitive accumulation in pre-industrial Europe into conversation with contemporary India, I am not suggesting that contemporary India is in any way 'pre-modern', nor am I attempting to bring Marathwada into discredited teleological models of economic modernisation (Rostow 1960).

Furthermore, the term violence is not new to agrarian distress in India, with Vandana Shiva's 'The Violence of the Green Revolution', first published in 1989, employing the term (Shiva 2016). Shiva's use of violence is two-fold: firstly, in a direct sense, she argues that the conflict in Punjab in the late 1980s has been misunderstood as a purely communal one, based on religious and political conflict over Punjabi independence. Shiva argues that the 'material scarcity' (Shiva 2016: 13) created by the Green Revolution is also central to this: 'they are not merely conflicts between two religious communities but reflect cultural and social breakdown and tensions between a disillusioned farming community and a centralising state, which controls agricultural policy, finance, credit, inputs and prices of agricultural commodities' (Shiva 2016: 12). Secondly, one might also see the violence of the Green Revolution in the 'ecological… fragmentation and breakdown' (Shiva 2016: 12), and the 'threat to life support systems posed by the destruction of natural resources like forests, land, water and genetic resources' (Shiva 2016:1). While Shiva has set this precedent, it must be stated that her work is a radical interpretation of the GR and a specific one to Punjab, with other scholars offering alternative perspectives on its legacy (Visvanathan & Parmar 2003, Patel 2013, Lerner 2018).

In conclusion, there is precedence for shifting traditional definitions of key concepts within the social sciences, and evidence of its impact beyond academia, for example around the concept of security (UNDP 1994). Political economists have used the term violence to describe the impact of economic policy on certain communities, with the argument being made that failing to describe the harm caused by economic systems violence, then these casualties become legitimised. The concept of primitive accumulation has particular resonances with the impact of agricultural

commercialisation in India, and violence has been employed as a concept by political ecologists like Shiva to describe the impact of the Green Revolution. In Marathwada, many of the features of the Green Revolution happened much later, in the last 30 years, since regulatory changes to the economy and the development of cheap borewell technologies suited to the Deccan Plateau. For these reasons, I argue it is appropriate to use the concept of violence to investigate agrarian distress and farmer suicide in Marathwada in this thesis.

2.3.2.1 Temporal Dimension: 'Delayed Destruction…across Time'

Slow violence can be seen as part of a broader wave of interest in temporality and history in human geography: an interest in researching geographical change across space *and* time. The debates around the Anthropocene, whether humans can be said to have initiated a new geological epoch, is the best example of this trend (Lewis and Maslin 2015). Conceptual frameworks locating anthropogenic environmental destruction at the hands of capitalism (Moore 2015), the impact of Descartes dualism on western philosophy[16] (San Román, Molinero-Gerbeau 2023)[17], racism and colonialism (Hawthorne 2019) and patriarchy (Grusin 2017) are testament to geographers' interest in understanding the role of socio-spatial structures and/or philosophical movements across time.

In Nixon's own work, examples of slow violence include the US's use of chemical weapons in the Gulf and Vietnam Wars, the impact of the oil industry in Nigeria and the Bhopal disaster in India. Each of these are the result of military, economic and/or political negligence over the long durée. When Napalm and Agent Orange still contaminate the bodies of Vietnamese children born this century (Dũng 2023, Dillon 2011:830), the use of slow violence as a concept leads readers to consider whether the violence of the Vietnam War has really ended. When the US chemical manufacturer Union Carbide has exposed 500,000 people to toxic gases in a Mayda Pradesh, with ramifications for people's lives over subsequent decades, he argues that racialised capital should be called (enduringly) violent (Pain & Cahill 2022). Slow violence invites social scientists to ask the basic

[16] Specifically, the dualism/binary that defined man as separate to nature, thus legitimising man's exploitation of nature, a foundational principle of Enlightenment philosophy and modernity more generally (Gillespie, 2008: 40).

[17]

question of 'how did we get here?', to counteract short-sighted and historically misinformed perspectives.

The temporal dimension of slow violence relates to the future as well as the past, with Nixon arguing that solutions to examples of slow violence (like anthropogenic climate change) are consistently deferred. To make this point, Nixon discusses a 2003 Pentagon policy paper on the climate crisis which proposes that rich countries protect themselves from climate refugees by building 'defensive fortresses around their countries… to hold back unwanted starving immigrants' (Schwarz & Randall quoted in Nixon: 2011: 264). The Pentagon believes that 'massive die-offs of poor people from war, starvation and disease would cull the human population, "which over time, will rebalance with carrying capacity"' (Schwarz & Randall 2003:18, quoted in Hendrixson and Hartmann 2019:255). Nixon writes that this is a 'conventional neoliberal response… classic short-termism … a security strategy built on the illusory, foundational assumption that addressing the causes of slow violence can be infinitely deferred' (Nixon, 2011:265). People vulnerable to climate change are left to fend for themselves, or to adapt Li's phraseology, 'left to die' (Li 2009). They are dehumanised and treated as a national security risk. Nixon argues that the neoliberal[18] state chooses not to take steps to prevent the suffering of the poor, postponing action until the rich and capital need protecting. Slow violence not only enables a better analysis of the causes and repetitions of contemporary harm which builds over years, but also the modern (liberal) state's preference for short termism, postponed action, and discrimination in the climate emergency. Slow violence refers therefore not only to the long, drawn out production of harm, but also the perpetuation of harm by the state through inaction.

2.3.2.2 Resonances with the Case: The Temporal Dimension

The temporal dimension of slow violence leads us to think about the long, drawn-out causes of agrarian distress. Linking to Sainath's claim that the causes of agrarian distress can be summarised as 'the drive towards corporate farming' (2009), Patel's work on the Green Revolution – the starting point for capitalist development of the agrarian economy in the postcolonial period - asks us to think historically about the contemporary agrarian

[18] His use of neoliberalism here is as a synonym for contemporary liberal governance arrangements, rather than Friedman's (1962) definition of a politics achieved through an economic system of markets.

economy in Maharashtra. Drawing on both the Annales School, the proponents of which believe in the virtues of studying over the 'long durée' (Braudel 1980), and also the Marxist tradition of basing historical periodisations around cycles of capitalist accumulation (Wallerstein 1974, Arrighi 1994, Hobsbawm 1997, Habib 1999), Patel challenges the idea that the Green Revolution ended in the 1960s and 1970s. While water intensive HYV crops, chemical inputs, productionist approaches, and new machinery were introduced from the US to India under Shastri and Indira Gandhi in the 1960s and 1970s, these practices expanded across the country at different rates and produced consequences that unfolded over many decades. By adopting a historical approach, the Green Revolution can be understood as 'a decades-long complex of discourse, technology, state power, class politics, national and international relations, private investment, cultural intervention, education and ecological change', stretching beyond the 1960s and 1970s (Patel 2013: 2).

A reassessment of the history of agrarian commercialisation is important given repeated calls for a New Green Revolution by politicians, and its discursive and symbolic role in justifying pushes for greater commercialisation and technological innovation (Holt-Gimenez and Altieri 2013). Patel argues that calls for a New Green Revolution suppose firstly that it has been completed, and secondly that it was universally positive, both of which he (and many agronomists and political ecologists) refute (Patel 2013: 1). The dominant perspective is that the Rockefeller Foundation's innovations, implemented by agricultural minister Swaminathan, increased grain production in India, ending famine and making India a self-sufficient nation in terms of food. This process of agricultural modernisation and state building is celebrated in a series of Indian stamps (Deshmukh & Joshi 2020) and in the speeches of Prime Minister Singh and George W Bush in a press conference in 2005 (Rao 2006). Patel's 'Long Green Revolution' seeks to complicate this narrative which is being utilised by politicians in the present. He instead argues that the Green Revolution was not a simple or successful technological fix, but involved 'processes of state reconfiguration, capitalist accumulation, concentration of power, disenfranchisement, agricultural investment and innovation' (Patel 2013: 2), which developed over many decades and often in disturbing ways that continue today.

While there isn't space to fully discuss the Green Revolution's controversial legacy, a few points should be made that show the importance of challenging the wholly positive historical narrative that often prevails in political discourse. Firstly, Pielke and Linnér argue that the Green Revolution narrative of famine aversion is a political myth which

falsely equated the aversion of famine in the 1970s with Norman Borlaug's technologies. They use statistical evidence to show that 'the postwar agricultural production surge was an evolution, not revolution', and 'policy innovations in incentives, finance, infrastructure, support, training and more' played just as big a role (Pielke and Linnér 2019: 287).

Cullather's work allows us to see why this positive narrative became dominant: not only did its alleged success contribute to a nation building narrative, but the programme was a concerted effort to steer India away from communism during the Cold War (hence its name, to differentiate it from 'red' revolutions). The pursuit of agrarian commercialisation via Green Revolution technologies was a political strategy to undermine political agitations for land reform and redistribution in the postcolonial period (Cullather 2020).

Sen's theory of Food Availability Decline (1983) and scholars in the Journal of Peasant Studies argue that the inequality created by the GR reduced purchasing power and thus poverty and food shortages remained (Griffin 1974, Pearse 1980, Lappé et al 1998). The focus on grain production numbers rather than other vital crops, and increasing land productivity rather than improving food distribution or wages for rural people produces a narrow view of the Green Revolution as a success story which distracts from the continuation of rural poverty, further embedded by neoliberal reforms since the 1990s (Iyer 2020). Furthermore, from an environmental perspective, Altieri argues that while agrochemical inputs 'temporarily boosted yields', this also resulted in a number of long term 'undesirable environmental and social costs' (Altieri 2001). This included land losses by small scale farmers over debts and conflict over water access, which especially in the context of Marathwada remain unresolved.

In conclusion, different starting points for agrarian distress can be found: British colonialism (Klein 2008, Upadhyay 2019), the Green Revolution of the 1960s, or as Mishra argues in the case of Marathwada, the borewell revolution and neoliberal reforms of the 1990s (Mishra 2020). The temporal dimension of slow violence enables an historically informed analysis of agrarian distress which can consider the legacy of each of these developments. Nixon's work demonstrates not only the importance of producing historically informed analysis of the production of harm as a matter of accuracy, but also its importance for pushing back against short termist, superficial policy approaches which perpetuate rather than end slow violence.

2.3.3.1 The Spatial Dimension: 'Out of Sight… dispersed across space'

Two points should be made about what I term the spatial dimension of slow violence, firstly that it is 'dispersed across space'. While Rob Nixon is a literary scholar, the spatiality of slow violence makes the term sit comfortably within the domain of geography. The critical and post-structuralist approach to space in geography, known as the 'relational ontologies of space', were a response to the quantitative revolution in geography in the 1960s which believed that space was 'a given, neutral and passive geometry, essentialist and teleological in nature', able to be captured through geological surveys, mapping and GIS (Castree et al 2013:480). Critical geographers have since argued that space is 'relational, contingent, and active… produced and constructed by people through social relations and practice' (Castree et al, 2013: 480-1). Critical geographers believe that space is produced by social relations, and given meaning by people. This idea is rooted in Henri Lefebvre's 'The Production of Space' (1974), and has been developed subsequently by scholars of critical geography and political ecology. That slow violence is 'dispersed across space' invites geographers to critically engage with the socio-spatial relations that produce harmful outcomes. It must be restated that for all Yetiş & Bakırlıoğlu's praise of slow violence capturing the 'everchanging, kaleidoscopical and thus hard-to-recognise instances of violence' (2023: 2), geographers must be attentive to the specific places and processes which produce it, and the underlying social structures which shape them (Tyner and Inwood 2014: 1). That is what this thesis sets out to achieve.

Secondly, and overlapping somewhat with the nominal dimension, I (like Davies 2019) take issue with the 'out of sightedness' of slow violence. That slow violence is not seen because it is spatially diffused and hidden is a provocative statement, given that, for example, the effects of anthropogenic climate change are visible, knowable and a lived experience for millions. Using different language (damage, injustice, or simply change for example), instances of slow violence are reported by news agencies and journalists, acted on by NGOs and charities, and often recognised by governments. Davies (2019) problematised Nixon's definition in a study of the impact of toxic waste in the area known as Cancer Alley in Louisiana; its epithet a testament to the visibility and knowability of violence in a particular geography over many decades. Davies asks instead 'who are they out of sight to?' (2019), and, how and why do governments fail to 'see' these harms, and act accordingly. Davies uses the term epistemic injustice to argue that its not that Cancer Alley is invisible to affected communities, polluting companies or governments by being

spatially diffused, nor that toxic waste can't produce arresting stories of newsworthy attention. Instead, these stories 'do not count' because they come from poor, African-American people who live in this particular space.

The liberal democratic state, which is commonly justified as being meant to enable the protection of citizens, listen to their concerns, and regulate capitalism, instead in this instance according to Davies '[renders] certain populations and geographies vulnerable to sacrifice' (Davies 2019:411). Davies' conclusions move debates on slow violence beyond Nixon's ideas. The question that arises goes beyond who is the slow violence out of sight to, but why, when it does create arresting stories, does this not generate a political mandate? Slow violence, as developed by Davies, thus acts as an entry point for understanding how, in the context of Marathwada, political actors and the institutions of liberal democracy fail to respond to the hardships faced by their citizens. Violence becomes an even more appropriate lexicon to use when the state, rather than being ignorant of an issue, instead actively decides to push ahead with harmful actions, or fails to act in response to them, as this is a concerted choice.

Critical realism offers an explanation of the 'invisible' nature of slow violence. While the *effects* of slow violence are visible and experienced (e.g. farmer suicides, groundwater depletion, rural impoverishment), the structuring forces and causal mechanisms embedded in socio-spatial relations which produce these outcomes often remain less visible or obscured. Bhaskar contends that the world is composed of three ontological domains: the empirical (experiences), the actual (events that occur, whether observed or not), and the real (underlying structures and causal mechanisms) (Bhaskar 1975).

What we observe in the empirical realm—distress, suffering, death—is only the surface expression of deeper systemic logics. These logics are not always immediately observable because understanding them involves working with abstractions, such as *neoliberal governance*, *hydro-political regimes*, or *slow violence*. According to critical realists, these abstractions are not mere social constructs but *real* because they have causal effects: the outcomes are visible, even if the role of these concepts are not always directly perceptible (Archer 1995, Bhaskar 1998). Critical enquiry can make explicit the links between institutions, infrastructures and their effects and social structures and logics that produce and perpetuate slow violence – this is the aim of critical social science (Sayer 2000). Critical enquiry is not only the domain of social scientists however – politicians, policy makers, NGOs, journalists and other civil society actors also employ

abstractions which link the empirical to the actual and real in order create explanations on which to act.

2.3.3.2 Resonances with the Case: The Spatial Dimension, and 'Out of Sight' to Whom?

Agrarian distress is a fundamentally spatial phenomenon. It is tied to the overextraction of groundwater, a subterranean resource diffused in the Deccan Plateau, that has taken place since the 1990s in response to the structural changes in the agrarian economy, with a colonial legacy predating this too (Upadhyay 2019). Groundwater is accessed for approximately 90% of all human water needs in Marathwada (Patil et al 2024). Rainfall infiltrates the ground (known as aquifer recharge). Water is then taken by people from the ground using wells, borewells and tubewells. The *violence* seen in Marathwada is a product of the depletion of a common pool resource which is unequally distributed and extracted across the region by various actors. It is a product of the interaction of hydrogeology, technology, and socio-economic relations. The spatial and material aspects of groundwater, agricultural practices and government interventions are central to understanding agrarian distress and slow violence in Marathwada. As Mishra summarises, agrarian distress is 'the various ways through which uneven development has been the cornerstone of the unfolding dynamics of economic growth in globalizing India' (Mishra 2020: 183), as the transformation of the state from the 1960s to the 1990s and beyond has resulted in a 'massive restructuring of *space relations*, producing geographical unevenness at multiple scales' (Das 2015: 719).

Relating to both physical distance and 'invisibility', Marathwada's small scale farmers are typically located in small, 'remote' villages hundreds of kilometres away from the political and financial centre of the state in Mumbai. The problem therefore exists 'elsewhere', out of sight and mind for powerful decision makers. There are three instances which capture this spatial dynamic in Bhatia and Sainath's Nero's Guests (2009). Firstly, the film makers cut from farmers' meetings and interviews with bereaved families in Vidarbha[19] to ultra rich Mumbai residents organising parties to raise money for rural charities. A party attendee says:

[19] Vidarbha is a semi-arid region which neighbours Marathwada to its north. It is a cotton producing region which shares many of the characteristics of Marathwada, including high levels of poverty and farmer suicide.

> "Mostly, we need to see the 'have nots' as key to our survival, we can't see them as different creatures from another world. They are the fresh laundry we have in the house every day, they are the fresh cut flowers in our bowl, they're the fact I have nicely blown dry hair once in a while, they're our manicures and pedicures, we need them, they are our freshly cooked food on the table" (Sainath 2009: 21:40)

Her response is both patronising and infused with caste, class and place-based discrimination, showing an awareness of the suffering of people in her state but only caring in terms of what they can provide for her.

Secondly, Sainath talks about the Lakme Fashion Week in Mumbai, 2006. That year's event was themed around cotton. One hour's flight away in Vidarbha the men and women who were growing that cotton were taking their lives at a rate of 6-8 each day. There were 512 accredited correspondents covering the fashion event – but at the time of filming, he says there was not a single dedicated poverty correspondent on TV in the whole of India.

A final example of the relationship between urban and rural is the hierarchy of electricity supply (Sainath 2009: 23:00). If there is an outage on the Maharashtra grid, the first to be protected are the wealthy areas of Mumbai including the multiplex cinemas and shopping malls, then the broader city, then the cities of Pune and Nashik, and lastly poor rural communities who consume the least power and rely on electricity to irrigate their crops and access drinking water. By cutting between these social extremes, Sainath and Bhatia show the ways that physical distance enables beneficiaries of exploitation to live without knowing suffering which enables their existence. Space acts as protection, distance and hierarchy.

Sainath's film shows that the agrarian crisis in India is not a new or untold story, but it is pushed to the fringes, forgotten and ignored. The problem is that these stories are not seen as valid, because the mistreatment of the poor, of lower caste people in rural areas, is normalised. This example mirrors two parts of the 'out of sightedness' that Nixon recognises – both physical remoteness, and 'from the way the dominant media frames issues' (2011: 16). As Davies summarises 'slow violence persists because those 'arresting stories' do not count and are not acted upon' (Davies 2019:441). Space helps to create a politics of indifference about the suffering of socially and geographically "marginalized" groups.

2.4 Relevance to Data Chapters

Slow violence is explored in chapter 4 by analysing the media coverage of the 2012-3 drought in Maharashtra. This is relevant because of the supposed difficulty in communicating instances of slow violence. As this chapter has demonstrated, slow violence invites us to question how everyday forms of violence are represented and communicated, given that they may be 'out of sight', spatially diffused and involve long term processes rather than supposedly newsworthy events. Sainath's remarks about the lack of the mainstream media coverage of agrarian distress in India also points to the importance of understanding the communication of the issue of drought and rural poverty. In this chapter the media is conceptualised as part of the public sphere, a core element of liberal governance, 'a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them' (Hauser 1999: 61). The public sphere (in its ideal form) allows the free flow of information, informs political debate, and holds institutions accountable for their actions. The free transfer of ideas and information is a major component of what is deemed to make liberal democratic governance superior to other political systems. Political ecologists see agrarian distress as a human-made problem linked to the emergence of a new political economy since the 1990s (Mishra 2020, Mehta 2003). Analysing media reporting on drought can see whether the slow violence resulting from this transition is recognised by mainstream commentators as being part of this historical context, whose perspectives are reported on, and whether political decision makers are made aware of these issues. We can understand if agrarian distress is really 'hidden' or hard to communicate, in order to understand the relationship between knowledge of an issue, and political/policy action. The nominal, temporal and spatial dimensions of slow violence are all implicated here.

Chapter 5 responds to Cahill and Pain's call in the 2022 Special Issue in 'EPC: Politics and Space on slow violence', which argues that research into instances of slow violence should 'prioritise the accounts of those who experience and are most affected by [it]' (2022: 361), to prevent it being hidden. Interviews were conducted with farmers in three villages in Hingoli District. Respondents were asked about the changes to farming practices and the returns on their products over the last fifteen years. This relates to the spatial and temporal aspects of slow violence: the reshaping of space through intensive commercial production and the changes to their farming practices and finances over

time. The farmers are finally asked about the future, and whether they think that political leadership in state can respond to their concerns. This final section relates to the relationship between slow violence and its perpetuation/resolution through the liberal democratic state.

Chapter 6 analyses the Marathwada Water Grid, a proposed solution to agrarian distress and drought in Marathwada. The relationship to slow violence is the idea that solutions are 'infinitely deferred', relating to the temporal aspect, and according to Nixon policies are developed by the state which protect and promote capital rather than prioritising the needs of harmed communities. The Marathwada Water Grid is a megaproject which is the latest project (cl)aiming to end drought in the region. The chapter uses interview data with water experts in Marathwada to argue that the MWG is an example of a technical fix, that makes the problem of water scarcity amenable to technological solutions, rather than tackling the social relations and economic model that underpins water scarcity. Related to the production of slow violence, the argument is made that liberal democratic governance doesn't have the kind of self-correcting mechanisms needed to develop successful and just policies. The MWG provides a vivid example of Nixon's slow violence in action, with state policies that perpetuate environmental and social harm through superficial, technocratic solutions, neglecting the underlying causes of the crisis and disproportionately affecting marginalised communities. The MWG is an example of how slow violence operates within liberal democratic states, where long-term environmental harm is institutionalized and often invisible, masked by the rhetoric of progress and modernization (Flyvbjerg 2004).

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to establish slow violence as a framework for understanding agrarian distress in Marathwada. It argues that the agrarian crisis has unfolded gradually, across time and space, and that slow violence is a useful and appropriate analytical tool. While slow violence is connected to the traditions of environmental justice, I argue that Nixon's term, developed by subsequent scholars, offers different questions for researchers. This is particularly in relation to the relationship between knowledge and communication of an issue, and political responses to it. I have reformulated Nixon's idea into three aspects, and brought in literature from social theory and research on the case study to argue that slow violence is a useful and novel starting point for understanding the

phenomenon of agrarian distress in Marathwada. The chapter breaks down Nixon's definition into three dimensions –nominal, temporal and spatial – and has shown the resonances of these ideas with the development of rural poverty. The chapter takes issue with Nixon's idea that slow violence is necessarily difficult to communicate, instead agreeing with Davies' idea that rather than being 'out of sight', social capital and power relations dictate whose narratives count in policy debates.

As this thesis proceeds, it will investigate how this slow violence is produced and sustained by the institutions of liberal democratic governance. I have identified that existing studies of slow violence tend to focus on the role of economics, and instead I pivot to focus on the role of the liberal democratic state (in its ideal form a vehicle for social justice) in three aspects — the public sphere (through media analysis), experiences of agricultural commercialisation and government programmes, and a future policy proposal. It is argued that agrarian distress might be seen as a *form* of slow violence, produced, enabled and sustained by unresponsive governments, and represents a failure of liberal democratic governance. This claim is investigated in three empirical chapters which follow the methodology chapter.

3. Decoloniality and Distance as Methodological Issues in Political Ecology

"'We're scared to meet guys like you…' said one farmer as the interview concluded, 'Please tell us about your scheme and how you're conducting it?'. RA explained that the 'scheme' was 'being conducted by a researcher from England', and their responses and this study would 'only help highlight issues'. 'People fraud us in the name of studies; they take money and disappear… people fall into traps and get looted'. 'Help us Sir, if you want something from us, please tell your company to assist us'."

Respondent: What are you doing? Will you help us? Please don't give false promises.

Interactions between an RA and Interview Participants in Hingoli District, 2023-4

3.1 Introduction

This chapter details my own experience navigating decolonial debates as a European researching agrarian distress in India from a British university. It is a reflection on methodological debates, rather than detailing the particular research methods employed in my data collection. My intention to undertake fieldwork in India, hosted by an Indian NGO, was thwarted by a combination of factors including difficulties securing a research visa. When faced with the reality of undertaking research remotely, the questions surrounding colonialism in academic research were magnified by my absence from the field site. This led me to spend considerable time and effort reflecting on what a decolonial approach could mean in relation to research concerning India, conducted remotely from the UK. The result is this chapter dedicated to a reflexive exploration of decoloniality and methods in remote research. I situate myself within these debates and address my positionality and the completion of data collection in collaboration with a research assistant. It is inspired by colleagues who have had similar thoughts about the value, ethics and impact of their work (Howell 2020). It is my attempt at decolonial reflexivity, a process which invites scholars to examine 'the inadequacies, limitations, and contradictions' in their own efforts at decolonisation (Moosavi 2023: 138). It explains the

steps I have taken to prevent this research 'inadvertently [perpetuating] coloniality rather than [dismantling] it' (Moosavi 2023: 138). It is divided into two parts.

In the first section I position myself in debates on decoloniality. I introduce postcolonial thought, arguing that it developed in three waves: during the anti-colonial struggles of the mid twentieth century (Du Bois 1945, Fanon 1952); during an academic poststructuralist second wave (Said 1978); and in recent decolonial approaches (Connell 2007, Bozalek 2011, Go 2016, Moosavi 2023). I shows how writers linked the political system and ideology of colonialism to the practices and epistemologies of academic research. I argue that northern/western institutions' research remains dominant, shown by the disparity in the wealth and prestige of universities in the global north and south (Connell 2017), the automatic application of western political and social theory to non-European geographies (Go 2016: 15) and the amnesia towards race and empire in many social science disciplines (Krishna 2001). In spite of this, I argue the solutions offered by scholars such as Connell and Go reinforce an unhelpful binary between the geographies and academic writings of the global north and south, misrepresent social theory as a vanguard for colonialism, and also undervalue the contributions of critical social science in exposing inequality. I show that 'western' social theory is varied, and can assist in the production of explanatory and emancipatory research in an interconnected world.

In the second half of the chapter, I reflect on the ethical questions raised and methodological opportunities created in my research design, inspired by Moosavi (2023). I show how I have taken inspiration from Participatory Action Research and critical realism. I then present a short biography to be transparent about my background, funding, and positionality before arguing that remote working and co-production (given the political climate in India) arguably and inadvertently facilitated a more 'decolonial' approach. I then explain the benefits and limitations of working with a research assistant employed to conduct interviews in the district of Hingoli. This data is analysed and presented in chapter 5. Working with an assistant from the case site centred new voices from communities affected by agrarian distress in academic literature, which according to Pain and Cahill (2022:361) should be the ultimate aim of research into slow violence[20].

[20] As substantiated later, conversations with water management charities in Marathwada suggest that very little research has been completed in Hingoli District on this topic.

3.2 Social Theory as Imperialism? Postcolonial Critiques of the Western Academy

Decolonial scholars argue that social science and social theory are characterised by 'an ethnocentrism that has privileged the questions, experiences, and knowledges of Western scholars and societies at the expense of their non-Western equivalents' (Moosavi 2023:1). Critiques of the Eurocentrism and 'coloniality' of social theory are rooted in the ideas of anti-colonial and anti-racist political leaders and thinkers. The Pan-Africanist leader of the negritude movement Aimé Césaire published Discourse on Colonialism in 1950, the first text of the '"tidalwave" of postcolonial literature' of the post-war period (Kelley 2000:8)[21]. Césaire's text explores the essentialisation and dehumanisation of non-European people under European imperialism, which played a significant part in developing and implementing the barbarism of the so-called civilising mission. Importantly, it explores how Europe was created through its relationship with its colonies: Césaire writes that 'Europe is literally the creation of the third world' (Césaire 1950), its identity, culture and wealth formed in relation to (and through the exploitation of) an essentialised and exploited majority world. Cesaire's contemporaries, and later Said (1978) in the poststructuralist second wave (which pulled apart imperialist ideology), criticise of the ontological dualism of Cartesian philosophy which pitted 'man' against nature, the west against the east, and the 'civilised' against the 'barbarian'[22]. Enlightenment philosophy has long been linked to the birth of European colonialism, and for Said, the Enlightenment's project to control nature is colonialism writ large: a school of thought which gave impetus to the domination and exploitation of people, places and environments through the nation state and capital (Said 1978: 115).

Critiques of the relational aspects of colonialism predate the collapse of European imperialism in the mid twentieth century. This is the case in India. Gandhi's Hind Swaraj ('Home Rule') discusses the corrupting influence of western industrialisation, consumption and representative democracy on Indian society (Gandhi 1910), while Nehru's The Discovery of India (1946) articulated an Indian history and culture separate

[21] WE.B. Du Bois's Color and Democracy (1945) and The World and Africa (1947), Frantz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks (1952), George Padmore's Pan-Africanism or Communism?: The Coming Struggle for Africa (1956), Albert Memmi's The Colonizer and the Colonized (1957), Richard Wright's White Man Listen! (1957), Jean-Paul Sartre's essay, "Black Orpheus" (1948) all contributed to this post-war discourse.

[22] Here the convergent philosophical ideas within post-colonial thought (Said 1978) and political ecology (Plumwood 1995, Kureethadam 2017) become apparent.

from the European political worldview. Furthermore, Savarkar's Hindutva: Who is a Hindu? (1969)[24] offered an alternative, darker, vision of an ethnic Indian nationalism contrasted against the (nominally) secular, universal democracies of Europe. Postcolonial scholarship, rooted in anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century, is a broad and important coalition of texts critiquing the imperial worldview and the dialectic relationship between Europe and its former colonies. The next section explores the legacy of these texts in the decolonial movement in academia.

3.3 Decolonising Academia

Beyond postcolonialism, conceptually and chronologically, is decolonialism. If postcolonialism critiqued colonial practices 'out there' in political systems and culture, decolonialism set out to overturn and reimagine these relationships in the academy. The global movement for decolonialising higher education was accelerated by the Rhodes Must Fall campaign at the University of Cape Town in 2015 (Chaudhuri 2016). This campaign by students in South Africa criticised the legacy of the British colonialist Cecil Rhodes, whose name continued to sponsor scholarships at the institution, and raised broader questions about the legacy of European imperialism in academia. Decolonial activists and scholars questioned the role that the colonial episteme played in higher education's syllabus, and whether researchers intentionally or otherwise continued to exploit, exclude or marginalise people in the majority world. Decolonialism's mission was to provincialise and destabilise the western episteme (Chakrabarty 2000), broaden the coalition of voices in the academic canon and to end predatory or 'extractivist' research practices that failed to uplift marginalised, racialised people.

In looking for texts to understand the relationship between colonialism and social theory, I was drawn to Connell's Southern Theory (2007) and Julian Go's Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory (2017). Connell's text was introduced to me while writing a paper on Theorising Back in Asian Geographies for the 2022 RGS-IBG conference, and it paints a stark picture of the 'pervasive power' of the western episteme (Connell 2017), the lens through which academics conduct their research. Connell argues that the global inequalities in higher education go beyond funding opportunities and prestige, and she calls out the division of labour where the global north uses the south as a laboratory for its

[24] Originally 1922

scientific experiments and observations. Her argument follows that knowledge from the south is not seen as valuable in and of itself, but only once analysed using the 'metrocentric episteme' which creates *real* expertise, whether in the form of books and research papers, or policies and technologies.

In response, Connell argued that the lens of northern theorists should be eschewed completely and theory should be rebuilt from the voices and perspectives of those situated in the global south. Barker and Pickerell argue in the context of geographical research, 'doing' geography differently would decentre academics as the source of knowledge production, employ more diverse voices in our teaching and provide embodied and material resistance to colonialism and neoliberal capitalism' (Barker and Pickerell 2020: 641). I agree that diversifying the places without diversifying the knowledges and inputs in knowledge creation is a false solution to the real issues that have been raised about the parochialism of western social theory and its colonial origins. In calling for a distinct, separate canon of social theory from the global south that rejects the lineage of western social theory and methods, Connell's book offers a compelling argument for how new decolonial knowledge and theory can be developed. I wholeheartedly agree with Barker and Pickerell's view on what decolonial geographical research should mean, with a focus on giving voice to marginalised communities and concurrently providing resistance to exploitation in the places social scientists study.

Turning to Julian Go's work, I came across Postcolonial Thought and Sociology (Go 2016) via Moosavi (2023). Go's call for a 'postcolonial sociology' builds on Connell and the acclaimed writer Gurminder K. Bhambra (2007, 2016, 2018). Given its date of publication, it offers a more contemporary view on decolonialism in social research than mid-century postcolonial thinkers. In his introduction, Go argues that postcolonial theory was born out of the global south and in opposition to European colonialism, while social theory was a European tradition tied to elite and coercive forms of governance: 'if social theory was born from and for empire, postcolonial thought was born against it' (2016:1). Examples to demonstrate this are August Comte's work, the father of sociology, who 'armed' elite technical experts with knowledge to 'help manage and control society' (Go, 2016:2). Go cites Calhoun's research on early sociology which aimed to 'make sense of and manage threats to the social order from below' in the aftermath of the French Revolution (2007:4-5). This is in spite of Comte's first use of the term coming half a century after the overthrow of the Ancien Regime in Paris in 1789.He also cites the racist, pro-slavery The Sociology of the South, or the Failure of Free Society (Fitzhugh 1854) which was one of the

first sociological texts in the US, to make this argument. While not claiming that current social science is the same as in the era of high imperialism, Go argues sociology remains tied to the 'imperial episteme' postcolonial thinkers critiqued and, like Connell, has a 'pervasive power we have underestimated' in contemporary social research (Go 2016: 5).

I feel it is worth adding here that, while concerning very different forms of knowledge to sociology, the division of labour in agricultural policy, and specifically the Green Revolution, resonate with Connell and Go's arguments about the metrocentric episteme. Cullather describes the technology transfer of the Green Revolution from the global north to the south as part of the United States' 'Development-Security Complex' during the Cold War (2010, 2014). The Rockefeller Institute, backed by the US government, used Mexico as an experiment site for genetically modified crops and capitalist-productionist policies which were then exported to India under Shastri and Indira Gandhi's premierships. This shows that agricultural policy and social theory have potentially problematic epistemological histories. This thesis, dealing with both subjects, must also counteract these dynamics which can perpetuate the subjugation of the majority world to western researchers who purport to produce superior knowledge and expertise.

3.4 The Limitations of Decolonialising Social Theory

Whilst I agree with the overriding analysis about the power-imbalances in global academia, the continued division of labour in research[26], and Barker and Pickerell's arguments for centring marginalised voices who are experiencing exploitation, I disagree with Go and Connell's history of social theory and see alternative steps forward in decoloniality. These texts are iconoclastic and provocative– and so they ought to be. The need for soul-searching in social research is essential and we need to think deeply and critically about the knowledge we produce. However, I argue that these arguments rely on oversimplification. That social theory is tied to colonialism seems reductionist if we see postcolonial thought and critical theory as an intrinsic part of social thought. Furthermore, the categories of 'northern' and 'southern' theory, as well as 'indigenous knowledges', break down once we begin to embark on empirical research, including in India. The

[26] Including political ecology – which at its core began life and continues to be a discourse produced in the global north about the global south (Blaikie 2010: 231)

pursuit of 'indigenous knowledge' becomes difficult, perhaps problematic, if we acknowledge the variety of social theory and the interconnectedness of the social world.

Firstly, dealing with Go, I would agree with concerns raised by his colleagues at Brown University during a discussion of his book (Brown University 2017) who argued that tying of social theory to the history of European colonialism is reductionist and selective. A range of critical, anti-imperial, anti-colonial social theory has been omitted. Marx's Communist Manifesto spent time looking at the relationship between Britain and its colonies, specifically in India, Ireland and south-east Asia. Young discusses Marx's 'Wakefield's A View of the Art of Colonization (1849)', in which Marx himself said he 'discovered not something new about the colonies, but, in the colonies, the truth about capitalist relations in the mother country' (Marx 1976–81,1: 931–2). Marx understood that overthrowing capitalism required the overthrow of colonialism and slavery. Other texts of Marxian political economy like Lenin's 'Imperialism: The Highest Form of Capitalism' (1939, originally published 1917) and Wallerstein's 'World System's Theory' (1974) demonstrate that the majority world were locked into a system of economic exploitation. The Frankfurt School and Gramsci (1971) did this too, as have a litany of others who have come after and been influenced by them. This extends beyond this traditional conceptualisation of critical theory explicitly tied to Marx, to the critical theory of feminism, queer studies and beyond.

Secondly Go's interchangeable use of the terms social theory and sociology in his texts do not stand up. His book starts with a 'lamentation on the parochialism' of specifically US sociology and the tendency of 'many sociologists in North America [who] continue to be recalcitrant to postcolonial theory' (Go 2016:15). He applauds the 'seminal attempts in the UK and Europe' to incorporate postcolonialism into his narrow view of social theory (Kemple and Mawani 2009, Steinmetz 2013, Bhambra 2007, Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Boatcâ, and Costa 2010, Connell 2007). Clearly this work is already being done, even just within sociology – with other disciplines including political ecology and economy being excluded. The 'promising signs' he discusses are, on the evidence of the scholars which he cites, already far more than that.

His history of social theory raises questions about what delineates an academic or activist from being a postcolonial thinker and not a social theorist. The scholars of the postwar 'tidalwave of 'postcolonial thought' are evidently not considered social theorists by Go. WEB Du Bois, the pan-Africanist and civil rights campaigner who was a Professor of

Sociology at Atlanta University - is described by Go as an exception to the rule. Perhaps the racist sociology departments of the early and mid-twentieth century would have denied other scholars access to the title. That does not mean that we should continue to other and exclude them from what has – as a consequence of their work – become a far more progressive, critical and reflexive academic tradition, with a large critical theory contingent who can quite easily, proudly and concurrently be social theorists and post-colonialists. As someone who has studied history, politics, international relations, and now political ecology and geography – the latter themselves interdisciplinary subjects – I find Go's interchangeable use of social theory and sociology unsatisfactory. Social theory is not just sociology, and definitely not just US sociology. Heterogeneity and anti-coloniality are found across social science disciplines. Moosavi summarises Go's Postcolonial Sociology as a call to ensure researchers navigating social theory '[consult] all of the maps, or scholarship, that exist, rather than only subscribe to a narrow pantheon, and to recognise the potential universality and the particularity of each contribution' (Moosavi 2023: 143). I would argue that Go's call for a postcolonial sociology is completely valid, but in my own experience, postcolonial, anticolonial and subaltern standpoints already exist in social theory if we look beyond his framing.

3.5 Critiquing Southern Theory and the Pursuit of Indigenous Knowledge

Returning to Connell, while I have sympathy with her arguments about the knowledge economy and the division of labour in research, the solution to pursue 'indigenous knowledge' is potentially problematic. Since Connell's text, the term 'indigenous knowledge' has become pervasive in sections of social science including political ecology (Middleton 2015). It's aim is to rightly decentre 'western' experiences and knowledges. However, that there is some kind of knowledge, away from the influence of the rest of the world that is untouched, and separable from other forms of knowledge – from the institutions of the state, from the influence of modern economics, politics or geography - is both impossible and ahistorical. Connell's mission chimes with other developments in political ecology which call for 'small is beautiful' ideas that equate 'indigenous' knowledges with sustainability and social good (Nussbaum 1995). Connell's solution has its merits, as it provides a template for radical 'epistemological challenges that attempt to repair the damage and impact historically caused by capitalism in its colonial relationship to the world' (Santos & Meneses 2009:12). Connell's approach however undervalues the

importance of social theories that link these 'indigenous' perspectives with broader social and political realities which can undermine colonial and exploitative practices in the places geographers study. Of course, knowledge is context specific, and as Barker and Pickerell and Middleton argue we should give considerable time and space to affected communities to challenge elite and hegemonic understandings of exclusionary and destructive social processes. I find it uncomfortable however to consider the small-scale farmers in Maharashtra 'indigenous' as if they are separate to the social and political structures in which their lives are embedded. I argue that decolonial researchers searching for 'indigenous knowledges' fetishise participants and renew a process of 'othering' while trying to achieve epistemological justice.

Whilst not agreeing with all the opinions of these writers, the work of Okin (1995) and Bozalek (2011) also highlight the limitations of this approach[27]. Goebel completed research on resettlement communities in Zimbabwe in the 1990s, and the ways that Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques – which searched for 'indigenous knowledges' – produced misleading, essentialist and oversimplified results. As development agencies began to understand that the success of policies and technologies were contingent on social relations, they searched for what they termed indigenous or traditional knowledges to fit into their policy models. Aside from the fact that social relations were cynically captured to placate or be instrumentally used by organisations in the implementation of their policies, the gender and religious dynamics they captured did not belong to an 'enclosed and static lifeworld' divorced from 'the west'. Goebel finds that disentangling the impact over many centuries of Christianity, other forms of spirituality, British colonialism, Mugabeism and local customs was a fool's errand (Goebel 1999).

Beyond indigenous knowledge being a misnomer, the idea of focusing only on the testaments of so-called situated people (i.e. building theory up exclusively from 'indigenous knowledge' and lived experience)[28] is unlikely to produce new knowledge that can, alone, contribute to debates for environmental justice. Okin, described by Bozalek as having a 'provocative' position (given other positions in decolonial debates like Connell's standpoint approach), contests the idea that 'only those residing in oppressive material and cultural circumstances are suitable candidates to critique their own situations' (Okin 1995:15). Okin takes issue with the idea that subaltern people have a 'wide-angled'

[27] I came into contact with these authors work from the Decolonising Methodologies reading list on the Lancaster University website (Lancaster University 2024)

perspective as is claimed in some of the writings on decolonising methodologies and is implicit in others (Denzin & Lincoln 2008; Graham 2002; Kovach 2009). This wide angled perspective is analogous to feminist and Marxist ideas that women or the working class have a double consciousness – one rationalised/depoliticised experience of their day to day reality, and one of their position within patriarchal and class structures which they can articulate and politically mobilise around (Harding 1987; Hartsock 1999; Hekman 1983). Okin also argues that the focus on the distinct cultural differences between people and places is symptomatic of a slide towards relativism that weakens the discourse of shared ideas of justice (Okin 1995: 274). While it may be possible that one's marginalised status gives one a more encompassing view of the world, this is not always or necessarily the case. Moreover, identity and experience in and of themselves do not necessarily lead to a particular consciousness, a particular political position, or to an unmasking of power relations.

India's politics and economy, and the work of those who study it, show the entanglement of different knowledges that undermine the idea of indigeneity. India is a capitalist economy entangled in the global economy and a democratic republic with a constitution that took inspiration from the US and France; the west or north does not have a monopoly on democracy or capitalism, nor should theories which explain these systems published from non-Indian scholars be excluded from research. Gandhi's Hind Swaraj (1997, originally 1909) critiqued western democracy and consumption in the form of a Socratic dialogue between the 'Reader' and 'Editor', indicating the interaction between supposedly 'Eastern' and 'Western' knowledges, while India's first Prime Minister was a Fabian educated at Cambridge (Kumar 2024) and Hindu nationalist ideologue Savarkar was influenced by Italian fascism (Casolari 2000).

Critical social scientists working on India further demonstrate this entanglement of 'north' and 'south', and cast doubt on their practical use as concepts. The subaltern school looked at class and caste relations as they played out during the capitalist development of India in the colonial and post-colonial era. To complete this task, they look to Marx to explain economic development and exploitation in South Asia (Spivak 1988, Chatterjee 1993). Contemporary feminist agricultural movements such as Vikalp Sangam (2025) draw on Gandhi as well as international feminist literatures. Nikhil Anand's Hydraulic Citizenship (2017) uses Foucault's biopolitics to discuss water management in Mumbai and explain the realities of water politics in the city. Veena Das (1995) talks about how the liberal democratic language of justice is used in the wake of the Bhopal disaster to

placate mourners and give itself legitimacy without actually taking action. With these few examples, I hope I have shown some of the inherent contradictions and oversimplifications in the ideas of decoloniality and indigeneity when approaching social science research in India.

3.6 A Warning on the Use and Abuse of 'Decolonialism'

As discussed, decolonisation has become a major area of debate within the political left of academia, with scholars seeking to push academic concepts and methods in more progressive, appropriate, and universal directions. The central critique is that European intellectual traditions have too often been treated as universally applicable frameworks, and that researchers must therefore be cautious about analysing social and political structures through concepts that may be historically and culturally alien to the contexts they study.

However, in both fascinating and troubling ways, the language of decolonisation has also been appropriated by the far right as a means of shutting down debate among both Indian and international scholars and organisations. Criticism of the Indian government is frequently labelled 'anti-Indian' with the government itself conflated with India as a political entity. This framing suggests that India's sovereignty is under attack by hostile external and internal forces. Such tropes — centred on "enemies within" and 'enemies outside' — bear clear parallels with coercive, fascistic, and authoritarian political traditions, both historically and in the contemporary world. Under the guise of resisting a supposed reassertion of British colonialism, parties such as the BJP, the Shiv Sena, and other right-wing forces have deployed decolonial rhetoric in ways that serve explicitly nationalist agendas.

Scholars have increasingly examined the ways in which decolonial discourse has been appropriated by the Hindutva right, and the challenges this creates for international researchers, particularly those unfamiliar with its political uses within India. Annapurna Menon, for example, highlights the emphasis on "indigeneity" within Hindutva interpretations of decolonisation — a return to an imagined purity and simplified historical narrative grounded in Hindu nationalist, and often anti-Muslim, ideas associated with figures such as Savarkar. Menon argues that, without attention to these authoritarian appropriations, "international researchers (without paying attention to domestic violence) might give legitimacy to the Hindutva right" (Menon 2022: 38). She further notes that much decolonial scholarship is produced in English and translated for audiences that often

include English-speaking upper-caste Indians, diasporic communities closely associated with Hindutva lobbying networks, and Western academic audiences who may unintentionally legitimise violent domestic political projects through uncritical applications of decolonial frameworks.

Writing for *Debating Development Research*, Wilson, Chandra, and Narayanaswamy (2023) argue that 'we have a responsibility to engage with the politics of how notions of decoloniality are used'. Returning to the original aspirations of decolonial approaches — anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and oriented towards social justice — they contend that Western and Northern scholars must remain attentive to the political misuse of the term. They also criticise what they describe as 'paternalistic valorisations of authenticity' including romanticised invocations of indigenous knowledge associated with scholars such as Connell. In attempting to disentangle the legacies of colonial power, scholars must also confront the ways in which decolonial language itself can be appropriated by new authoritarian and exclusionary political forces.

3.7 PAR, Critical Realism and Decolonial Methods

Having engaged with the debates around decolonising social theory the chapter now discusses how I went about producing ethical research remotely from the UK. Agreeing with the ethos and rationale for decolonising but not necessarily the limitations of social theory or the pursuit of indigenous knowledge, I now move to discuss my research approach. This research aims to meet the expectations of decolonial research which seeks to undermine exploitative practices and centre marginalised voices. While lots of effort has been taken to conceptualise decolonial theory, Morreira et al argue that 'there is a gap between high-level decolonial theory and its practices of implementation' (2020:2). Indeed, the NGO Systemic Justice argues that extractive research, characterised by 'the funding, commissioning, conducting, production, and dissemination of research or knowledge that fails to uplift, represent, or reflect the experiences of racially, socially, and economically marginalised communities' remains a considerable problem (Systemic Justice 2024), even when (cl)aiming to do otherwise. Mason and Williams argue that universities '[valorise] community engagement scholarship' while concurrently undermining the ability of projects to realise their potential; show signs of disproportionate benefits for academic's careers vis-a-vis communities; and lead to the

depoliticisation of radical political/campaign groups as a precondition for academic collaboration (Mason and Williams 2022). This research attempts to avoid these pitfalls.

Different approaches have been consulted in order to understand how to create decolonial research; I came across Participatory Learning and Action (PAR) from Bozalek's 2011 article listed by Decolonising Lancaster (2024) on its 'Decolonising Methodologies' website. PAR was begun by academics and activists in the global south in the 1970s. It involves a 'growing family of approaches, methods, attitudes and behaviours to enable people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, and to plan, act and monitor, evaluate and reflect' (Chambers 2006:3). PAR asks academics to build research around the insights of social activists, scholars and experiences of the research participants rather than exclusively academic debate (Bozalek 2011:471). It emphasises that social investigation, education and the improvement of the lives of participants should be the researcher's goals (Yeich & Levine 1992).

PAR argues research should begin with a critique of dominant ideologies and discourses (Bozalek 2011: 471), which chimes with political ecology's aim to destabilise dominant understandings of nature-human relations. It argues that challenging dominant ideologies is necessary to undermine not only the perspective of privileged actors but also to overturn 'internalised discursive practices that naturalise the positions of marginalised people – including within their own communities' (Bozalek 2011: 471). The prevalence of such internalised discourses is discussed by Sen, who uses the term 'small mercies' to describe instances where minor assistance or relief is received with disproportionate levels of gratitude by marginalised communities due to the internalisation of their social status (Sen 1995)[29].

Other important aspects of PAR include redressing the boundary between subject and object/participant in the creation of new knowledge. This includes challenging the outdated idea that the former can objectively capture the latter. This resonates with my critical realist (CR) approach which recognises that both researchers and participants are co-constitutive in the creation of new knowledge (Healy 2000, Kemmis & McTaggart 2005, Vodde & Gallant 2002). While critical realism is a school of thought derived from European social science, it relates to idea of case studies being hybrid - retroduction, the dominant

[29] While important, this element of PAR does sound slightly paternalistic if not patronising. As my data collection indicates, my participants were very aware of the injustices they were facing and their right to better lives.

mode of thinking in critical realism, is the process of producing new knowledge from the interaction of the researcher with empirical data and social theory. Indeed this project began through a personal interest in the state's role in environmental governance. This interest led me to the case of groundwater depletion and agrarian distress in Maharashtra having attended seminars with the Transformation to Groundwater Resources research group. Findings have been generated from the interaction of these interests and training, from empirical data and social theory through retroduction. This has enabled the experiences of farmers to be placed into a wider context and understanding, and linked it to the larger political trends and conversations relating to the development of policy in contemporary India.

Rather than a solely phenomenological approach centred on communities' experiences, retroduction enables a greater understanding of the dynamics which have led to the current crises in Marathwada. The consequence is a more impactful critical interrogation and more valuable assessment of the case study, which leads to research that is stronger in its ability to affect change– the ultimate goal of truly decolonial research. Having introduced the PAR and retroduction, I now provide background to the project including relevant parts of my positionality, before explaining how data was collected in collaboration with a research assistant.

3.8 Biography and Project Background

I believe that producing anti-colonial research comes from being transparent about a project's background so that the personal, intellectual and institutional factors that have influenced a project are visible. This thesis was funded by the Faculty of Science and Technology at Lancaster University in the United Kingdom. I am a white, British, state educated, queer, male researcher from the north-east of England. This PhD opportunity was advertised on the mailing list of the Sheffield Institute for International Development, events of which I attended while completing an MA in International Relations at the University of Sheffield. Applicants put together a proposal for research on community management of natural resources in the global south that would sit in the discipline of political ecology. Water or forest management were suggested as possible case studies. Having met with the project's lead supervisor, I devised a project that responded to my own interests, academic background, and would align with the expertise and networks of my supervisors.

I had been studying Indian politics since 2016 during my bachelors in History the University of Cambridge. I completed a module on the Bandung Conference in my second year and subsequently wrote coursework on India's role in the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War. In my final year I completed a module titled 'Indian democracy 1947-2007' with Professor Shruti Kapila, after which I wrote coursework on Nehru's role in India's constitutional debates in the 1940s. During my MA I became acquainted with social theory and focused on environmental politics, particularly the politics of climate change. Environmentalism and sustainability had been an interest of mine since I was young[30]. I wrote my MA thesis on the ways in which the concept of energy security could drive progressive climate policies and researched solar and hydropower projects in India and Bhutan. My PhD supervisor is part of the Transformations to Groundwater Sustainability (T2GS) research group, which included researchers at the Advanced Centre for Water Management (ACWADAM) in Pune, Maharashtra. Seminars with T2GS and ACWADAM, attendance at the RGS-IBG conference in 2022 and 2024, and audited master's modules in LEC all informed my research approach. Farmer suicides in Maharashtra had made the international news in 2020, providing further interest in the subject.

This biographical section hopefully indicates my commitment to transparency and reflexivity with regards to my positionality, the origins of this project, and the diverse range of influences that a multi-disciplinary academic career has given me. I may read Ambedkar, Gandhi, Chatterjee, Phule and contemporary south Asian writers, but clearly the western canon and British education system have impacted my outlook more. Concluding this section, I would also like to stress that while the research has been funded by a UK institution and has been influenced by its environs, I have been given the freedom to develop it as I saw fit without institutional pressure to follow certain schools of thought or practices. My academic background, institution and the pedagogies and approaches in political ecology have however clearly been influential to my approach.

[30] I was a an 'Eco-Warrier' in my primary school, and initiative of the then forward thinking South Tyneside council in the North East of England. I spent lunchtimes aged 10 making powerpoints to educate my peers about climate change, recycling and the depletion of the ozone layer.

3.9 The Research Climate in India

This section explains how my inability to travel to India to complete in person data collection impacted my research. Whilst creating limitations when trying to verify information in chapter 5, working remotely has also been beneficial given the current political climate in Modi's India. As explained in chapter 1, While I had hoped to collaborate with ACWADAM and complete ethnographic fieldwork, this did not prove possible. The COVID-19 pandemic and visa issues then prevented me from travelling . ACWADAM is an established, reputable, apolitical organisation that has hosted research students from Europe in the past. While only speculation, it is impossible to ignore the current political climate in India when thinking about this outcome.

Since then, I have thought it was perhaps a fortunate outcome. Modi's Hindu nationalist government has engaged in a campaign to supress criticism and freedom of speech. India is 161 out of 180 in Reporters Sans Frontières list of press freedom (RSF 2023). Journalists and academics have been targeted, harassed and attacked by Hindutva organisations or defunded by government. Funding for international research at the Centre for Policy Research was suspended amid outcry (Lewis 2023). Criticism of government leads dissenters to be called 'anti-national' for completing evidence-based research or giving opinions that differ from that of the government. These circumstances have worsened over the last five years, as has been widely reported in the international press – fewer and fewer Indian publications remain who can or feel able to stand up to this anti-democratic assault (Abhishek 2020: Lem 2020: Raj 2021)[32]. These issues were the subject of the award winning 2022 documentary 'While We Watched', which follows the NDTV news anchor Ravish Kumar over a two-year period; Kumar coined the phrase 'Godi' (meaning lap, or lapdog in Hindi) media to describe pro-BJP media (Jacinto 2022). Debate and protest over agricultural policy is sensitive too. As I write this chapter, Punjabi farmers protesting changes to the Minimum Support Price for crops on the border of Uttar Pradesh and Delhi are being met with teargas, with one dying from its effects (Indian Express 2024).

Regardless of the grounds on which the visa application was rejected, there is an advantage (from an ethical and safety point of view) to not being in the field under this political regime as an international researcher. Successful ethnography and interviews

[32] The Caravan, the People's Archive of Rural India, Economic and Political Weekly are some of the English language publications carrying on this fight.

would have relied on the guidance and access provided by ACWADAM. Travelling without the correct documentation on a tourist visa to work from their headquarters would not have been appropriate or safe. While frustrating and concerning, the result was remote collaboration with a researcher in situ who was able to gain access to remote communities (thankfully) without these barriers or scrutiny. The working relationship with the RA, and its ability to place the voices of farmers at the centre of this project, are now discussed.

3.10 An Autoethnography of Research Co-Production with an RA

Autoethnography is a research method in which the lived experience of conducting research itself becomes data. It allows scholars to reflect critically on the politics and ethics of research practices and is increasingly prominent within critical social science research concerned with extractive or damaging forms of knowledge production rooted in racialised, colonial, and class-based hierarchies, as discussed in Soini's 2025 paper in the International Journal of Qualitative Methods. Drawing on memories, conversations, diaries, communications, and other materials generated throughout the research process, autoethnography is intended to provide a personal, and at times confessional, account of the research journey. Soini describes it as a form of "retrospective care" towards oneself and participants, as well as a means of reflecting on the wider climate of social research and one's relationship to it through processes of "identity work". Shared with Moosavi's (2023) notion of decolonial reflexivity and broader poststructuralist epistemologies, autoethnography stresses that research is never neutral: researchers' identities, assumptions, institutional constraints, and lived experiences shape the knowledge they produce.

This perspective is especially important when employing research assistants (RAs), because assistants are not passive intermediaries but active participants in the production of knowledge. Scholars have written extensively on the ethical implications of employing RAs, particularly within fieldwork conducted in the Global South. Historically, RAs have often been treated as subordinate to lead researchers despite providing indispensable support through local knowledge, language skills, navigation, and social networks (Robson 1994). As Deane and Stevano (2016: 217) note, these relationships can reproduce broader historical inequalities rooted in race, nationality, and class. Recent scholarship has therefore challenged the hierarchical assumptions embedded within research practice and the norm of sole authorship. Gupta and Cleaver (2014: 394), for

example, critique the “fiction” of sole authorship in ethnography and connect it to ideas of individual ownership and the figure of the auteur. Conscious of these critiques, I attempted to structure the project in a collaborative and ethically reflective manner.

The RA’s wage was set at a competitive rate following advice from a Maharashtrian colleague with experience conducting similar fieldwork, and this was paid separately from expenses. The RA had flexibility to work around his own schedule, and after selection signed an informal agreement outlining expected working hours, wages, expenses, training, ethics procedures, and the aims of the project. I attempted to create an open and supportive working relationship in which concerns could be raised at any time, and from our communication I believe the collaboration was mutually beneficial. It was made clear from the outset that any future publications using the data would be co-authored and that his contribution would be formally acknowledged in the thesis. Beyond payment, the role also provided experience relevant to future PhD applications.

At the same time, reflecting retrospectively on the process reveals tensions between ethical procedures “on paper” and the realities of fieldwork in practice. The ethics forms and risk assessments submitted to the university gave the impression of robust safeguarding procedures and institutional oversight. In reality, much of the emotional and practical responsibility fell informally onto me and the RA as we navigated unpredictable situations remotely and without immediate institutional support. There were moments where I became acutely aware of how limited my ability was to guarantee his wellbeing despite the safeguards formally described in ethics documentation.

One incident remains particularly vivid. During a phone call with the RA, I suddenly heard shouting and what sounded like a physical altercation occurring around him. Being thousands of miles away in the UK, unable to intervene directly, I was deeply concerned for his safety and uncertain how to respond. Only afterwards did I learn that the disturbance involved his intoxicated landlord rather than anything directly connected to the fieldwork itself. Nonetheless, the experience exposed the vulnerability and anxiety embedded within remote collaborative research. It also highlighted how the realities shaping research assistants’ working conditions extend beyond the narrow institutional framing of “fieldwork risk”. The incident forced me to confront the limits of procedural ethics and the extent to which care, responsibility, and emotional labour are unevenly borne within international research collaborations.

Practical and financial issues also complicated the collaboration in ways not captured in formal ethics processes. University administrative delays repeatedly made it difficult to pay the RA promptly for completed work. These problems became especially acute during the extended closure of university offices between December 2023 and January 2024, when administrative systems effectively stalled. Conscious that delayed payment could materially affect someone relying on this income, I ultimately transferred funds from my own personal account to ensure he was paid on time while waiting for reimbursement and institutional processes to catch up. While this resolved the immediate issue, it again revealed the disconnect between institutional ethics frameworks and the everyday realities of conducting collaborative research across borders. The ethics process foregrounded participant consent and data management but had comparatively little to say about the practical infrastructures of care, payment, and responsibility that sustain ethical research relationships in practice.

Despite these tensions, the benefits of collaborative data production were substantial. Working with an RA without my physical presence at interviews provided access to people and perspectives that would otherwise have been inaccessible from the UK, placing the experiences of farmers at the centre of Chapter 5. Without this collaboration, the thesis would likely have relied predominantly on media reporting, NGO accounts, government perspectives, and secondary sources. Even without travel restrictions, it is unlikely I would have gained the same level of access to the communities RA engaged with independently.

The absence of my presence during interviews also removed the need for real-time translation and reduced the barriers associated with language and outsider status. As a Marathi-speaking researcher trained in qualitative methods, RA was able to facilitate conversations that flowed organically in ways unlikely to have occurred had he functioned solely as a translator mediating my direct involvement. After extensive training meetings, he translated the interview schedule, with certain key questions highlighted for emphasis. The resulting transcripts demonstrate conversations that were fluid, dialogic, and responsive to participants' concerns. Participants built on each other's answers and raised issues organically in ways consistent with the aims of semi-structured interviewing.

There were, however, methodological trade-offs. Because I was not present, I could not ask spontaneous follow-up questions myself, which occasionally produced frustrations during later analysis. Yet maintaining a constant remote presence via phone or video link

would likely have compromised the openness and spontaneity of the discussions. I therefore relied heavily on RA's own social science training, previous RA experience, and judgement in navigating interviews appropriately.

Importantly, the use of a local RA also reduced the likelihood of state scrutiny or interference that other non-Indian researchers had described experiencing while conducting politically sensitive fieldwork. Several researchers had warned me that holding a research visa could place a "target on your back" with police and local officials. Such scrutiny could have endangered both participants and researchers or, at minimum, discouraged candid discussion regarding water governance, agrarian distress, and the role of business and government actors. As someone from the district itself, RA was able to communicate the aims of the project in a way that fostered trust and reduced suspicion.

The transcripts themselves reveal this wariness towards outsiders. One participant remarked at the end of an interview that "we're scared to meet guys like you," while another explained that researchers and officials often "take money and disappear" or make false promises. My physical presence as a foreign researcher may well have intensified these concerns and inhibited participation. RA was able to reassure participants that the research was independent from government and NGOs, that responses would remain anonymous, and that participation was not tied to access to benefits or schemes. Payments for participation were framed transparently as compensation for people's time and knowledge rather than inducements tied to specific responses.

Reflecting autoethnographically on this process therefore reveals both the possibilities and contradictions of collaborative and supposedly "decolonial" research practice. While I believe reasonable steps were taken to reduce exploitative dynamics and centre local voices, the project also exposed the fragility of institutional ethics procedures when confronted with the realities of transnational fieldwork, administrative inertia, uneven responsibility, and emotional labour. The experience reinforced that ethical research cannot simply be reduced to completed forms and formal approvals; it must also involve continual reflection on care, collaboration, vulnerability, and the unequal conditions under which knowledge is produced.

3.11 Conclusion

Robert Cox wrote that 'theory is always for someone and for some purpose. All theories have a perspective. Perspectives derive form a position in time and space, specifically political time and space' (1981: 128). By recognising our work is not apolitical but of a place, time, genre and social position, we do a lot of the work in demystifying our research. I have attempted this in the biographical section of this chapter. If we start from the position that knowledge is not neutral, nor scholarship works of objective truth (as critical realists state), and we recognise that social theories are abstractions of a messy reality – then we're on our way to distancing ourselves from many of the critiques that modern science has faced from postcolonial scholars. Researchers must be critical and reflexive, however no research design, methodology, epistemology, analytical framework – no theoretical approach or construct, will be perfect.

This chapter has shown how the social sciences have undergone a necessary period of reflection in the last decade. Postcolonialism, for decades an important critique of the western academic tradition, has been reappraised by a proactive decolonial movement that has attempted to diversify the knowledge, places and voices in the academy. The decolonial movement has sought to overthrow unequal power relations based on race and other categories of difference in researcher-society relations and in the places geographers' study. It is imperative that academics challenge the inequality of access, ideas and resources in higher education and research. Given what is at stake, it is understandable that these debates have been charged when they involve decolonising scholars grappling with the raison d'etre of their disciplines: their history and role as a force for good.

This chapter has argued that social theory, and research conducted from social scientists such as critical political ecologists, is not necessarily tied to an extractive and essentialising western episteme that continues to subjugate the majority world to the worldviews of western research institutions. Decolonisation is both relevant and necessary, and I agree with many arguments put forward to Go, Connell, Moosavi and Middleton. I concur with Pickerell's notion that decolonising geographical research would 'decentre academics as the source of knowledge production, employ more diverse voices in our teaching and provide embodied and material resistance to colonialism and neoliberal capitalism' (Barker and Pickerell 2020). However, the history and scholarship of South Asia is a testament to the messy, interconnected ideas and forms of governance

that exist in a place like Marathwada. Theories and perspectives that centre the experiences of marginalised communities and bring them into dialogue with conversations in environmental justice are anti-colonial. It is hoped that this thesis' attempt to understand the slow violence of agrarian distress, bringing concepts from political ecology, economy and theory into discussion with the testaments of affected communities in Marathwada, is too.

The second half of this chapter shows how this thesis has taken inspiration from a variety of sources to create my own decolonial research design. I have argued that co-producing data with a trained research assistant from the region of study has enabled farmer's perspectives on agrarian distress to play a central part of this thesis; this would have been difficult even if I had completed in person data collection given the political situation in India. I have evidence to suggest that the data collection was beneficial for all involved – myself, my RA, and participants.

4. Slow Violence Made Visible? The Media, Reflexivity and the Narration of the 2012-3 Maharashtrian Drought

'The relative invisibility of slow violence tempts us to discount it, to defer attention, to dilute urgency. But out-of-sightedness is not merely a result of physical remoteness. It can also result from the way the dominant media frames issues, from the way state power obscures responsibility, or from how the victims of slow violence are marginalized or rendered politically disposable'

Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011: 4)

4.1. Introduction

This chapter is the first of three which examine aspects of liberal democratic governance in Maharashtra. It analyses media coverage of the 2012-13 drought, a significant event for both farmer livelihoods and the development of water management strategies in the late 2010s. The drought led to a major policy intervention, Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan (the 'Village Water Scheme'), a BJP-led scheme which aimed to 'end drought' through localised, mostly overground, irrigation interventions (Ashar 2020). The media's role in shaping public discourse and influencing policy makes it a crucial site for analysis. The media performs many roles in liberal democracies: it holds government to account and provides platforms for politicians, businesses, civil society organizations and citizens to share information and opinions. Journalists maintain close links with policymakers, influencing political direction and policy development (Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999; Sharma & Kumar 2023).

Along with political and civil society organisations, public forums and social media, print media is an integral part of the public sphere. Habermas suggests that actors in the public sphere should conduct the 'properly civic task' of engaging society 'in critical public debate' (Habermas 1989); his work relates to the end of the Ancien Régime in Europe, but more recently his ideas have been employed by green political theorists like Robyn Eckersley. For her, critical public discourse is important for reshaping the state from an

exploiter of nature and facilitator of capitalism to an environmental trustee (Eckersley 2004: 83). Her work suggests that the public sphere, of which the media is a crucial part, has an important role to play, encouraging the state to act in socially and ecologically just ways. The media analysed here is government facing elite media – a section of the public sphere – which Chatterjee might describe as representing 'civil society' discourse (2004).

Further to this, as explored in chapter 2 and signposted at the beginning of this chapter, the concept of slow violence raises questions about epistemic justice. Nixon's concept invites us to question how everyday forms of violence are represented and communicated, given that they may be 'out of sight' or not considered violent at all, inflicted (and ignored) over the long durée by actors such as governments and corporations. Slow violence, particularly it's nominal dimension, leads us to think about the epistemology of violence: whose framings and voices matter and are seen as valid by powerful decision makers (Davies 2023). Sainath's criticism of the Indian media in the 2009 film Nero's Guests would suggest agrarian distress is a form of slow violence because it does not fit the attention grabbing newsworthy 'events' typically befitting of media coverage, or like with Davies' work on Cancer Alley (2019) in Louisianna, that mainstream media (like the institutions of government) do not care about affected farmer's suffering enough to intervene.

Arising from this, the research questions answered in this chapter are, firstly, how are the causes and solutions to drought discussed in the Indian media? Discussions of causes and solutions to drought are done in tandem because they are inherently linked, with solutions to problems often made explicitly in media coverage or are otherwise inferable. And secondly, are the long term, structural issues effecting rural communities and rural communities experience of harm (i.e. slow violence) being drawn to the attention of society and political leaders in this sample of media coverage? From this we can reflect on Eckersley's work on the public sphere, and whether the media supports instrumental approaches to water management that seek to manage, rather than resolve, the deeper causes of water scarcity. To assess this, I apply Eckersley's hierarchy of reflexivity (2004:80) to media narratives of drought, as a way of understanding the extent to which they reveal and critique the current state approaches to water management: current approaches which enable a harmful political economy, resulting in farmer suicides, inequality, debt, and environmental overexploitation.

Firstly, the chapter introduces the 2012-3 drought, using reports from the South Asian Network on Dams, Rivers and People to argue that this was a human-made crisis. The theoretical section demonstrates the importance of Habermas' work on public deliberation to writers interested in state transitions from liberal to ecological democracies. Their normative works now feel out of kilter with current political trends, however Eckersley's hierarchy of reflexivity is argued to be an effective analytical tool for understanding the arguments made in media reporting on the drought. The methodology section follows, showing how the corpus of news articles was created using Nexis and analysed to draw out key themes. The findings section answers the first research question (how are the causes and solutions to drought discussed in the Indian media?) in two parts, before the second research question concerning the visibility of slow violence is answered.

4.2 Human-made Scarcity: the 2012-3 Maharashtrian Drought

The drought that occurred over the course of 2012 and 2013 in western India was described by the Chief Minister of Maharashtra Prithviraj Chavan as the worst in 40 years (SANDRP 2013). It was a major humanitarian crisis that effected 17 districts across Maharashtra, but especially Marathwada, including the districts of Beed, Latur, Osmanabad, Jalna and Hingoli. Rainfall was less than 50% of the normal monsoon level; the state recorded a rainfall deficit of 25% overall, but Marathwada suffered a deficit of between 50 and 75% (Udmale et al 2014A). The drought led to a 50-60% reduction in crop yields across the state, especially for crops like sugar cane, cotton and pulses (Udmale et al 2014B, 2015).

Periods of low rainfall might be described (despite the intensifying impact of anthropogenic climate change) as a natural phenomenon, experienced since time immemorial in monsoonal regions like western India. While low rainfall is not uncommon, as Nitnaware reported 10 years on, droughts like in 2012-3 and their devastating impacts are human-made (Nitnaware 2024), driven by political failures, poor water management and compounded by the issues of debt, inequality and poverty for low-income people: these latter components are the hallmarks of agrarian distress (Mishra 2020). While government ministers may have been right in saying the impacts of the 2012-3 drought were worse than 1972, as the South Asian Network on Rivers, Dams and People reported,

rainfall level were higher than at the time of that earlier event (SANDRP 2013). This highlights the impact of the borewell revolution, the expansion of cash crops and the deregulation of the agrarian economy since the 1990s as aggravating factors in this disaster. This attempt to portray current water scarcity as natural by government echoes Mehta's seminal work on the construction of water scarcity by political actors as natural (rather than human made) and chronic (rather than cyclical) phenomena. Her research looks at the role of political, economic, and institutional factors in producing both scarcity and inequality, in Western India and elsewhere (Mehta 2003, 2007, 2010). She considers both the material and discursive elements of these constructions.

Iyer and Sainath show this to be the case in Marathwada, arguing that the term drought naturalises a human made catastrophe – the 'continued drawing of groundwater from unsustainable depths, continued drawing of water from reservoirs at record levels of dead storage… bad debt, desperation and farmer suicides' all playing their part (Iyer 2020). Maharashtra ought to have been well equipped to deal with lower monsoonal rainfall; indeed, it has 'by far' the largest number of dams in the country (SANDRP 2017). But as Sainath writes 'the agony of the peasantry was not just due to natural calamity – the generic 'drought' – but also profit and policy driven', the pursuit of 'development' has proven and continues to be extremely destructive, attempted in a context of 'historical backwardness and deep-rooted caste-based exclusions and discrimination' (Sainath in the preface to Iyer 2020).

As discussed in chapter 2, agricultural commercialisation occurred in the context of an anarchic system of groundwater governance, with the ability for water users to take unlimited water from their land, and with large government electricity subsidies in place to facilitate this (Shah 2008). The shallow aquifers and low rainfall in Marathwada made this water intensive development strategy even more dangerous. While researchers like Iyer and Sainath make this argument in their books and films, this chapter aims to understand the different framings around the causes of and solutions to drought in Marathwada as found in mainstream public discourse.

4.3 Slow Violence, Representation and the Public Sphere

This section turns to social theory, looking at the relationship between slow violence and public discourse in liberal democratic regimes. Slow violence, as defined by Nixon, is

characterized by slow, often 'imperceptible' degradation of the environment, which causes harm to vulnerable populations (Nixon 2011). Unlike spectacular forms of violence, slow violence unfolds over extended periods and is embedded in systems of governance, policy, and social inequality. The drought in Maharashtra is a culmination of policy failures and inaction, justified as a form of slow violence in chapter 2. Slow violence is described as 'pervasive but illusive' and 'typically [does] not display [itself] in spectacular moments of terror as single event, but instead quietly accumulate and defer their damage over time' (Davies 2023: 410). When the monsoon failed in 2012-3, these long-term structural issues and rainfall shortages combined to create a newsworthy event where slow violence might become visible and be challenged.

As discussed in chapter 2, Davies takes issue with Nixon's characterisation of slow violence being 'out of sight' to corporations or government, instead arguing that the health and wellbeing of affected people is not worthy of intervention. In the case of coverage of the Maharashtrian drought, the question is whether news organisations (important actors in liberal democratic governance that can challenge injustice) continued to '[render] certain populations and geographies vulnerable to sacrifice' (Davies 2019:411), or through highlighting the work of civil society groups and academics, helped create a mandate for political-economic change. The public sphere's reflexivity (in relation to government policy) —or lack thereof— influences whether slow violence is acknowledged and addressed or whether it remains invisible[33]. As Eckerlsey (2004:80) and Torgerson (2013) in employing Habermasian ideas have argued, a reflexive public sphere advocating strong ecological modernisation, would challenge the prevailing, harmful approaches and bring to light the structural causes of environmental degradation, pushing for long-term, systemic changes rather than short-term fixes.

4.3.1 The Public Sphere and Ecological Democracy

The public sphere is a term most associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas and his theory of communicative action, but its importance has subsequently been stressed by political ecologists interested in the links between democracy, sustainability and post-capitalism. In his text 'The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere' (1989), Habermas traced the history of public debate and democracy (in Europe) and identified a

[33] Eckersley's use of the term reflexivity is different from typical ones. This is explained shortly.

time in which informed public debate had a substantial influence on government direction. This period between 1830 and 1900, in Habermas' view, was the pinnacle of democratic experiments when through 'self-reflective and critical attitudes, the previously unquestioned and unquestionable legitimacy of the family, traditional values, and the political order eroded' and 'eventually, the vertical organization of society became untenable' (Alario 1994: 330). The space for critical examination of society in absolutist states in Europe is argued to have brought about the end of the Ancien Régime as the media led the 'properly civic task of [engaging society] in critical public debate' (Habermas 1987: 57).

Habermas's work is ultimately a narrative of democratic decline. He argues that capitalist managerialism and the 'scientization of politics' (Habermas 1971) triumphed over the course of the 19th century: the practice of technocratic managerialism (propped up by 'public rational discourse') serving the interests of capital and the status quo at the expense of true democracy. Eckersley, Torgerson and Alario however continue to have faith in the public sphere (including journalists and the researchers, civil society organisations, and social movements broadcast by them) to shape environmental governance through debate. New discourses, '[ensembles] of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that [are] produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities' (Hajer 1993), are believed by Eckersley et al to prefigure and enable material policy change. Without the work of journalists and researchers, 'invisibility and hence lack of public recognition prevent vital problems and social asymmetries from surfacing [and] being recognized as legitimate political [concerns]' (Alario 1994: 327).

In the 1960s, environmental scientists and activists challenged the status quo by communicating the environmental risks posed by industrial modernity. For Alario, the earlier fall of absolutism in the face of secularism and republicanism has parallels with the impact of the Labour and New Social Movements in the mid-twentieth century. These campaigners fought for a revised raison d'etre of the state that brought civil rights, welfarism and the protection of populations from environmental hazards under its remit (Alario 1994: 331). According to Torgerson, until the 1960s 'industrialist discourse … had enjoyed virtually unquestioned supremacy in both public and policy arenas' concerning environmental issues (Torgerson 2013: 788). The environmental justice movement brought together ecologists, social justice activists and marginalised communities who

bore the brunt of industrial processes' negative impacts. These interventions, amplified by the press, increased the pressure on governments and forced them to consider the impacts of products and processes such as chemical fertilisers, nuclear power, CFCs and carbon dioxide pollution. Habermas' ideas are incontrovertibly Eurocentric in his choice of case studies (Chakrabarty 2004), but the normative ideal of communicative action and mandate building through reporting, debate, press freedom and plurality are common across liberal democracies. These aspirations are evidenced in the constitutional debates led by Ambedkar as referenced in the introduction.

In India, there have been influential environmental movements that have engaged in public debate and critiqued the post-colonial capitalist state. These have included the Chipko ('tree hugging') movement of the 1970s which fought against deforestation in the northern state of Uttarakhand; the International Campaign for Justice following the Bhopal Disaster in Madhya Pradesh 1984[35]; and Narmada Bachao Andolan's campaign for the rights of 250,000 people displaced by the Narmada Dam (Frontline 2022). More recently there have been farmer protests in 2019-2020, involving strike action by 250 million people fighting against changes to the Minimum Support Price which critics argued would leave producers at the mercy of corporate buyers. While many of these issues evidently remain, greater public awareness of the environmental consequences of unregulated industrial-economic processes has placed pressure on states to regulate economic development and ban unsustainable practices.

Consequently, the theorists of ecological democracy see informed public debate and critique as a key component of the potential transition away from an economic model committed to capital accumulation above the interests of nature and vulnerable populations. They argue a 'radicalized' public sphere can act as a catalyst in the transition from capitalist liberal democracy to ecological democracy, and a departure from the post-Brundtland sustainable development agenda that saw ecological concerns co-opted and neutered by the state (Torgerson 2013). Increased public consciousness of environmental mismanagement and the promotion of alternative methods and value systems is understood as an important part of shaping (and potentially transforming) the state in relation to the natural environment and those who rely on it for their livelihoods.

[35] Written about by Veena Das in Critical Events (1995); a text cited by Rob Nixon in Slow Violence and the environmentalism of the poor (Nixon 2011)

Eckersley's Green state argues that a 'green constitutional design' should 'facilitate a 'green public sphere by providing fulsome environmental information and the mechanisms for contestation, participation, and access to environmental justice. This is a key tenant of what she calls 'ecological democracy', the next step in the development of the state beyond liberal democracy, which should have new mechanisms to 'enhance the reflexive learning potential of both the state and civil society' and ensure the consultation and protection of all constituents (2004:140). The role of the public sphere in environmental governance, then, is seen as reshaping the state's role from one of managing and facilitating unsustainable capitalist practices to one that (in the context of Marathwada) would promote sustainable water usage, sustainable agricultural practices and equality of resource access as its mission.

India's media landscape (or that of any modern democracy) is not like the idealised version Habermas describes in 19th century Europe, given that social inequalities such as class, caste, gender, and race pose limits on participation, particularly in traditional news publications (Habermas, quoted in Fuchs, 2020: 207). Furthermore, the capitalist media (i.e. those requiring shareholders and advertising to sustain their publications) and public service media (reliant on the state for funding and commissions) are argued to be 'mediated by political economy and ownership structure' rather than indifferent or antagonistic towards them (Fuchs 2020). In summary then, they are not independent from capital or the state, but embedded within these structures. As Kohli writes 'by influencing what issues get covered and how they get covered, as well as via editorials, the privately controlled media in India today attempt to shift the political preferences of Indian society in a pro-business direction' (2012:7). A critical discourse analysis of the coverage which reflects on the role of the media as narrators of the 2012-3 drought can investigate the extent to which this is true in this context.

It is fair to say that Eckersley's normative ideas of an ecological democracy, published in 2004, seem quixotic in 2025; the Sustainable Development agenda that Torgeson critiques perhaps even radical in the current global political climate of climate denialism and authoritarianism, made worse by the dissemination of lies and propaganda across traditional and social media. Her ideas are still a powerful and hopeful reminder of what environmental justice and ecological democracy could look like, and a useful tool of analysis in this chapter.

4.3.3 Green Theorists and Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a key concept in understanding how the public sphere can resist slow violence and promote inclusive, sustainable, environmental governance. Eckersley's understanding of the term is different to a traditional one. Here, reflexivity refers to the questioning of dominant modes of thinking and doing; for critical social scientists, this involves stepping back from the typically narrow framing of social problems as they are perceived and articulated by policy makers and other powerful economic actors. Reflexive knowledge contrasts with instrumental knowledge, which focuses on problem-solving within existing ideological frameworks, without addressing the root causes of environmental degradation. This typically results in short term fixes which 'cannot head off further environmental degradation in the longer run' (Eckersley 2004:83). Critical, reflexive knowledge interrogates the norms and values that are inherent in policy maker's discourses and practices.

The difference between problem solving knowledge and critical knowledge was articulated by Robert Cox in his 1981 essay 'Social Forces, States and World Orders'. While problem solving knowledge 'takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for action', critical or reflexive knowledge production 'calls [institutions and power relations] into question by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing' (Cox 1981: 129). For Cox then, critical, reflexive knowledge transcends the existing social order, drawing on alternative social orders and values. Being reflexive is a political act that problematizes the narrow framings of complex problems and the values these framings support, pushing back against the depoliticisation and scientization that Habermas suggests led to the end of public policy development in the public interest (Habermas 1971).

Reflexivity is also a term associated with Beck, Bonss and Lau who discussed reflexivity with regards to the transition from what they called first to second modernity. For them, 'reflexive modernisation' is the process in which the institutions of modernity are consuming and undermining themselves. First modernity was characterised by the pursuit economic growth, the goal of full employment, a family structure with one breadwinner, traditional gender roles, the welfare state and expectation of a single occupation followed by retirement. 'The Theory of Reflexive Modernization' (Beck et al

2003) argues that these structures are eroding, which is in part due to a 'global ecological crisis' that has forced societies to acknowledge that there are finite natural resources that limit economic growth. Under these conditions 'nature cannot be seen as an infinite provider of resources, or something that can be bent to [human's] will' (Beck et al 2003:7). For them, it is untenable for the state to continue to perform the role of harvester and regulator of natural resources for the purposes of economic growth. They argue a new phase of state-society-nature relations is emerging in the twenty-first century as a result of reflexive modernisation and a recognition of ecological limits.

Robyn Eckersley's work on the potential emergence of a 'Green State' provides a useful framework for understanding different levels of reflexivity in policymaking and public discourse, articulating how a radical change in the role of the state might emerge. She identifies four degrees of reflexivity in public policy, each at different levels of rigour and radicalism in challenging the role of the state vis-à-vis the economy, social justice and nature. Her ideas are adapted from Hall (1993) and Vig (1997). The hierarchy runs from weak ecological modernisation and low reflexivity (1) to strong ecological modernisation and high reflexivity (4). This is explained in Figure 3.

Hierarchy of Reflexivity	**Explanation**
1. Change in policy instruments	'which may uncritically accommodate deeper contradictions in the broader policy environment' (2004:80) e.g. achieving the same goals through different ends
2. Change in policy goals	A change in desired outcomes of certain policies
3. Change in policy paradigm or the hierarchy of policy goals	Greater priority given to ecological sustainability across multiple policy dimensions
4. Changes in the role of the state	A fundamental philosophical change in the role of the state to one of 'environmental trustee' (Eckersley 2004:83)

Figure 3. Eckersley's Hierarchy of Reflexivity (2004:80)

Weak ecological modernisation/low reflexivity seeks to sustain capitalist structures through environmental adjustments, without fundamentally changing the state's role in resource management. Strong ecological modernisation/the highest level of reflexivity involves a reimagining of the state as a public trustee of the environment, rather than as an exploiter of natural resources for economic growth. In Maharashtra in 2012, state policy corresponded to tier 1. Groundwater management was anarchic (Shah 2008), and

water use was regulated through the 1882 Easement Act which allows land-owners to take water from the surface and ground in perpetuity. The Government of Maharashtra created Special Economic Zones which gave benefits to water intensive industries such as sugar, soft drink and alcohol manufacturing, with individual water users paying 20 times the price per litre of water versus factories in these locales (Iyer 2020:1).

While the demands and constraints (institutional, financial, time) of policy making mean that instrumental knowledge 'in the service of problems identified by clients' (Burawoy 2006), that is 'concrete and pragmatic in nature' (Cleaver and Franks 2008:158) pursued by policy makers, the public sphere (according to Habermas and Eckersley) has greater potential as a space for deliberation and reflection, for a diversity of knowledges, perspectives and critiques that do not require immediate, short term and narrow solutions that fit with dominant ways of doing. It has, like critical social science, the potential to demonstrate the 'inherently political' nature of water governance (Cleaver and Franks 2008:165), and to be broader and more critical in its understanding of water scarcity and agrarian distress. The empirical section of this chapter uses Eckersley's hierarchy to group narratives around the causes of and solutions to the 2012-3 drought in Marathwada. Using Eckersley's hierarchy helps to distinguish between calls for superficial and transformative changes to the governance arrangement which produce agrarian distress.

4.4 Methodology: Critical Discourse Analysis in Environmental Policy

The analysis used in this chapter is influenced by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) found in the work of Fairclough (2003), Jäger (2001) and Wodak (2013). CDA differentiates itself from other approaches to discourse analysis in environmental policy by being 'motivated by an ambition to unmask hidden (e.g. capitalist, right-wing) ideological agendas as drivers of political text and talk' (Leipold et al 2019: 448). These authors have an established normative position in relation to the texts; namely the ambition to advance democratic stakeholder participation in decision making by pointing out power imbalances and discrimination. In my case, it starts from accepting the position put forward in chapter 2 that the liberal democratic state has failed over a significant period of time to act to protect agricultural labourers from agrarian distress through mismanagement. I am not coming to this analysis as a neutral observer. Academics and activists have informed the question I have set, and the themes I will observe. Indeed, the

rationale for this enquiry is to 'embrace particular social norms to establish critiques of domination and asymmetry in organizational or political decision-making and public language use' (Leipold et al 2019: p448). Critical discourse analysis is an interpretive tradition tied to the Frankfurt School of critical theory, committed in uncovering the capitalist ideology and how it functions in society to uphold a growth focused, environmentally unsustainable and class ridden society.

4.4.1 Data Collection and Analysis: A Sample of 'Civil Society' Public Sphere

The media corpus used in this chapter was created using the online media database LexisNexis. LexisNexis is a commonly used database of news articles that allows for a refined search of publications based on key terms. The search terms I used were "Maharashtra", "Marathwada", "Water Scarcity" and "Drought". The search was then narrowed by specifying English language news and opinion articles, published by journalists both in print and online by media outlets based in India, between June 1st 2012 and 31st December 2013. This time period covers the period from the start of the low rainfall during the monsoon, through a year-long period when the drought unfolded. The keywords of "drought", "irrigate" and "farmer" were used to narrow the sample to forty texts, deemed to be an appropriate size for analysis. The forty texts that produced by this search came from twenty-two different news organisations. Details of the publications and the number of articles from each publication are found in Figure 4[36]. Figure 4 indicates that the sources are taken from papers across the political spectrum, from online and print news publications, and business and industry magazines. The texts were then tagged in different colours to pick out different framings of the causes and solutions to drought.

The sample of English language newspapers is clearly separate from the thriving Marathi language publications across newspapers, pamphlets, grassroots political organisations and co-operatives. These texts are not the subject of this chapter. As such it is necessary to restate that the empirical work here is an analysis of a particular subsection of government facing, elite media publications. They fit with Chatterjee's idea of 'civil society' (elite society), which is separate from the broader, more diverse 'political society.

[36] The political leaning column in Figure 4 is not a particularly scientific estimation, but based on online information and reputation. This is to give a general overview of the publications as they existed in 2012 – political developments have shifted the editorial policy of many of these publications subsequently.

Partha Chatterjee (2004) distinguishes between civil society, inhabited by rights-bearing middle-class citizens operating within formal legality, and political society, where marginalized populations negotiate with the state through informal, tactical, and governmental forms of politics. This chapter analyses the civil society public sphere which is more closely linked to and more closely influences government policy.

The overall framings found in the corpus were then synthesised with context and critique coming from the texts introduced in chapter 2 and further readings from academic publications. Research question 1 is answered two sections:

Section 1: Narratives 1-7, which call for 'a change in policy instruments only':
Section 1 provides narratives which do not blame an input intensive agricultural model for the drought, and continue to support the government as an exploiter of nature with the pursuit of profit and growth as its core function. These narratives correspond to the lowest level of reflexivity/weak ecological modernisation according to Eckersley's hierarchy – calling for call for *a change in policy instruments only*, rather than policy goals or more radical changes in the state's role. Rather than critiquing the economic strategy of government - to increase the productivity of land particularly through cash crops – they argues that government should change its policies in order for Green Revolution technologies to flourish in Marathwada. They do not question the political economic strategy of the government, discuss the inability of the landscapes of Marathwada to adapt to these models, or recognise the agrarian distress which is produced by this strategy. There are signs however of the long term dysfunctionality of liberal democratic governance in responding to water scarcity; this is discussed when answering the second research question.

Section 2: Narratives 8-9, calling for 'a change in policy goals' or change to the 'hierarchy of policy goals':
These narratives do question the economic model facilitated by government in the context of Marathwada. They correspond to the second and third most reflexive levels in Figure 3. These two narratives call for stricter regulation of the sugar industry, the subsidisation of drip irrigation technologies and the incentivisation of less water intensive crops through the Minimum Support Price. In one text arguments are made that local village governments (Panchayats) should take resource management into their own hands. These framings push back against the idea that the state should be facilitating the

growth of water intensive industries and they show an understanding that the geography of Marathwada is not suited to the input intensive agricultural strategies found in other regions of India. They suggest that natural resources should be protected, and long-term sustainable practices and alternative governance structures should take precedent over short term growth strategies.

Media Organisation	No. of Articles	Article Number	Publication Type	Political Leaning
Hindustan Times	5	22, 23, 24, 29, 32	Broadsheet	Centrist/Centre Left
The Economic Times	5	1, 2, 12, 20, 21	Broadsheet, Financial	Centre Right
MINT	4	18, 25, 37, 39	Financial and Business	Economically Centre Right
Indian Express	3	14, 33, 35	Broadsheet	Cente Left / Critical
The Financial Express	3	6, 26, 34	Financial paper of Indian Express	Centre Left / Critical
Associated Press	2	9, 10	International	N/A
Digital News & Analysis (DNA)	2	16, 28	Broadsheet, based in Mumbai	Centre Left
Economic & Political Weekly	2	38, 40	Journal	Left
Business Today	1	19	Business Magazine	Centre Right
Canadian Press	1	8	International	N/A
Domain-b	1	7	Online Business Magazine	
Financial Times	1	3	International	Cente Right
Free Press Journal (India)	1	31	Political Journal / Magazine	None
India Today	1	13	News Magazine	Centrist
Mail Online	1	4	International	Centre Right
Indian Public Sector News	1	5		
Money Life	1	11	Business Magazine	
TendersInfo	1	17	Business Magazine	
The Indian Awaaz	1	27	Business News Website	Centre-left / Critical
The New York Times Blogs	1	15	International	Centre
Youth Ki Awaaz	1	36	Blog/Opinion	Centre Left
Daily Bhaskar	1	30	News Website	Centre Left

***Figure 4**. List of Media Articles, published June 2012 – December 2013*[38]

4.5 How are the causes and solutions to the 2012-3 drought framed in the media corpus?

4.5.1 Section 1 – Narratives Which Call for 'A Change in Policy Instruments'

4.5.1.1 Narrative 1: Inadequate Investment in Irrigation Caused the Drought

In this narrative, there is criticism of the level of investment in irrigation infrastructures in Maharashtra. Maharashtra is compared to other states in India, particularly those which were the centre of the Green Revolution in the 1960s, such as Haryana and Punjab. Figures are repeatedly quoted that Punjab has 98% irrigation. This is compared to just 9% in Vidarbha, the region to the north of Marathwada (Article 3)[39]. Article 4 states 'Punjab is better off than the rest. Despite poor rains, farmers there have completed sowing, benefitting from the extensive groundwater irrigation facilities'. In this narrative, Punjab is presented as a model for Maharashtra to follow. An interview with Chief Minister Chavan

[38] See Appendices for contents table from Lexis, and an example article

[39] It can be inferred from these statistics that by 'irrigation', the authors are referring to overground irrigation only, not groundwater irrigation. The statistics for overground irrigation in Marathwada are cited in chapter 2.

argues that if Maharashtra was only able to reach 50% irrigation, then it would be able to 'feed the nation' (Article 24). There seems to be confusion about what 'irrigation' specifically means; Marathwada does have 'extensive groundwater irrigation', and it is the main source of water in the agricultural economy. The 98% irrigation figure for Punjab includes the vast canal network that has been present since the colonial era.

Calls for greater investment in infrastructure are found repeatedly in articles; it is inevitable that stakeholders in the agrarian economy of Maharashtra, like stakeholders in any industry, use their public platform to call for greater public investment from government. In the corpus, this is often done in a generic way without specification. Article 14 argues that there has been an 'underinvestment in rural infrastructure' and that India cannot afford to neglect investment in irrigation structures of all types. In Article 22 from January 2013, the Former Chairman of Osmanabad Municipal Council and (agriculture expert and Congressman) Nanasaheb Patil, is quoted blaming his own party. 'The government is not at all serious. I strongly feel this government doesn't have money to uplift us' he says (Article 22).

This narrative suggests that the Punjab is a model to follow, but fails to recognise the huge differences in the history, politics and hydrogeology of the two regions which would offer greater reflexivity in commentary and reporting. Punjab was at the centre of colonial irrigation policy, which then enabled it to take advantage of water intensive crop varieties deployed during the Green Revolution in the 1960s. As Ali writes in his 1988 text 'The Punjab Under Imperialism, 1885-1947', under British rule the canal irrigated area of Punjab increased from 3 million acres in 1885 to 14 million acres by 1947 (Ali 1998)[40]. This enabled the productionist agricultural model focused on increased outputs through genetically modified crops to take place there. Marathwada and Vidarbha are far more reliant on groundwater, with Marathwada lying on the Deccan Plateau comprised of small, hard rock aquifers with lower capacity. Punjab's groundwater irrigation does not suffer from these geological limitations, and has higher rainfall. These facts are not discussed in the corpus.

Article 11, an opinion Piece by AK Ramdas, does show an awareness of the history of failed irrigation technologies in Maharashtra. He discusses the plans made over 100 years

[40] This is across the entirety of Punjab, which was split between India and Pakistan after partition

ago by famous engineer M Visvesvaraya who planned to create a grand canal and integrate Indian river systems in order to transfer surplus water to scarce regions; according to Ramdas, this project was shelved by the British who thought it would cultivate Indian nationalism. The Government of India set up a body to implement these changes early in the postcolonial period. 'It would be gratifying to know from the ministry of irrigation about the progress they have made in this regard, considering the sordid fact that millions of our countrymen and the parched earth are starving for water to quench the thirst?' (Article 11). This article argues that the current issues of water scarcity have been predicted for the entirety of India's postcolonial period, but have not been acted upon. In summary, this narrative ignores political, social and environmental differences between the regions of India, and the ability of natural environment to cope with the impact of water intensive, productionist agriculture. The focus here remains on making semi-arid Maharashtra more productive through increased government investment, with the state continuing to be proposed as an 'environmental exploiter and facilitator of private environmental exploitation' (Eckersley 2004:83). There is an awareness of long term failures and suffering farmers, which is turned to in section 4.6.

4.5.1.2 Narrative 2: Misused Money

A second narrative emerges which suggests that it is not that a lack of spending on irrigation has led to drought, but instead that a large amount of money has been misspent. This is due to a lack of oversight on the spending of public money. In the first article in the corpus, it is reported that 66,000 crores ($8.04bn) have been spent under the INC-NCP governments since 2004 (Article 1); an article published a year later states that this money has only increased irrigation capabilities by 0.1% (Article 39). Article 1 states that a White Paper has been requested by opposition parties that would detail how this money has been spent, but its release has been continually delayed. Eight months later, in a series of articles offering a post-mortem on the drought, a 'state official in Beed', says that irrigation schemes in the district were 'completed in haste to claim bills', suggesting that contracts are given out to builders who complete shoddy work (Article 22). The following month it is reported that CM Chavan has stated that government must 'consider linking payments to contractors to 'completion of projects on time' (Article 23). Whether work is completed 'in haste' or delayed to get more income, both of these articles suggest that the contracts given out by government for the completion of irrigation work by private companies produces poor results and there is a lack of accountability over the spending

of government money. This narrative suggests that public money is misspent over the past 14 years, rather than government lacking the funds to tackle irrigation issues.

4.5.1.3 Narrative 3: Inappropriate Irrigation Technologies: Big ticket Dams

A third narrative suggests that public funds have been spent on inappropriate technologies; articles repeatedly call for 'proper' irrigation and 'proper' oversight on their maintenance (Articles 1, 24, & 39). Dr A Narayanamoorthy, NABARD chair professor and director at the Department of Economics and Rural Development at Alagappa University, says that the 20% reduction in rainfall reduction vis-à-vis the average should not have led to the level of destruction witnessed in 2012 and 2013. Maharashtra has 'the largest irrigation sector in terms of dams and investments… you will never see this sort of situation in other states' (Article 34). The article argues infrastructure have been built and then neglected – only continuing to work when they have been maintained by NGOs rather than government. Article 32 titled 'It's Déjà vu All Over Again' from April 2013 says that if just 1% more of the land had been irrigated, then the crisis would not have occurred. The wrong types of irrigation, specifically 'big ticket dams', have been at the centre of government plans for decades. These solutions, namely along the Godavari river, only benefit those in the command area of those dams and the adjoining canal systems. The Hindustan Times reports that eleven irrigation projects are in place - 'more than enough for the region – but today seven of these projects are dry' (Article 22). This view is supported up by an unnamed state official in Beed who says 'many villages have overhead tanks and pipelines, but no water' (Article 22). Here, media articles provide critiques of the kinds of infrastructure being build, that focus on large dams rather than smaller local infrastructure or the regulation of groundwater usage which predominates in Marathwada.

Smaller, appropriate technologies are cited as the solution to drought by the Chief Minister Chavan when interviewed in the Hindustan Times in February 2013. His solution is to create an 'alternative water conservation' system comprised of farm bonds, Nullah bunds and smaller dams, capable of '[irrigating] every in inch of farmland in the state' (Article 24). He argues that smaller scale infrastructure local to villages, which are not reliant on canals or large pipes.[41] Whilst demonstrating an awareness of the specific needs of remote communities and geographies, the reporting suggests the purpose of this

[41] The proposal for smaller, more 'appropriate' irrigation technologies appears to preface the Chavan's political opponents the BJP as Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan.

policy is explicitly to facilitate economic growth and the expansion of GM crop varieties. According to article 24, Bt crops such as Bt cotton (which produces 3 or 4 times the yield of 'desi' cotton) is viable in Maharashtra despite the fact it requires 'continuous soaking'. Chavan does recognise the pressures on farmers, 'The farmer is tempted to spend his last paisa on Bt cotton seed, in the hope and temptation that he will make huge gains on the yield;. This alludes to agrarian distress, the cycles of debt, water overextraction and land degradation that farmers get stuck in. For Chavan, the solution is the expansion of water storage to facilitate bt cotton, rather than the curbing of these water intensive practices.

It is reported that the Union Minister of Agriculture and Food Processing Industries Shri Sharad Pawar sees the drought as a crisis of productivity. He says that 'one cannot hope to increase farm production and productivity, if the challenge to provide adequate and timely water to farmers is not addressed' (Article 17). 37 million USD worth of commodity exports is at stake. The deployment of smaller scale irrigation technologies is being pushed by state officials with the goal of increasing productivity rather than safeguarding lives and livelihoods as the primary aim. That the two might are not intrinsically linked, that the benefits of increased productivity are not evenly shared or bt crops are a cause of the drought, is not questioned by these political leaders or reporters.

4.5.1.4 Narrative 4: The Failure of Groundwater Regulation

This narrative echoes the anarchic system of groundwater governance as conceptualised by the Shah (2008). In Article 34, a journalist argues that 'currently, there is no effective legislation for groundwater in the state' and that colonial laws (including the 1879 Bombay Irrigation Act)[42] remain in place (Article 34). Echoing this, a report in the Hindustan Times says 'government has no control over this free supply of water' (Article 22). Other articles report that 'multiple legislative acts' have passed through the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly but have not been put into practice. It cites the Maharashtra Irrigation Act of 1976, five different Irrigation Development Corporation Acts passed between 1996 and 1998, the Maharashtra Management of Irrigation Systems by Farmers Act 2005, and the Maharashtra Water Resources Regulatory Authority Act also from 2005 (Article 16). A Communist Party of India Trade Union leader describes law without rules and enforcement mechanisms as 'a soul without a body' (Article 16). Without prescribed

[42] Linked to the 1882 Easements Act which remains in place at the national level.

methods and procedures [to implement legislation] water management has become a big headache' says a former associate professor at Water and Land Management Institute in Aurangabad (Article 16). There is recognition in the media corpus that legislative implementation has been a failure. There is recognition by successive parliaments that drought is linked to colonial groundwater regulations, but putting new regulations that restrict usage in place has not been successful.

4.5.1.5 Narrative 5: The State as a Short Term Saviour – Diesel Subsidies, the 'Natural Disaster Relief Fund' and the Water Tankers Industry

The corpus of media articles indicates that there are a raft of drought relief policies that both the state and national governments turn to intuitively in times of drought, which tackle the short-term impacts. These are hugely expensive, and while necessary in the short term, don't engage with the underlying causes of drought and agrarian distress. From early in the drought (1st August 2012), the state intervenes to provide relief to farmers suffering from water shortages; rather than deciding to reduce groundwater extraction, it instead announces a subsidy on diesel. This 50% government subsidy for farmers was a national policy introduced by the Union government (Article 7). This was to be introduced for areas where, during the monsoon, the rainfall deficit has been more than 50%, or there has been 15 days or more of continuous dry spells. It is reported that half of this subsidy is to be paid by the state government, and half by central government (Article 6). Diesel is used to generate electricity supply for groundwater extraction, by those farmers that can afford the practice. As this is a national policy, the subsidy can be taken by farmers practicing across the different landscapes of India, from states with large reserves of groundwater that can help mitigate against the rainfall deficit, to regions like Marathwada where groundwater is already greatly over extracted. The reporting suggests that groundwater resources are seen by the government as a safety net in times of failed monsoon. This is not the case in Marathwada where these resources are already overused. This policy was put in place around 6 months before the suspension of alcohol factories in Marathwada in late January 2013, showing a bias towards water intensive industries (Article 20).

Relief packages for farmers suffering from crop failure are shown by reporters to be commonplace as short-term solutions to drought, costing both the state and union governments millions of dollars a year. Article 4 states that **'**When the rainfall deficit for

the country is more than 10 per cent of normal and more than 20 per cent of the country's area is affected by drought conditions, the Centre declares a drought year.' Once this has been announced, relief packages are handed out from the National Disaster Relief Fund. The Financial Times (Article 3) writes that on August 1st 212 RS38 Crore in relief has been handed out by the centre in Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Karnataka. That a system is in place for relief from drought shows the state regularly intervenes to save farmers from its own economic model and water governance regulations. Article 25 from March 2013 states that 4,500 RS will be given per hectare up to 2 hectares for rainfed farmers and 9,000Rs for farmers with an irrigation facility. Farmers who have already have access to more irrigation infrastructure get the most compensation, indicating that low income farmers are disadvantaged (although this point is not made by the reporter). I would argue that the use of the 'National Disaster Relief Fund' for drought mitigation, serves to naturalise the crisis and downplay its human/political economic causes.

A final aspect of short term measures mentioned is the water tanker industry. Water tankers are contracted by government to deliver water supplies in HGVs to drought hit areas. Article 22 says that 'the government has hired 1,300 tankers to supply water and more will come' (Article 22). These tankers are becoming a more permanent fixture over time, with numbers rising from 250 in 2012 to 2,300 in 2012, and 'likely to reach as many as 4,000'. These are privately operated businesses, cannot supply enough water to sustain the economy, and profiteer off the misery of rural communities by importing water and selling at exorbitant prices.

4.5.1.6 Narrative 6: Political Infighting and Accountability

Another emergent narrative in the corpus is the way that democratic processes, namely the division of power and responsibility in coalition governments and the priority given to election winning over problem solving, means that solutions to water scarcity get ignored. There is recognition that political institutions and parties of liberal democracy in Maharashtra have failed to deliver workable solutions over the last decade. The Nationalist Congress Party and INC have been in coalition governments since 2004 at the onset of the 2012 drought. In the Economic Times article of 5th June 2012, the INC Chief Minister of Maharashtra is distancing himself from the Water Resource Department which is run by his coalition partners. The journalist cites irrigation as a 'major political issue', but only in an interview on February 2013 does a politician put forward an overall plan for irrigation policy (Article 24). As previously discussed the intervening time his government

has failed to deliver a white paper outlining how the irrigation department has spent its RS66,000 crores ($8.04bn) since 2004 – leading to further infighting between the two parties.

The Economic Times argues that the potential political ramifications from opposition parties and anti-corruption activist Anna Hazare have led 'both Congress [the INC] and NCP…to be pushing the blame on each other for the plight of farmers and the general population in drought hit areas of the state' (Article 1). It is notable that the journalist in the Hindustan Times on February 9th, notes that Chavan must resolve the irrigation problems as he 'faces assembly elections in 18 months' (Article 23). He had been in power for two years; the INC and NCP in two coalition governments since 2004. Long term planning has failed to prevent the drought in 2012-3; a new vision for irrigation policy is presented with reference to elections and political gain as the primary aim, rather than the protection of farmers. The INC-NCP were voted out of power after its failures, but this is hardly evidence that liberal democratic governance is functioning to protect citizens from environmental hazards. In this framing, the political culture of liberal democratic politics in Maharashtra is argued to be a barrier to the prioritisation and critical engagement with the issues of drought and agrarian distress. There is however no reflection in the articles themselves about the need for new democratic structures or a revised vision of political economy.

4.5.1.7 Narrative 7: Sugar Production Is Not To Blame

Two distinct framings of the role of the sugar industry in the production of drought emerge, the first, discussed here, arguing that sugar production is not to blame for the drought, and that the industry should be supported by government. This framing makes the case that sugarcane production and the accompanying industries are important for global prices, a vital part of the local economy, and deserve to be protected during the drought. The articles in business and finance focused publications do this in particular; already, in July 2012 the Financial Times correspondent in Delhi Amy Kazim links a rebound in the price of raw sugar from a 22-month low due to predicted water shortages in India (Article 3). In MINT 'Suspend cane crushing in 11 factories : Osmanabad DM' from January 2nd 2013, the INC co-operative minister claims 'as millions of farmers in the state are involved in sugarcane farming and it provides employment to a few lakh labourers', making even the short term closure of sugar factories would be detrimental (Article 18). According to

politicians quoted here, many millions of people have economic interests in this industry succeeding for their livelihoods.

The main proponent in this collection of articles of allowing sugar processing factories, alcohol factories and soft drink manufacturing plants open is Jaiprakash Dandegaonkar, a member of the legislative assembly from Basmat in Hingoli District, who is also vice-chairman of the Maharashtra State Co-Operative Sugar Factories Federation Ltd lobby group (Article 18). Dandegaonkar attempts to downplay the amount of water required for sugar processing, stating 'Nearly 70-80% of water used for sugar production is recycled and only when a sugar factory is running a distillery and co-generation unit (to produce power), around three to four lakh litres of water will be required in a day'. He also states that 'Marathwada has very few factories that are involved in allied businesses' (Article 18). This view is countered in the article by other voices, detailed in section 2 (4.5.2).

This perspective focuses on the centrality of sugar to the region, chronicling developments (restrictions on water extraction for industry, the impact on the global sugar market in article 3), without reflection on the links between sugar and drought made by authors like Sainath and Iyer. It also shows the intimate and overlapping relationship between water intensive industries and politicians meant to regulate the industry, with some articles in the corpus providing platforms to pro-sugar perspectives.

4.5.2 Section 2 – 'Changing Policy Goals' and the Hierarchy of Policy Goals

4.5.2.1 Narrative 8: Dissent Against the Sugar Economy and Political Leadership

Contradicting the pro-sugar lobby explained in narrative 7, narrative 8 is critical of its expansion and the protection it receives from government. These views are put forward by worried scientists, academics, bureaucrats and some politicians. That the business dealings of politicians are tied up in the sugar industry is not a secret and MLA Dandegaonkar's case (his comments discussed in narrative 7) is not unique. Many politicians (of all parties) own co-operatives and factories including 13 of the 30 government ministers at that time (Article 18). The Osmanabad Collector (a civil servant) asked for sugar factories to be closed on 2nd January, but this was more than six months from the onset of the drought. A SANDRP representative attacks the 'dubious statistics' that accompany arguments of pro-sugar politicians and the sugar barons who 'treat constituencies like personal fiefs [and] don't want to think beyond personal short-term

profits' (Article 27). This pushes back against the ideas put forward by MLA Dandegaonkar on the amount of water consumed by the industry.

Activist organisations like the SANDRP are not alone in pointing out the unsustainability of sugar in Maharashtra – the World Bank is reported to have continually pointed out the 'unjustifiably high share' the crop holds in the state; this is used to criticise the national government's 2003-4 a memorandum on drought relief that called sugar Maharashtra's 'agro-economic lifeline' (Article 27). Others call for sugarcane to stop being supported by the Minimum Support Price scheme. Instead, it is argued that 'politicians bend over backwards in increasing procurement price every year [to make it] more and more attractive' (Article 27). In late January 2013, as reported by the Economic Times, the Government of Maharashtra eventually forces alcohol factories[43] to shut, but an independent MP from Sangli[44], who led the farmer protests over their drought response, claims 'we have reports that the irrigation department is still quietly supplying water to distilleries and breweries and this is happening at the cost of farmers' (Article 20). In Article 28, an official from the Water Resource Department heavily implies that corruption and self-interest is at the heart of the alliance between politicians and the sugar industry. They say that politicians will be 'salivating' over the possibility of 'syphoning' money from the relief schemes only to then reopen the sugar factories as soon as it begins to rain (Article 28). The narrative here is made that the industries in part responsible for water shortages, including drinking water supplies, will benefit from short term measures designed to mitigate against the humanitarian crisis. The long term causes of drought will not be addressed, and the unsustainable sugar economy will be propped up during the crisis by self-interested politicians, so that it can return to business as normal when the drought has passed.

4.5.2.2 Narrative 9: 'Challenging the Hierarchy of Goals' and Beyond

A small number of articles and perspectives take a more radical approach in challenging the input heavy, cash crop focused, productionist form of agriculture that has become widespread in semi-arid Marathwada.

[43] An industry tied to the sugar industry
[44] A turmeric producing town in Western Maharashtra, around 150km from the border with Marathwada

The diversification of crops and better prices through the MSP are argued to be options to provide alternative ways of making money than the planting of Bt cotton and sugar, that involve less water. 'The sugarcane crop gives farmer assured income and that's why many farmers in Maharashtra have turned to (this) but for Maharashtra, which is drought prone, we should encourage crops such as pulses, soybean, and jowar, which can be grown in rain-fed conditions', says Mulik, Former head of the department at Mahatma Phule Agricultural University (Article 18). He says the government should announce minimum support price for these crops[45].

The suggestion of subsidising micro-irrigation technologies – which at a cost of RS30,000 are still too expensive for the majority of farmers according to the President of the Vegetable Growers Association of India (Article 12) – are suggested as methods for long term changes to the agrarian economy. The director of Director of the Central Research Institute for Dryland Agriculture argues that drip technologies can reduce water needs by up to 50%, with mulching paper (to control evaporation) can reduce water needs by a further 25% whilst reducing the need for pesticides. These contributors reject the state government's position that increasing water availability is enough to produce a workable agrarian economy in the long term, without the need to incentivise alternative crops, organic farming methods and subsidise expensive drip irrigation systems. This solution rejects government policies which pushes for the expansion of the most valuable cash crops for export at the expense of water security.

An outlier in the corpus, the success of banning sugarcane and mandating drip irrigation is shown in article 19 titled 'Village of A Visionary'. This article tells the story of the village of Hiware Bazar, admittedly around 100km to the west of Marathwada, which under the leadership of resident Popat Rao Pawar and the Panchayat transformed its agricultural practices over a twenty-year period. The Adarsh Gaon Yojana (model village programme), launched in 1995 by the Government of Maharashtra helped to fund '52 earthen bunds, two percolation tanks, 100 loose stone bunds and nine check dams were built'. The allocation of money was to be used by local communities to design and implement technologies that were appropriate for the specific communities and landscapes. Since the banning of sugar cane, mandating of drip irrigation, and instigation of tree planting programmes and soil conservation scheme by the Panchayat, groundwater levels have

[45]Pulses have now been included after a 2015 report called for a restructuring of the MSP

been restored, out-migration has stopped, and the per capita income of the village has increased. The village has not been impacted by the 2012 drought as a consequence. This article argues that government schemes can be successful when communities are given a say in how the money is spent, and when communities work co-operatively to make decisions over common pool resources. This case study is used to argue that local governance, which eschews the recommendations and regulations of governance, can be the vehicle for sustainable resource management in the service of the local community.

4.6 Is the slow violence of agrarian distress visible?

Whilst it can be argued that Eckersley's hierarchy of reflexivity sets a high bar for media critiques of the state (calls for 'a transformation of the role of the state' being a big ask of mainstream media publications), the media coverage does visibilise many of the *structural and institutional failings* that cause slow violence under liberal democratic governance, even if the *experience* of affected communities is largely obscured. Two mentions of the 'routineness' of farmer suicide (Article 16, 24) and the 'millions of countrymen starving for water' (Article 11) are the main examples of when the impacts of agrarian distress on actual people are mentioned.

Turning to the structural and institutional failings however, aspects of the temporal dimension of slow violence production are routinely made visible, echoing Nixon's writings on the preference of the liberal state for delayed action (and short termist solutions). This is shown in articles which highlight that Marathwada's irrigation failings since 1960s, including the failure to implement groundwater acts since the 1990s. Furthermore, the evidence from the media corpus suggests politicians in government have not been transparent about government spending, have blamed coalition partners for the drought, and have only become interested in these issues because of their culmination in a devastating event 18 months out from an election. Short term fixes such as the sanctioning of the water tanker industry, debt relief (implemented with advantages for the most-wealthy farmers), and the protection of the sugar industry months after monsoonal rains have failed also echo Nixon's ideas about the liberal (democratic) state's protection of capital through short term measures (2011:265). In terms of the implementation of government policy, there are hints at problematic relationships between contracted workers, and explicit criticisms of corrupt relationships between ministers and the sugar industry.

In the Article 31, the journalist Gangandah reflects on the relationship between political elites and farming communities. Gangandah cites a 'dangerous' division between the experiences of suffering communities and the response of politicians. He says that there is a 'blatant insensitivity of the ruling class, politicians, the police and the rich towards the common man'. He write that 'every single National Congress Party worker should be compelled to visit' the empty dams, and dreams of the media frenzy that would occur from such an event – one that he laments would never happen with both political leadership and media organisations unwilling to broadcast the suffering of communities.

One final example of the visibility of the effects of slow violence is linked to political scandal, following comments by government minister Ajit Pawar in April 2013 (Articles 30, 36). Pawar was the deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra and the former irrigation minister. In response to hunger strikes in Solapur[46] by farmers calling for water to be released from dams into canals, Pawar exclaimed in a press conference that there was no water in dams to be released, and that farmers should urinate in dam. This was met with laughter by his supporters (Article 30). The deputy chief minister was forced to apologise for his comments after backlash from Shiv Sena leader Uddav Thackeray. This example suggests that media attention was only drawn to agrarian distress when it became linked to a political scandal. Rather than a sustained or investigative approach to covering the drought's *impact* on farmers, media coverage in this case appears to have been reactive and sensationalised, driven by the backlash against a politician rather than impact of the crisis itself.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed media publications using Eckersley's hierarchy of reflexivity to understand narratives around the causes and solutions to drought in 2012-3. This was completed because the media is a central part of the public sphere, which has been recognised by green political theorists such as Torgerson and Eckersley as important for the emergence of ecological democracies. The work of Fairclough (2003) and Hajer (2003) demonstrate the role that discourses play in framing policy issues. This was also completed because slow violence, as conceptualised by Nixon and Davies, is understood as a phenomenon that is typically unnewsworthy and 'out of sight', but the drought is an example of how agrarian distress might emerge into 'sensational visibility' (Nixon 2011:2).

[46] Solapur is not in Marathwada, but in the neighbouring Pune region

The findings indicate that that while narratives emerged which highlighted political and infrastructural failures of liberal governance, these narratives correspond to the lowest level of reflexivity in Eckersley's hierarchy. The focus is on increasing productivity (Article 17), rather than ending the agrarian distress experienced by farmers. It is suggested that productivity can be achieved through improved groundwater regulation, smaller technologies and more responsive and transparent political leadership. Some suggest this could Marathwada an agricultural powerhouse to rival states like Punjab and Haryana. It is often stated or assumed that if an adequate amount of water is attained through different/smaller technologies (Article 24), a thriving sugar and Bt cotton economy be sustained.

Unlike the research of Mishra, Iyer and Sainath which stresses the following developments, these seven narratives fail to make the connection between the economic and technological changes in the agrarian economy of Marathwada and agrarian distress. The drought is portrayed as impeding these political economic developments, rather than the drought being a product of them. The underlying idea that through technological intervention the government can facilitate a free, fair and productive market based on cash crops in a semi-arid area, remains in tact.

Two other narratives, which correspond to the second and third levels of Eckersley's hierarchy show greater reflexivity about agrarian political economy, particularly over the sugar industry's excessive use of water resources, as well as the close relationship between sugar barons and the political elite. The article written about the village Hiware Bizare argues that the best use of government funds for irrigation infrastructure comes when it is directed by local communities, and when Panchayats decide their village's own strategies for water conversation and crop planting.

In this corpus of media articles, the causes of slow violence rather than the effects are visibilised; the voices, perspectives and experiences of small-scale farmers in semi-arid Marathwada are rarely found. Critiques are particularly made around the delayed action and short termism of policy making, echoing Nixon's work on the preference of the liberal democratic state for postponed action and the protection of capital. This is in spite of 2012-3 being before the curtailing of press freedoms seen under subsequent Hindu Nationalist governments.

5. The Market and the State: Past and Present Experiences of small-scale farmers in Hingoli District

‘An alcoholic man needs alcohol; that way, chemicals are needed in farms’

(Respondent in Village A)

‘We need a dam. People Are Dying Without Water’

(Respondent in Village C)

Farmers in Hingoli, Maharashtra January 2024

5.1 Introduction

The chapter uses interviews with farmers in three districts in Hingoli District, Marathwada, to understand the experiences of small-scale land-owning farmers. This has been completed in order to centre the experiences of affected communities in discussion of slow violence and agrarian distress. Davies argues that these voices are silenced and are treated as if they ‘do not count’ (Davies 2019:411). Pain and Cahill, in the introduction to a special issue on ‘Critical Political Geographies of Slow violence and Resistance’ argue that it is incumbent on researchers to ‘[privilege] the vantage point of those who are most affected by slow violence’ to fulfil an ‘epistemological commitment to situated knowledge’ (Pain and Cahill 2022: 361). These interviews form an important part of this project, breaking through from desk research to gain insights directly from affected communities rarely consulted in the development of policy or highlighted in mainstream media chapter 3. The data has limitations due to the nature of its collection through an intermediary, which makes claims hard to verify and triangulate. It is hoped that the interview process was also a cathartic experience for participants to voice their opinions and reflect on their experiences.

The interview data is used to answer three research questions: what are farmers’ experiences of the agrarian economy in Hingoli District? What are farmers’ experiences of water and land use schemes, including Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan, that regulate the agrarian

economy?[48] And finally, what are respondents beliefs about political leadership? These questions help us to understand the experience of agricultural commercialisation that has taken place over the preceding decades, the role of government in facilitating and regulating this development, and the question of political will in dealing with agrarian distress. This final question enables an understanding of whether there is hope that liberal democratic politics can overcome agrarian distress by acting in these communities' interests.

In this chapter, firstly, the district of Hingoli is introduced, providing demographic, geographic and economic background to the district. This demonstrates that Hingoli is typical of Marathwada in terms of its low rainfall and poverty levels, but does not have a large sugar manufacturing industry as found elsewhere in the region. Then, the research methods are introduced to explain how data collection was co-produced with a research assistant, having completed this project remotely from the UK. The villages and characteristics of respondents are then introduced, providing context about the gender, caste, water resources and farming practices in each case, before the research questions are answered. The findings demonstrate the complicated social relations including caste, landownership, production methods, literacy and income which influence the lives of rural communities in Marathwada, and the lack of faith in democratic politics to respond to these challenges.

5.2 Hingoli District

Hingoli district was established on May 1, 1999, after being carved from Parbhani district. It encompasses an area of approximately 4,526 square kilometres, and borders Washim and Buldhana (in the region of Vidarbha) and Parbhani (in Marathwada) (see Figure 5). Hingoli district comprises five smaller administrative 'tehsils' or blocks: Hingoli[49], Kalamnuri, Sengaon, Aundha Naganath, and Basmat[50]. As per the 2011 Census, Hingoli District had a population of 1,177,345 (Government of Maharashtra *n.b*). Agriculture forms the backbone of Hingoli's economy, engaging approximately 85% of the population, with the primary crops cultivated being soybean, cotton, tur (pigeon pea), and gram (chickpea). Sugar makes up a smaller percentage of the economy than in other areas of

[48] Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan (the 'Village Water Scheme) was implemented after the 2012-3 drought
[49] Where the city of Hingoli, the administrative centre for the whole district, is situated.
[50] The interviews took place with farmers based in villages in three of these blocks

the state. Three sugar factories are based there – and as of 2011[51] it was responsible for producing 2.6% of the state's sugar crop (Shinde 2016)[52]. The district's soil profile is predominantly shallow black soils (55.7%), followed by deep black cotton soils (36.34%) and medium deep black soils (7.95%) (Agricultural Welfare Department, *n.b*). Hingoli is notable for containing the Isapur Dam on the Penganga River which created one of the biggest reservoirs in the state. Being on the Deccan Plateau, in the 'rain-shadow' of the western ghats, Hingoli experiences water shortages, posing significant challenges to agriculture and overall economic development (IJARIIE 2019). A baseline survey indicated that Hingoli lags behind national averages in several development indicators. For instance, only 54.6% of households have pucca (permanent walls) compared to the national average of 59.4%, and merely 12.2% have water-closet latrines (sanitation facilities) against the national figure of 39.2% (ICSSR 2025).

Figure 5. Map of Hingoli District (Maps of India 2023, Copyrighted)

5.3 Research Methods

Three group interviews took place in December 2023 and January 2024, with between 6 and 7 participants in each group. The three villages are in three different tehsils of Hingoli District. The villages were selected after the RA travelled to tehsils, and found farmers willing to participate. Group interviews were completed because the RA communicated

[51] More recent statistics could not be found.
[52] The land mass of Hingoli is 1.47% of the total of Maharashtra

that farmers were more comfortable speaking in this environment; indeed speaking with colleagues I understand that this form of data collection is typical, particularly for those carrying out ethnographic work in rural areas, particularly in the global South. It was communicated to me by the RA that this was the only way that respondents were willing to participate in the project, and this method became a necessity. Whilst this is a common practice, there are clear limitations of this kind of data collection including in terms of those willing to, or feeling safe to, explain their individual experience or air grievances against fellow participants. These issues are discussed in Slovák et al (2023).

Interviews typically lasted an hour . Having engaged with discussions about the ethics of paying research participants (Warnock et al 2022), I decided that that the farmers, having given up their time to help the study, would be paid 750Rs each for an hour of their time. This was above local hourly rates of pay. They were informed when giving consent that their responses were for PhD research and their responses would not be known by government, charitable or other schemes, or result in benefits from them. Reflecting on the data collected and discussions with the RA, I do not see any evidence that payment impacted the content responses given. If anything, it showed the value I placed on their time and expertise and only my appreciation for their co-operation with a study from the UK which would not benefit them directly.

The interviews were completed following a semi-structured guide that had been provided to the RA and were finalised after our meetings. The interview guide can be found in Appendix 6. The interview scripts began by asking about the land use and demography of the individuals and their village. It then moved to discuss water infrastructures and techniques; incomes, finance and debt; government schemes; political representation; and finally the future of farming in Marathwada (the subject of the chapter 6). These questions were borne out of the literature review, my conceptualisation of slow violence, and the findings of the initial empirical chapter on the 2012-3 Maharashtrian drought. They related the changes to the agrarian economy over the last two decades, covering the time since the 2012 drought, owing to the temporal dimension of slow violence. My interests then lay in understanding the relationship of the farmers to both the economy, and the state government which regulates it. The questions enable an understanding of the implementation of policy, infrastructure and regulations by the liberal state, and the feelings of rural communities towards politicians and the political process.

The respondents gave oral consent that was recorded by the RA, with an example of a completed consent form also in the appendices. The interviews were completed in

Marathi, before being transcribed into English to be coded and analysed by myself on Microsoft Word and Excel. I then followed an integrated thematic analysis. The overwhelming similarities in the experiences of those spoken led me to complete an integrated rather than comparative analysis of the different villages, although the specificities of the villages are detailed where appropriate.

I recognise that completing interviews remotely makes following up on claims made by respondents difficult to follow up on or verify. Discussions with RA were however useful in gaining more context for the villages, the respondents' circumstances, and these findings were triangulated (as best as possible) in the interviews conducted with water resource experts carried out for chapter 6. The findings, rather than being definitive, open up questions about the relationship between the state, the democratic process, and the development of the commercialisation of agriculture. They particularly highlight the social inequalities that are exacerbated or ignored by state policy which ultimately shape access to water, land and fair prices for crops.

Next, the chapter introduces the specific villages, before presenting the integrated analysis to answer the research questions. Villages and respondents names are pseudonymised to protect the identities of respondents given their criticism of government policy and the hostile political environment in Maharashtra. For future reference, the villages, respondents and transcripts will be cited in the following way:

Village: VA/VB/VC
Respondent: R1/2/3 etc
Transcripts Page: P1/2/3

5.4 Introduction to Villages

5.4.1 Village A, Aundha Naganath Block

In Village A (VA), the interview was conducted with members of the Andh community, a tribal or 'adivisi' caste group, in Aundha Naganath block. All respondents were male, apart from respondent 3. While from a religious point of view they are outside of the caste system, tribal communities face their own exclusion on similar grounds, and are grouped by government with 'backward' castes[53]. Respondents describe the other community in the area as being from the 'Dodal' community, a higher caste background who own more land. The farmers we spoke to were landowners, owning less than one acre of land. This

[53] And as such have been given reservations, like scheduled and Dalit castes

was ancestral land that has been broken down into smaller areas over generations when they were inherited by the previous landowner's sons. Respondents described their land as 'mountainous land which is full of rocks' which struggled to hold water[54]. Some of the farmers in the group also had small strips of more fertile land by a small river where vegetables could be grown. Jowar (also known as sorghum), sesame, cotton and soybean were grown on the main areas of their land. Borewells were the dominant form of irrigation.

5.4.2 Village B, Kalamnuri Block

No details were provided about the caste group of respondents in Village B, and all respondents were male. Respondents in Village B describe the quality of their land as 'medium good… not extremely fertile'. The main crops are soybean, cotton, jowar, red gram, with turmeric being grown in smaller quantities by those with the irrigation needed to grow this more water intensive (and lucrative crop). It is estimated by the respondents that 75% of the land relied exclusively on rainwater, with only 25% relying on irrigation technologies – in this case groundwater irrigation. Like VA, the land for these farmers is away from larger or more centralised rivers, canals or dam systems, with irrigation left to individuals to develop; an example of the groundwater anarchy described by Shah (2008).

5.4.3 Village C, Sengaon Block

Village C is in Sengaon Block, in the north of Hingoli District. Respondents 1 to 5 were male, with 6 and 7 were female. They all belonged to scheduled and Other Backward Castes. The respondents said that Maratha's (rather than themselves) were the main landowners ('patils') in their tehsul; while Marathas are more powerful actors in this village, within the state they have a lower position overall. There had been major political agitation from Maratha community in Maharashtra for reservations when these interviews were recorded. Unlike VA and VB, the respondents in VC received their land from the government after it was redistributed one generation back. They each had one to two acres of land. VC has the most acute water related issues - it is 'dryland farming [which] lacks a proper channel', and their wells remain dry. They do not have any functioning

[54] It was estimated that 10 to 12 times the amount of water would be required to make the soil as fertile and wet as better quality soils.

irrigation infrastructure on their land, and rely on rainwater or else pay for high rates for water from neighbouring farms who have functioning borewells.

5.5 Findings

5.5.1 Research Question 1: What are the experiences of small scale farmers of the agrarian economy in Hingoli District?

'For farmers, the main concern is to be free from loan trap'

VA, R1

'Capitalist farmers are improving, but we are not.'

VC, R4

5.5.1.1 Debts, Documentation and Degradation

This section focuses on the farmers' relationship with loans and credit schemes, which are procured from banks, local landlords and agricultural supplies stores. These loans are taken in order to purchase inputs used in industrialised agricultural processes including fertilisers, pesticides and hybrid seeds. The loans are typically paid back on an annual basis after their produce has been sold. Respondents spoke about their struggles accessing loans and the 'debt traps' (VB: R2) they have fallen into when they have been secured, owing, as they see it, not just to high interest rates and the stagnant prices their goods fetch, but also the smaller returns they get from soil which is damaged. The corrosivity of debt and chemicals dependence to their finances and land are shown to be perpetual problems in spite of these issues being highlighted journalists, activists and scholars for many years.

Firstly, the findings show the challenge of accessing loans with the current documentation procedures. Amongst the farmers spoken to, the level of illiteracy was high. In VA, three quarters of the respondents described themselves as illiterate, and having to rely on those with an education to fill out the forms. This theme is picked up in VB and VC also. Unable to fill out the forms themselves, R5 states that illiterate farmers

cannot even rely on the Gram Panchayat (village council)[57] conflict resolution officer to fill out the forms on their behalf, and instead have to turn to literate individuals in the village just to find out how to begin the application process. This is 'not a good idea' they say: they have paid 100 rupees in the past for assistance, and even this has not guaranteed that they will receive help. Respondents from VB also deride the documentation process for accessing bank loans, saying that the 'loans don't come through instantly' once they have been sent off, creating more risk and uncertainty for applicants (VB: p7). Trust of local political representatives, literate farmers and the banks themselves is low.

Dryland agriculture (which relies solely on rainfall) is seen as a big risk for banks and other money lenders, preventing these small land-owning farmers from accessing the amount of credit required for them to run their business successfully. Dryland farmers in VB said that the loans they are offered are half the size of those offered to irrigated farmer – the example of 10,000RS rather than 20,000RS is given (VB: p6). This prevents small landowners from being able to invest in wells and sprinkler systems that would mitigate against water scarcity and financial losses, perpetuating the marginalisation, indebtedness and precarity of rainfed farmers. Over generations, the size of the land owned by individual families has shrunk through inheritance splits: in VB, R1 and R2 say ''We fell into a debt trap with the two acres of land my father cultivated, so I had to go to outside work'. As farm sizes reduce, it becomes harder for dryland farm owners to access sufficient credit from official sources.

For those who are able access loans and credit, repayment is hard given interest rates and diminishing productivity. In VA, R2 took out a loan of 62000R from an Indian Bank, but they are unable to repay the loan given the high interest rate. R3 said the cheapest seeds they can find are 10,000R: this produces 17,000R worth of crops. With production costs included, they made a loss of 25,000Rs in one year (VB p3). In VA a 5% interest is placed on goods purchased from agricultural material shops – which is described as 'an expensive procedure [in which lands] become barren (VA p11)'. Farmers are paying for products that makes their land less fertile and them poorer: 'the costs of insecticides are increasing, but our produce is not' stated a respondent in VB. To supplement this income young people have to migrate to Andhra Pradesh for labour, working on turmeric farms after their cotton crop has been collected, as loan repayments cannot be fulfilled through the productionist agricultural practices they are meant to enable. In farming, R2 in VC

[57] The respondents are not members of the Gram Panchayat

says ‘two people can’t eat properly’ (p5). The balance between repaying interest on inputs and loans is not offset by the returns on crops, which has decreased over time owing to the impact of the inputs on the soil quality.

Other respondents are excluded from applying for bank loans altogether because of the size of their land and profits, and are forced to look for alternative forms of credits: ‘our farms don’t yield enough crops, so getting a loan is very challenging’ they say (VC, R4, p5). They are forced instead to turn to patils and savarkars (larger landowners with capital), entering an exploitative relationship. These interest rates are unregulated. It is this form of debt that R4 in VC said was responsible for farmer suicides: ‘We can't pay back the interest rate We have to sell the farm because of loan problems, That is why farmer suicides are happening (VC: p5). Respondents in VC said that the savarkars set interests rates on loans at 10% which given the spiralling cost of inputs, reduced land quality and stagnant prices (for example cotton which is stagnant for 15 years (VB R3)), is said to be unrepayable. In VB, loans are taken from a local finance company rather than a bank. These loans, like bank loans, are sufficient for farmers to invest in wells and irrigation technologies that could assist farmers in breaking the cycle. One sign of resistance against the loan regime is the self help group ‘Mahil Bachat Gat’ that female farmers in the village have created. They contribute to a central fund which they then use to buy inputs, a sign of solidarity and resistance within the community.

5.5.1.2 The Corrosive Effect of Chemicals on Lands and Profit

Farmers are acutely aware of this cycle that results from high input agriculture, but says breaking from the cycle is not easy. In VA, a proponent of organic farming who works at/for Organic Grower Gujarat[58] used the following simile to clarify the problem. ‘An alcoholic man needs alcohol; that way, chemicals are needed in farms. We can't stop chemicals directly; we have to reduce chemical usage slightly’ (V1: R1: p19). ‘The government should promote organic farming’ he said (V1: p16), and ‘provide subsidies [to this end]. Health will be better, spending on farming will go down and disease will be reduced’(. Attempts to transition to more sustainable forms of agriculture, which do not involve the use of chemicals or GM crops requiring large volumes of water, are hindered by the three years it takes for organic farming to break even. Without government support for this transition, and the need to repay loans in the meantime, this is not a viable option. As much as

[58] An organisation promoting organic farming techniques

farmers would like to ‘disturb the chain’ (VA, R2), farmers are locked into the loan repayments. In the meantime, basic ‘family sustenance is the problem’ (VA, p16). R4 in VB states: ‘You use chemicals, and the land becomes infertile’’. ‘Nowadays production is dependent on chemical spraying; without spraying, we don’t get anything’ chimed in R5. Farmers are aware of the steps that need to be taken to break this cycle, but the short term losses involved make more sustainable farming impossible to achieve. Work by NGOs such as SOPPECOM have been successful in other areas of Maharashtra at overcoming these challenges; although evidence from an interview conducted for chapter 6 suggests that individual farmers deciding to stop using pesticides can have devastating effects with swarms of insects attacking their plot of land.

The products sold to farmers, supposedly to increase their productivity, are often procured also from disreputable sellers coming to the villages who exclaim the virtues of their products. The initial interactions between the RA and respondents shows that this is commonplace, as people believed the RA was a potential salesperson coming to sell their wares. ‘Does anyone guide sowing, spraying and other agricultural aspects?’ VB was asked by the RA. ‘Few people come, but they are sponsored by certain companies and only try to sell their products’ (VB: p3). It is explained that there is a lack of government regulation of these products, with ‘no one from the government side is there to help or guide us’ (R2:VB: p9). ‘Fake advertisements’ (VB:9) are used to lure in farmers and their desperation leads them to try these unknown and unregulated products, with salespeople ‘compelling’ farmers to buy into their brands. Illiteracy and desperation fuels the crisis, as farmers are forced to take a chance on unknown products claim to alleviate their problems. The picture painted is one of no alternative: ‘We have to accept their products, and so our farming style is shaped by their knowledge’ (R3). The result remains the same: ‘the soil becomes infertile’ (R4). The picture painted is one of a vacuum of credible expertise and regulation, echoing Flachs claims about the departure of the state from agricultural regulation (2019), where illiteracy and desperation gives cynical, predatory salespeople the opportunity to exploit farmers in Hingoli.

5.5.1.3 Loan Waivers Produce Unequal Outcomes

The loan waiver system, a policy introduced by successive governments, is shown to be a sporadic, patchy and short-termist solution to the problem of indebtedness. Firstly, loan waivers are only available to those who have been able to access official bank loans in the

first place, with illiteracy, land and production size barriers for a large percentage of the respondents. 'The Thackaray government', the Shiv Sena coalition from 2019 to 2022, 'brought a resolution for loan waivers for the whole of Maharashtra. Did people get benefit from that?' asked the RA to both VA and VB. Most small farmers don't get loans was the reply, and 'for those who don't have any kind of [official] loan, what benefit do they get? (VB: R2: p10). 'We don't want loan waivers; just provide benefits equally. We just want a proper rate for our produce' was the response in VB (p9). In VA, only some respondents who had official loans received the waiver, and even then it was not 'sarsakat mafi' (an entire loan waiver) (R3: p13). The loan waiver system, repeatedly introduced in times of crisis, is comparable to natural disaster relief schemes discussed in the media corpus of chapter 5. These are sticking plasters that demonstrates the unsustainability of the loan taking process and the economy of the region as a whole. The system, even when sporadically implemented, fails to uplift those struggling without the capital and cash flow to fall back on in times of need. Repeatedly having to fall back onto these measures showcases that underlying structural flaws in the economy are not targeted. Respondents in VC were in agreement with respondents in VA and VB: 'The government's benefits are not reaching those who most needy (R6). 'Landlords [who can access loans'] get all the benefits' (R7) they say; 'We don't want waivers, just provide water'.

5.5.1.4 Stagnating Prices, Rising Costs

The findings of this research show that the Minimum Support Price does not succeed in ensuring incomes for farmers in Hingoli. The MSP was put in place by the Government of India in 1965 to mitigate problems raised by the commercialisation of agriculture and its increasing exposure to international price fluctuations. Since 1985, the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP) has been responsible for setting a minimum price for more than twenty crops at the start of each sowing season at which the government will buy the crops through government procurement agencies. The MSP is a barrier between producers and the market to ensure reasonable incomes for farmers when prices drop.

Respondents who sow cotton suggested that the MSP has not helped to maintain the income of farmers through this turbulence. In VB, R3's experience is that 'for 15 years, the same rate has prevailed for cotton'. They go on to say that in more bountiful years, 'when rain falls on cotton, [buyers] just reduce rates' (p6). In more productive years, the abundance of cotton reduces its value, and the MSP system does not function to guarantee their income, either because they do not have access to government

procurement agencies offering the MSP, or the MSP is even lower than the market rate and becomes redundant. The second point is backed up in VC. Farmers are asked if they are supportive of the Punjabi farmers (who made up a large proportion of the 2020 and current protesters (India Today 2024)) asking for changes to the MSP guarantee. They say that their produce 'does not have appropriate rates' under the scheme anyway (VC: p7), and that imports of soybeans allowed by the Government of India further undermine market prices. While the MSP fails to regulate prices for crops, seed prices fluctuate depending on availability to further undermine incomes. The government is accused of profiteering on seed shortages, one year raising cotton prices to 1600 rupees per bag[59]. The commercialisation of agriculture, and the exposure of small farmers to international markets in both input procurement and prices has not been regulated successfully by government. The (failed) government MSP reforms, shelved after protests, suggests that if these failing mechanisms are to be reformed in the future, greater exposure rather than protection for small scale farmers is the direction the of travel.

5.5.1.5 Conclusion

The data collected show that indebtedness and input reliant agriculture, the hallmarks of agricultural commercialisation, continue to produce negative outcomes for small land owning farmers in Hingoli, showing much continuation since the 1991 liberalisation. The loan market is fraught with difficulties for small land-owning farmers, despite repeated the criticism of activists and political ecologists going back over many decades. Illiterate farmers struggle to access bank loans and Panchayats are not trusted to help with applications. Savarkars (local landlords) offer alternatives official bank loans but, according to respondents, charge excessive levels of interest. Access is based on relations with local landlords, of higher caste statuses, with the consequences in poor harvests being land seizures and farmer suicides – explicitly mentioned in VC. Loan waivers are a favoured policy of recurring governments, but this preserves a glass ceiling as only those with official loans benefit. Ironically, loans are not sufficiently large or cheap for investment in irrigation that respondents believe could help break cycles of debt and drought. Loans are set at high rates, inputs are getting more expensive (and damaging for soil), and prices for produce have stagnated. Labour costs also increase with people

[59] The previous year's prices are not given, but given the sums mentioned for yearly income, this is evidently extortionate.

migrating from the area. The MSP, particularly for cotton production, is not functioning, with prices fixed for 15 years. The transition to organic farming is a dangerous financial risk without government subsidies to facilitate sustainable practices that would break the debt trap. These findings suggest that indebtedness and inequality on the basis of land ownership and caste has been catalysed by by agricultural commercialisation. As shown in chapter 2, these issues have been repeatedly by some journalists, activists and scholars, even if they do not form part of the conversation in mainstream public debate (chapter 3).

5.5.2 Research Question 2: What are farmers' experiences of government water and land use schemes, including Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan?

The findings from these interviews show that water access is one of three major concern for small scale farmers in Hingoli, alongside debts and fair prices. The confluence of different factors, including wet and dry drought, the poor implementation of schemes such as Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan and the unequal access for small land-owners has resonances with the challenges in accessing credit discussed in the previous section. This section discusses the challenges that these villages face and the failure of government schemes and the NGO the Paani Foundation to mitigate these risks. Land management schemes are then discussed as tools which further marginalise these farmers, with governments enclosing land to grow forests and failing to provide requisite compensation against wild animal attacks.

5.5.2.1 Water Access

For farmers in VA who rely on groundwater for their agriculture, aquifers and soil quality have both been reduced, and without government intervention in the form of water infrastructure, their crops suffer - not only from dry drought in the summer, but also wet drought during the monsoon season. As mentioned in the opening description of VA, the village has particularly poor soil quality, meaning that, according to respondents around 10 to 12 times the amount of water would be needed to keep the soil at peak condition compared to high quality soil (VA, p4). Wet drought occurs due to a variety of factors: in this context, the poor soil means the water escapes quickly, with evaporation due to heat and deforestation, so that even with precipitation the result is drought (EEA 2021). Conditions like those found in VA mean that the water does not infiltrate into aquifers,

that are tapped using borewells for groundwater irrigation. Their farming is reliant on groundwater, but the geology of the area makes this unreliable. State built canals which could end this reliance do not exist in this area. Problems have become more acute in the past generation – R4 says that cotton and sorghum used to be sown on the land but this is no longer profitable; the use of hybrid seeds (which require more water and degrade soil quality) rather than 'traditional seed conservation' (VA: R4:p9) has changed this. Some cotton is still sown, and soybean too. The only overground water source is a river – but these respondents only have enough land near the river to grow vegetables for themselves.

Without government assistance to overcome these issues (a recent common well to serve the entire Gavthan (area) to solve drinking water shortages the only apparent government technology in place), farmers indicate that they drill borewells out of their own income or else turn to large landowners for help. Tube wells, which go deeper into the ground are too expensive; even borewells (which are shallower) are too expensive for the majority of respondents in VA – 'those who have good land and the [financial] capacity to take borewells, only those people have it' said R2, 'We have one borewell among three of us' stated R3. Farmers have 'worked in other cities and tried to get borewells' given the expense; sprinkler systems which would cut water usage are also beyond their means (VA:p7).

In these circumstances, respondents in VA turned to larger landlords to gain access to water in an exploitative system seemingly mirroring that of the unofficial loan process. The cost of water access is one third of their income (VA: p5) and can only get access 'sift-wise' – waiting in a queue, one after another. The majority of the time 'their water is sufficient for only them', for the wealthy landowners who have functioning borewell, ' so they won't provide us with water' (VA:p8). In VB, similar social relations (involving caste based hierarchies and land ownership disparities) are present, with the large landowners expecting one-quarter of their produce in return for water access; 1000 rupees per night is the charge in VC. This echoes research in other areas of India, particularly the North West (Sayre & Taraz 2019), who highlight how the rapid increase in groundwater usage has exacerbated social inequality, giving capital to larger landowners who have the resource to exploit their neighbours (Jana 2021).

5.5.2.2 Exclusive Reservoirs

In Village A and B, reservoirs have been constructed by government on the farmer's lands, but they have been excluded from its benefits which go to larger landowners with political connections[60]. In VA, the RA noted that a lake has been built near to the village; after enquiring, the benefits of this dam are inaccessible to the farmers. 'We lost our lands in it. But we do not get the benefits of it'. This lake was constructed during Indira Gandhi's premiership, showing the recurring patterns of land loss and exclusion over many decades. VB experienced comparable problems. The Isapur dam, located in the east of Hingoli on the border with the district of Nanded next to VB, led to the creation of one of the biggest reservoirs in Maharashtra. 'The dam is in Hingoli District, but the benefits go to Andhra Pradesh… the people of Hingoli district do not get the water for that dam'. The farmers laugh at the absurdity of the situation. The idea that they might actually get to benefit from a dam that has flooded their land is ridiculous to them. They can see the lake but they are excluded from its benefits because 'we do not have the economic capacity to take water from that lake through pipelines'. In VA, the lake has not produced benefits such as the saturation of soil that borders the lake or replenished aquifers - 'there is one [bore]well near to the lake but it is waterless' they say. This is owing to aquifers being recharged from underground supplies that may be 10s or 100s of kilometres away. The focus on reservoirs over groundwater focused policies in the JSA has failed to deliver benefits for research participants in VA.

5.5.2.3 'Co-production': Implementation of the Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan and other schemes

Turning to Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan (the Village Water scheme), the findings echo the arguments made by journalists in the DNA article of 1st September 2012 levelled against previous irrigation schemes and policies. In that article, Sandeep Pai argued that the 'state sits on multiple irrigation acts, doesn't bother to frame rules' – going back as far as the 1976 Maharashtra Irrigation Act, and citing half a dozen others which remain unimplemented. The need to reimagine irrigation regulations (as discussed in the media coverage in chapter 4) and intervene to redistribute water and prevent groundwater overextraction in Maharashtra has been a recurring promise of governments. But beyond the passing of laws and proposal of policies, the implementation of irrigation schemes has failed. Farmers in VA use the same language to describe the subsequent JSA. 'Yes

[60] Whilst not confirmed, it is likely this is part of the JSA

that scheme was enacted, but we didn't receive any benefit' they say. 'They just created streams, then nothing else', they say, which didn't' provide water, and took over their remaining common grazing land. All three villages were aware of the schemes, VA and VB lost from the scheme, and VC did not even come into contact with its implementation.

In VB, not only is the inefficacy of the infrastructure built under the JSA criticised, but so is the exploitation of recipients labour and money. Co-production has been a part of development schemes for decades, theoretically chosen as a way of including the preferences and knowledges of situated peoples. But rather than involving Hingoli farmers in a way that embeds their knowledge and needs into the scheme, instead the Water Resources Department are said to have exploited the labour and finances of the people-utilising their desperation for water access in the process. Respondents in VB describe how the JSA was implemented: 'the government sponsors the digging of wells but they ask us to dig, and it costs up to 3 lakh ($3,602)' in terms of materials and labour. 'When we have 2 acres of land, how can we manage 3 lakh?' they ask. It is not possible for them to find this money given their revenue, and they do not trust that the money will be refunded to them.

Aside from the wells, the government built one small dam near VB under the JSA, but it has failed to provide them with water. 'It is very small, it's a broken dam. A few walls were built and gates were installed, they did not finish it yet' – the scheme was enacted in 2015 and was due to be complete in 2018. Hopes that it will be completed, particularly when the government has changed hands twice in the intervening years, have all but gone. 'They just built it to loot money from people' they conclude. Some bunds were successful, but overall 'we got a loss from that scheme' R2 says; the evidence suggests the JSA was a regression in terms of financial and water security for these people.

Respondents argue that the requirement on farmers in invest in government schemes is not unique to water schemes, with a 'home building scheme' from the government having led them into debt. 'The money from the government [to implement the scheme] is very insufficient and we are falling into a debt trap'. They can't even afford to build the foundation which the government says they will get refunded. An example given is the Nanasaheb Deshmukh climate resilience scheme, set up by the Government of Maharashtra in partnership with the World Bank for the building of sheds to house picked crops. Like with the JSA however, this required an initial outlay of 5 lakh, which is unaffordable, particularly with little faith that these sums will be reimbursed. On Natural

Disaster Relief Packages (VC: p4), the receipt of sufficient compensation is also rare. 'If there's a natural calamity, they observe half of the villages and dams and give compensation to only half of the people. We didn't get any' (VC).

5.5.2.4 Land Management Schemes

The protection of the natural environment is one area in which the Maharashtrian government is invested. This is demonstrated through multiple policies, including reforestation, but according to farmers this has been achieved at the expense of farmers who suffer wild animal attacks, said to be one of the biggest threats to farmers' incomes and health. 'Wild animals like neelgay[64] and wild pig are more dangerous than anything for our crops' (VA: R3: p16). Monkeys and deer are also cited as a threat. Respondents recalled how they watch wild animals by torchlight eating the seeds that have been planted the day before. Sorghum plants in VB are targeted too. Wild animal compensation has not been received for three to four years (VB, R4, p2).

Beyond wild animal attacks, land reservations by the government for forests has taken away land previously used for domesticated animals that provided produce and helped to till the land of farmers in Hingoli. This communal grazing land for is now inaccessible: 'we do not have an entry to it, so we can't take care of any pets' says R1 in VA. 'In the past, there were animals owned by every household [and] in every village there was a separate person who looked after those animals'. Now there are only two bullocks for every three or four farmers. People from the Forest Department asked people to plant trees – the merit of which they questioned - at their own expense. 'Free services do not come to us... they are procured by their favourite person' (R4: p2). Discussing government policies more generally, R1 in VB stated that the government 'creates many conditions that can't be fulfilled by us' (p9). The example is given, without reference to a specific scheme, that farmers are requested to keep a 100 metre distance from neighbour's farms in order to access its benefits, potentially for the growing of trees or the building of bunds and steams. When farms are so small, it is impossible to meet these expectations.

[64] A large antelope

5.5.2.6 Conclusion

A range of different policies and interventions came up in the discussions across the villages both with regards to water and land management. The Village Water Scheme aimed to end drought in the state by building small scale infrastructure at the village level: the discussion here suggests it had little effect in Hingoli with its implementation being misguided and exploitative of local people's money, land and labour. Alternative sources, required given the challenges in accessing aquifers and the reliance on diminishing and unreliable rainfall, lead farmers to pay huge sums to larger landowners for water access, which is only available when they themselves have surplus.

The policies of the forest department and dam building schemes led to lost land. Additional requirements, such as keeping 100 metre distances between farms for the building of bunds and the planting of trees, create further barriers for accessing government support. As with exclusion from loans, respondents feel that government schemes and benefits are implemented in ways that respond to the needs of the wealthier landowners who have the social (and financial) capital to persuade bureaucrats to implement policies and infrastructure in their favour. This relationship is directly described as a 'contract system' (VA: p14), a corrupt system of influence and favours. What is clear from the findings is the basic needs of fair prices and water access of farmers are not being met by government interventions.

5.5.3 Research Question 3: What are farmers' experiences of political leadership?

'In Hingoli, we don't have proper political representation… We don't have leaders to solve problems'

R1: VB

This final findings section relates to respondents' views on political leadership. These questions were asked given the changes in the political culture over the last fifteen years since Nero's Guests including the rise of populist politics under the BJP and Shiv Sena led coalition governments in Maharashtra[65]. Major policy initiatives were also introduced in

[65] It is appreciated that asking anyone their opinions on an incumbent government will likely result in negative responses.

this time, such as the Village Water Scheme, were brought in under the Fadnavis (BJP) government to ‘end drought’ in Marathwada and Vidarbha. The findings show that a lack of engagement with the needs of farmers, and unkept promises and caste politics are used to gain re-election. This section begins by focusing on the perceived powerlessness (of Hingoli versus other districts, and of voters in relation to politicians) and then evidence of caste and populist politics which is believed to be a barrier to progress on agrarian issues. Evidence here, and from chapters 3 and 4, would suggest that the failure of democratic institutions to respond to small farmers needs in Hingoli (and Marathwada more broadly) goes beyond current Hindu Nationalist and populist trends.

5.5.3.1 Powerlessness

The powerlessness of Hingoli in Maharashtrian politics is felt across the different villages, with little faith shown in the democratic process or different parties to solve their problems. As described in chapter 2, Marathwada is the poorest region in the richest state in India with very different needs and challenges compared to other regions. Calls for a separate state for Marathwada have been on the fringe of debates about the region, but have not led to real political movements to bring about this change (Sujatha 2016). The sense that realities are being ignored by politicians, even given the life and death situations described with reference to debts, land seizures and water access, is palpable (‘we need a water dam; people are dying without water’ (VC:R4:p4)). Asked whether the Thackeray (Shiv Sena) or Fadnavis (BJP) governments are better at addressing their needs, the response is that ‘they can only speak; no right action is taken for us on the ground’ (R1:VC:p6). R1 in VB has a similar response: ‘We don't have any benefit from anyone, specifically not a single party supports our cause’ (p. The respondents say that Winter Assembly of the Government of Maharashtra 2023-4 had ‘no farmer’s representatives’ present. ‘People who come from outside do not listen to local farmers (VA:R7:p13).

In VB, farmers also feel that their taluka (local administrative area) has less political power than neighbouring districts. Asked if their village has a canal, they say ‘No! Water from our area is supplied by the government to other districts. Isapur dam is in our taluka, but our village doesn't get any benefit from that, and neighbouring districts get the benefit’. Conversely, nearby Vasamat has a canal, and this is put down to the area having ‘political power, so they get water’. In Hingoli, they say, ‘ we don't have proper political representation, so they can't raise their voice against water injustice in Hingoli. We don't

have leaders to solve problems'. In VC, the farmers pleaded, saying that they 'need a government in Hingoli'. This statement suggests that government is absent entirely or at least that no government represents their needs or interests. They ask 'sir, please proceed with this research, authorities help us'. The evidence presented indicates that small scale farmer's voices are not being listened to. A farmer is the 'Jagacha Poshinda (Savior of the world) (VA, p14), and farming is the dominant profession in Maharashtra, but their votes are taken for granted.

5.5.3.2 Populist Politics

Populist politics based on divisive nationalistic and caste focused policies are argued to prevent engagement with the economic and financial problems articulated by farmers in these interviews. The Maratha Reservation debate is brought up in VB. Members of the Maratha community have been agitating for reservations for decades, but this has reached a crescendo in the last few years. The Maratha caste community is 'native' to the state of Maharashtra, and there have been claims that they have suffered from caste-based discrimination. There is conflicting evidence about whether this is the case, and the Maratha leadership rejected reservation in the 1960s. What is clear is that over the last year, the Maratha claim to reservation has become a vote winner, caused the breakdown of government, and led to mass protest by Maratha's calling for reservations, with outbreaks of violence also occurring (Bose 2024). In February 2024, two months after these interviews were completed, the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly (MLA) passed a bill to provide a 10% reservation for the Maratha community in education and government jobs (Bose 2024). In VB, the farmers saw the domination of the issue of the Maratha reservation in politics as a barrier to progress on agrarian issues: 'The Maratha Reservation conflict is also ongoing; they don't listen to anyone and ignore farmers' demands' says R4. R5 says that the protesters have destroyed civil buildings, and the government should 'give them proper results' (give into their demands) if it means this disturbance can end. Calls for Maratha reservation have dominated political discourse and farmers argue this has distracted from their needs.

In VB, the MLA is Santosh Bangar. The villagers say that the MLA has never been seen in their village outside of election times. 'They come to give fake promises, but after becoming MLA, they haven't given us anything. Now, elections are coming soon, so they will revolve around the village again', with votes counting only for the election of

candidates rather than acting as a mandate for the issues they face (p7). Santosh Bangar is a controversial figure wedded to the Hindu Nationalist cause, who has made a name for himself through various stunts and interviews. Only this year, he broke election rules by telling school children in Hingoli that they should refuse to eat if their parents say they are not voting for him in this years' MLA elections (Livemint 2024). He also said that he would hang himself in the road if Narendra Modi does not win the 2024 national elections (Banerjee 2024). Crass statements to gain media attention and notoriety amongst the Hindutva have been more forthcoming than policy solutions for the people of Hingoli who rely on him to flag the issues they face to the Maharashtrian assembly. Evidence suggests that political representatives such as Bangar spend more time engaging in cultural wars and identity politics to gain a following, than by representing those who vote for him. Considering the findings of chapter 4 however, the rise of populist politics can be seen as the latest trend to distract and delay action on agrarian distress; the INC-NCP coalition government who oversaw the governance of Maharashtra from 2004 to 2014 were, according to media coverage (and evidenced in the 2012-3 drought) ineffectual in tackling the agrarian crisis.

5.6 Reflections on Slow violence

This findings in this chapter bring out the everyday injustices and challenges which create agrarian distress in Marathwada, that sit beyond the appreciation of media coverage and political discourse. It highlights the ways that a credit and input reliant agricultural model has eroded at the land, resources and incomes of communities in Hingoli District. It also show the ways that caste and class relations within these villages, which dictate access to the benefits of government schemes, water infrastructures and credit, are exacerbated by the commercialisation of agriculture. This has been shown in other regions of India too (Jana 2021). The issue of farmer suicides is directly raised by one respondent discussing the repossession of land by creditors, with this issue chiming with the description of the violence of primitive accumulation discussed in chapter 2 (Tyner and Inwood 2014). Government schemes such the Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan, Minimum Support Price, reforestation and climate resilient programmes, have not been successful in regulating the market and environment for the benefit of participants. Instead, respondents argue they have been excluded from their benefits and their labour and financial resources have been at times exploited too.

Participants are able to reflect back on their own lives, and those of previous generations. The sense is that the changes brought by borewell revolution and the commercialisation of agriculture have been building over time and are reaching a crescendo. Asked 'how do you see the future of farming?, R1 in VC says bluntly 'our time is over now'. There is a sense of lost agency over their lives, and the governance structures meant to produce prosperity and protect citizens being lost over time, with present and future generations facing challenges that their predecessor would not have imagined, and a lack of faith in political structures to end this slide.

5.7 Conclusion

The chapter has presented findings from small, land-owning farmers in Hingoli District in Marathwada, asking them about the changes that have been brought about by the commercialisation of agriculture. The chapter has focused on three key areas: firstly, the changes to the economy and finances of small scale farmers; secondly the access to water and the role of water and land use schemes in responding to these changes; and thirdly the opinions of farmers on political leadership and the degree to which they believe that politicians can be relied upon to overcome the challenges they face.

Overall, the findings show the continuation and entrenchment of the problems of commercialised agriculture raised by activists and scholars for decades, highlighting the unresponsiveness of liberal democratic governance. Input reliant agriculture has led to debt traps and soil degradation that undermines the productivity of farms in Hingoli. Appropriate loans are hard to access for small landowners due to high levels of illiteracy and low incomes. The MSP is not functional in securing a liveable income, particularly given fluctuations in seed prices and the difficulty in reaching government procurement agencies. Given these challenges, loans have to be accessed through local landlords at high rates which are unregulated by the government. The loans are not large enough to be able to invest in irrigation which might enable farmers to break this cycle; this goes also for transitions to organic farming which are prevented by the three years it would take to begin making profits through these new practices. Water schemes, such as the JSA have not been implemented successfully, with corruption and incompetence as key themes. Land has been taken away from farmers to build dams, but the farmers spoken to have not been connected to these supplies. Respondents now have little faith in the democratic process to overturn these injustices, as caste politics and Hindu nationalist

politicians seek re-election on issues that do not relate to the lived experiences of farmers in Hingoli, and history provides little reassurance of change. These findings would benefit from triangulation with individual interviews, given the limitations on confidentiality which Slovák et al (2023) highlight.

6. Technical Fixes and the Future of Agrarian Distress in Marathwada: Analysing the Marathwada Water Grid

'There's no time here, not any more... this is the trap. This is nowhere, and it's forever.'

From Saphire and Steel, BBC Drama 1979
as quoted in Mark Fisher's 'Hauntology: Ghosts of My Life' p1

RA: How Do You see the Future of Farming?
Farmer: Our Time Is Over Now.

Hingoli Farmers, January 2024

6.1 Introduction

Having considered the past and present of agrarian distress in Marathwada, this chapter discusses a future government proposal: the Marathwada Water Grid (MWG). The evidence presented in previous chapters suggests that the causes of agrarian distress in Marathwada have not been addressed through successful or appropriate policies over a long period of time. The issues raised in the academic literature in Chapter 2 regarding the causes of agrarian distress and farmer suicide remain evident in my interviews with farmers in Hingoli conducted in December 2023 and January 2024. Statistics published since these interviews suggest that these challenges remain undiminished: 2,851 farmers committed suicide in Vidarbha and Marathwada in 2023 (Times of India 2024a), while a *Down to Earth* report stated that in 2024 the water table in Beed district had reached a 30-year low of 300 metres below ground level (Nitnaware 2024b).

The focus of this chapter is the Marathwada Water Grid, the largest and most politically significant policy proposal designed to tackle water scarcity in the region. The policy has been in development since 2018. A megaproject costing approximately $4.7 billion (Mid-

Day 2020), it aims to connect 11 dams across the region. Chief Minister Fadnavis argued that the scheme would "make Marathwada's drought history" (NDTV 2019). This echoes the stated aims of the Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan (JSA), which later became embroiled in corruption allegations following findings by the Comptroller and Auditor General concerning misspent public funds (Ashar 2020; Karthikeyan and Doshi 2025).

This chapter addresses two research questions. First, what does the MWG seek to achieve, and what might the consequences of its implementation be? By identifying the aims of the project, it becomes possible to assess whether new proposals correspond to the findings of this thesis and whether meaningful policy learning has taken place since 2012. I argue that the MWG exhibits many characteristics of what Science and Technology Studies (STS) scholars describe as a "technical fix" (Weinberg 1978), one that does not address the social relations underpinning farmer suicides and agrarian distress. Second, why, in light of the evidence presented, does the MWG remain such a compelling option for policymakers? Flyvbjerg's (2004) concept of the four technological "sublimes" and Scott's (1998) theory of high modernism offer insight into this question.

To support this discussion, I conducted interviews with three experts on the agrarian crisis in the region: a journalist and author, the leader of a groundwater management NGO, and an engineer with several decades of experience working for the Government of Maharashtra. Their perspectives are triangulated with media reports on agrarian policy, white papers on the MWG, and the findings presented in Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis.

The structure of the chapter moves from the case study to theory and back again in the discussion. It begins by introducing the MWG, outlining its purpose, technologies, and the actors involved in its implementation. The following section introduces ideas from STS concerning technologies as harbingers of modernity (L. Marx 1997), instruments of future-making (Urry 2016), and tools of political control (Winner 1980). The concept of the technical fix emerged in the 1960s (Weinberg 1978) and refers to interventions that render complex, often "wicked" social problems (Rittel and Webber 1973) amenable to engineering solutions. STS scholars argue that such interventions often rely on oversimplification and support hegemonic political and economic systems while masking their political implications through an ostensibly apolitical discourse of progress (Hess 2007). Similar dynamics have been identified in water infrastructures that reinforce state control and forms of "political rule" (Obertreis et al. 2016: 172).

The methodology section explains the selection of interviewees and the semi-structured interview approach employed, before the discussion addresses the two research questions.

Three main arguments are advanced regarding the likely impact of the MWG. First, the policy focuses primarily on surface water infrastructure rather than regulating the dominant groundwater economy that lies at the centre of the agrarian crisis (Shah 2009). Second, the project seeks to consolidate state control over water distribution while further commodifying water resources. Third, the MWG introduces new ecological risks through large-scale inter-basin water transfers that may endanger both human and non-human actors.

Flyvbjerg's four "sublimes" of megaprojects — technological, political, economic, and aesthetic (Flyvbjerg 2014) — help explain why the MWG remains appealing despite concerns raised by water experts and the findings of this thesis. The MWG reflects a politics of grand rhetoric and lost control, in which liberal democratic politicians claim the ability to "end drought" through Promethean technologies despite historical evidence and the messy social realities on the ground. This disconnect between technocratic schemes and lived reality offers insight into the potential continuation of slow violence under liberal democratic governance.

6.2 **The Marathwada Water Grid**

This section introduces the case study of the Marathwada Water Grid (MWG). The MWG is a major infrastructure project proposed by the Government of Maharashtra that would create a network of pipelines and dams across Marathwada. The scheme would establish an integrated water pipeline network of approximately 1,300 km, linking dams at Jayakwadi (Aurangabad), Yeldari (Parbhani), Majalgaon and Manjra (Beed), Lower Terna and Sina Kolegaon (Osmanabad), Dhanegaon (Latur), and Siddheshwar in Hingoli on the Purna River.

Media reports suggest that the project would benefit 76 towns, 79 talukas, and 12,000 villages across the region, reaching approximately 18.7 million people (Mid-Day 2020). The pipelines would be connected to water treatment plants and pump houses, allowing water to be transferred from water-surplus reservoirs to drought-prone talukas (Indian Express 2019). In 2019, Fadnavis announced a collaboration with the Israeli state water

company Mekorot Development and Enterprise. Mekorot has partnered with governments around the world on water management projects, and in Maharashtra the MWG forms part of its role in "advising the government and planning a master plan for the water economy with a 2050 planning horizon" (Mekorot 2024). The project is estimated to cost ₹40,000 crore (approximately $4.7 billion), with Mekorot reportedly holding a 60% stake in the project (Mid-Day 2020). Additional funding is being sought from the Government of India and the World Bank (Sambhajinagar 2024).

Central to the success of the project is the proposal to transfer vast quantities of water from the flood-prone Konkan region in western Maharashtra to the drought-prone Godavari basin in Marathwada. Maharashtra is geographically divided by the Western Ghats, a mountain range running parallel to the Arabian Sea coast approximately 30–50 km inland. To the west lies the Konkan region, characterised by numerous rivers and high levels of rainfall, while to the east lie the Deccan Plateau and Marathwada, which receive significantly lower rainfall. Large-scale water transfer projects intended to support semi-arid regions of the state have been proposed since the 1960s, with programmes such as the Krishna Bhima Stabilisation and Krishna Marathwada Lift Irrigation schemes representing earlier, smaller-scale examples (SANDRP 2015). However, the pan-state MWG and Konkan–Godavari transfer proposal represent a project of an entirely different scale. The MWG has been promoted as the next major step towards ending drought in Marathwada by increasing water supply, with the JSA previously presented by Fadnavis as a successful initiative for improving local water storage capacity.

The first detailed plan for the MWG was outlined in the 2018 document produced collaboratively by the Government of Maharashtra's Water Supply and Sanitation Department and Mekorot, titled Marathwada Water Supply Master Plan (MJP 2018). The document proposes a "comprehensive water supply master plan covering all types of water resources and demand categories (potable and urban, livestock and agricultural), in order to help achieve sustainable long-term water balance and avoid any water shortage crises" (MJP 2018: 11).

A map of the scheme is shown in Figure 6, illustrating the three categories of water transfer infrastructure: the main, secondary, and reverse-flow sections of the network. The map demonstrates that the grid would cover the entirety of Marathwada, while also highlighting the vast distances over which water would be transferred. The proposed

transfer of water from the Konkan region to the Godavari basin in Marathwada would only occur once the internal grid within Marathwada had been completed.

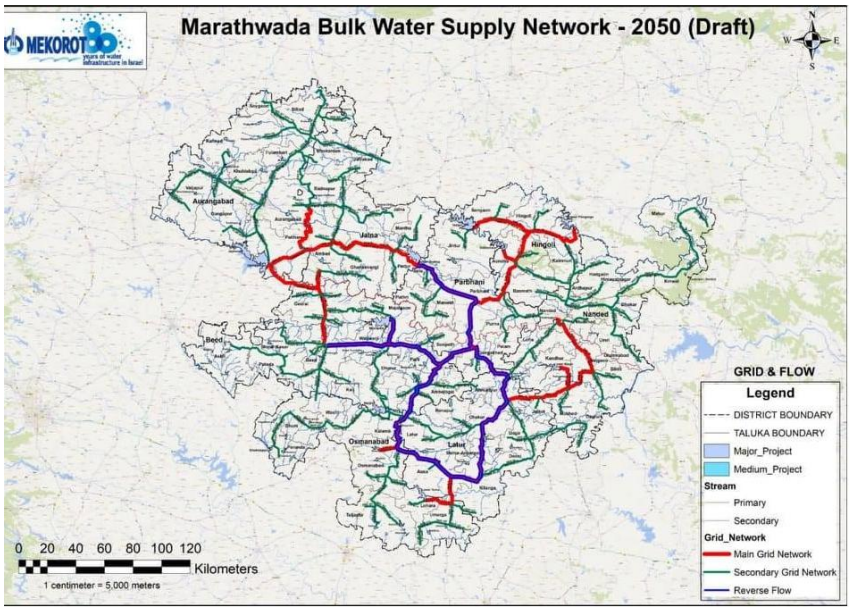

Figure 6. Map of the Marathwada Water Grid (Tiwari 2023)

6.3 Technology, Modernity and Future Making

Before turning to the discussion section, this section develops ideas concerning the material and discursive role of technology in modern politics. Policymaking is a form of future-making undertaken in the public interest and implemented through state institutions and technologies. Scientific and technological innovation has transformed humanity's relationship with nature and reshaped perceptions of agency over the future. In pre-modern societies, the future was often believed to lie in the hands of gods, mystics, and prophets, interpreted through religious texts and their earthly representatives (Urry 2016). This divinely ordained order was challenged during the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Industrial Revolution, as developments in science and technology increasingly provided humans with the tools and confidence to shape their own futures through ideas of progress.

Influenced by Thomas More's Utopia, political philosophers such as Condorcet and Francis Bacon imagined futures organised around scientific advancement and rational governance. In Bacon's New Atlantis, Salomon's House — a scientific research institution — governed the fictional island, while Condorcet envisioned a prosperous, egalitarian, and enlightened society directed by scientific expertise (Kumar 1987: 22). These

Enlightenment ideals of human progress through science and technology were later influential among American republicans such as Franklin and Paine (Hawke 1998). Through science and technology, humans increasingly came to see themselves as capable of managing their own destiny. The modern state embodies many of these assumptions, positioning itself as a technocratic and modernising force capable of reshaping societies and landscapes.

Gray's Black Mass argues that modern political ideologies nevertheless retained deeply religious and millenarian characteristics while replacing older belief systems. Utopian futures, or what Gray calls "apocalyptic fantasies", developed by Enlightenment thinkers and their political successors remained infused with ideas resembling the Christian Second Coming (Gray 2008). Visions of the "End of History" recur across modern political thought, appearing in thinkers as diverse as Bacon, Marx, Lenin, and Fukuyama's argument concerning the triumph of capitalist liberal democracy in the 1990s. Anatole France famously wrote that "without utopias of other times, men would still live in caves, miserable and naked… out of generous dreams come beneficial realities" (France 1896/1904). Yet, as Gray argues, such visions may also produce oversimplification, falsehoods, and dangerous utopian or dystopian political projects.

If prophets and mystics were once believed to foresee the future, in modern societies politicians, policymakers, scientists, technocrats, and financial actors increasingly occupy this role. The utopian and dystopian imaginaries of modernity often become material realities through technological systems and infrastructures.

Considering the discursive power of technology, Leo Marx argues that the term itself only emerged in its contemporary form within the past two centuries. He warns that "technology" has become an amorphous, depoliticised, and potentially "hazardous" concept, frequently treated as synonymous with progress itself (Marx 1997). Marx uses a speech by the US congressman Daniel Webster at the opening of a railroad in New Hampshire in 1847 to demonstrate a significant semantic shift. Earlier Enlightenment thinkers such as Paine, Condorcet, and Franklin viewed developments in the "mechanic arts" as tools for achieving broader human progress. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, technological innovation itself had increasingly become equated with progress (Marx 1997: 565). Technology was no longer viewed as a means to an end; it became the end itself.

This uncritical faith in technological solutions remains visible in contemporary political discourse, whether in relation to post-Brexit trade arrangements, climate change mitigation, or responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Such examples demonstrate a discourse that places extraordinary faith in science and technology while depoliticising the social, political, and ecological consequences of technological development and implementation.

To counter this depoliticisation, scholars in STS and Critical Water Studies emphasise that technologies embody specific forms of power and authority (Winner 1980). Obertreis's contribution to the 2016 special issue of Water Alternatives argues that water infrastructures should be understood as socio-political constructs rather than merely technical or engineering projects. Water infrastructures are therefore tools for producing particular futures and political objectives. Contributors to this body of scholarship discuss, for example, the role of nationalism in dam-building projects in Sudan and the political, economic, and ecological implications of large-scale irrigation projects in Uzbekistan and India.

This intellectual tradition has a long history, extending from Wittfogel's controversial theory of "Oriental Despotism" (1967) to contemporary scholarship on water politics (Mollinga 2008), water governance (Boelens and Doornbos 2001; Suhardiman 2014; Mirumachi 2015; Conca 2006), and Foucauldian analyses of technological power drawing on Discipline and Punish (1977) and The Subject and Power (1982) (Hellberg 2018). STS and Critical Water Studies therefore emphasise that technologies are instruments for producing specific social futures rather than neutral embodiments of progress. Scholars demonstrate how technologies are often developed and implemented by governments and corporations in ways that consolidate political control while obscuring their wider social, political, and ecological consequences through technocratic discourse. social, political, and ecological consequences through technocratic discourse.

6.4 Technical Fixes, Grand Schemes and Megaprojects

"Technical fixes" are a subset of technologies that STS scholars argue exhibit problematic characteristics when applied to complex and intractable social problems. The meaning of the term has evolved over time. Alvin Weinberg first used the concept to suggest that technology could offer superior solutions to problems traditionally understood as social, political, or cultural. Significantly, Weinberg made this argument in 1965, only three years

before William S. Gaud of USAID coined the term “Green Revolution”, reflecting the techno-optimism of the period.

Criticism of technical fixes also emerged during the 1960s. Burke (1967), for example, warned against what he described as a growing “technological psychosis” (Nicotra 2017), arguing that societies were becoming dangerously infatuated with technological solutions. A technology-first logic continues to play a major role in contemporary policymaking (Stirling 2008: 264), including within schools of thought such as ecomodernism (Latour 2015). Importantly, STS scholars do not criticise technical fixes because they are anti-technology or “Luddite”; rather, they are concerned with the potentially damaging consequences arising from the misapplication of technology and the depoliticised discourse surrounding it (Van den Hoven et al. 2012).

Several critiques of technical fixes can therefore be identified. First, they may adopt a reductionist understanding of social problems by focusing narrowly on the ways technologies can alleviate immediate symptoms. As a result, they often provide only shallow or temporary solutions that fail to address underlying structural causes. When implemented by large and powerful organisations, technical fixes may allow the root causes of harm to persist while obscuring the actions of politically or economically powerful actors. Hess (2007) argues that technological fixes frequently reinforce dominant political and economic systems. Shiva similarly interpreted the Green Revolution in these terms, arguing that it was proclaimed a success by institutions that directly benefited from it — including both the Indian state and its technological suppliers in organisations such as the Rockefeller Foundation and the US government (Shiva 1989: 12).

Classic examples of technical fixes include geoengineering proposals designed to shield the earth from solar radiation or store carbon dioxide underground without addressing dependence on fossil fuels. Similar dynamics exist within public health, where a focus on frontline medical treatment may neglect the social determinants of illness such as poverty, housing, and education. Carson’s Silent Spring and Beck’s Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk (1995) similarly demonstrate how narrow framings of complex problems produce narrow definitions of policy success. What counts as a successful technological intervention — and what is dismissed as an acceptable externality or collateral damage — depends heavily upon how the problem itself is framed.

From the late 2000s onwards, some political ecologists and STS scholars advocated more participatory approaches to technological design and implementation, emphasising collaboration between engineers, social movements, and affected communities. Such approaches suggest that under liberal democratic governance, states should develop strategies that support vulnerable communities without exhausting their time and resources.

Scott's Seeing Like a State vividly illustrates how the ideology of high modernism and the desire for centralised administrative control can produce catastrophic consequences. Scott highlights "the dangers of dismembering an exceptionally complex and poorly understood set of relations and processes in order to isolate a single element of instrumental value". He demonstrates this through examples including Soviet collectivisation, scientific forestry in Germany, the architecture of Brasília, and villagisation programmes in Tanzania. Scott's work illustrates how poorly researched and ideologically driven schemes may fail disastrously when confronted with social and ecological reality. Governments often favour order, legibility, and simplification because these qualities symbolise control over both nature and populations while facilitating state administration and market expansion. These ideas are revisited in the discussion section below.

6.5 Methodology

To support the discussion of the MWG, key informant interviews were conducted with three individuals. All interviews were completed and recorded via Microsoft Teams in English before being transcribed. The interviews were loosely structured and explored the interviewees' professional backgrounds, the work of their organisations, and their relationships with the Government of Maharashtra's irrigation and agrarian programmes. Participants were asked to provide insight into the failures of the agrarian economy in Marathwada in relation to farmer suicides and prolonged water shortages. They were also asked to reflect on the actions of previous governments, including the JSA and attempts at groundwater regulation, and to consider the likely impacts of the proposed MWG. Finally, interviewees were invited to suggest alternative strategies for addressing agrarian distress in the region, drawing on their own work and experience.

The three interviewees were: a journalist who has reported extensively on agrarian distress in Marathwada (R1); an employee of an NGO working directly with communities in

the region to address water shortages (R2); and a retired engineer who had worked as a bureaucrat within an autonomous body under the administrative control of the Government of Maharashtra's Water Resources Department (R3). R3 had worked within the organisation for more than three decades. These respondents were selected because of their long-standing engagement with the agrarian crisis in Marathwada, whether through implementing governmental or non-governmental water management strategies or documenting the lived experiences of small-scale farmers across the region.

The discussion section draws on these interviews alongside grey literature, social theory, and reflections on findings presented throughout the thesis. Additional sources include news reports, material published by Mekorot and the Water Resources Department, and government white papers such as the 2018 Marathwada Water Supply Master Plan. The findings presented here remain necessarily speculative given that the MWG has not yet been fully implemented.

6.6 Discussion

6.6.1 The Marathwada Grid Focuses on Overground Water Systems

The first, and perhaps most obvious, feature of the MWG is that it seeks to move vast quantities of water across the state through pipelines and large-scale surface infrastructure. However, as this thesis has demonstrated — and as emphasised by the interviewees — the agrarian crisis in Marathwada is fundamentally a groundwater crisis involving a distinct set of technologies, regulations, and social relations that the MWG neither directly addresses nor regulates.

According to figures from the Government of Maharashtra's Minor Irrigation Census, the number of borewells increased fourfold between 1976 and 2007, rising from approximately 500,000 to 2,150,000 (Sheikh 2016). This expansion contributed to a reported 70% decline in groundwater levels. The development of cheaper borewell technologies enabled widespread over-extraction of groundwater and played a central role in producing the contemporary crisis. Rather than addressing this system of extraction, the MWG effectively circumvents the politically and technically sensitive issue of groundwater regulation by overlaying new infrastructure onto existing patterns of water access and use.

While suggesting that the MWG may prove partially successful during years of good monsoon rainfall, R2 expressed serious doubts regarding the project's ability to respond

consistently to the scale of the crisis. According to R2, approximately 90% of water access in the region occurs through wells and borewells, and under the current "anarchic" system of groundwater exploitation it is "nearly impossible to implement and prevent new borewells from being drilled on land". As groundwater levels continue to decline, only those with sufficient financial resources to drill deeper borewells are likely to retain reliable access to water.

According to a report produced by R2's organisation, drilling deeper into aquifers also threatens drinking water quality because deeper aquifers contain sulphides and other contaminants. Although the Maharashtra Groundwater (Development and Management) Act was first introduced in 2009, implemented in 2014, and amended in 2020, R2 argued that enforcement remains extremely weak. Regulations supposedly preventing drilling below 60 metres are frequently ignored or circumvented. As a consequence, R2 described a "mass exodus" of people migrating to cities such as Mumbai and Pune in search of alternative employment opportunities.

The evidence presented here suggests that the MWG fundamentally misdiagnoses the agrarian crisis in Marathwada by framing water transfer as the primary solution to what are, in reality, deeply embedded social and political relations surrounding water access, as discussed in Chapter 5. The MWG does not directly address the anarchic system of groundwater extraction or the water-intensive industries — particularly sugar cultivation — that have contributed significantly to drought conditions. In this sense, the MWG resembles the "technical fix" described by STS scholars: a project that either misdiagnoses or ignores the underlying social and technological causes of crisis in favour of solutions more amenable to state control and engineering intervention.

6.6.2 The MWG is About Control and the Commodification of Water

The MWG also exhibits characteristics associated with Obertreis's concept of "political rule" and Scott's theory of high modernism. By reducing the broader complexities of agrarian distress to the problem of increasing water supply, the project transforms water quantity into a singular metric of social progress and crisis resolution. Scott argues that states frequently convert "qualitative issues" into quantitative ones measured through a "single metric" such as profit, output, or production because these are easier to administer and control (Scott 1998: 346). Similar dynamics are visible in the framing of drought and agrarian distress within the MWG.

Questions concerning social inequality, livelihood insecurity, farmer suicides, caste relations, and unequal access to water are simplified into a technical problem of water availability. Rather than asking broader questions — such as why farmers struggle to access water, why poverty remains entrenched, or why suicide rates remain high — the project instead assumes that increasing water volumes and economic productivity will automatically produce social progress. R2 stated that large-scale water transfer schemes have been "a dream of government for 70 years in Maharashtra" but have never been fully realised. This ambition dates back to the early postcolonial period when, as demonstrated through the Green Revolution imagery discussed in Chapter 4 (Deshmukh and Joshi 2020), technological infrastructure became closely associated with state-building, modernisation, and political legitimacy. In this sense, the MWG revives an older developmental vision centred on extending political control and demonstrating state capacity through large-scale infrastructure.

Although the project may not be driven by an explicitly revolutionary ideology comparable to the cases examined in Scott's *Seeing Like a State*, it nevertheless remains deeply political. The post-political discourse surrounding neoliberal development frames the MWG as an axiomatic and self-evidently rational solution, while portraying the modern state as a Promethean actor capable of "ending drought" through technological intervention. Yet despite this ostensibly neutral and scientific discourse, the project carries significant political and economic implications. Given that the scheme represents an investment opportunity for the Israeli water company Mekorot, it is reasonable to assume that financial returns are expected through the further commercialisation of water resources. Furthermore, the inequalities identified in Hingoli — where small-scale farmers frequently struggle to access existing schemes, infrastructure, and agricultural loans — suggest that, unless these issues are meaningfully addressed during implementation, marginalised communities may once again be excluded from the benefits of the project.

6.6.3 The MWG involves Ecological Risk

The interview with R3, a former government engineer, raises further concerns regarding both the contract system through which state projects are implemented and the ecological risks associated with such schemes. Reflecting on the JSA, R3 argued that construction companies "went on widening and deepening the nala [watercourses] in a

very excessive manner, and there things went wrong. The whole scheme was hijacked by the owners of JCBs [excavators] and other companies because their interest was to dig and dig and get the money. That affected the aquifer, because these got exposed by the deep cutting."

When asked whether these issues had been resolved in preparation for the MWG, R3 responded critically, arguing that politicians "always like [this], they love to have drought and water stress because that is the opportunity for them to earn money" through relationships with construction contractors and political funding networks. Evidence from a contributor who worked for decades within the Government of Maharashtra therefore suggests that corruption and political interests frequently override the concerns of planners and engineers attempting to account for ecological risks within project design. As R3 stated, "Governments, irrespective of political party, are never bothered about management of irrigation systems. They're only interested in construction."

More broadly, scientists have raised substantial concerns regarding the environmental, social, and economic consequences of inter-basin water transfers (WWF 2007; Zhang et al. 2015; Zhuang 2016). While such schemes may produce certain benefits — including reducing pressure on groundwater resources (Poland 1981), improving water quality (Hu et al. 2008; Rivera-Monroy et al. 2013), and supporting ecological restoration efforts (Snedden et al. 2007; Dadaser-Celik et al. 2009) — they also carry significant ecological risks.

These include evaporative losses and leakage resulting from inadequate infrastructure maintenance (Davies et al. 1992), salinisation caused by reduced downstream flows (Zhuang 2016), increased nutrient loading from donor basins (Fornarelli and Antenucci 2011; Jin et al. 2015), and the spread of pollutants and invasive species (Murphy and Rzeszutko 1977; O'Keeffe and De Moor 1988; Snaddon and Davies 1998; Clarkson 2004). Inter-basin transfers may also alter native species composition and disrupt local ecosystems (Grant et al. 2012; Lin et al. 2017). Evidence from R3 suggests that such ecological concerns are often marginalised during the implementation stage of large government projects.

6.7 Slow Violence, Democracy, and the Four Technological 'Sublimes'

This section addresses the second research question: why does the MWG remain such a compelling option for policymakers despite the criticisms outlined above? Flyvbjerg's (2004; 2014) concept of the four "sublimes" of megaprojects helps explain the enduring

political appeal of large-scale infrastructure schemes. Flyvbjerg argues that megaprojects persist not simply because they are rational or economically efficient, but because they generate powerful emotional, political, aesthetic, and economic appeals for different groups involved in their planning and implementation. These “sublimes” help explain why governments repeatedly pursue ambitious infrastructure projects despite substantial evidence of cost overruns, environmental damage, implementation failures, and limited social benefits.

The first is the technological sublime: the fascination engineers, planners, and political elites often feel towards large-scale technological systems and the possibility of “pushing the envelope” through ambitious designs. Megaprojects are frequently presented as evidence of modernity, scientific progress, and state capability. They symbolise humanity’s ability to overcome natural constraints through technical expertise and engineering intervention. In the case of the MWG, this technological sublime is clearly visible in political rhetoric surrounding the project. The promise to “end drought” through a vast network of dams, pipelines, pumping stations, and inter-basin water transfers reflects a profoundly modernist faith in technology’s capacity to overcome ecological limits. Water scarcity is therefore reframed not as a consequence of political economy, unequal resource access, groundwater overextraction, or ecological degradation, but as a technical problem solvable through sufficiently advanced infrastructure. The scale of the project itself becomes evidence of political seriousness and technological sophistication.

This technological imagination is closely tied to what Scott (1998) describes as “high modernism”: the belief that scientific planning, technological intervention, and centralised administration can rationally reorganise complex social and ecological systems. As with the examples examined in *Seeing Like a State*, the MWG simplifies an extraordinarily complicated set of social, hydrological, and ecological relations into an engineering problem manageable through technical expertise. The project seeks to render water scarcity “legible” to the state through quantified flows, mapped infrastructures, and centralised systems of control. Yet, as Scott demonstrates, such simplifications often fail because they overlook local knowledge, informal social relations, ecological complexity, and unintended consequences. The technological sublime therefore produces not only optimism, but also a dangerous overconfidence in the capacity of technological systems to resolve crises rooted in structural inequalities and environmental limits.

The second sublime identified by Flyvbjerg is the political sublime. Megaprojects provide political leaders with opportunities to demonstrate ambition, authority, and decisiveness. Large infrastructure schemes are highly visible and easily communicable to the public, particularly in electoral politics. Announcing a megaproject allows politicians to position themselves as visionary modernisers capable of transforming landscapes and solving long-standing social problems. In drought-prone regions such as Marathwada, where water scarcity is both materially devastating and politically salient, the promise of a massive water infrastructure project carries significant symbolic power.

The MWG therefore functions not only as a practical policy proposal but also as a political performance. Political leaders can claim to be taking decisive action against drought, agrarian distress, and farmer suicides, even if the structural causes of these problems remain largely unaddressed. The scale and visibility of the project help create an image of state competence and control at a time when governments may otherwise appear unable to manage escalating ecological crises. R3's comment that "the government has made [ending drought] an issue of prestige" reflects this dynamic clearly. The project becomes tied to political legitimacy and electoral identity, making criticism politically difficult even where substantial technical or ecological concerns exist.

This political sublime is particularly significant within liberal democratic systems. Politicians operating within electoral cycles often favour projects capable of producing visible and immediate political gains. Large-scale infrastructure offers opportunities for media coverage, ribbon-cutting ceremonies, and symbolic demonstrations of progress. By contrast, policies focused on groundwater regulation, restricting water-intensive crops, strengthening local institutions, or addressing caste inequalities may be slower, politically contentious, and less visually dramatic despite potentially being more effective in the long term. The MWG therefore aligns closely with the incentives produced by democratic competition and developmental politics.

The third sublime is the economic sublime, which refers to the powerful economic interests generated by megaprojects. Large infrastructure schemes create enormous flows of public and private capital involving construction companies, engineering firms, consultants, investors, subcontractors, and financial institutions. As Flyvbjerg argues, megaprojects are attractive not only because of their stated developmental goals, but because they create substantial opportunities for profit and economic accumulation.

The economic sublime is particularly visible in the case of the MWG given the scale of investment involved. The project is estimated to cost approximately ₹40,000 crore ($4.7 billion), with funding involving state institutions, international financial actors, and private corporations. The involvement of Mekorot and the search for additional funding from institutions such as the World Bank indicate that the project is embedded within broader networks of global capital and infrastructure finance. Such schemes therefore create powerful coalitions of interests committed to their continuation.

R3's reflections on corruption and construction contracts within the JSA also suggest how megaprojects may generate incentives for politically connected contractors and construction firms. According to R3, political actors "love to have drought and water stress" because these conditions create opportunities for infrastructure spending, construction contracts, and political funding relationships. Whether or not such claims can be fully substantiated, they point towards an important political-economic dimension of megaprojects: crises themselves may become economically productive for certain actors. In this context, drought does not simply represent an environmental disaster requiring resolution, but also an opportunity for capital accumulation through infrastructure development.

The economic sublime is also connected to broader developmental ideologies surrounding growth and modernisation. Increasing water supply is assumed to generate economic productivity through agricultural expansion, industrial development, and urban growth. Yet this emphasis on productivity often obscures questions concerning distribution, sustainability, and social justice. The economic rationale underpinning the MWG therefore prioritises aggregate growth while paying comparatively little attention to who benefits from this growth, who bears the ecological risks, and whether such development is environmentally sustainable over the long term.

The final sublime identified by Flyvbjerg is the aesthetic sublime, referring to the emotional and symbolic appeal of monumental infrastructure itself. Engineers, architects, bureaucrats, and political leaders may derive satisfaction and prestige from constructing vast, iconic systems that visibly reshape landscapes. Megaprojects often become symbols of national progress, state power, and technological achievement. Dams, bridges, pipelines, and large-scale irrigation systems possess a visual and symbolic grandeur that smaller, decentralised interventions do not.

Although less immediately visible than dams or skyscrapers, the MWG nevertheless reflects this aesthetic dimension through its scale and ambition. Maps of the proposed pipeline network portray the state as capable of reorganising entire hydrological systems across vast territories. The imagery of interconnected dams, pipelines, and water transfers creates a vision of mastery over nature and environmental uncertainty. Such representations reinforce the legitimacy of technocratic governance by presenting infrastructure as evidence of progress and modernity.

Importantly, these four sublimes do not operate independently. Rather, they reinforce one another. The technological sublime legitimises the political sublime by presenting political leaders as modernising visionaries. The economic sublime provides material incentives for corporations, contractors, and financial actors to support projects politically. The aesthetic sublime reinforces all three by symbolically representing infrastructure as inherently progressive and desirable. Together, these dynamics help explain why megaprojects such as the MWG remain politically attractive despite repeated warnings from hydrologists, environmentalists, journalists, and local communities.

Flyvbjerg argues that these sublimes frequently override rational cost-benefit analysis, producing what he calls the 'megaproject paradox': the systematic underestimation of costs and overestimation of benefits (Flyvbjerg 2003, Chapters 2–3). Megaprojects are therefore often sustained less by empirical evidence than by political desire, technological optimism, and institutional momentum. Whether the MWG will ultimately follow this pattern remains to be seen, but the evidence presented throughout this chapter suggests that similar dynamics may already be visible.

Viewed through the framework of slow violence, the persistence of such projects demonstrates how liberal democratic governance may continue reproducing environmental harm even while claiming to resolve it. The MWG promises a dramatic technological future in which drought can be eliminated through engineering intervention, yet in doing so it risks obscuring the slower and more deeply embedded causes of agrarian distress: groundwater depletion, ecological degradation, caste inequality, uneven development, and agricultural commercialisation. In this sense, the project may ultimately reproduce the very forms of slow violence it claims to overcome.

6.8 Conclusion

This chapter has drawn upon literature from Science and Technology Studies and Critical Water Studies to critically appraise the MWG, the latest major scheme proposed to address drought in Marathwada. Using a range of sources, the chapter has highlighted significant limitations within this approach, suggesting that the MWG exhibits many of the characteristics associated with technical fixes and megaprojects.

The project seeks to remake the spatial organisation of Marathwada by centralising control over water distribution without adequately addressing the social relations underpinning unequal water access. Evidence concerning the project's funding model further suggests that it may contribute to the continued commodification of water resources, potentially deepening inequalities for low-income farmers. Rather than representing the "classic neoliberal response of postponed action", the MWG instead constitutes a dramatic and interventionist megaproject likely to produce substantial ecological and social consequences.

is text is widely cited in political ecology and water governance literature on unequal groundwater access.

proof read The work of Flyvbjerg and Scott helps explain why such projects remain politically compelling for democratic governments. The MWG is infused with Promethean language concerning the power of technology to reshape nature and "end" drought, yet the evidence presented throughout this chapter from policy reports and interviewees suggests that these ambitions remain fundamentally at odds with the complex social and hydrogeological realities of Marathwada. Liberal political theorists often argue that liberal democracy possesses the capacity to learn from policy failure and improve over time through institutional self-correction. However, the findings presented here suggest that such learning is not taking place in this case and that the MWG may ultimately intensify rather than resolve the slow violence of agrarian distress. These concerns include weak oversight of construction contracts, the unwillingness of political actors to engage meaningfully with hydrogeological expertise, the continued commodification of water resources, and broader structural pressures beyond governmental control, including climate change. The perpetuation of slow violence through misdiagnosis of policy problems sits at odds with the techno-optimism on display in this data. This speaks to the incongruity of democratic discourse and the realities of policy outcomes which underpins

perpetuations of violence and injustice, and the ineffectual liberal democratic-technocratic state in Marathwada

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7. Conclusion

Different am I
So unusual my life
My death will surprise you
Like the untimely rain
Fond of poetry
I exist like the cotton crop
It's root sweet
Alike the hard stem of sugarcane
Of my death, they'll say
How it hangs
Like decorations on doorframes

Shri Krishna Kalamb, Maharashtrian Farmer Poet,
Who took his own life[70]

7.1 Introduction

This thesis has explained the various ways in which agrarian distress in contemporary Marathwada can be understood as a form of slow violence (Nixon 2011). Agrarian distress, the common term for rural poverty, has been attributed by various authors to the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s (Mishra 2020; Iyer 2022; Sainath 2009; Kohli 2012). This thesis has argued that these reforms tell only part of the story and should instead be understood as part of a broader matrix that includes the development of affordable borewells, Green Revolution technologies, the continuation of laissez-faire colonial-era groundwater regulation, and, more recently, failed technocratic approaches to water management, as seen in the JSA and MWG. This has all occurred under liberal democratic governance. The convergence of these elements has created a desperate situation for small-scale, groundwater-dependent farmers in Marathwada. This thesis analyses this phenomenon through the framework of liberal democracy. It has argued that the mechanisms of liberal democracy have, over the period of this study, been ineffectual in protecting small-scale farmers in Marathwada from the negative impacts of these

[70] As read in Nero's Guests (2009)

changes. Instead of improving their income and agency, small-scale farmers (particularly those with less than two acres of land and from lower caste groups) have become increasingly precarious and vulnerable, leading, too often, to farmer suicides: 32,605 farmers took their own lives between 2001 and 2019, 84% of them in Vidarbha and Marathwada (Ade 2021). Sainath argued in the pioneering film *Nero's Guests* (2009) that agrarian distress in Maharashtra could be summarised as "the drive towards corporate farming". This has been an agenda pursued by successive governments and reinforced through IMF structural adjustment policies. In Marathwada, this model of agricultural commercialisation was implemented through flawed assumptions about the region's hydrogeological capacity, economic potential, and social relations.

What this thesis has sought to achieve is an understanding of how and why agrarian distress and farmer suicide remain so prevalent despite years of documentation by journalists, researchers, and NGOs; repeated experiences of drought; changing government policies; and the election of successive governments. The concept of slow violence, which describes long-term, embedded, and often "unseen" socio-economic processes that lead to harm (Nixon 2011), has been employed to understand how agrarian distress in Marathwada continues apace without meaningful structural intervention. Bringing slow violence into dialogue with this case is a key contribution of this thesis, as the concept offers a new perspective on water scarcity and remains underemployed in critical water studies.

Looking back to the Constituent Assembly and the role of Dr Ambedkar and Congress in creating a secular and progressive postcolonial state in India, this thesis has focused on liberal democratic governance because it was designed as a vehicle for social justice (Ambedkar 1948). It has considered three aspects of liberal democratic governance in an attempt to understand their relationship to the slow violence of agrarian distress. By employing Marxist political economy and critical political ecology, the thesis has demonstrated that the experiences of small-scale farmers in Marathwada under conditions of primitive accumulation are worthy of the name violence. It has further argued that the state has increasingly relinquished its role as mediator between citizens and capital, thereby negating its responsibility to protect the lives and livelihoods of the rural communities under study. More broadly, this thesis contributes to understandings of liberal democratic governance in the context of the climate emergency. Drawing on the work of Plumwood (1995), Eckersley (2004), and Bailey (2015), it questions whether this system of governance, often proposed by liberal political theorists as the most effective

form of government (Fukuyama 1989; Sen 1999), possesses the institutional capacity to respond adequately to long-term ecological crises.

7.2 The Contributions of this Thesis

This thesis has engaged with a growing body of geographical scholarship (Loyd 2012; Springer 2011; Tyner 2012; Woon 2011, 2013; Wright 2011) that calls for a re-evaluation of the term violence beyond conventional understandings of violence as immediate, spectacular, and physically visible acts. Following Nixon's (2011) formulation of slow violence, this thesis has argued that agrarian distress in Maharashtra should be understood as a gradual and structurally embedded form of violence. This argument has been supported through a three-part conceptualisation of slow violence developed from Nixon's work: a nominal aspect, in which the harms produced through agricultural commercialisation, indebtedness, land loss, ecological degradation, and farmer suicide ought to be recognised as violence; a temporal aspect, emphasising the long-term development of agrarian distress; and a spatial aspect, demonstrating how these processes are tied to uneven regional development and socio-spatial inequalities within Maharashtra. Conceptualising agrarian distress in this way represents an original contribution to both slow violence scholarship and studies of agrarian change in India.

While much of the literature on slow violence focuses primarily on neoliberal capitalism, this thesis has instead foregrounded liberal democratic governance in order to understand how the democratic state responds to, obscures, and reproduces slow violence. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates concerning the capacity of liberal democratic institutions to engage reflexively with ecological degradation, climate crisis, and rural inequality. This has been undertaken with an awareness of alternative theories of the state, particularly those emerging from post-development and postcolonial scholarship.

In Chapter 3, this thesis contributed to debates on decolonial theory and methodology by critically examining claims that social theory functions primarily as a vehicle for neocolonial domination. Reflecting on the limitations imposed by travel restrictions and positionality, I argue that although social theory remains dominated by perspectives from the global North, scholars such as Connell and Go risk overlooking the contributions of critical theorists, Marxist thinkers, postcolonial scholars, and political ecologists whose work actively critiques structures of exploitation and violence. I take a critical stance

against rigid divisions between “Northern” and “Southern” theory, particularly in the Indian context, where theorists of democracy, capitalism, and ecology from multiple traditions can provide valuable analytical insight. The chapter also reflects on the increasing politicisation of “decolonialism” within contemporary India, particularly through its appropriation by the Hindutva right to delegitimise criticism and constrain academic freedom.

Methodologically, the thesis contributes to discussions surrounding collaborative, remote, and reflexive research practice in increasingly difficult research environments. The second half of Chapter 3 demonstrates that working with research assistants, particularly under conditions where in-person fieldwork may be politically or ethically risky, can produce meaningful and collaborative forms of research. At the same time, the thesis openly reflects on the anxieties, compromises, and ethical ambiguities involved in conducting remote fieldwork as an early-career PhD researcher during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. In this sense, the project reflects broader transformations in academic research shaped by shrinking research budgets, environmental concerns surrounding international travel, restrictive visa regimes, and growing authoritarianism in many fieldwork contexts. The autoethnographic reflections included in the thesis therefore serve not only as methodological transparency, but also as an example of the emerging realities of qualitative social research under these conditions, illustrating both productive practices and mistakes or limitations that future researchers may learn from.

In Chapter 4, I brought together literature from green political theory and liberal democratic theory to analyse representations of the 2012–13 drought in Maharashtra. This chapter contributes to understandings of how slow violence is represented, obscured, or depoliticised within the public sphere. Analysing English-language newspaper coverage, the chapter demonstrates that despite the scale of the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Marathwada, discussions remained dominated by technical and managerial perspectives rather than structural critiques of agricultural commercialisation, deregulated groundwater extraction, or regional inequality. The experiences and perspectives of small-scale farmers were largely absent from this discourse, suggesting limitations within elite forms of the public sphere as mechanisms of democratic reflexivity and accountability.

Chapter 5 contributes original empirical evidence on agrarian distress and water governance through interviews conducted in Hingoli district between December 2023 and January 2024. Respondents reflected on changing agricultural practices, ecological

decline, indebtedness, and their growing distrust of political leadership and state-led development schemes. The findings demonstrate how market-oriented agricultural policies and projects such as the Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan failed to overcome entrenched social inequalities between caste groups and between large and small landowners. The chapter highlights how many farming communities increasingly view their futures with pessimism, captured starkly in one respondent's statement: "our time is over now".

Finally, Chapter 6 analysed the proposed Marathwada Water Grid (MWG), a megaproject promoted by the Government of Maharashtra and Mekorot as a technological solution to drought. Drawing on Science and Technology Studies literature on "technical fixes" (Weinberg 1978), the chapter argues that the MWG simplifies deeply social and ecological problems into engineering challenges while failing to address the structural causes of water scarcity, including unsustainable agricultural practices, inequality, and groundwater depletion. The chapter therefore contributes to scholarship on technocratic governance and demonstrates how slow violence may continue to be reproduced through depoliticised megaprojects that prioritise infrastructure and productivity over environmental justice and social sustainability.

This thesis has also explicitly addressed its central research questions concerning how agrarian distress in Marathwada can be understood as a form of slow violence, and how liberal democratic governance responds to and reproduces that violence. Across the empirical chapters, the thesis demonstrates that agrarian distress emerges not from isolated policy failures or climatic events, but through the interaction of groundwater depletion, agricultural commercialisation, uneven development, caste hierarchies, and technocratic governance. Together, these findings suggest that slow violence persists not despite democratic governance, but through its institutional logics and developmental priorities.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that agrarian distress in Marathwada should not be understood as an unfortunate by-product of development or climatic uncertainty, but as a form of slow violence embedded within political, economic, and ecological systems that continue to privilege extraction, commercialisation, and short-term growth over environmental justice and sustainable rural livelihoods. In highlighting the limitations of technocratic governance and the inadequacies of existing democratic responses, this thesis contributes to wider debates concerning governance in the climate emergency. At the same time, it emphasises the importance of reflexive, collaborative, and ethically

attentive research practices capable of engaging critically with unequal power relations both in the field and within the academy itself.

In conclusion, this thesis argues that rather than protecting vulnerable citizens such as the groundwater- and rainfed-dependent farmers represented in this study, liberal democratic governance in Marathwada has increasingly treated them as acceptable casualties of primitive accumulation and agricultural commercialisation. The underlying rationale for improving water availability has remained largely unchanged throughout the period under study: more water is pursued primarily to expand water-intensive crops and industry in pursuit of short-term economic productivity. Yet water is a common pool resource fundamental to life, and its commodification has intensified ecological degradation, scarcity, and social inequality. Without a substantial transformation in the institutions, regulations, and ideologies governing water use, these dynamics are likely to deepen rather than resolve the crisis. As climate change intensifies ecological uncertainty and Indian politics continues along an increasingly populist and nationalist trajectory, this thesis finds limited grounds for optimism regarding the resolution of agrarian distress in the near future.

While NGOs and panchayats may continue to mitigate challenges at the local level, slow violence is likely to persist without a broader reimagining of the state as an environmental protector rather than exploiter (Eckersley 2004: 8). Policies such as restricting sugar cultivation, ending collusion between politicians and so-called “sugar barons”, expanding support for organic farming, and implementing accessible and enforceable minimum support prices for non-cash crops could form the beginning of such a transformation.

This transformation must begin with the recognition that Marathwada’s land, soil, water resources, and people cannot continue to be treated as expendable casualties of short-term and ultimately Icarian models of agricultural commercialisation. I conclude with an analogy from a foundational text of political ecology that I encountered early in this PhD and repeatedly returned to throughout the research process. Though referring to the western United States, Edward Abbey’s reflection speaks directly to the pursuit of agricultural commercialisation in semi-arid Maharashtra:

> “Water water water … There is no shortage of water in the desert but exactly the right amount, a perfect ratio of water to rock, of water to sand, insuring that wide, free, open, generous spacing among plants and animals, homes and towns and

cities, which makes the arid West so different from any other part of the nation. There is no lack of water here, unless you try to establish a city where no city should be …"

Edward Abbey, Desert Solitaire (1968: 130)

7.3 The Limitations of the Study

This study was completed remotely from the United Kingdom due to the visa issues discussed in Chapter 2. As a result, the project is limited in its ability to capture the everyday lived effects of slow violence in Marathwada, as well as the implementation of government policy by bureaucrats and contractors on the ground. By working with a research assistant, I was nevertheless able to conduct interviews with farmers in Hingoli district and gather valuable data on how small-scale farmers negotiate water access, government schemes, and market pressures. While this method of working was beneficial in many ways, the study would likely have benefited from ethnographic fieldwork involving deeper immersion within the communities and landscapes under study. Research incorporating the embodied experience of living within semi-arid Marathwada could have provided a more holistic understanding of the everyday realities faced by farming communities.

As discussed at length in Chapter 3, the data collected from farmers in Hingoli was limited to three villages within one district. This limitation emerged from a combination of travel restrictions, financial constraints, and the timing of the fieldwork during the final year of the PhD after unsuccessful attempts to obtain a research visa. Broader fieldwork across multiple districts in Marathwada would have enabled stronger comparative analysis concerning how agrarian distress manifests across different ecological, social, and political contexts, including differences in caste relations, cropping patterns, and interactions with state institutions.

The methodological approach adopted in this thesis also raises broader questions concerning the realities of contemporary qualitative research. Conducting fieldwork remotely through collaboration with a research assistant required navigating institutional delays, safeguarding concerns, unequal power relations, and the emotional pressures of remote research management. These experiences reflected wider structural changes affecting early-career researchers, including shrinking research budgets, environmental concerns surrounding international travel, increasingly restrictive political environments, and the growing normalisation of remote methodologies in the post-Covid academic

landscape. While the project demonstrates the possibilities of collaborative remote research, it also reveals its limitations and ethical ambiguities. In this sense, the thesis may serve as both a practical and cautionary example for future researchers working under similar constraints.

Finally, the theoretical discussions concerning liberal democracy can only be preliminary. While scholars such as Nixon, Davies, and Brickell have examined different forms of slow violence, relatively little work has focused specifically on the democratic state as the central object of analysis. Further comparative research examining how slow violence operates under different democratic and non-democratic political systems would be necessary before making broader claims about the structural limitations of liberal democratic governance. I would also have liked to engage more extensively with the substantial literature on the postcolonial Indian state produced by political scientists and historians.

7.4 Questions for Further Research

This project opens several avenues for future research concerning the relationship between slow violence, environmental governance, and liberal democracy. Comparative studies examining irrigation systems, agrarian modernisation, and ecological governance across different political systems or national contexts would provide valuable insight into how various regimes respond to long-term environmental crises. In particular, this thesis has demonstrated that significant barriers exist within the Government of Maharashtra's approach to implementing scientific and ecological knowledge, especially through corruption, technocratic governance, and the depoliticisation of water scarcity within projects such as the Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan and the proposed MWG. Comparative research could therefore help evaluate the adaptability, transparency, and inclusiveness of different governance systems in responding to ecological crises and agrarian distress. The paper published by Chacko (2023) on the interlinked roles of 'paternalism, neo-liberalism and Hindutva civilizationalism', could offer an intersectional and political ideology rather than governance focused framework for understanding slow violence and agrarian distress.

The most immediate continuation of this project, research visa permitting, would involve immersive ethnographic fieldwork in villages across Maharashtra. Such research would provide a richer understanding of the everyday lived experiences of slow violence while

also focusing more directly on the agency, resistance, and adaptive capacities of farming communities. Due to its emphasis on political systems, governance, and structural critique, combined with the realities of conducting research remotely from the United Kingdom, this thesis has necessarily presented a relatively pessimistic account of agrarian life in Marathwada. While this perspective is supported by the data collected, future research focusing on local resilience, ecological adaptation, collective organisation, and community-led alternatives may provide a more balanced understanding of how farming communities negotiate adversity.

Future work could also explore more collaborative forms of research involving NGOs, activist networks, environmental groups, and local organisations committed to ecological sustainability and social justice. Moving beyond the state as the primary object of analysis may reveal forms of agency, resistance, and environmental stewardship that remain less visible within this thesis. Such approaches may help reposition farmers not simply as victims of macro-economic and ecological change, but as active participants shaping alternative agricultural and political futures.

8 References

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9. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Table of Contents for the Lexis Media Corpus, used in Chapter 4

LexisNexis®

User Name: = subscriber16829

Date and Time: = 2022-02-28

Job Number: = 165359416

Documents (40)

Client/Matter: -None-

Search Terms: Maharashtra marathwada water scarcity drought

Search Type: NaturalAnd

Content Type	Narrowed by
news	Timeline: 01 Jun, 2012 to 31 Dec, 2013 Publication Language: English Geography News: Asia Geography News: Southern Asia Geography News: India Geography News: West India Geography News: Maharashtra, India Keyword: drought Keyword: irrigate Keyword: farmer

1. NCP fails to meet the 'white-paper deadline'; Chavan gets aggressive

2. NCP Fails to Bring out White Paper on Irrigation Projects

3. Slow monsoon season threatens India crops

4. Agriculture secretary raises red flag as monsoon proves elusive

5. Confederation of Indian Industry: Deficient Monsoon a Major Concern: CII

6. Diesel aid, relief package in govt's drought strategy

7. Government takes steps to address potential drought

8. India's low level of monsoon rains hits farmers, likely to send demand for power soaring;Scarce rain in India hits farmers, power supply

9. Scarce rain in India hits farmers, power supply

10. Scarce rain in India hurts farms, power supply

11. India facing third drought in a decade: What steps has the government taken so far?

12. Farmers Bet on Cheaper,Local Micro-irrigation

13. Modi Faces Political Drought

14. Waiting for rain

15. Sluggish Monsoon Threatens India's Growth

16. State sits on multiple irrigation acts, doesn't bother to frame rules

17. India : Adequate water availability is a must for enhancing farm productivity-Sharad Pawar

18. Suspend cane crushing in 11 factories : Osmanabad DM

19. Goveranance: Village of a Visionary

20. Drought Hits Liquor Producers in State

21. Grape,Pomegranate Prices Dip on Harsh Winter & Oversupply

22. Panic aggravates water crisis in state

23. CM Prithviraj Chavan links drought to irrigation mess

24. 'With just 50% irrigation, state can feed the nation'

25. Tackling drought: Maharashtra makes drip irrigation mandatory

26. Govt okays Rs.2,892-cr relief for 7 states

27. Govt sanctions Rs 2,893 crore disaster relief fund for 7 states

28. Krishna, Godavari basins drying up;Water-intensive sugarcane crop grown in drought-hit areas is to be blamed

29. Maharashtra drought: a story of India's failed water management

30. Ajit Pawar apologises for 'urinate' comment on Maha drought

31. So much water under the bridge

32. It's deja vu all over again

33. Farmer fasting for water to Ujani finds irrigation experts' support

34. Manufacturing drought, Maharashtra style!

35. Water will reach Ujani in 40 days: Govt to HC

36. No Need To Urinate In Dams Mr. Pawar: Amravati Farmer's Water Petition Gets Unprecedented Support

37. Sugarcane can prove to be Maharashtra's nemesis

38. Parched Earth Policy

39. Smaller dams make sense

40. Water Governance and Droughts in Marathwada

Appendix 2: Example Media Article from Corpus

LexisNexis®

NCP fails to meet the 'white-paper deadline'; Chavan gets aggressive

The Economic Times

June 5, 2012 Tuesday

Section: POLITICS/NATION

Length: 602 words

Body

MUMBAI: ***Maharashtra*** Government's ***Water*** Resources Ministry controlled by the NCP has not been able to bring out a white paper on the expenditure of Rs.66,000 crores on various irrigation projects launched in the last decade. It was announced in the cabinet meeting two weeks ago that such an audit (white paper) will be published within 15 days. ***Maharashtra*** CM Prithviraj Chavan's demand to bring out a white paper on irrigation sparked off a bitter political war between coalition partners Congress and NCP in the state.

As it becomes clear that NCP lead ***Water*** Resources ministry is not able to justify the expenditure of Rs.66,000 crores incurred in 10 years, Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan is now seen targeting Sharad Pawar's NCP at every public event over the failure of irrigation schemes in the state. Since the Congress-Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) coalition government has come to power in ***Maharashtra*** a little over 10 years ago, the irrigation ministry has always been controlled by the NCP and most of the time it was held by Sharad Pawar's nephew Ajit Pawar. Now with ***drought*** situation in the state becoming a major political issue, Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan is seen targeting the NCP for the government's failure to provide ***water*** to the farmers despite spending over Rs.66,000 crores of tax payers money.

Speaking last week at a farmer's meet in Akola in Vidarbha region, Mr.Chavan said, "The main reason behind farmer's woes is lack of proper irrigation. We have to really investigate why the government has failed in the last 10 years to provide assured ***water*** supply to farmers in all parts of ***Maharashtra*** despite thousands of crores of rupees being spent on these irrigation schemes." It was clear that Mr. Chavan wanted to point out to the farmers that the NCP and especially Deputy CM Ajit Pawar was responsible for the failure of irrigation schemes.

Water scarcity and ***drought*** situation in Western and Southern ***Maharashtra*** has already become a big political issue. Though there are no major elections lined up immediately in the state, the ruling coalition fears that if the opposition parties and activists like Anna Hazare carry on a campaign on the issue of ***drought*** and failure of long term irrigation schemes, it would certainly cause a set back for both the parties. Sensing this, both Congress and NCP seem to be pushing the blame on each other for the plight of farmers and the general population in ***drought*** hit areas of the state.

NCP President and Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar hit back at Chavan at NCP's working committee meet in Mumbai by saying "The state government's decision making process has slowed down to such an extent that most MLAs are feeling frustrated. Many are demanding a change in the leadership." Mr.Pawar also made some

comments against the state governor earlier for allegedly not allotting funds for ***drought*** hit areas in time. (according to article 371 in the state of ***Maharashtra***, the governor has special powers to allot funds for irrigation)

Maharashtra Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan who is generally considered to be suave and non-aggressive is now seen taking-on the NCP at every opportunity. In his one day tour of Panjabrao Deshmukh Agriculture University at Akola last week he blasted the NCP over ***water scarcity*** in both his speeches. Earlier the last round of the interparty feud happened when Mr.Chavan's tour of ***drought*** affected villages was ridiculed by NCP President Sharad Pawar as tokenism. During that visit Mr.Chavan had a lunch with some farmers on a field in ***drought*** affected Satara district.

Appendix 3: Consent Form

Lancaster University

CONSENT FORM
Project Title: A Study of Water Management in Marathwada

Name of Researcher: John Campbell
Email Address: j.campbell2@lancaster.ac.uk

Please read the following carefully:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within **2 months** of commencement of the study my data will be removed. ☐
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and I will not be identifiable.
4. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent. ☐
5. I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure. ☐
6. I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study. ☐
7. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Name of Participant (BLOCK CAPITALS)

_____

Signature. Of Participant: _____ Date: _____
OR
Signature of Research Assistant (if necessary to affirm participant oral consent)

_____ **Date: _____**

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

25/01/2022

Appendix 4: Participant Information Sheet

Lancaster University

Participant Information Sheet

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

A Study of Water Management in Marathwada

I am a PhD student at Lancaster University and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about water management in Marathwada, Maharashtra.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether you wish to take part.

What is the study about?
My goal is to understand the experience of a variety of actors in the agrarian economy of Marathwada in relation to water management. I am interested in speaking with those who are researching, planning, and implementing water management programmes, as well as farmers who interact with these programmes. My research aims to understand how different actors understand the causes of and solutions to water related problems in the region, including drought. I am interested in government policy on water management. I am also interested in understanding how different actors see the future of Marathwada, in terms of the wellbeing of its population, environment and economy.

Why have I been invited?
I have approached you because I am interested in hearing from those who play a role in and have knowledge of water management in Marathwada. As someone with knowledge on the subject either as a farmer, community organisation or government official, I would be very grateful if you agreed to take part in this study, so that I can understand your perspective on these events and processes.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?
If you decided to take part, you would be asked to take part in private interview, lasting up to one hour in length. If the interview would take place in a language other than English, a translator/research assistant would also be present. It would involve you reflecting on your experience of water management schemes in Marathwada. You would be asked about your job. You would be asked about your understanding of water management in Marathwada. You would be asked about your experiences in the region. You would be asked about the challenges of managing water in Marathwada. You would be asked about the role of government. You would be asked about the future of the agrarian economy and water management in Marathwada. With your permission I, or my research assistant, will record the interview on an audio device and take notes as the interview proceeds.

It will be at a time and location to be agreed on but convenient to yourself. In the majority of cases, interviews will take place online via Microsoft Teams or another platform convenient to you.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?
Taking part in this study will allow you to share your experiences and views of water governance in Maharashtra. This is an opportunity to share your perspective with new audiences and shape the debate around water management in Marathwada.

Do I have to take part?

25/01/2022

No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary and there will be no consequences if you choose to withdraw.

What if I change my mind?
You may withdraw your data during the two months after the interview has taken place. In these circumstances I will extract any data you contributed to the study and destroy it. Data means the information, views, ideas, etc. that you will have shared with me. After two months however, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised and/or pooled together with data from other participants.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part, except for taking up an hour of your time. The interview would take place at a time and place comfortable and suitable to us both.

Will my data be identifiable?
After the interview, only I, the researcher conducting this study, and my university supervisors, will have access to the data you share with me. The only other person who may have access to the data is a professional transcriber who will listen to the recordings and produce a written record of what you and others have said. The transcriber will sign a confidentiality agreement.

I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. It may be necessary to use a pseudonym that denotes your responsibilities in your organisation and your expertise. I will anonymise any audio recordings and hard copies of any data. This means that I remove any personal information. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.

How will my data be stored?
Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher, will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. Some notes and recordings data may be recorded on a 4 digit password protected mobile phone before being transferred to the encrypted server.

Any hard copies of any data will be kept securely in locked cabinets in my office at Lancaster University.

The data that can identify you will be kept separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic).

In accordance with University guidelines, the data will be kept securely for a minimum of ten years.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?

I will use the anonymised data you have shared only in the following ways:
For academic publications including my PhD thesis, journal articles, book publications, in presentations at academic conferences and university teaching.

25/01/2022

Lancaster University

The data from this research may also be used to inform non-academic writing, such as news articles and policy reviews.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. When doing so, I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from our interview with you), so that although I may use your exact words, you cannot be identified in our publications.

Who has reviewed the project?
This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Science and Technology Research Ethics Committee at Lancaster University.

What if I have a question or concern?
If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself at j.campbell2@lancaster.ac.uk or my supervisor Professor Frances Cleaver at f.cleaver@lancaster.ac.uk. We can also be reached via post at

Lancaster Environment Centre,
Library Avenue,
Lancaster University,
Lancaster
LA1 4YQ

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact:
Kirk Semple, Lancaster Environment Centre Head of Department
k.semple@lancaster.ac.uk
+44 (0)1524 510554

Thank you for considering participating in this project.

25/01/2022

Appendix 5: Working Arrangement with RA

Lancaster University

Slow Violence and Agrarian Distress in Maharashtra

This research aims to understand the relationship between agrarian distress and water management in the drought-prone region of Marathwada in Maharashtra. It uses the concept of slow violence as a way to understand these processes, that are linked political and economic processes that began with the Green Revolution. The chapter contains the three following empirical chapters

Empirical Chapter 1 - Slow Violence, Aquifers and the History of Agrarian Change in Postcolonial Marathwada

This chapter will use archives to understand the Irrigation Department of Maharashtra's approach to groundwater and drought management. The intention is to use policy documents to create an official policy narrative of irrigation in Marathwada. This will then be compared to the 'critical' perspective offered by Iyer and Sainath, which I characterise as one of slow violence. Archival material is being collected from TISS and from sources in the UK such as the Centre for South Asian Studies at the University of Cambridge. Materials will focus on the Green Revolution in the 1960s and the major drought that occurred in 1972.

Empirical Chapter 2 – Slow Violence Made Visible – Reflexivity in Public Discourse on Drought 2012-2013

This chapter analyses news articles published by journalists in India during the onset of the 2012-3 drought, with specific reference to the sub-region of Marathwada in the east of the state. This period was important for drought policy in the region. It brought about a reassessment irrigation policy as it had been implemented under the Indian National Congress (INC) and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), who had been in power since 2004. Following the 2012-3 drought, the BJP was elected into government with a new irrigation plan, Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan ('The Village Water Scheme') which claimed to be able to end drought. This media analysis focuses on the 'reflexivity' of the public debate on water scarcity by considering the discursive construction of drought and the space afforded to diverse, critical knowledges and farming communities' voices.

The Research Assistant has been Employed to Help Collect Data for the Third Empirical Chapter

Empirical Chapter 3 – The Worldviews of Actors Tackling Agrarian Distress in Contemporary Marathwada

This chapter will use key informant interviews to understand the worldviews of actors in contemporary water governance in Marathwada. These interviews will be conducted with three groups:

1. Farmers engaging with government irrigation programmes,
2. NGOs/Research/Community Organisations
3. Bureaucrats – from the Water Resources Department or other relevant departments, who are involved in irrigation policy.

The main line of questioning will be around people's lived experiences, their understandings of the causes of and solutions to drought, their understanding of the role of government in water management, and the future of the region's environment and economy.

Lancaster University

RESEARCHER – ASSISTANT AGREEMENT

Project Title: Water Management and Agrarian Distress in Marathwada

Name of Research Assistant: Ratnadeep Milind Kamble
Name of Researcher: John Campbell
Supervisors/Principle investigator: Frances Cleaver, Nils Markusson

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Information Sheet for the above study. ✔
2. I confirm that I have read and understand the Research Consent Form for the above study. ✔
3. I confirm that it is my responsibility to ensure safety of myself, co-researchers and research participants while data collection, handling and processing. ✔
4. I confirm that I shall never engage in any form of data manipulation. ✔
5. I confirm that I shall present and deposit all project-related data and/or information collected with the PhD researcher. ✔
6. If advised by the PhD researcher, I shall share relevant project data and/or information with members of the research team. ✔
7. I confirm that without prior written approval from the PhD researcher/Principal Investigator, I shall not share any project data and/or information with anyone outside the project team. ✔
8. I confirm that I shall handover all data to the PhD researcher/ Principal Investigator by the project completion date or my departure from the research team – whichever comes first. I also confirm I shall not keep any data with me, in digital or in hard copy, after the data handover date. ✔
9. I understand that all digital data will have to be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure. All physical data will also be kept secure. ✔
10. I understand that data will be kept according to Lancaster University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the project. ✔
11. I agree to submit work diaries and timesheets detailing completed work for the project ahead of payments ✔
12. I agree to be a part of the above research team. ✔

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13. The research assistant will be recompensed at the following rates (below) excluding expenses for days in the field (including food, accommodation, travel).

Rs50000 per month full time (equivalent 40 hours per week)
Rs25000 per month for part-time (20 hours per week)
Rs2250 (8 hours/Day rate)

John Campbell

Signature of Researcher **John Campbell** Date 23/11/23

Signature of Research Assistant **Date. 23 / 11/ 2023**

A signed copy of this form will be given to the researcher and the original kept in the files of the Principal Investigator at Lancaster University.

Appendix 6: Interview Questions for Farmers in Hingoli

Interview Questions for Farmers

1. **Biographical Questions**

Tell me about yourself… Follow Up Questions

Where do you live?

Are you a labourer or a land-owners, role in community (part of panchayat)?

How long have they lived in the area?

What are their pastimes, responsibilities

Is farming a full time job or seasonal work – do you migrate to find work at different times of year? How does this compare to others in your area.

2. **Farming Practices**

How would you describe the land you farm on – e.g. soil quality, size?

How many crops do you plant a year? In both the Kharif and Rabi season?

Describe how you plan for the year ahead?

Which crops do you grow, do these change every year? – on what basis do you make these decisions?

Do you sell your produce? If so, where?

What role does water play in making these decisions?

What are the risks and the trade offs that you have to make when making decisions about which crops to grow?

If you had a successful few years, and had the ability invest in your farm, what changes would you make in the next few year?

3. **Water Management**

Tell me about your relationship with water – what role does it play in your life?

What technologies do you have in place to manage and store water? I.e – bunds, bonds, nukkahs, canal, borewells, tube wells. How successful are they?

How is water managed at the local level? E.g. By community organisation, panchayat, through an NGO, by main landowner?

Is groundwater part of your water strategy? Are you able to afford mapping?

Do you have sufficient water to produce the crops that give you a stable income?

What are the main barriers to having improved access to water?

4. **History and Change over Time**

What is the history of the area according to the participant?

I want to hear about their village, their family – how long have they lived in this area for?

How have farming practices changed since their parents and grandparents generations?

What kinds of conversations do they have with older friends and family members with regards to change over the years?

Has farming been passed down through generations, or is it a new occupation?

How has the village changed – has it become more prosperous? Grown in size? Have the demographics changed?

5. **Finances / Debt**

Do you need to take out loans in order to invest in farming?

If you are willing to say, how much debt must you take on each year? – Who do you loan from?

How easy do you find it pay off the loans? What are the consequences if this doesn't happen?

easily is it to acquire these loans, crop varieties, irrigation technologies?

6 Challenges

What are the recurring challenges you face year after year?

Do you feel that it is becoming easier or harder to complete your work?

Are you able to provide for a standard of living for your family that you are happy with? If not, why not, and what are the consequences of this for your family?

What are the main pressures on the wellbeing of yourself and your family?

What challenges do smaller farmers face above larger owners?

What role does caste/gender play in making these challenges worse?

What are the unique challenges that you face on your land/in your village that others don't?

Do you discuss climate change as an issue?

What is your view on the role of the sugar industry in your district – what role does it play in your access to a common resource like water?

7 Government Interventions

In what ways have the Government intervened to try and help your work?

How often do you come into contact with government officials and bureaucrats – for example from the Water Resources Department?

What is your relationship like with government officials? What are your opinions of them? What are your interactions like?

Do you remember the policy Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan, which was implemented by the previous Fadnavis government? It was designed to 'end drought' between 2014-9 – did you experience anything to do with this scheme? How successful was it?

Do you feel that the government has a strategy to make small scale farming a worthwhile profession?

What currently is the government trying to do help?

How successful have these measure been? (e.g. infrastructure, debt relief) in the last five years?

8 Political Representation

Do you know who is your representative in the MLA?

Are you politically active / do you vote?

What do you think of the performance of the Fadnavis Government, vs the Shiv Sena Government before?

How much do you feel that the government stands up for your interests as a farmer?

Can you remember any promises made to you during the last election?

How much faith do you have in the political system to stand up for their interest?

If they don't feel they are listened to by government – why do they think they are ignored?

9 Futures

What does the future look like for you?

What are your hopes for the future – are you optimistic about your land, about your prospects?

What are your aspirations for your family?

Appendix 7: Example Transcript, Analysed in Chapter 5

2nd Farmers Focus Group Discussion

Location - XXX Village, Kalamnuri Block, Hingoli.

Participants-

R1 - XXXX

R2 - XXXX

R3 - XXXX

R4 - XXXX

R4 - XXXX

R5- XXXX

R6- XXXX

M: Hello, everyone. I'm RA, a graduate of Azim Premji University. I'm currently working on a project focusing on how small landowners in Marathwada cultivate their land and the challenges they face in the process. Marathwada is a drought-prone area, and there is a pressing need for proper water access for agricultural fields. Due to these difficulties, many young individuals migrate to metro cities in search of employment. The combination of small land sizes and large families often leads to division in land ownership and the expansion of families. This research, commissioned by Lancaster University, aims to understand the challenges faced by farmers in Marathwada. As a representative, my role is to conduct this research and convey the identified problems to researchers. It's essential to note that this work is intended for academic purposes only and has no other intentions.

M: In this region, conventional farming is prevalent on generational land. What kinds of crops do you typically cultivate?

R1: Major crops grown here include Soybean, Cotton, and Red gram, and Turmeric at a small level.

R2: Turmeric is cultivated by those who have a well on their farm or another water source.

R3: About 75% of the land relies on rainwater, while 25% depends on irrigation.

M: For those relying on rainwater, how do they manage?

R1: They are entirely dependent on rainwater; if rainfall occurs, we sow cotton; otherwise, the land remains uncultivated.

M: How many years have you been engaged in agriculture?

R1: I've been involved for 25 years.

M: Across the generations involved in farming, do you have any alternatives or expectations for agriculture?

R1: No, nothing.

R2: I have worked in a private company, but I returned to the village for farming during the pandemic after my brother's death, and I haven't returned to my job.

M: When you go outside to earn, what kind of work do you do?

R1: Those with diplomas find lower-paying work.

R2: Those without an educational background take contractual jobs, earning only 15k per month, which is insufficient. Only two to three thousand can be saved; the rest goes into expenses.

M: Why did you choose less-paid work this time?

R1: Due to insufficient land and water.

R2: We fell into a debt trap with the two acres of land that my father cultivated, so I had to go outside to work.

M: How is the quality of the land here?

R1: It's medium-good, not extremely fertile.

M: What crops do you grow primarily?

R1: Mainly Soybean, Cotton, and Red gram, with some seasonal crops Like sorghum who has the water Cultivate Sorghum

M: Are there challenges with wild animals?

R2: Sorghum cultivation faces challenges from wild animal attacks like pigs and Neelgay, causing crop damage.

R3: Compensation schemes from the government for crop losses due to wild animal attacks are needed.

R4: We haven't received compensation for 3 to 4 years; a regular government provision would be beneficial.

M- Did you get shed under the scheme?

R1-Yes,Under the Nanasaheb Deshmukh scheme.

R3-Well making scheme we have here but it took 5 lakh to build after getting reimbursed how we can spend 5 lakh?

M: Do you grow the same type of crops every year?

R1: We alternate between cotton and soybean, and also cultivate other seasonal crops.

M: What is the condition of the water currently? Do wells or borewells have water?

R1: Some individuals' wells have enough water, while others don't. Groundwater levels are uneven.

R2: The length of borewells is around 400 feet, but water availability is still being determined.

R3-It is luck by chance to get water at 400 feet sometimes 400 feet well dont get water

R3: Water availability this year has been low, and rainfall during the fruiting stage damages crops.

R4: We had to resow due to uncertain rainfall.

(10.00 Min)

M - Could you share some additional challenges faced in agriculture?

R1 - Unseasonal rainfall, wet drought, and dry drought are significant issues.

M - Does the government provide any compensation for crop losses due to drought?

R1 - No, we don't receive anything.

R2 - We have the Pik Vima (crop insurance) facility.

M - Do you benefit from crop insurance in case of loss?

R1 - No, we don't.

R2 - We get it once in 5 to 6 years.

R2 - The government doesn't credit for 2 to 3 years.

R3 - In the shared list, we get 10000, but in the bank, we only receive 5000.

R4 - Bureaucracy is causing difficulties for us.

R5 - Now with the online process, there's some transparency that brings faith.

R6 - Cotton crops are attacked by pink bollworms, so we have to remove cotton in January only. Earlier crops used to give production up to March.

R7 - Cotton sowing got delayed due to rain, and other diseases like lalya (red leaf disease) damaged crops.

R8 - We can only pick cotton 2 to 3 times.

M - How much do you earn from all cotton picking for a 5-acre owner farmer?

R1 - All income is equal to the cost of production; nothing is surplus.

M - How is the condition of marginal farmers with 2 to 3 acres of land?

R1 - Very vulnerable!

R2 - Dryland farmers seem non-existent; we can't even think about their vulnerability.

R3 - Always in a loss of 25k, including the cost of production!

R4 - Our labour is a waste of time; we don't get any return.

R5 - Cotton crop growers have to pay laborers who come to collect cotton in the farm. They also have to pay them 7 rupees per kilo. It's not affordable for us.

R6 - If rain doesn't come, the rate will be down up to 4k per quintal. The government doesn't do anything for farmers. If they had done something, we would be grateful.

R7 - When farmers get produce, the rate goes down; this has become a common trend nowadays. Farmers sell everything at a cheap rate, and then the rate goes up.

R8 - Now, Tur (Pigeon pea) has a rate of 12000, but we don't have that produce. We don't have enough peas as seeds for sowing; where will we sell it? When pigeon pea production comes, the rate goes down.

R9 - With good production, wild animals cause damage.

M - Does off-season rain impact cause any harm?

R1 - Yes!

M - Is there any nearby mandi (market station for sale) where you sell your farm produce?

R1 - We sell in Bolda bazar near our village, within a radius of one kilometer.

M - If you are a marginal farmer or a hilly farmer, how do you manage the water supply for farms when rain doesn't come?

R1 - We lease water from neighboring farmers' wells and give them a small portion of the production.

M - How much do you pay for a timely supply for the farm?

R1 - 1500 or a small portion of farm produce.

R2 - If our production is 4 quintals, we keep three quintals, and the water supplier takes one quintal.

R3 - Everything is ours; they provide the water.

M - Do you get this water on time?

R1 - No!

R2 - Electricity problems also cause much damage; we can't take proper advantage of water on time, resulting in less production.

M - What is the schedule for electricity?

R1 - There is a schedule when we don't produce anything. The restriction only comes when our crop needs water.

R2 - Electricity at midnight may cause problems for us.

R3 - The electricity board tortures us by not giving proper light on time.

M - This is not only your life; 80% or more than that are vulnerable to this system. Does any NGO or gram panchayat assist you?

R1 - No, no one helps us.

R2 - There is no one for farmers.

M - Do you make collective decisions about water problems in your village? What is your water source, river, or well?

R1 - Wells! Those who already dug in their fields, mostly large farmers, have them.

R2 - The government sponsors well digging in our farms, but they ask us to dig, and it costs up to 3 lakhs. Then the government gives that amount back to us. But how can we have 3 lakhs already to dig a well?

R3 - Who has 2 acres of land? How can he manage 3 lakhs?

R4 - The government built one small dam near the village; they don't give us water.

M - How big is it?

R1 - It's very small.

R2 - It has no use for us.

R3 - It's a broken dam!

R4 - A few walls were built, and gates were installed.

R5 - They did not open yet.

R6 - They just opened to loot money from people.

M - Has the Pani Foundation come to your village? Are they known to you?

R1 - They built this dam.

R2 - They just built a gate; now water is stored in that space. We lost our own land for that unusable land.

R3 - Rainwater was stored, but it percolated from the stone; their built bund didn't function.

R4 - We collectively worked on it and gave free labour to build that dam.

(20.00 Min)

M - Whatever income you receive, can you and your family sustain it?

R1 - No! No! We can't depend on the farm; we have to go for daily wage labour.

R2 - Those who have a big family face many problems and can't sustain less income.

R2 - When children come for marriage, it is a hard time.

M - What is your demand from the government? The government provides you 2000 a month; what is your take on it?

R1 - No! We don't need government money, just a reasonable rate for our farm produce.

R2 - Those who can store can earn money. They have large farms and enough property.

R3 - When rainwater falls on cotton, they just reduce rates.

M - Can you sustain your family on farm income?

R1 - No! We can't sustain on income.

R2 - These are the necessities the government should fulfil.

R3 - For 15 years, the same rate has prevailed for cotton; we need a change in this.

R4 - The farming business means falling into a debt trap for us.

M - You have rich experience in farming; can you please specify the changes that occurred in the last 15 years?

R1 - When my father was in agriculture, at that time, only cowyard manure was used, no chemical spraying.

R2 - Nowadays, hybrid seeds are destroying the lands and not providing proper output.

R3 - Earlier, there was no infection of bollworms; crops used to be healthy and give more yield compared to the present time.

R4 - No other way than chemicals to stop bollworms.

R5 - Without spraying, yield does not come, and the crop can't sustain.

R6 - Because of this chemical usage, health problems are occurring in humans. All people are getting seriously ill because of such hybrid seeds and chemical use.

R7 - At my current age, it's not about aching legs, but at this age, my body aches.

M - Earlier, we used to take crops like gram, and black gram. Nowadays, cash crops play a good role in agriculture; how do you see it?

R1 - We don't go into it now; wild animals destroy everything, and we can't afford to sow!

R2 - During the daytime, monkeys, and deer, and at night, pigs and neelgai destroy our crops; we've become extremely vulnerable to this.

R3 - In our village, accidents have occurred due to wild animals.

R4 - My father was pushed by a wild pig and got seriously injured.

R5 - My nephew was injured as well.

M - On farm produce, families can't sustain, but even so, they depend on farming. So, do you take a loan? From where do you take it?

R1 - We had a loan from a local finance company.

M - Any other source for financial support?

R1 - Mahila bachat gat (Self Help group).

R2 - There are 10 women in SHG, and they collect money mutually and spend it on farming.

M - Do they give money to outsiders?

R1 - They don't have enough money, so they don't give to others.

M - Do you have a bank loan facility? Do small farmers get that?

R1 - They are not giving a loan for the farm.

R2 - Dryland gets 10k per acre, and irrigation land gets 20k only by the bank.

M - Do you get that loan instantly?

R1 - No! No!

R2 - The documentation process is long.

M - Getting a bank loan is an easy process?

R1 - Documentation is a lengthy process, and once the documents are collected, the loan is received.

R2 - Since a long period doing agriculture every year, the scene of problems changed. Do you feel those year-by-year changes?

R3 - We take a loan from Savakar or landlords for farming to pay the bank loan.

R4 - You use chemicals, and the land becomes infertile; no chemicals.

R5 - Nowadays, production is dependent on chemical spraying; without spraying, we don't get anything.

R6 - Small landowners face problems of higher labour on their farms and can't pay them wages on time.

R7 - Laborers are also less because they are migrating.

M - Right! Right!

(30.00Min)

M - Now, with farm technology getting introduced each year, how do you see that change?

R1 - Earlier, bullock carts were in use.

R2 - Spraying is done on tractors.

R3 - Total expenses have increased.

M - Is rearing animals easy nowadays?

R1 - No! We have no fodder for them.

R2 - Domesticated animals also damage our crops.

R3 - If you sow fodder grass for your own animals at the farm, that grass also gets damaged by wild animals.

R4 - How will they manage animals at home if the owner is not getting enough food?

R5 - Acre dryland owners can't afford to have domesticated animals; there's no proper water, and fodder grass is destroyed by wild animals, so rearing animals is difficult.

M - We have seen many things and challenges such as electricity, and water. In dry and wet droughts, the government provides compensation; what do you think of this matter?

R1 - Those who have large lands get better compensation; we have 1 acre of land, and we do not get enough to cover traveling expenses to credit it from the bank.

R2 - You had a loss of 1 lakh, and the government pays 10000; it's not worth it to us.

M - In the Fadnavis government led by the BJP, they launched the Jal Yukt Shivar Abhiyan and introduced a scheme for water management. Do you gain benefits from that scheme?

R1 - Yes, they built a few bunds nearby villages, and a few farmers got benefits, but not all benefited from that scheme.

R2 - We had a loss because of that scheme.

R3- I got the benefit Because I had steam near my farm.

R4- They made cheap gets and very bad dam and it has no use for us.

M - What kind of loss?

R1 - They did not make a proper gate and kept half the work, and our land was wasted.

R2 - It is only a showpiece, with no intention of developing water management.

R3 - Only corruption they can do! Nothing else!

M - What do you think about that? Do governments provide their full support to farmers?

R1 - This year, no government worked for us; they are just playing a game to buy MLAs from other parties and are busy with farming. The government is not focusing on us.

R2 - No government gives us proper benefits.

R3 - Currently, the Winter Assembly has been organized by the government; no farmer's son or representatives are there.

R4 - The Maratha Reservation conflict is also ongoing; they don't listen to anyone and ignore farmers' demands.

R5 - Protestor destroying common property causing us inconvenience. The government should give them proper results.

R5- Something alternative we have to grow vegetables and try to sell on a small piece of land.

M - Which party's governance do you like?

R1 - We don't have any benefit from anyone, specifically not a single party supports our cause.

M - Do agriculture bureaucrats come to your village for any kind of support or training regarding your socio-economic problems?

R1 - Yes, at times, they come.

R2- One person did a soil test because he is rich.

R2 - But we can't take benefit from anything; for example, soil testing, we can't do it, especially those who have large farms.

R3 - We have to go to Parbhani City, and we can't afford to go and have a soil test.

M - Do they come to the village for soil tests?

R1 - No, they don't come.

M - Does anyone guide sowing, spraying, and other agricultural aspects?

R1 - Few people come, but they are sponsored by certain companies and only try to sell their products.

M - Are farmers getting looted by such fake advertisements?

R1 - Certainly! They compel us to use their brand products, but we don't have any benefit from them.

R2 - No one from the government side is there to help or guide us.

R3 - Company agents come to us to advertise their hybrid seeds and chemicals, so we don't have any other guidance. We have to accept their products, and so our farming style is shaped by their knowledge.

R4 - Because of the usage of chemicals, the soil becomes infertile.

M - Any other challenges that you feel to share?

R1 - Many problems, family problems, agriculture, animal conflict.

M - Can't we access good education for children?

R2 - No! With a small income, we can barely sustain ourselves, and children's education is so difficult for us.

R3 - If children get any education, in the future, they won't get any kind of job.

M - For the coming generation, what will you suggest about agriculture management? What will be the future?

R1 - Children know that clearly; we don't have money at home, so they understand things.

R2 - Our children do not have any future here.

R3 - We use our children for farm work, for spraying, because hiring labourers is unaffordable.

R4 - One farmer can't perform all work on the farm, livestock, and other tasks.

M - The agriculture business is very hard in our Hingoli district.

(40.00)

M - Do you benefit from any government schemes?

R1 - There are many problems. If we avail of a government scheme, they create conditions that can't be fulfilled by us. They instructed us to keep a 100-meter distance from the neighbour's farm, but our farm is very small, and we can't fulfil that condition. So, many problems arise when trying to access government schemes.

M - Who is the MLA in your area?

R1 - Santosh Bangar.

M - Does he provide any schemes?

R1 - The MLA hasn't been seen in Bolda village. They become leaders only at the time of elections. They come to give fake promises, but after becoming MLA, they haven't given us anything. Now, elections are coming soon, so they will revolve around the village again.

M - Before this government, the Thackeray government brought a resolution for loan waivers. Did people benefit from that?

R1 - See, sir! If one person gets benefits, it means 10 farmers get that benefit. But for those who don't have any kind of loan, what benefit do they get? Maximum small farmers don't get loans. Give everyone the same treatment. We do want a loan waiver; just provide benefits equally. We just want a proper rate for our produce, nothing else.

M - For the sake of farmers, your name was cut down from the ration card, and can't access other benefits like pension. Is this a problem for you?

R1 - Yes, for those who don't have a farm, the government recognizes them as farmers and doesn't give them ration and pension. In our village, those who have 15 acres of land got the home scheme from the government, and the landless don't get it. Political relations decide whether I will benefit or not.

M - Does your village have a water canal?

R1 - No! Water from our area is supplied by the government to other districts. Isapur dam is in our taluka, but our village doesn't get any benefit from that, and neighboring districts get the benefit.

M - I visited Kharavad near Isapur Dam village, and they said they can see water but can't access it. Their land is submerged in it. Other states are accessing it.

R1 - Vasamat has a canal; they have it from their resources. Vasamat has political power, and they get that water. In Hingoli, we don't have proper political representation, so they can't raise their voice against water injustice in Hingoli. We don't have leaders to solve problems.

M - Farming is hard.

Thank you! I got good information this will help for further report writing. Thank you once again!