

**From Primitive Accumulation to Regimes of Dispossession:
Six Theses on India's Land Question**

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the dispossession of land has become unprecedentedly central to India's political economy. While tens of millions of people were dispossessed of their land in the period of state-led development (Fernandes 2008), the scale of land dispossession has accelerated since liberalization. Its causes, moreover, have profoundly shifted as privatized forms of industry, infrastructure, real estate and extraction have eclipsed public-sector projects as causes for forcibly taking land from farmers. What has also changed, particularly in the last decade, is the breadth and strength of anti-dispossession politics. While dozens of movements, most notably the *Narmada Bachao Andolan*, fought tenaciously against dams and other public sector "development projects" from the 1980s onwards, since roughly 2005 so-called "land wars" have become unprecedentedly widespread and *successful* in stopping and stalling projects. This opposition has been occasionally aided (though typically not started) by political parties as land dispossession has become electorally salient for the first time in India's history. This opposition has, in the aggregate, reached a point where it now poses a significant obstacle to accumulation: by one estimate, in 2011 capital investments worth 3% of India's GDP were stalled due to land acquisition problems (CMIE 2012). Stalled investments have been singled out—rightly or wrongly—as a cause of India's recent economic slowdown and become a key object of concern for both state and capital; overcoming these "road blocks" is at the top of the new government's agenda. The Indian state is caught between the land requirements of capitalist

growth and the political compulsions of electoral democracy; whether, how and for whom this contradiction gets resolved constitutes India's "new" land question.

There is a pressing need, then, to understand this conjuncture. This paper argues, however, that existing theoretical perspectives, whether Marx's primitive accumulation or Harvey's accumulation by dispossession, are not in themselves adequate for understanding the relationship between land dispossession and capitalism—in India or elsewhere. They are inadequate because they do not help us understand how dispossession changes over time and space; and they do not illuminate the politics of dispossession. While building on this theoretical tradition, I advance the concept of "regimes of dispossession" as an alternative way of understanding the relationship between land dispossession and capitalism. Dispatching with the obfuscating assumption that dispossession is a "necessary" cost of development or stage in the development of capitalism, I argue that dispossession is fundamentally a social relation of coercive redistribution. While this relationship exists in probably all social formations, it is driven by different forms of accumulation and class interests under different historical phases of capitalism. We can thus think of dispossession as being organized into socially and historically specific regimes. Under different regimes of dispossession, states seek to redistribute resources to different classes (or class fractions) for different economic purposes. Given these purposes and interests, regimes of dispossession have different combinations of means—force, legitimacy, and material concessions—available for making people comply with their dispossession. The concept of regimes of dispossession is useful, I argue, for two reasons. First, it helps us to compare and thus critically interrogate the specific economic purposes that states, at any given time, seek to legitimize as "development." Second, it helps us to understand the conditions under which dispossession is most likely to encounter non-compliance and be effectively stopped. Regimes of

dispossession thus provides the basis for a political economy of dispossession without the assumptions of economic progress or political inevitability.

Applying this concept to land dispossession in post-independence India, I argue that beginning in the early 1990s India shifted from a regime that dispossessed land for state-led projects of industrial and agricultural transformation (the production of commodities) to one that dispossesses land for private and decreasingly productive investments (the commodification of land itself). This radical transformation of Indian states into land brokers for private capital is entirely missed by economists who insist that today's land grabs are a necessary cost of "development" (Banerjee et al. 2007; Bardhan 2011; Chakravorty 2013) as well as those theorists who see them as part of India's passage through the (presumably inevitable) stage of "primitive accumulation" (Chatterjee 2008). Both formulations naturalize dispossession by turning contemporary forms of "class robbery" (Thompson 1963: 218) into historical necessity.¹ The land grabs of the neoliberal period do not represent simply more "development-induced displacement" or the inexorable march of "primitive accumulation," but rather the emergence of a new regime of redistributing landed wealth upwards. This new regime of dispossessing land for increasingly financialized private purposes is arguably less "developmental" than its Nehruvian predecessor. It is certainly far more politically tenuous. Its continuance depends on the Indian state's questionable ability to substitute land prices for nationalist legitimacy.

In the following six theses, I develop the concept of regimes of dispossession as way of understanding the relationship between land grabs and specific historical phases of capitalism, and demonstrate its ability to illuminate India's contemporary land question.

Thesis 1: Contemporary land grabs are not "primitive accumulation."

¹ On the need for "denaturalizing dispossession," see Hart (2006).

While the concept is much beloved and applied generously to land grabs and many other social phenomena that smell of theft and fraud, it is time to recognize that “so-called primitive accumulation” obscures more than it illuminates about contemporary forms of land dispossession. In the final chapters of Volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx advanced the concept to explain how the origins of capitalist social relations lay in “the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production” (1977: 875). Basing his analysis partly on the English enclosures, Marx argued that the bloody and violent process of expelling peasants from the land generated the *pre-conditions* for capitalism by effecting the “two transformations, whereby the social means of subsistence and production are turned into capital, and the immediate producers are turned into wage-laborers” (Marx 1977: 875). In a process stretching over several centuries and culminating in the Parliamentary enclosures of the 18th century, the English common lands (along with state and church lands) were turned into sheepwalks and capitalist farms while commoners were turned into a proletariat. Mocking Adam Smith’s “idyllic” fairytale of capitalism’s origins, Marx observes that capital came into the world “dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt” (1977: 926).

It is important to recognize that there is ambiguity in Marx’s own conception of primitive accumulation. Fundamentally, this section of *Capital* offers an origin story about how the pre-conditions for capitalism came into being.² In this sense, primitive accumulation is defined by its *function* in the development of capitalism: it is those historical processes that establish capitalist social relations. On the other hand, Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation also appears to make a *means*-specific distinction between those processes that gave rise to a capitalist mode of production in which “conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, played the greatest part” (1977: 874), and a mature capitalist system that, once developed, can dispense with extra-

² As Perelman (2000) points out, “primary” or “original” is a better translation of the German than “primitive.”

economic coercion and rely on the “silent compulsion of economic relations” (1977: 899). In the first possible conception, it is the *function* that distinguishes primitive accumulation from capitalist accumulation proper, and in the second it is its extra-economic *means*. This leaves two possible ways of understanding primitive accumulation as a general concept: 1) it is any process that creates the pre-conditions for capitalism; or 2) it is any process that creates capitalism’s pre-conditions through the use of force. There is also a third possibility: primitive accumulation is any process of accumulation that involves force. Only in this last option would primitive accumulation be ongoing under capitalism. Marx, however, confined primitive accumulation to an early chapter in the development of capitalism, calling it, “an accumulation which is not the result of the capitalist mode of production but its point of departure” (1977: 873).³ To the extent that it continues, it does so *serially* as different countries *transition* to capitalism.⁴

Within the functional conception, there is another ambiguity. How much emphasis should one place on each of the “two transformations”: turning the land into capital, and turning the peasantry into a proletariat? In his analysis of the enclosures, Marx devotes little attention to the economic forces motivating the gentry to enclose the commons for sheep walks (the rising price of wool generated by the booming textile industry of Flanders) compared to its main consequence: creating a class of wage laborers “freed” from their means of production. This is because Marx was more interested in providing an historical account of the emergence of a proletariat rather than a political economy of land dispossession. But by focusing on dispossession’s consequences rather than its causes, Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation is

³ In the more Hegelian idiom of the *Grundrisse*, Marx states, “The conditions and presuppositions of the *becoming*, of the *rising*, of capital presuppose precisely that it is not yet in being but merely in *becoming*; they therefore disappear as real capital arises, capital which itself, on the basis of its own reality, posits the conditions for its realization” (1973: 459).

⁴ Others have argued that a theory of ongoing primitive accumulation can be found in Marx (De Angelis 2007). I think, at best, one can argue that Marx’s account of primitive accumulation *implies* that it would be ongoing (why would capitalism’s thirst for land come to an end?), but Marx himself relegates it the “prehistory” of capital. For the distinction between a serial and recursive conception of primitive accumulation, I thank Michael Watts.

based on a kind of post-hoc functionalism that prevents it from becoming a theory of ongoing land dispossession under capitalism. Merely calling primitive accumulation “ongoing” does not resolve these conceptual problems.

Subsequent applications of primitive accumulation, particularly in the literature on agrarian transition, have compounded the initial ambiguities in Marx’s conception. First, analysts of the transition to capitalism in England have argued that it was not necessarily the enclosures but rather reduction to “market dependence” that signaled the rise of capitalist social relations in the countryside (Brenner 2001; Wood 2002), raising the question of whether coercive land expropriation is necessarily a part of primitive accumulation. Decades of research on the “agrarian question” outside of England demonstrated that the widespread enclosure of land constitutes only one historically specific pathway to capitalist development (Byres 1991). Primitive accumulation, consequently, came to mean one of two things: first, it could refer to any process that proletarianized peasants and forged a class of agrarian capitalists. This often proceeded not through wholesale eviction from land but through a gradual process of class differentiation (Lenin 1967; Kautsky 1988: 17; Adnan 1985: 57). Economic processes like debt came to be seen as equally effective levers of primitive accumulation as the extra-economic enclosure of land (Bhaduri 1983). Second, primitive accumulation could refer to the general process of diverting agricultural surpluses for capitalist industrialization (Byres 1991: 11). In this usage, primitive accumulation did not necessarily mean establishing capitalist social relations, but transferring surpluses from agriculture to industry.⁵ Such primitive accumulation was seen as

⁵ The two were connected to the extent that capitalist agriculture generated larger surpluses that could be appropriated for subsidizing industrialization.

a necessary condition for economic growth in all “backward” countries, including socialist ones (Preobrazhensky 1965; Ka and Selden 1986; Byres 1991:11).⁶

The vast research on the origins of capitalism and agrarian transitions in Europe and the Global South has thus amplified the original ambiguities in Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation. It is no longer clear if primitive accumulation refers to the dispossession of land through extra-economic means, to any process that generates the pre-conditions of capitalism, or even to any process that provides surpluses for industrialization. My purpose here is not to question the utility of primitive accumulation for understanding transitions to capitalism,⁷ but to simply point out that is not adequate for explaining the persistence of land dispossession and the various forms it assumes within capitalism. Agrarian transitions and land grabs for capitalist development are distinct phenomenon in need of different concepts.

Today’s dispossessions cannot be understood in the old functional sense of creating the pre-conditions for capitalism: dispossessing farmers for SEZs or factories or mines does not necessarily inaugurate capitalist social relations (which often already exist) and do not mark transitions between modes of production. They often have little to do with agriculture, and are not about resolving the “agrarian question.” They involve dispossessing land—sometimes already held within capitalist social relations—for *non-agricultural* development and are thus entirely orthogonal to the slow and uneven development of capitalist agriculture. They are, moreover, geared towards capitalizing land with little regard for what happens to the dispossessed farmer whose labor power is largely superfluous (both to specific projects and to accumulation as a whole). They reflect not an early stage of capitalism but advanced capitalist demands on land and natural resources. They take a myriad of sector-specific forms—whether

⁶ For a critique of this argument, see Gerschenkron (1962).

⁷ Though the problematic of transition faced its own difficulties and its relevance is may anyway be declining along with that of agriculture to national projects of capitalist development (Bernstein 2012; Lerche 2013).

dams, highways, mines, steel plants, Special Economic Zones or housing—that do not resemble the “classic” pattern of the enclosures. They must be understood within a new problematic: not what is the role of land dispossession in transitions to capitalism, but what is the role of land dispossession within capitalism? This requires, I suggest, shifting attention from “modes of production” to “regimes of dispossession.” Before developing this framework, however, we must turn to the strengths and limitations of Harvey’s more recent formulation of “accumulation by dispossession.”

Thesis 2: While contemporary land grabs may be considered accumulation by dispossession, we should understand this as a political process of state redistribution and not a functional response to over-accumulation.

In *The New Imperialism* (2003), Harvey argues that “accumulation by dispossession” has become the predominant mode of accumulation under neoliberalism and that the traditional Marxist focus on labor must be complemented with greater attention to proliferating struggles over the dispossession of various forms of public and private wealth. Harvey’s examples of accumulation by dispossession include the expropriation of land and natural resources from peasant populations; the conversion of common or state property into private property; the extraction of rents from intellectual property rights; the privatization of collective social assets (such as pensions, healthcare, and other social entitlements); and the various predations of finance capital. Harvey sees the resurging importance of these mechanisms relative to “expanded reproduction” as a response to the problem of over-accumulated capital in the core economies of the North.

To its merit, Harvey’s accumulation by dispossession explicitly recognizes that dispossession is driven by advanced capitalism. Accumulation by dispossession unmoors the

notion of primitive accumulation from the interstices of modes of production, making it a more versatile concept capable of explaining very diverse forms of dispossessions that have little to do with agriculture and that do not necessarily inaugurate capitalist social relations: for example, dispossessions for factories, dams, Special Economic Zones, slum demolitions, mining projects, privatized infrastructure, and real estate. Accumulation by dispossession marks a significant advancement on primitive accumulation precisely in its ability to capture diverse contemporary dispossessions that take sector-specific and geographically dispersed forms, and whose significance for capital lies more in the expropriated asset (e.g. the land) than in the labor-power of the dispossessed owner.

But what exactly defines accumulation by dispossession? While freeing primitive accumulation from its function of generating capitalist social relations, Harvey redefines the concept through another, more contemporary function: namely, absorbing over-accumulated capital in the global economy. We might expect Harvey to further specify accumulation by dispossession as those processes that provide outlets for capital through *extra-economic* means—as in Marx’s characterization of primitive accumulation as involving, “conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force” (1977: 874). However, Harvey does not provide a clear definition of accumulation by dispossession, and explicitly claims that it is “primarily economic rather than extra-economic” (Harvey 2006a: 159). Without this means-specific distinction, it is not clear what these different processes share, nor what separates accumulation by dispossession from other “fixes” to the problem of over-accumulation or from the “normal” expanded reproduction of capital (see Brenner 2006; Levien 2011, 2012). The concept’s boundary is vitiated, undermining its analytical utility.

The consequence is that Harvey underemphasizes the most significant aspect of land dispossession: namely, that it is a deeply political process in which owners of the means of coercion transparently redistribute assets from one group to another.⁸ Although he recognizes that state force can be central to dispossession (Harvey 2003: 154), he overextends the concept to include so many diverse phenomena—including those like finance capital that have an indirect or unclear link to state force—that he cannot explicitly incorporate the state into his theory. As a result, Harvey’s framework misses the crucial and distinguishing feature of accumulation by dispossession as it applies to land: its fundamental and transparent reliance on state force. This prevents him from grasping the distinctive *politics of dispossession*.

As a process of transparent and coercive redistribution, land dispossession is a political process whose outcome is determined by class struggle and not merely the circuits of capital (Brenner 1977; De Angelis 2007). There is nothing automatic about capital (over-accumulated or not) finding outlets in land or in any other asset; by reading every instance of dispossession as a result of the global impulses of capital, Harvey fails to answer the question of why impulses towards accumulation translate into *dispossession* in a particular context? Why do capitalists need states to dispossess land for them rather than simply purchasing it on the market? And why do states do it for them? Dispossession requires a state that is willing and able to use its monopoly of the means of violence to expropriate land from certain classes for the benefit of others. It often arises, as in the case of land dispossession in India, from the desire of states to help capitalists overcome barriers to accumulation, such as rural land markets dominated by small-holding peasantries. But, in different times and places, we find that states have been willing and able to dispossess land for *different* classes (or class fractions) for *different* economic

⁸ I use group here rather than class because the dispossessed often belong to multiple classes (especially in the countryside), while the recipients of the land are typically of the capitalist class (though they can be from multiple fractions of that class).

purposes. In India, the colonial state dispossessed land for railroads and natural resource extraction to benefit metropolitan capital; the Nehruvian state dispossessed land for public sector industry and infrastructure; and the neoliberal state dispossesses land for all forms of private accumulation including real estate. Looking across countries, dispossession in India and China today is predominantly driven by urban-industrial purposes,⁹ while in Africa and Latin America it is largely for agricultural plantations. Harvey's concept offers little basis for understanding this variation. While it may be true, as he argues, that the quantity of dispossession is increasing with the institution of neoliberal economic policies, it is unclear and probably impossible to show that over-accumulated capital in the Global North is the cause (much of the capital for India's SEZs, for example, has come from India itself).¹⁰ More fundamentally, what we must understand—and what Harvey overlooks—is how and why states restructure themselves to dispossess land for different purposes and different classes in different periods.

One must also explain how states *succeed* in dispossessing people of their land for any given set of purposes and what accounts for variation in this success. The transparent use of state coercion to dispossess land creates an immediate antagonism between the would-be dispossessed and the state. Unable to rely on the mystification common to the exploitation of labor under capitalism, states must justify land dispossession with ideological claims to be serving “a public purpose” or the “national interest”; in the past century, they have typically done this through the language of “development.” The persuasiveness of these claims rest considerably on whether the economic purpose driving dispossession can be aligned with a widely accepted concept of national development. Where ideological justifications and/or material compensations prove

⁹ Although dispossession for agribusiness is also accelerating in China.

¹⁰ See Levien (2012).

inadequate and resistance emerges, the ability of the state to dispossess is decided by the balance of political forces.

With accumulation by dispossession, then, the state, politics, and ideology are—as Perry Anderson argues for *pre-capitalist* modes of production (1974: 403-404)—*internal* and *constitutive* features of accumulation itself. This is the very significant implication of the fact that extra-economic coercion, which is thought to subside with the transition to capitalism, is an intrinsic and ongoing aspect of accumulation under advanced capitalism. It means that the character and outcome of dispossession in different times and places will be shaped by heterogeneous and nationally specific political, economic, and ideological factors that cannot be read off of global imperatives of capital. Their specific configuration in any given place and time can be understood as a regime of dispossession.

Thesis 3: Dispossession is organized into socially and historically specific regimes.

When owners of the means of coercion consistently dispossess land for particular classes for a fairly coherent range of purposes, we can call this a regime of dispossession. If a regime of production is an institutionalized way of extracting surplus value from workers (Burawoy 1985), a regime of dispossession is an institutionalized way of expropriating land from their current owners or users. It has two essential components: a state willing to dispossess for a particular set of economic purposes that are tied to particular class interests; and a way of generating compliance to this dispossession. These two aspects are intrinsically linked.

At any given time states have a set of economic purposes for which they are willing and able to dispossess land. With respect to private property, this is partly a legal matter of what is considered a “public purpose” under relevant eminent domain statutes and domestic case law

(common and state land are typically dispossessed with little legal impediment). However, it remains primarily a political question since, as we have seen in India, states amend (and sometimes flout) these laws to suit their purposes at any given time; and, further, because states might not choose to dispossess land for all the purposes allowed to them by law.

Some might consider this a *non*-question under the assumption that states are always instruments of the dominant class and are therefore always willing to dispossess whatever that class desires. However, assuming that state willingness to dispossess flows automatically from the “needs” of capitalism elides important variation and also renders dispossession inevitable. First, many states have for long periods in their history limited the forcible dispossession of land from their own citizens to “public purposes,” construed narrowly as projects of the state. While some classes inevitably profit more than others from state projects, one must distinguish between dispossessing land for public infrastructure and dispossessing land directly for private capital. The latter characterizes distinct historical regimes (such as India’s present one), whose emergence must be explained. Second, dominant classes and class fractions change during different phases of capitalism; as such, the kinds of accumulation they propose to undertake with dispossessed land change along with them. This variation shapes the developmental consequences of dispossession as well as its politics.

Every regime of dispossession must have a way of compelling people to relinquish their land. This is a different power relation than that involved in the exploitation of labor: whereas exploitation requires that workers continuously work, dispossession requires a one-time expulsion of people from their land. *Whereas exploitation requires enduring consent at the point of production, dispossession only requires one-time compliance at the point of enclosure.*

Dispossessing people of their land is ultimately a question of political authority, or the ability of states to make people comply with their orders (Weber 1978: 212-215). Because dispossession cannot be mystified, there are three basic means available for doing this: coercion, material compensation, and normative persuasion (e.g. legitimacy). All regimes of dispossession rely to some degree on the actual or threatened use of force. When a state notifies farmers that it seeks to acquire their land, the potential use of violence backs this intent; regardless of any compensation that might be offered, unless farmers have the right to refuse, land acquisition is fundamentally coercive. If farmers do ultimately refuse to vacate their land, the threat of coercion becomes actual violence. Given its political costs, however, states typically hope to economize on violence and rely on other means. Regimes of dispossession vary in the extent to which they must rely completely on coercion or can additionally draw on normative and material inducements to separate people from their land.

States almost always find it necessary to justify their use of coercive power to redistribute property. This is not simply the case in liberal democracies; even if they can use relatively more coercion, authoritarian governments still typically feel compelled to justify dispossession as serving the public or national interest (as we see in China today). A major determinant of the success and stability of a regime of dispossession is the extent to which its appeals to the public interest are convincing to the dispossessed and to would-be supporters. This hinges crucially on the economic purposes justifying dispossession and their anticipated beneficiaries.

The other basis for compliance is appealing to the material interests of the dispossessed. While there were scant incentives for English peasants to relinquish the commons—they were driven off without compensation and transformed into a destitute proletariat—most contemporary societies require that those forcibly dispossessed of their private property be given

some form of compensation. States sometimes base this compensation on an assessment of a property's "fair market value" (though determining this in the absence of a voluntary transaction poses a problem), and, in recent decades, they have sometimes augmented this compensation with explicit policies for the "resettlement and rehabilitation" of the dispossessed. While historically such concessions have been meager, states almost always make some sort of material promises to the dispossessed, trying to convince them that they will be given some stake in the "development" that their dispossession makes possible. Both the types of promises made—irrigated land, jobs, real estate values, etc.—and the ability of states to deliver on these promises depend crucially on the particular kind of accumulation that is driving dispossession.

Different regimes of dispossession are thus able to offer different kinds and degrees of incentives to get peasants to comply with their dispossession. This makes some regimes of dispossession more formidable, and others politically tenuous. If seeing dispossession as a necessary aspect of capitalism can only disempower political struggles against it, regimes of dispossession helps to identify why "accumulation by dispossession" can sometimes be halted by the non-compliance of rural people.

In the remainder of this essay, I argue that the framework of regimes of dispossession helps to illuminate the changing political economy of dispossession in post-liberalization India.

Thesis 4: Since 1991, India has passed from a regime that dispossessed land for state-led industrial and infrastructural expansion to one that dispossesses land for private—and increasingly financial—capital.

Between 1947 and 1991, the Indian state largely dispossessed land for public-sector projects to expand the industrial and agricultural productivity of the country. The main forms of

this dispossession were public sector dams, steel towns, industrial areas, and mining. It is important to note that while the Land Acquisition Act (LAA) allowed for the acquisition of land for private companies, in practice this was relatively rare before economic liberalization. While companies could receive plots of land in industrial areas/estates, the state maintained ownership and collected ground rent from companies. States did not acquire land for private companies to re-sell on the market; rather, the rent from dispossessed land accrued to the state not private capitalists, who were allotted leased land on the condition of engaging in industrial production.

This is not to say that dispossession in this period actually served the “public interest” or “development.” Such terms are always obfuscations of particular class interests. Dispossessing land for these projects made possible accumulation that disproportionately benefited the industrial bourgeoisie, dominant agrarian classes, and public sector elites (Bardhan 1984; Dwivedi 2006; Nilsen 2010). Although this accumulation had some beneficial effects for other classes, these projects were distributionally regressive as they came at the cost of the impoverishment and proletarianization of approximately tens of millions of rural people who were typically already among the country’s most poor and marginalized (Fernandes 2008). Many were also ecologically destructive and failed on their own terms.

Nevertheless, these projects resonated with the Nehruvian vision of national development that had widespread public legitimacy in the post-independence years. This is not to say that the dispossessed found their expropriation and impoverishment legitimate, but that the broader legitimacy of post-colonial developmentalism made resisting these projects difficult. This legitimacy was inextricably linked to the fact that large numbers of people believed they would benefit from the irrigation of large dams or receive the jobs in the public sector industries. When farmers resisted, they were quickly suppressed and this suppression was itself legitimized as in

the national interest. Land acquisition was not politically salient and farmers only occasionally found allies to take up their cause, usually to demand more compensation (cf. Brass 2011; Struempell 2014). It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that strong opposition movements began to challenge this model of development and the “displacement” it required. Movements such as the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* challenged the legitimacy of “destructive development” and pioneered anti-dispossession politics in India. Tragically, they were rarely successful in stopping their own dispossession, underscoring the enduring strength of the developmentalist regime of dispossession. A combination of coercion and powerful ideological appeals to the nation ensured that the development model would itself give way before these political movements could significantly impede its ability to dispossess land.

In the early 1990s, however, economic liberalization initiated the genesis of a new regime of dispossession driven by increasingly privatized, decreasingly productive, and less labor-absorbing purposes. While there are many ways to periodize India’s liberalization (cf. Kohli 2012), the early 1990s was the key turning point for land acquisition.

First, economic liberalization after 1991 unleashed increasing private demand for land for industry, infrastructure, and real estate. With the decision to liberalize private investment and to diminish the public sector’s role in the economy (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2002), the share of private capital in the economy steadily increased and became dominant by the end of the decade (Kohli 2012: 45). While liberalization did not substantially spur the manufacturing sector, it unleashed dramatic growth in India’s service sector, particular Information Technology and Business Process Outsourcing (Bardhan 2010; Kohli 2012). This IT boom contributed to a dramatic growth in demand for commercial real estate that could not be accommodated within the confines of older cities (Searle 2010), leading to the growth of Hi-Tech parks on the peri-

urban frontier. This growth of the IT sector dovetailed with a second generation of reforms that liberalized the real estate and infrastructure sectors (the privatization of which is first considered in the Eighth Five Year Plan formulated in 1992). The central government introduced a series of policies to attract private investment in power (1992), roads (1997), and ports (1997) as Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) became the preferred method for building infrastructure. By the 2000s, 37 percent of infrastructure investment was coming from the private sector (Gulati 2011: 380). Crucially, compensating private infrastructure investors with excess land and/or development rights became an increasingly popular method of cost recovery in these arrangements—whether for roads, airports, or affordable housing (Ahluwalia 1998; IDFC 2008, 2009). Infrastructure investment thus became a vehicle for private real estate accumulation, culminating with Special Economic Zones in the mid-2000s.

The privatization of infrastructure has thus been synergistic with the liberalization of India's real estate sector. While urban development was a state-dominated affair before liberalization, in the 1990s the government loosened restrictions on bank lending to private developers. By 2002, private developers were allowed to obtain financing (for construction, though not land purchases) from foreign investors. This policy was further liberalized after 2005 (Searle 2010: 30). This credit expansion, combined with growing demand for housing and office space, precipitated a dramatic real estate boom by the mid-2000s.

In addition to real estate, economic liberalization unleashed a mineral rush across central and eastern India. Beginning in 1993, India began to liberalize its largely nationalized mining industry. The “New National Mineral Policy” of 1993 and subsequent revisions over the next decade facilitated private and foreign investment in prospecting, extracting and processing of most minerals. After changes in 1997 and 2000, foreign private equity investments of up to

100% were granted automatic approval. By the 2000s, mineral prices were increasing with the Indian and Chinese construction booms driving up demand. While the mining sector has not grown exceptionally fast, the number of Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) signed with private mining companies has accelerated and several states (Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, and Orissa) have been particularly pro-active in handing over large mining concessions to private investors.

The process of economic liberalization that began in the 1990s has thus created “a voracious appetite for space to meet the demands of industrialization, infrastructure building, urban expansion and resource extraction” (Ghatak and Ghose 2011: 65). This demand grew steadily over the 1990s, receded somewhat during the East Asia financial crisis-triggered slowdown between 1997 and the early 2000s, and ascended new heights in the mid-2000s as India’s growth rate reached 9% and a liberalized real estate market entered a dramatic boom.

This demand could not be met by the ordinary operation of land markets. Most of the land available for such projects lay in the hands of India’s large small-holding farmers and there are several well-known obstacles to consolidating large chunks of rural land. First, very small-holdings make negotiations difficult and holdouts likely. Second, legal problems are almost guaranteed for large projects given titling issues and ambiguity in ownership. Third, many farmers remain reluctant to sell land for multiple reasons, including the lack of attractive exit options from agriculture. The growing demand for land initiated by liberalization in India thus confronted the supply barrier of rural land markets that do not provide “an open field” for the circulation of capital (Harvey 2006b: 271). If large land consuming private investments were to go forward, the state would have to dispossess land for them.

There were two main incentives for states to help capital overcome this obstacle. First, liberalization also unleashed fierce inter-state competition for investment (Jenkins 1999;

Rudolph and Rudolph 2001). What has been underappreciated is the critical role land dispossession has assumed in this competition.¹¹ Given the barrier to amassing large chunks of land through market purchase, companies making large enough investments insist on a government commitment to acquiring it. Such a commitment is an invariable item in the MoUs signed between companies and state governments. According to both government officials and industry representatives that I interviewed in seven states, the ability of state governments to dispossess peasants has become of critical importance in the inter-state competition for investment. As Nirupam Sen, then Industries Minister of West Bengal, explained:

Providing land is one of the most important things, you see, because until and unless you get a hold of the land, there is no question of setting up industry.... That is the most important input. If you don't get it, if you cannot provide it, then they will seek somewhere else where they can get that land (Interview, 2/28/11, Kolkata).

The flight of Tata Motors from West Bengal to Gujarat after meeting stiff opposition in Singur powerfully illustrated the centrality of land to the inter-state competition for footloose capital.

The second incentive for states to move into dispossessing land for private and increasingly real estate-driven purposes was the enormous licit and illicit rents this would make possible. Acquiring land and selling it to private investors became a significant source of revenue for industrial development corporations, urban development authorities, and other parastatals. Moreover, this increasing state role in land acquisition and allocation expanded the opportunities for illicit graft, which takes the form of government officials and politicians buying land in advance of projects being announced (or selling that information to others) or demanding bribes for land allocation, land conversion or shifting project boundaries. This nexus of government officials, politicians, brokers and developers generates “corruption” and black money on a scale that makes the “license raj” look quaint.

¹¹ On the broader significance of land liberalization and new forms of urban governance, see Sud (2012) and Goldman (2011).

The upshot is that state governments restructured themselves into land broker states. No longer confining themselves to dispossessing land for state-led projects of productive material expansion, states turned to dispossessing peasants for any private economic purpose that constitutes “growth,” including real estate speculation. As a shorthand, we can characterize this as a shift from a regime of “land for production” to one of “land for the market.” No longer is land dispossessed just for the production of commodities, but increasingly for its own commodification. This began in the early 1990s as industrial development corporations and other agencies began acquiring land for private and decreasingly industrial purposes (Levien 2013), and reached maturity in the mid-2000s with Special Economic Zones, other forms of PPP infrastructure, and the auctioning by urban development authorities of peri-urban farmland to private investors. Rather than simply dispossessing land for production, states began dispossessing land so that private companies could capture the differential between the price paid to farmers and its ultimate market value. I call this ratio between the compensation and market prices the *rate of accumulation by dispossession* (illustrated in Figure 1). In the case of the Mahindra World City SEZ in Rajasthan, I have used documents obtained through the RTI to conservatively estimate this rate as 439%—including a profit of over Rs. 2.5 *crore* per acre on land turned to residential use—based on 2011 prices (Levien 2012: 947-948). In peri-urban Delhi, the Greater Noida Development Authority has been documented acquiring land at Rs. 820 per square meter and reselling it to developers at Rs. 35,000 (Sood 2011). The key point is that under India’s neoliberal regime maximizing such windfalls has itself become the purpose of dispossession, devoid of any broader considerations of “development.”

Thesis 5: Under this neoliberal regime, dispossession has become less developmental.

The old term “development-induced displacement” always assumed what needed to be examined: that it was in fact “development” for which people were being displaced. This assumption, which resonates with the state’s claim that anything it does is development, is reproduced by recent commentators who, in analyzing contemporary land struggles in India, insist that acquiring land is a necessary cost of development and that the main issue is the terms of compensation (cf. Banerjee et al. 2007; Bardhan 2011; Chakravorty 2013). In his recent book, Sanjoy Chakravorty argues, for example, that “Development cannot take place without changing the use of some land.... The problem is not with acquisition per se, but with unjust acquisition” (2013: 173). By unjust acquisition Chakravorty means acquisition compensated at an artificially low price; the solution, according to Chakravorty, is to “get the prices right.” This perspective, however, misses the historical transformation in the economic purposes driving land dispossession from the developmentalist to neoliberal periods, and simply accepts that these purposes constitute “development” of a sufficiently “public” nature. Partha Chatterjee (2007) accomplishes a similar reduction when, following Sanyal (2007), he chalks up today’s land grabs to a vaguely specified “primitive accumulation” whose political fallout must be managed by the state. While focusing on the “governmentality” he sees involved in the latter, he ironically leave us with an ultra-orthodox concept of “primitive accumulation” that renders today’s land grabs into the necessary birth pangs of capitalism when they are in fact simply new forms of class redistribution mediated by the state. These accounts make it appear as if the privatized and speculative forms of dispossession in the neoliberal era—a Reliance SEZ, a DLF Mall, a high-end residential colony, a Formula 1 Race Track—represent generic and laudable “development” (Chakravorty) or a necessary stage in the development of capitalism (Chatterjee).

While development is an inescapably normative concept, by most definitions many of today's land grabs fail the test. Indeed, there is a strong case to be made that the projects for which the Nehruvian state acquired land had much greater claims to development than those of today. Consider India's steel towns, a huge source of dispossession in the early decades after independence (Parry 1999; Parry and Struempell 2008; Struempell 2014). India's public sector steel towns provided relatively high quality employment to tens of thousands of people, including many of those whom they displaced. They allowed India to autonomously manufacture the key building block of an industrial economy. They had huge linkages with the domestic economy and generated ancillary industries in their vicinity. And their revenues were captured by the state. Even dams, for all their many problems, at least produced electricity and provided irrigation to hundreds of thousands of farmers. Now consider today's private Special Economic Zones. These zones are driven—and their location determined—by the interests of their developers in reselling land at a profit. Aside from real estate speculation, the production that exists in them is oriented towards non-labor-intensive industries; almost two-thirds are in the IT/ITES sector (Government of India n.d.). The tax breaks afforded to them represent a huge drain on government revenue. My own study of a multi-purpose (but IT/ITES focused) SEZ in Rajasthan found that it employed an individual in only 18% of dispossessed families (all in temporary sub-contracted positions), created few productive linkages to the surrounding areas, and that its main effect was real estate speculation that dramatically exacerbated pre-existing class, caste, and gender inequalities. When the dust settled, my random-sample survey of 94 households in four villages found that 65% of dispossessed families and 88% of SC/ST families reported having less income; 50% of families and 75% of SC/ST families reported having less food; and 76% of families and 88% of SC/ST families reported receiving more “loss” than

“benefit” from the project (see Figure 2). And this was within water-scarce villages of Rajasthan that received a better-than-average compensation package for an SEZ that contains some of India’s largest IT companies and is considered a “success.” One can imagine how much less impressive are the “developmental” results of SEZs in more agriculturally prosperous regions, not to mention the residential colonies, golf courses, race tracks, and malls for which land is being expropriated in so many other parts of India.

It is no longer plausible to *assume* that dispossession is a necessary price of development or stage of capitalism. Instead, we must begin to take seriously—and empirically study—the variation in the socio-economic consequences of dispossession across kinds of projects and diverse agrarian milieu. Understanding such variation helps us to interrogate rather than quietly accept the justifications for dispossession put forward by states and capital in the name of “development.” The concept of regimes of dispossession helps to highlight this variation, illuminating the different forms of accumulation and associated class interests that dispossession serves in different times and places. Recognizing that dispossession is organized into qualitatively different regimes helps us to throw off the yoke of teleology and historical determinism. If the economic purposes driving dispossession change over time and place, then the dispossession of direct producers is not a necessary stage of economic development: it is *neither a stage nor necessarily generative of development*. The concept of regimes of dispossession invites us to see dispossession as form of coercive redistribution that serves different purposes and class interests in different periods but whose contribution to economic change and the “public interest” is not only open to question, but subject to political contestation.

Thesis 6: India’s neoliberal regime is politically tenuous and is unlikely to be rescued by higher compensation.

Just as India's neoliberal regime of dispossession was reaching scale in the mid-2000s, it began to encounter increasingly widespread and militant land wars. The dimensions of these struggles are by now well-known and need not be repeated. It is enough to say that since the mid-2000s, they have become endemic and uncommonly successful. Beneath the more high-profile struggles—Nandigram, Singur, Raigad, Kalinganagar, Jagatsinghpur, Bhatta-Parsaul, Niyamgiri—are endemic wars of attrition across the country. In addition to organized opposition are the more prosaic legal challenges that, according to my interviews, besiege industrial development corporations, urban development authorities and other parastatals in almost all states. Cutting across the vicissitudes of individual struggles is an aggregate picture of remarkable obstruction. That land acquisition is now a top concern of Indian capital and the present government is testament to this newfound success.

What explains this remarkable success? There are several factors, which prove challenging to isolate. The first is the previous groundwork laid by movements against Nehruvian-era projects, such as the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* and the many movements gathered under the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM). The second is the spread of NGOs and mass-media into rural areas, and the rise of opposition parties. The precise effects of these changes remains to be investigated, and it is important to remember that journalists, NGOs, and parties typically arrive on the scene only once opposition to a project is well-underway. But more fundamental than these background factors, I would suggest, are several features intrinsic to the neoliberal regime of dispossession itself. As we have seen, the shift towards dispossessing land for the private sector, and particularly for real estate purposes, has greatly magnified the discrepancy between compensation prices and market prices. Not only has the rate of accumulation by dispossession increased, but it is also more visible under the

neoliberal regime than it was before: instead of dispossession subsidizing the internal rate of return of a large infrastructure project, it is now a mere instrument for maximizing private companies—and farmers’ need only know the market price of land to estimate the extent to which they are being ripped off. The second and related factor, as I have already suggested, is the increasingly exclusionary growth that land dispossession is facilitating in the neoliberal era (cf. Kohli 2012; Dreze and Sen 2013; D’Costa 2014). Inseparable from these material considerations is the dubious legitimacy of dispossessing land for private and often speculative purposes. Few farmers can be convinced that giving their land to a private corporation for real estate constitutes a “public purpose” justifying their forcible removal. Even the media, political parties (at least when they are in opposition), and courts have become increasingly skeptical of forcible land acquisition for real estate speculation, as seen in the uproar over SEZs (see Levien 2013). Normative persuasion is simply not one of the resources available to India’s neoliberal regime for producing compliance. This leaves material compensation and brute force as the main mechanisms for getting farmers off their land.

After 2007, we saw concerted attempts by state governments and the central government to overcome land wars by increasing material compensation. Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Rajasthan are among the states that put policies into place that went beyond the usual below-market compensation price (or the DLC rate) typically given to farmers. The overthrow of the Left Front government by the TMC’s Mamata Banerjee on the heels of its massacre of farmers in Singur and Nandigram demonstrated that land acquisition had arrived as an electorally salient issue and that it would henceforth be politically difficult to continue shoving farmers off their land with minimal compensation. For the first time, offering a better deal to farmers became a matter of inter-party competition. Nevertheless, there are limits to state-level policies as capital

can always flee to states that are better able to politically manage with low prices—Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat, for example, all continued acquiring land without giving particularly high compensation (though not without problems). This generated a race to the bottom. As an official with the Haryana Industrial Development Corporation told me, after Haryana put into place its unprecedentedly remunerative compensation policy at the behest of powerful farmers' groups, high land prices become a deterrent to investors who started going to other states (Interview, 2/21/11). The only way to overcome this race to the bottom was a national legislation to uniformly raise compensation rates.

After six years of wrangling, and much dilution at the behest of capital, the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act (LARR) was passed in September, 2013. Explicitly framed as a compromise between the needs of industry and the interests of farmers, the legislation was intended to orchestrate a class compromise that would overcome endemic land wars and ensure a predictable supply of land for capital by giving farmers higher prices. It sought, in other words, to ensure compliance to an ideologically tenuous neoliberal regime of dispossession by making material concessions in the rate of accumulation by dispossession. It was Rahul Gandhi who apparently came up with the idea of turning land acquisition into a new right—the right to be fairly dispossessed, as it were. While BJP government has now diluted several of LARR's key "rights," it is important to recognize the limitations of the original bill. Even in its undiluted form, LARR was unlikely to significantly suppress land wars.

First, LARR did not, as pro-industry critics maintain, give landowners effective veto power over land acquisition. While the original bill required that 80% of affected landowners approve land acquisition for private projects and 70% for PPP projects, states could get around

this provision by allocating private companies land from their “land banks.” Most states already acquire land well in advance of demand for particular projects; since they are not explicitly for private projects when acquired, these acquisitions would arguably not come under the 70-80% approval clause. Even under LARR, then, states could continue to dispossess land for private capital, but with some time lag between acquisition and allocation. This clause was, in any case, one of the principal casualties of the government’s recent ordinance and then legislative amendment, which effectively eliminated any need to obtain consent from farmers.

Second, the compensation and resettlement and rehabilitations provisions in the original bill became so diluted by the time it passed that LARR would have anyway failed to appease most farmers. While early versions of the bill called for a uniform fixing of compensation levels at six times the government assessed value of the land, or “circle rate” (always much below the market level), the final bill reduced this to effectively 4 times the rate in rural areas and 2 times the rate in urban areas (a distinction it leaves to state governments to establish). Given the rates of accumulation by dispossession described above, this will hardly bring compensation up to the level of market value. The relentless lobbying of industrialists and builders to reduce compensation levels illustrated Marx’s observation that capitalists have a difficult time seeing beyond their noses (i.e. short term profits) to coordinate their long-term class interests. While some worried that the bill made prices too high (Chakravorty 2013, 2015), this amounts to little more than a defense of using eminent domain for generating corporate super-profits. LARR did not bring compensation prices up to market prices and, even in its original form, probably would have been inadequate to significantly reduce “land wars.”

Third, and more fundamentally, the idea of utilizing the exchange value of land to build a class compromise between urban capital and farmers assumes what needs to be explained, which

is how farmers come to value their land at its exchange value in the first place. In other words, it is not clear that all farmers can be bought, or at least that their “reservation price” is in a range acceptable to state and capital. Many farmers’ struggles on the peripheries of expanding cities are, no doubt, struggles over prices. Many such farmers are amenable to a class compromise on the terrain of commodification if the price is right. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to collapse, as Partha Chatterjee (2007) does, all of dispossession politics into ad-hoc negotiation over its terms. There remains a second category of anti-dispossession movement that have shown absolutely no interest in compensation. From Nandigram to Niyamgiri, Raigad, Singur and Jagatsinghpur, we find numerous examples of farmers unwilling to even consider compensation. One should notice that not all of these are in *adivasi* areas, where such attitudes are considered to be more prevalent. By refusing to value their land at its exchange value, these farmers cannot be brought into a class compromise on the terrain of commodification.

Finally, even among those who are willing to consider compensation, a final obstacle to the Indian state’s ability to pacify anti-dispossession struggles lies, as we have pointed out, in the developmental contradictions of the neoliberal growth model itself. The non-labor intensive and real estate driven growth that characterizes India’s SEZs—and India’s growth model as a whole—has little to offer most farmers aside from land values. If the Nehruvian state dispossessed land for economic purposes that farmers could at least be *theoretically* included in—irrigated agriculture and public sector industrialization—the neoliberal regime of dispossessing land for real estate and non-labor intensive growth does not even offer this possibility. For India’s vast semi-proletariat, this makes holding on to even small pieces of land to supplement wage-labor far preferable to pure landlessness. While economists justify forcible land acquisition by the macro-level efficiency of transferring land from agriculture to “higher

value” land uses (Bardhan 2011; Chakraborty 2013), what they fail to understand is the micro-level rationality that is often behind farmer’s opposition to this transfer.

If the neoliberal regime is short on legitimacy and faces several obstacles to building compliance on a material basis, there remains the time-honored route of intimidation and violence. Undoubtedly, the neoliberal regime of dispossession has, like its predecessor, relied significantly on brutal state violence. There are simply too many cases of states using police, party cadre, and thugs to kill, beat, rape and loot protesting farmers. Nevertheless, this violence often backfires, and the land wars of the past seven years have shown the limitations of brute coercion. The spread of media and the relentless work of NGOs and movements have made it more difficult to hide this violence than in the past (though, to be sure, it is still far easier to get away with it in the remote forested areas of central India than in the peri-urban plains). It is also much harder to legitimize this violence, as I have suggested, when it is being used to transfer land to a private corporation than to the state itself. Where anti-dispossession struggles have in recent years succeeded in attracting significant outside attention, it has often prevented the massive use of violence to definitively break their blockades—witness the ability of farmers in Jagatsinghpur to hold up the larger proposed Foreign Direct Investment in India’s history with bamboo gates and human shields. What the Maoist insurgency shows, moreover, is how this state violence can backfire on a massive scale.

This is not to say that state violence against rural people who refuse to be dispossessed will cease any time soon. The signals coming from the Prime Minister’s office are that it will do anything possible to push through private investments and large infrastructure projects, as seen in its dramatic dilution of LARR and its “streamlining” of environmental clearances. Fewer material incentives will mean greater reliance on state force. Nevertheless, it is unclear how

much can be accomplished from the center; it will still be up to states to acquire the land, and it is they who must deal with the political fallout of calling in the thugs to take land for the Reliances of the world. There will certainly be great sub-national variation in how this plays out (Sud 2014). But the most likely aggregate scenario is that states will fumble towards a less-than-fully-successful class compromise with politically influential farmers in the plains, and continue to use substantial force against marginalized *adivasis* in remote areas. It is far from clear, however, that the sum total will be anything resembling a stable regime of dispossession.

CONCLUSION

By the latter half of the 2000s, the Indian state had to confront the fact that the land requirements of its neoliberal growth model were difficult to fulfill under conditions of electoral democracy. India's vast rural population, the second largest in the world, controls the land that is desired in ever greater quantities for the private investment that is central to the country's neoliberal phase of capitalist expansion. Whereas in the period of state-led development, states were able to mobilize the substantial legitimacy of the Nehruvian developmentalism to transfer land from peasants to public sector projects, the neoliberal regime lacks the normative power to compel farmers to "sacrifice for the nation." Its remaining hope, aside from increasingly illegitimate and counterproductive violence, is to offer farmers some share of the unprecedented real estate values that dispossession is being used to manufacture and capture. But land values are a bad substitute for inclusive growth, both developmentally and politically. With land dispossession increasingly being put to use by predatory state governments in the service of an exclusionary development model, it is unlikely that this neoliberal regime, even with the recent

amendments, will be able to accomplish what it seeks: the easy and predictable transfer of land from farmers to capital.

The upshot is that farmers are making themselves the most significant obstacle to capitalist growth in India. While the peasantry has long been seen as an obstacle to progress, this specific roadblock is as unexpected for modernization theory and classical Marxism as it is for “India Inc.” These land struggles are shaping the trajectory of Indian capitalism in unforeseen and unpredictable ways, and have firmly lodged the “land question” at the center of Indian politics. Whether these anti-dispossession movements can open the way for more equitable paths of development and social change remains to be seen. But their chances will be far greater if they can ally with a reinvigorated left that has abandoned old theories of dispossession’s role in history.

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Figure 1: The Rate of Accumulation by Dispossession

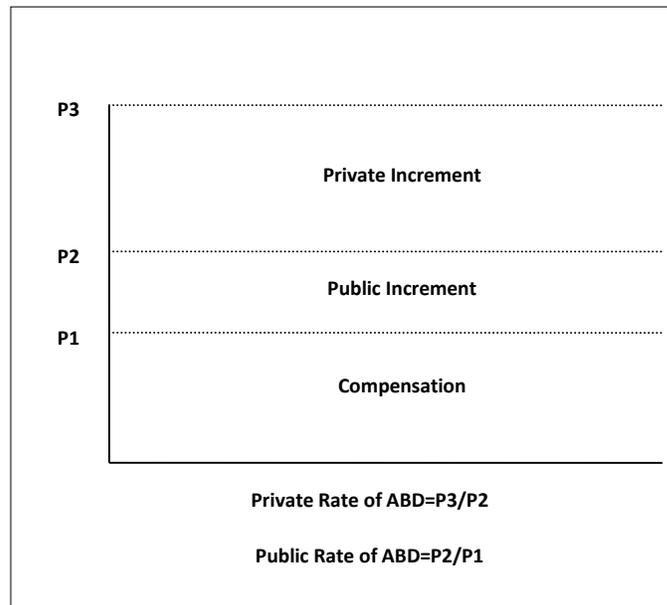


Figure 2: Impoverishment through Land Acquisition for Mahindra World City SEZ in Rajasthan

