

# India's land impasse

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LAND and 'resources' attached to land are once again at the centre of capitalist accumulation strategies globally. In so-called emerging economies, 'land-grabs'<sup>1</sup> for infrastructure and urbanization are legitimized to facilitate the flows of capital and aid economic growth. Industrial corridors and special economic zones (SEZs) are expected to generate productive investments and employment in manufacturing and create 'world-class integrated townships' or more recently, 'smart cities'.

In India, state-led forcible acquisitions invoke the principle of eminent domain for land and facilitate resource transfers to global and domestic capital. Where forcible acquisition is not used, market-induced processes driven by appreciating land prices additionally ensure transfer of land and resources, further impoverishing agrarian livelihoods and environments. State- and market-led land-grabs are thus fundamentally transforming agrarian and other existing relationships with land and resources (such as relations around forests, water bodies and areas of spiritual significance).

Dispossession by these projects, however, is intensely contested by peasant and citizen groups across the country, underlining how critical land and resources are to a large number of people who attach a range of socio-cultural, environmental and political-economic meanings to them.<sup>2</sup> As new and ongoing policies and projects threaten to alienate more people from land and resources, we witness recurring conditions of impasse as projects are resisted, revised and, increasingly, reversed. These contestations are not universal, but have significant effect on policy and articulate emergent possibilities for differing conceptions of development. How can we theorize India's *impasse* over land, as generative of possibility for egalitarian 'development from below?'

This paper offers a preliminary framework to analyze the unfolding dialectic between land-grabs for infrastructure and urbanization on the one hand, and resistance against dispossession on the other, that is creating 'India's land impasse'. While a similar impasse unfolds over land-grabs for extractive projects facing resistance, my focus here is on infrastructure and urbanization projects to highlight the peculiar geographies of rent they index. I draw on recent research around the institution of the Dholera Smart City along the Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC) in Gujarat, and previous research on the Regional Plan and SEZs in Goa, to illustrate different contexts of land impasse. While Dholera is a site of ongoing resistance, the Regional Plan and SEZ agitations in Goa have 'successfully' led to policy reversals.<sup>3</sup>

**S**truggles over land and resources are significantly shaped by historically particular local contexts, but their frequent recurrence

across diverse contexts in recent years constitutes grounds for analysis. Several mobilizations resisting land-grabs in various states have secured 'success' over years of agitation, though at tremendous cost. Conditions of impasse have arisen where those resisting have refused to negotiate the 'terms of inclusion' (say with better compensation; see White et. al. 2012). Agitations against the infamous Indonesian SALEM SEZ in Nandigram and the TATA automobile plant in Singur in West Bengal, the South Korean Pohang Steel Corporation SEZ in Odisha, the Mangalore SEZ in Karnataka, and the Mumbai SEZ in Maharashtra are some of the better known cases. Close to Dholera and also along the DMIC, 36 out of 44 villages were exempted from the Mandal-Becharaji Special Investment Region (SIR) in early 2014 following protests.

These various struggles coalesced at the national level in the combined resistance to the ruling National Democratic Alliance government's attempts to amend the 2013 land acquisition law in 2015. The amendments sought to exempt industrial corridors and a wide range of public and private infrastructure and housing projects (including entertainment, health and education projects) from social impact assessments, and private projects from mandatory consent provisions. They were defeated as a result of nationwide agitations that brought together peasants, big farmers, social activists, environmentalists, journalists, lawyers, academics, other concerned citizens, political parties and trade unions on common platforms, despite differences in organizational objectives. This success, at least temporarily, challenged land-grabs at the national level.

India's land impasse, however, is not only a contemporary impasse for infrastructure and urbanization projects, or for capital, or state policy in capital's aid. It runs deeper – historically instituted as far back as the Permanent Settlement of 1793, with its unequal land rights in aid of revenue for the capitalist-colonial project. This deeper historical impasse over equitable land rights remains unresolved in post-independence India with the failure of redistributive land reforms.

As ongoing resistance to dispossession confronts capitalist accumulation, to create *contemporary* conditions of impasse; the *historical* impasse, in turn, confronts peasants' and citizens' groups resisting dispossession over the question of redistributive reforms for egalitarian land and resource use rights. Unless this historical impasse is addressed, we are likely to continue witnessing recurring conditions of contemporary impasse, and may never manage to institute egalitarian and ecologically appropriate relations with land and resources as deeper resolution. What we see unfold in the recurrent conditions of impasse over land and resources in India then, is a historical dialectic within a contemporary dialectic, in other words, a *double dialectic of impasse*.

Land-grabs	
Capital	Impasse
Resistance to dispossession	
Capital	Impasse

## Historically unequal property relations

**T**he Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC)<sup>4</sup> was initiated in 2006 with an agreement between the governments of India and Japan. During Premier Shinzo Abe's visit to India in August 2007, the Indian consultancy firm Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services prepared and presented the concept of the corridor that was subsequently approved and mutually ratified. It sealed the involvement of global capital in the creation of the corridor.

The DMIC maps a complex policy terrain along the 1483 km stretch between Delhi and Mumbai. Approximately 180 million people or 14 per cent of the Indian population will officially be affected by the corridor's development in six states – Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra. The corridor incorporates nine mega industrial zones, one high-speed freight line, three ports, six airports, a six-lane intersection-free expressway connecting the country's political and financial capitals, and a 4000 mw power plant. Funds for the project have been arranged from the Indian government, Japanese loans, investments, depository receipts issued through Indian businesses and other foreign capital. Individual projects will involve a host of private actors under public private partnership arrangements.

The 920 square kilometre Dholera SIR covers 22 villages with a population of 39,300, and is among the first smart city projects along the corridor. As 340 square kilometres of the Dholera area falls under the sensitive coastal regulation zone, 580 square kilometres is available for 'development', with some land reclaimed from the sea. Dholera's proposed land use includes residential, industrial, tourism, commercial, IT, recreation sports and entertainment zones. The project is located in the Bhal region bordering the Gulf of Khambhat. Rain-fed wheat (the regionally coveted *bhaliya ghaun* variety), cotton, cumin, jowar (sorghum) and milch cattle with flourishing milk cooperatives complement local livelihood strategies with other occupations, including diamond polishing.

**D**holera is being implemented under the Gujarat Special Investment Region (SIR) Act 2009, which brings within its purview the Gujarat Town Planning and Urban Development Act 1976. The town planning law, historically used to convert rural-agrarian land into urban land for expanding urban centres, is now also applied to greenfield cities like Dholera. It uses the mechanism of 'land pooling' under the principle that the implementing authority brings together a *voluntary* group of landowners for planning. The Dholera SIR Authority and other state and national DMIC officials claim that land pooling for Dholera was based on 100 per cent public consultation and claim no knowledge of resistance on the ground, notwithstanding the fact that the authority has not managed to pool any land since 2010 (Sampat 2016).

My research indicates widespread dissent on the ground. Those resisting the project have made several petitions to the authorities demanding exemption for their villages. Local residents have formed a Bhal Bachao Samiti (Protect Bhal Committee), with sub-committees in

each affected village. Agitations have been continuing; 100 people were detained and 22 arrested in February 2014 when protesting land acquisition (see *The Indian Express* 2014; JAAG 2014). Residents have also filed a writ petition in the High Court of Gujarat challenging the project. In December 2015, the High Court ordered a stay on all project implementation activity until the matter is duly heard (*Gujarat Khedut Samaj vs Gujarat State* 2015).

Given the continuing impasse in Dholera, uncertainty around the project implementation has grown, further underlined by a general lack of investor interest in the project (Sampat, 2016). Residents have articulated the need for greater agrarian support and egalitarian livelihood arrangements around land. They argue that implementing such measures will improve the overall productivity and prosperity of the region.

Goa's Legislative Assembly prepared and approved the first Regional Plan (RP) 2001 for land use planning in 1986. The plan promoted tourism for the state's economic development, giving many concessions to capitalist hoteliers (Trichur 2013). It relaxed norms in coastal and conservation areas to allow construction, but restricted commercial expansion by peasant households providing small-scale tourism services. The blatant promotion of capitalist hoteliers over the interests of petty service providers included federal subsidies for establishing resorts and laid the foundation for subsequent tourism development (*ibid.*). *Comunidade*<sup>5</sup> commons were acquired through forcible acquisition and led to the massive destruction of *bunds*,<sup>6</sup> *khazans*<sup>7</sup> and exhaustion of water tables, reinforcing a downward spiral in agricultural productivity. The pressure to convert lands into tourism related uses thus increased, causing conflicts among the coastal peasant communities. Official emphasis on 'high-end' tourism subsequently paved the way for real estate investment in the state.

Environmentalists point out that Goa's policy frequently reflects the interests of powerful pressure groups; the government machinery is often rewarded for non-enforcement or misinterpretation of rules (Alvares 2002). Violations of regulations for coastal zones, building height, untreated sewage release in the sea and extraction of groundwater causing salinization of aquifers are frequent. Sand dunes are denuded or razed for an unhindered sea view, khazan lands are neglected, and land is increasingly converted for residential complexes, beachfront hotels, beach shacks, restaurants and other entertainment activities (*ibid.*; Kazi and Siqueira 2006). A growing presence of regional and national real estate developers underlines the role of these investments as critical accumulation strategy. Land conversions for real estate and conflicts over land conversions in Goa must be seen in this backdrop of ongoing processes of land and resource appropriation.

The RP 2011 was initiated in 1997-98. Even as the official plan drafting process was on, in October 2005 the state government introduced an urgent ordinance (number 3) that fundamentally amended the Town and Country Planning Act of 1974. The ordinance was cancelled following public protests and a court petition, and the final plan released in

August 2006 met fierce resistance. Alarm at the scale of conversions from 'green areas' (typically agricultural, orchard and forest lands) to 'settlement areas' (for construction permission), with implications for local housing, agriculture, infrastructure and the environment catalyzed an agitation, spearheaded by the Goa Bachao Abhiyan (Save Goa Campaign). The Congress-led state government had to eventually withdraw the plan by February 2007, and initiate a participatory process for a new plan.

**T**he RP 2011 process was, however, controversial and the plan had to be released in three installments from 2009-11. The final release disregarded the drafts made by villagers. For a combination of reasons, including the fierce anti-SEZ agitation in 2007, the Bharatiya Janata Party which came to power in Goa in April 2012, with the review of the RP process as an important part of its election manifesto. The RP process has since been in abeyance, despite frequent political references to it; de facto, it is the RP 2001 which operates.<sup>8</sup>

The RP 2011 agitation laid the ground for the anti-SEZ agitations in 2007, as SEZs threatened the appropriation of *comunidade comuns* for realty and industry. The anti-SEZ agitation in 2007-09 resulted in the cancellation of the state's SEZ policy and 15 approved SEZs by the state government.<sup>9</sup> As five private developers took the matter to court, the High Court of Bombay at Goa upheld the state government's decision in 2010. The matter is currently *sub judice* in the Supreme Court of India, although there are occasional reports of the state government in talks for an amicable out of court solution (*Herald* 2016).

**W**hile the anti-RP agitation emphasized decentralized planning, the anti-SEZ agitation highlighted the need for locally appropriate development as a living history of environmental activism and concerns, combined with mobilizations around a 'Goan identity' and indigenous assertions over relations around land and resources, popular frustration over corruption, aided substantially by a sympathetic media, the small size of the state, and resulting electoral contingencies. The two agitations brought together a mixed social base of caste, class, gender and community identities. Men and women, professionals and peasants, educated, semi-literate and non-literate people, Catholics from various castes and communities,<sup>10</sup> Hindus from various castes, and unconverted Scheduled Tribes acted simultaneously as rights-bearing citizens asserting claims over the rule of law, and vocal members of local communities, many politicized in the course of the agitation (Sampat 2015).

The Goan impasse over the RP and SEZs also highlights the need for ecologically appropriate and egalitarian use of land and resources. However, several new projects continue to threaten dispossession even as protests unfold (see Almeida et. al. 2015).

**F**or Lefebvre (2016), the capitalist production of space is revealed

through a focus on the constitutive trinity of capitalist society – ‘land-labour-capital relations’ (see also Elden and Morton 2016; Marx 1992). As land relations are transformed through infrastructure and urbanization investments, the appreciation of rent keeps the stakes high for continuing attempts at land grab. The circuits of rent, however, hinge upon the capacity to realize it, either through access to land holdings or investment in built infrastructure, notwithstanding the dispossession they entail.

Given capital's constant drive for accumulation, merely stalling a particular project or policy can only effect a temporary reprieve. A proper resolution to this double dialectic of impasse requires a renewed political commitment to locally and ecologically appropriate, egalitarian and democratically determined development processes that enhance local livelihoods and food security. However, this requires programmatic social movements that push beyond contingent alliances against dispossession and engage with fundamental reconfigurations of relations with land and resources that effectively counter capitalist land-grabs for a deeper historical resolution of India's land impasse.

#### Footnotes:

1. For a discussion of the term, see Sampat 2015.
2. Peasants' groups include small and marginal landowners, landless agrarian workers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, forest dwellers and others; and citizens' groups refer to coalitions of individuals, often concerned professionals and representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that coalesce around contentious issues. They are not NGOs in themselves, but people working voluntarily for campaigns and raising resources through individual donations.
3. Similar policies and projects, however, continue to threaten residents with alienation.
4. This account is based on a larger study on the Dholera SIR supported by The Hindu Center for Politics and Public Policy.
5. *Gaonkars* were considered the original inhabitants of Goa's villages, with collective ownership of land and resources leased for cultivation to 'users' through auctions, including non-*gaonkars*. Under Portuguese rule *gaonkaris* were retained and legally codified as *Comunidades*.
6. *Bunds* are check dams used to control flow of water into fields.
7. *Khazans* are reclaimed from marshy mangroves by constructing dykes and sluice-gates.
8. This account is based on interviews with GBA activists and supporters, architects and planners part of the RP 2021 drafting process, and accounts from *The Hindu* 2006; Couto 2007; Bose 2007; Aghor 2011. Also see <http://www.savegoa.com> (last accessed February 27, 2014); <http://www.goafiles.com/> (accessed 25 April 2014).
9. For discussions of Goa's experience with SEZs, see Sampat 2015; Da Silva 2014; Bedi 2012.
10. Depending on a Catholic person's locality of origin, their 'original' caste can be determined and often (though not always) corresponds with their socio-economic status.

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