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Exploring variations in political reactions to large scale land  
acquisitions in India

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## Abstract

Movements resisting compulsory land acquisition by the Indian state for ‘public purpose’ projects exhibit significant differences in their goals, discourses and strategies of contention. Understanding the variable political reactions to such large scale land acquisitions thus require a more contextual analysis of how land acquisition processes unfold across different communities and project types. Building primarily on existing work in agrarian political economy, this paper identifies four interrelated factors - the perceived legitimacy of land acquisition processes, the political influence of affected communities, their incorporation into projects, and existing linkages to capitalist production relations - that have a crucial influence on how communities experience land acquisition and the role played by the state in this process. It argues further that the political character of movements resisting particular instances of land acquisition, in terms of their goals, discourses and strategies, are closely linked to the interplay between such factors. For instance, resistance to large hydroelectric dams and mining projects has tended to coalesce around a fundamental opposition to the project, in contrast to the opposition to many Special Economic Zones (SEZs) which have focused on securing higher compensation for acquired lands. Popular perceptions of the ‘public interest’ served by the state’s acquisition of land for a project also influence movements’ choices of discourses focused on localized concerns of land and livelihoods, versus those which more broadly challenge the dominant capitalist development paradigm or climate change discourses. The increasing use of environment protection laws to contest land acquisition processes is a particularly illustrative example of emerging strategies of contention, albeit with significant variations across different project types.

## Keywords

Compulsory land acquisition; land grabbing; resistance; India; political economy; social movements

## Acronyms

CSE Centre for Science and Environment  
NBA Narmada Bachao Andolan  
SEZ Special Economic Zone

## **I. Introduction**

Eminent domain laws in India give the state the right to forcibly acquire land, without the explicit consent of the owner or occupant, for projects which are deemed to serve a 'public purpose'. Such compulsory acquisition of land by the Indian state and its transfer to private and public entities executing the projects, while far from a new phenomenon, has become an increasingly contentious and politically salient issue in recent years. Much of the discussion on the rapid increase in organized resistance by communities opposing the forcible acquisition of their lands has focused on what may be regarded as its proximate cause - the proliferation of privately developed Special Economic Zones (SEZs) following the passage of an SEZ Act by the central government in 2005, which resulted in the acquisition of large swathes of primarily peri-urban, agricultural land for these projects. However, it is important to recognize that contemporary resistance is a much more widespread occurrence. One recent estimate counts 642 active land conflicts across the country, with a significant proportion of these related directly or indirectly to cases of land acquisition (Land Conflict Watch 2018). Large infrastructure projects like hydroelectric dams and mines were, and continue to be, major drivers of land acquisition and displacement (Fernandes 2007: 203), particularly in mineral-rich states like Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha, and in the hill states of North and Northeast India. More recently, India's international commitments to substantially reduce the emissions intensity of its economic growth are driving a rapid increase in (primarily) forest and common lands required for renewable energy and climate change mitigation projects (Pahuja et al. 2014, Shrivastava 2014).

Recent research on conflicts related to acquisition of land for privately developed SEZs and industrial projects in India has highlighted the diverse political reactions of those affected by this process. Resistance movements have increasingly succeeded in stalling or cancelling a number of projects through a combination of legal mechanisms, political mobilization and sustained, primarily non-violent, protest. Along with the diverse strategies adopted by movements resisting contemporary land acquisition, many instances of such opposition involve communities voicing a fundamental opposition to the loss of their land, rather than claims for improved compensation and rehabilitation. This literature cautions against narrowly interpreting rising and variable opposition to land acquisition as a response to the amount and terms of compensation paid to affected communities.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is adapted from an unpublished research paper titled 'The Political Economy of Resistance to Compulsory Land Acquisition in India', submitted by the author in partial fulfillment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of MA in Development Studies at the International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands.

In line with this recent literature, this article calls for a more contextual understanding of resistance to land acquisition in India. It argues that the nature of such resistance relates closely to how land acquisition processes unfold across communities and project types. It identifies a range of crucial factors which have an influence on how affected persons experience particular instances of land acquisition and the state's role in this process. Finally, some preliminary observations on the similarities and differences in the political character of resistance to land acquisition - in terms of its goals, discourses and strategies - resulting from the interaction between such factors in particular instances of land acquisition are offered.

The analysis presented here relies extensively on a critical evaluation of existing theoretical and case-specific literature documenting the nature and causes of opposition to SEZs and large dams in India. This is supplemented by data collected during multiple rounds of field research by the author since 2012 with anti-coal mining movements in Raigarh district of the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh, including most recently, a three-week period in August 2016. Interviews conducted during this period with members of state and national level social movements and other related actors like human rights activists, lawyers and journalists, have also informed the research.

## **2. Conceptualizing contemporary resistance to compulsory land acquisition**

Research on political reactions to global land grabbing (Borras and Franco 2013, Hall et al. 2015) emphasizes the highly variable nature of resistance to large scale land transfers, both within and across such transactions. Differing political reactions to land grabbing are particularly influenced by contestations over the meaning of land between the various actors involved and the role played by the state in this process. Looking at the influence of these factors on existing social relations of land and labor of persons affected by land grabs helps to understand their responses to such transfers (Borras and Franco 2013: 1741), which can take a number of different forms - ranging from an absence of opposition, to struggles against expulsion from the land (either for improved terms of expulsion or explicitly opposed to the process) and struggles for incorporation into land deals - and the political trajectories of such struggles (Borras and Franco 2013: 1730-8).

Recent research on resistance to acquisition of land for privately developed SEZs and industrial projects in India similarly highlights a range of different factors that influence political reactions of those affected by this process (Bedi 2013, Bedi and Tillin 2015, Levien 2012, 2013a, 2013b, Nielsen 2011, 2016, Sampat 2015, Sud 2014, Vijayabaskar 2010). Sud (2014) and Bedi and Tillin (2015), for instance, emphasize on the role of sub-national land governance structures in

understanding variations in impacts and responses to land acquisition processes. Others, like Sampat (2015) and Nielsen (2016), focus more on the project and community specific factors influencing the nature of individual movements resisting the loss of their land. Levien (2013a), on the other hand, argues that while anti-land dispossession movements are characterized by the wide variation in their goals and ideologies, they also exhibit a range of common features, including their direct opposition to the state and its agents, reliance on overt resistance, their localized, ad-hoc and politically autonomous status, and the cross-class nature of their mobilizations. He links this distinctive 'politics of dispossession' to specificities in the process of land dispossession - the explicit and transparent use of extra-economic coercion by the state, the sudden and one-off nature of its impact, its relative marginalization within existing political and social movements, and its indiscriminate impact on a given geographical area (Levien 2013a: 360-72).

This article builds on and positions itself within these discussions seeking to conceptualize political reactions to global land grabbing and land dispossession in India. It acknowledges the wide diversity in how persons and communities are impacted by compulsory land acquisition and choose to respond to this process, including the many instances where resistance does not emerge. However, instead of focusing on one particular scale or level of analysis, it emphasizes the influence of a range of interlinked factors on how land acquisition processes unfold across different types of projects and impact affected communities. Variations in these factors - namely, the perceived legitimacy of land acquisition processes, the political influence of affected communities, the nature and scope for their incorporation into projects, and the extent to which they communities are already integrated into capitalist relations of production - influence, but do not determine, the nature of land acquisition processes and, in turn, responses to them. Such an emphasis does not seek to invalidate other frameworks of analysis discussed earlier. However, I argue that a greater focus on these factors proves useful for understanding the wide variations observed in land acquisition processes (elaborated in section 3) and in the political reactions to them (section 4).

### **3. Identifying key influences on processes of compulsory land acquisition**

As Borrás and Franco (2013) propose, unpacking the contested meanings of land and the role of the state is central to a more nuanced conceptualization of how people are impacted by land acquisition processes and, in turn, choose to respond to them. The four factors discussed below provide useful analytical lenses through which to understand variations in such contestations and state roles.

#### ***3.1. Perceived legitimacy of land acquisition***

Since compulsory land acquisition does not require the explicit consent of affected communities, the ability of the state to effectively exercise its power to forcibly expropriate land is contingent on broad public legitimacy for its actions. In other words, even when there is a general public acceptance of the logic of capitalist development, the state still has to justify the ‘public purpose’ for which it engages in compulsory land acquisition.

Widespread opposition to land acquisition for SEZs, for instance, can be seen as being a result of the low perceived public legitimacy of what Levien describes as the current ‘regime of dispossession’ (Levien 2013b). He argues that compulsory land acquisition for such projects, given their clearly non-developmental and real estate driven motivations, has implied a fundamental change in the role of the Indian state, from that of a landlord acquiring land to build on or rent for a public purpose, to a land broker serving the interests of private capitalists, by dispossessing peasants for projects with questionable public purpose (Ibid: 395). The state’s exercise of its power of eminent domain in such instances of land acquisition can be difficult to defend as being in the broader public interest and opposition to such projects by affected communities that are unwilling to be dispossessed and displaced from their land may not be resolved through the use of state violence and coercion.

However, it is unlikely that low public perceptions of legitimacy, which are evident in the case of SEZs and certain industrial projects, also apply to projects like large dams and mining projects which, at least in terms of public opinion, are generally seen to serve a legitimate ‘public purpose’. Though the role of the private sector in such projects has increased in the post-liberalization period in India, this has primarily been perceived as being necessary to facilitate the development process in a more efficient manner than the public sector, which has historically executed such projects. As a result, arguments questioning the legitimacy of state involvement in acquiring land for such projects are less likely to find broader public acceptance than for projects like SEZs, where the nature and extent of private gain is more clearly evident.

Land acquisition for SEZs has faced widespread opposition across the country, ultimately resulting in a central government decision to not undertake compulsory land acquisition of agricultural land for SEZs.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the state has continued to actively to acquire land for large hydroelectric, thermal power, mining and industrial projects, including in the increasing instances where such projects are executed by the private sector. If at all, the pace of such projects has increased (CSE n.d., Vagholikar and Das 2010: 3). This suggests the different role that the state sees for itself in relation to projects like large dams, mines and thermal power

<sup>2</sup> For a broad summary, see Intercultural Resources (2009: 33-49) and Levien (2013b: 398-400).



plants, which were also a characteristic feature of the post-independence Nehruvian developmental state in India, and its view of the broader public legitimacy of compulsory land acquisition for such projects, even when they serve private profit.

### ***3.2. Nature of political influence***

Irrespective of the extent of broader public legitimacy for compulsory land acquisition for different public purpose projects, it remains in the state's interest to reach a compromise with affected communities resisting this process. Since land losers, both within and across projects, are rarely homogenous, measures like improved terms of compensation and rehabilitation are only likely to address the concerns from some affected persons. For resisters who are fundamentally opposed to the dispossession of their land, the state essentially has two choices - to not acquire the land or to acquire through the explicit use of force and intimidation. Such decisions about the degree of extra-economic coercion utilized in the process of compulsory acquisition of land are influenced, in particular, by differences in existing levels of political influence and mobilization of affected communities. In addition, the strong role of the regional state in relation to land governance and acquisition, and the specific political, social and economic contexts in which the regional state operates, translates into distinctive official and unofficial regional responses towards land acquisition (Bedi and Tillin 2015). As a result, regional and local governments are often the primary avenue for affected communities seeking to influence the state's role these processes.

A rich body of literature on agrarian political economy has elaborated on the substantial influence historically exerted by different classes of peasants on the post-independence Indian state. More recently, Lutringer (2015) has compared the uneven nature of political mobilization of agrarian movements across different regions of India, linking this to their trajectories of agrarian development. Regions like Western Uttar Pradesh, which have been the primary beneficiaries of India's green revolution, are among the major grain producing regions of the country and are well-integrated into capitalist production relations. Agrarian movements in this region - which are also discussed therefore have strong political influence and have successfully mobilized to secure access to state subsidies on agricultural inputs and procurement prices, and more recently, to oppose reforms in the agrarian sector. In contrast, regions like Chhattisgarh have remained relatively peripheral to India's economic geography and agrarian economy, and are characterized by a primarily indigenous Adivasi population dependent on rain-fed agriculture. Agrarian movements in these regions have mobilized around very different issues and have been less politically influential at the national level than movements in Western Uttar Pradesh (Ibid: 70-81).



Historically, land acquisition for public purpose projects in India has been responsible for the large scale displacement of primarily indigenous Adivasi and lower-caste Dalit communities in remote areas of the country. However, acquisition of land for SEZs and similar projects in recent years has also increasingly impacted affluent farmers in peri-urban plain areas and regions (Levien 2013a: 368-9) with a history of organized and politically influential peasant movements. Strong opposition by such movements has been a crucial factor influencing recent changes in the state's role in the land acquisition processes for SEZs, whether in the form of a moratorium on forcible acquisition of agricultural land for such projects, or through substantial increases in compensation levels by state governments (Ibid: 373). The state's use of violence against politically mobilized resisters - as was the case with a large proposed SEZ and chemical hub in Nandigram, West Bengal (NHRC 2008) - has also provoked substantial backlash, widespread media coverage and interventions by civil society organizations and political opposition parties. In other instances, like the opposition to SEZs in Goa, the state's use of explicit coercion or repression in land acquisition processes was limited by the relatively strong political influence of opposing groups and their proximity to the political class in this small state, despite high levels of public protest and some instances of violence by protestors (Bedi 2013: 46, Sampat 2015: 784).

### *3.3. Scope for incorporation into projects*

While dispossession is almost always a reality in the case of land acquisition for public purpose projects in India, this does not preclude the presence of other avenues for incorporation of affected landholders into the project. While this does not preclude the possibility of a fundamental opposition to land acquisition or land use change by the affected community, it can reduce such a likelihood and instead result in negotiations focused on the terms on which they are incorporated into the project. For instance, which many instances of large scale land acquisitions for agriculture do expel people from their land without resulting in their employment in the projects (Li 2011: 286), the continued use of land for the production of labor intensive crops may create scope of their incorporation as landless workers or small-scale contract farmers, despite changes in land use and land property relations (Borras and Franco 2012, 2013: 1735).

In most cases of compulsory land acquisition for public purpose projects in India, the nature of land use change, from agricultural to highly extractive non-agricultural purposes, limits the possibility for inclusion of affected persons as workers within projects. Essentially, the jobs being created through such capital intensive projects are inadequate in number for those who stand to lose their lands and livelihoods due to such projects. Kennedy (2013) and Levien (2013b) also highlight the skewed nature of job creation in SEZs, many of which primarily employ educated urban youth in the information technology services sector, rather

than the peasants and agricultural workers dispossessed by such projects. In the case of large hydroelectric dams and mines, which have historically led to the large scale displacement of marginalized indigenous Adivasi and lower-caste Dalit communities, the large majority of workers are hired from outside the affected community (Fernandes 2007: 2014).<sup>3</sup> The limited extent of incorporation that is possible within such projects, in terms of jobs and small contracts to supply particular services, are typically used as bargaining tools to secure the consent of the more landed and influential members of the community.

The availability of non-labor related mechanisms through which land losers can be incorporated into the project can also influence impacts of land acquisition on affected communities. Levien (2012: 946) documents, for instance, the case of a private SEZ in Rajasthan, where the terms of acquisition included the provision of small developed plots of project land to land losers. The provision of such plots to members of the affected community meant that they could benefit from the large subsequent land appreciation associated with development of the SEZ. However, the attractiveness of such incorporation mechanisms has much to do with the geographical location of most SEZs in relatively urbanized districts and regions of the country (Jenkins et al. 2014: 8, Kennedy 2013: 3). The dynamics of similar mechanisms for incorporating affected persons into projects like large dams and mines, and thereby managing contestations over very different meanings of land for landholders and project developers, is likely to be quite different due to the often remote geographical location of such projects and the very different motivations behind them.<sup>4</sup>

### ***3.4. Relationships to capitalist relations of production***

Much like the rest of the world, land acquisition in India rarely involves land being utilized purely for subsistence. However, acquisition and transfer of land to more extractive purposes does inevitably result in the closer integration of land and associated labor into the market economy. And while those impacted by such processes are rarely outside the domain of either capitalist (Hall 2013: 1597) or similarly extractive non-capitalist production relations (Adnan 2013: 100-1), the nature and extent of these relationships does vary.

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<sup>3</sup> This is also the case with coal mining projects in Raigarh, Chhattisgarh, where there is often a conscious effort to not employ local residents who are perceived to be lazy or more likely to strike work (Bharadwaj 2016, personal interview).

<sup>4</sup> The different nature of these projects influences not just their ability to incorporate affected communities, but also in the compensation they are able to offer them i.e. the terms of their expulsion from the land. With projects like dams and mines, it remains difficult to adequately compensate communities for their losses without substantially restricting the benefits that accrue from the cheap exploitation of these ecological resources. In contrast, Levien (2013b: 395) highlights the real estate driven orientation of many SEZs results in very high profits for the private sector from such projects, which also provide greater scope for securing the consent of affected persons through improved compensation.

In the Indian context, for instance, it is instructive to look at such differences between middle-sized and large peasants, and the indigenous Adivasi communities, both within and across different instances of land acquisition. Lutringer (2010) refers to the former as ‘subsidized capitalists’ who were the primary beneficiaries of green revolution techniques pushed by the state in the 1960s and are now well integrated into capitalist systems of production and market exchange. On the other hand, Baviskar (2004: 156-7) documents how widespread ecological destruction and state control of forests has severely limited the ability of Adivasi communities in central India to maintain their self-sustaining economies. This, she argues, has facilitated an ongoing process of increased commodification of their produce and labor, through increased participation in markets and migration. The extent and terms of the incorporation of these two communities into capitalist production relations are thus very different.

Such variations provide a useful analytical lens to understand how different communities are positioned to deal with the loss of their land and their further integration into capitalist production relations.<sup>5</sup> In Tamil Nadu, for instance, Vijayabaskar (2010: 38) credits the relatively limited opposition by land losing peasants and landless agricultural workers to SEZs to a combination of a long term crisis in agriculture, relatively high levels of urbanization and industrialization, and strong social mobility and educational levels. The experience with land acquisition for large coal mining projects in Chhattisgarh suggests that the primary beneficiaries of this process have often been upper-caste landed peasants and better educated members of the community. These groups have been able to directly negotiate with private companies in the initial stages of the project to secure better compensation for their land. In other instances, through a combination of incorporation into the project, in the form of jobs or small contracts, and the investment of the proceeds from the acquisition of land, they have been able to better manage the impact of land acquisition (Rath 2016, personal interview). In contrast, Adivasis in particular have often found it difficult to manage the rapid transition to a purely cash-based economy that has been facilitated by the acquisition of their land (Tripathi 2016, personal interview).

Levien (2012: 952-60) similarly documents how, in the case of land acquisition for the SEZ in Rajasthan, upper-caste peasants with larger landholdings were generally better equipped to manage the livelihood impacts associated with the loss of land, and were also able to benefit significantly from the intermediary roles created through the process of land acquisition. On the other hand, poorer peasants and landless agricultural workers were made significantly worse off from

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<sup>5</sup> Importantly, such differences are only one component of many closely overlapping divisions based on class, caste, ethnicity and gender, among others, that tend to influence the impact of land grabbing (Borras and Franco 2013: 1727).

the land transfers. The eventual benefits realized from the sale of developed land plots provided as part of the land acquisition process also varied widely within the community, with richer, upper caste peasants able to gain substantially more from the land speculation that this enabled (Ibid: 954).

#### **4. Differentiating the political character of resistance to compulsory land acquisition**

Building on the previous discussion on factors influencing variation in processes of land acquisition, this section goes on to argue that such differences are useful to understand differences in the political character of resistance to this process. In doing so, it does not seek to essentialise the specific characteristics of particular project types and affected communities, and thereby ignore the widespread variation within and across individual instances of land acquisition. Rather, it argues that the factors highlighted above are important for understanding the tendency of resistance movements to exhibit certain similarities and differences in their goals, discourses, strategies and alliances.

##### ***4.1. Goals of resistance to compulsory land acquisition***

It is often difficult to clearly link goals of movements resisting land acquisition to characteristics of particular project types and affected communities. In part, this reflects the very different impacts of land acquisition process on members of what are generally very heterogeneous communities. Where resistance does emerge, it can also be challenging to distinguish between the public goals of movements and the motivations of diverse persons coming together to oppose the project. Stringent resistance, for instance, may primarily reflect attempts to secure improved terms of expulsion and/or incorporation into the project for some community members, but a more fundamental opposition to such expulsion for others. At the same time, active state involvement in dispossessing landholders on unfair terms, often through some combination of coercion, intimidation and obfuscation, can make the acquisition process seem inevitable; agreement from affected communities in such cases may not truly reflect their consent to the project and a willing acceptance of the terms of acquisition.

Nevertheless, there is evidence suggesting that opposition to land acquisition by Adivasi communities and/or to projects like large dams and mines often tends to be more fundamentally opposed to land acquisition, irrespective of the terms on which this process occurs (Levien 2013a: 374, Baviskar 2004: 203). This is also the case with the (primarily Adivasi) communities resisting coal mining projects in Raigarh, Chhattisgarh. There is, in fact, a high degree of overlap between Adivasi communities and those affected by large scale infrastructure projects like

hydroelectric dams and mines.<sup>6</sup> This tendency may partly be explained the poor historical record of rehabilitation of persons affected by such projects (Fernandes 2007). At the same time, such projects offer a fairly limited scope for incorporation of affected communities, particularly when compared to projects like SEZs. The peri-urban location and the real estate driven imperatives underlying most SEZ projects generates possible mechanisms for incorporation of affected communities into the project - for instance, through the provision of developed land plots to enable their participation in subsequent real estate appreciation resulting from the project - and more broadly, for the payment of higher levels of compensation. Moreover, with land acquisition for projects like dams and mines, the limited and unfavorable terms of inclusion of many affected communities in capitalist production relations can make the loss of land and an increased dependence on the market economy a highly disruptive process. This, in turn, can lead to an unwillingness to give up land irrespective of the price being offered. Levien (2013a: 374-5) similarly highlights the relatively lower possibility of a compensation-based compromise in such cases, along with the lack of suitable jobs, greater dependence on ecological resources, and the influence of cultural identity and political histories of resistance to the state, as key factors influencing the opposition to land acquisition by Adivasi communities.

There tends to be greater variation in the goals of organized resistance to SEZs, though these differences are also likely to be similarly influenced by specific characteristics of the projects and affected communities. For instance, the high-profile and successful opposition to the Reliance Maha Mumbai SEZ in Raigarh, Maharashtra and the POSCO SEZ in Jagatsinghpur, Odisha involved a fundamental opposition to the land acquisition process. Yet, these projects were somewhat atypical of the real estate oriented nature of most SEZs, in that they were proposed in relatively remote rural locations and involved the acquisition of significant amounts of forest and wetland areas, in addition to agricultural land (Intercultural Resources 2009: 44-6, Kale 2010: 11). While opposition to SEZs in peri-urban areas of north and north-west India varies across projects, it has typically been led by politically influential farmers' organizations seeking higher compensation for acquired lands (Levien 2013a: 373).

#### ***4.2. Discourses of resistance to compulsory land acquisition***

It can be difficult to clearly distinguish between the factors influencing the decisions of affected persons to resist a project and the discourses employed by organized opposition to it. This is particularly the case when movements seek to

<sup>6</sup> For instance, an estimated 70 per cent of coal reserves in India are located in three Indian states - Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha - which are home to about a quarter of the country's Adivasi population (All 2016: 6.) Adivasis have also borne the brunt of development induced displacement in post-independence India (Fernandes 2007: 203).



build broader support for their struggles.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the choice of discourses by social movements resisting land acquisition is likely to link closely to considerations about the perceived legitimacy of state involvement in this process. In recent years, acquisition of land by the state for SEZ projects has been difficult to justify, particularly when it serves to purely and transparently facilitate private capital accumulation through the transformation of agricultural land into real estate (Levien 2013b: 396). By denoting them as ‘real estate scams’ (Levien 2013b: 399, Sampat 2015: 769), anti-SEZ protestors have focused on challenging the state’s use of its eminent domain powers to forcibly dispossess affected communities. Such discourses are often not opposed to industrialization or SEZs per se, but rather the active role of the state in facilitating private profit by dispossessing land at lower than its perceived or market value (Levien 2013a: 373, Sampat 2015: 781).

For projects like large dams and mines, where the nature of ‘public purpose’ has greater public legitimacy, challenging the process of land acquisition itself can be more difficult. Goals of such resistance movements also tend to coalesce around a fundamental opposition to the loss of land, rather than an effort to negotiate compensation or seek incorporation into projects. Resistance therefore often relies on discourses that challenge the broader development paradigm legitimizing such projects, often in combination with discourses around ecological sustainability and protection of indigenous rights. Essentially, movements seek to challenge the dominant view that these projects are in the public interest. For instance, opposition to the Sardar Sarovar dam project sought to challenge the validity of the state’s claims about the overall benefits of the project and more broadly, the existing model of development which served elite groups while causing the large scale displacement of marginalized communities (Baviskar 2004: 222-4). Such discourses were employed alongside more localized efforts to publicize irregularities in land acquisition procedures and the state’s use of violence to counter opposition to the dam (Ibid: 201-2, 211). Movements opposing land acquisition for coal mines in Raigarh have similarly challenged the current framework of uneven and inequitable development and called for a greater recognition of the interests of directly affected communities, as opposed to those of private capital and urban elites.

Discourses of resistance by communities mobilizing against projects with relatively high levels of public legitimacy also tend to include an explicit avowal towards non-violent protest. The use of terms like Koyla Satyagraha (Coal Satyagraha) by anti-mining movements in Chhattisgarh (Drolial 2016) and Jal,

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<sup>7</sup> Baviskar (2004: 236-8), for instance, discusses how opposition to the Sardar Sarovar dam involved a process of reframing the particular concerns of project affected communities, about sustaining their lands and livelihoods, into a broader critique of the current development paradigm, in part to build support among national and international elites.

Jangal, Jameen Haq Satyagraha (Satyagraha for Water, Forests and Land Rights) by the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA 2016) invoke Gandhian ideas of non-violent resistance against injustice.<sup>8</sup> Such active attempts by movements to highlight the non-violent and legitimate nature of their struggles seek not just to build broad public support, but also to counter the very real threat of state repression and violence to suppress such resistance under the pretext of public interest or safety.

#### ***4.3. Strategies of resistance to compulsory land acquisition***

Opposition to land acquisition generally tends to be localized in nature and targeted at the regional and local levels of the state, which are most closely implicated in this process (Bedi 2013: 40, Levien 2013a: 369). However, communities affected by mines and big dams have increasingly involved the court system and advocacy efforts targeted at the central government in their strategies of resistance. In part, this is because, unlike projects like SEZs, such projects are typically initiated and approved by the central government, even though the land acquisition process itself may be facilitated by state governments. Moreover, as discussed earlier, to the extent that such opposition seeks to challenge the existing development paradigm legitimizing such projects, it also needs to engage with broader public opinion and the central government, alongside challenging the regional and local state.

Perhaps more importantly for politically less influential communities resisting projects with high public legitimacy, the Indian court system has proved to be an increasingly effective avenue for contesting state-led land acquisition. Progressive central government laws - in particular, the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 (commonly known as the PESA Act) and the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 (commonly known as the Forest Rights Act) - include strong provisions for prior consultation or mandatory consent of indigenous Adivasi communities in relation to land acquisition and diversion of forest land respectively. These protections are in stark contrast to the very limited rights available for land losers to directly oppose the land acquisition process. They mean that, in principle, indigenous communities threatened by displacement due to such projects often have alternative legal avenues to challenge the loss of their land. Two prominent recent cases - of a large mining project in Niyamgiri, Odisha and a hydroelectric dam in Lippa, Himachal Pradesh - illustrate how local communities have been able to effectively stall the land acquisition process through favorable court rulings calling on the government to enforce existing laws which mandate the consent of affected communities for the acquisition of forest land (Pradhan 2016).

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<sup>8</sup> Satyagraha can be loosely translated into English as a 'struggle for truth'.



While movements resisting projects like SEZs have often approached the Indian court system (Levien 2013a: 364), progressive laws on indigenous rights and transfers of forest land often do not apply to land acquisition proceedings for projects involving agricultural land and non-indigenous farming communities. In such instances, legal cases seek to remedy illegalities in land acquisition processes or the state's use of violence, but cannot withhold consent to the project itself. Moreover, political mobilized and influenced farmer movements are generally better positioned to directly challenge the regional state, particularly in cases where such projects are perceived to serve little or no 'public purpose'.

#### ***4.4. Alliance building in resistance to compulsory land acquisition***

Different relationships to land and capitalist production relations - which often overlap with class divisions - can lead to differentiated views on land acquisition and resistance within any project-affected community. However, when opposition emerges, it generally involves alliances between different classes of affected persons, albeit with varying degrees of stability. Levien (Ibid: 370) links the cross-class character of land dispossession struggles to the indiscriminate impact of land acquisition processes on persons within a specific geographical space. While such impacts are undoubtedly important, the nature of alliances also links closely to how movements are able to amplify or moderate existing class-related differences.

Discussing the resistance to the Sardar Sarovar dam, Baviskar (2004: 71, 92-3, 217-8) highlights how the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) involved an alliance between two historically antagonistic groups - indigenous Adivasi communities in the hill areas and Hindu Patidar farmers who had settled in the plains and steadily alienates Adivasi land - with very different socio-cultural relationships to land and existing linkages to capitalist relations of production. She argues that such an alliance was possible because opposition to the dam coalesced around common concerns of displacement and social justice. Participants of the movement agreed to largely disregard internal contestations over land, based on existing class and caste relations, and focused rather on how the project would benefit the Indian state, urban elites and wealthy farmers in neighboring states, at the expense of local populations being displaced (Ibid: 220-2). Opposition to land acquisition against coal mining projects in Raigarh, Chhattisgarh has involved similar cross-class mobilizations by affected communities including, in a number of cases, alliances between Patidar farmers with relatively large landholdings, and Adivasi and Dalit farmers who own less land and hire out their labor to larger farmers. While agricultural workers are less visible in these movements, it is unclear if this is primarily due to relatively low levels of landlessness in these areas or, as highlighted elsewhere, the specific challenges to building alliances between landless workers and landholding farmers (Baviskar 2004, Levien 2013a). In a slightly different context, Sampat similarly illustrates how the anti-SEZ protests in

Goa involved a broad coalition of peasant and citizen groups motivated by common concerns about the adverse impacts that the establishment of such projects would have on their access to community land and other resources (Sampat 2015: 771).

## 5. Conclusion

In proposing an analytical framework for understanding the varied nature of resistance to compulsory land acquisition for public purpose projects in India, this paper argues for a more contextual understanding of how the process of land acquisition unfolds across different communities and project types. It looks, in particular, at variations in four factors - the perceived legitimacy of land acquisition processes, the political influence of affected communities, the nature and scope for their incorporation into projects, and the extent to which community members are integrated into capitalist relations of production - and the influence such variations have on how communities experience land acquisition and the role played by the state in this process. Differences in the political character of resistance to land acquisition across communities and project types are, it argues, closely linked to specific interactions of these interrelated factors. The goals, discourses and strategies of movements opposing compulsory land acquisition for projects like large dams and mines are often qualitatively different from those resisting projects like SEZs. Likewise, there are differences in the nature of resistance by indigenous Adivasi communities and that of relatively more affluent and politically influential peasants.

The research paper thus engages with Levien's theorization of a politics of dispossession influenced by specificities in the process of land dispossession (Levien 2013a). It illustrates how some of the specific characteristics of dispossession that he identifies can exhibit variations across communities and projects, thereby influencing how this process is resisted. Levien's focus on presenting a politics of dispossession that is distinct from labor and agrarian politics results in a relatively limited emphasis on such differences. More broadly, the paper seeks to engage with the existing literature on variable political reactions to land grabbing, much of which has focused on the context of large agricultural concessions (Borras and Franco 2013, Hall et al. 2015). In looking at the varied nature of resistance to land acquisition for non-agricultural projects like large dams, mines and SEZs, it highlights, in particular, how the nature and scope for incorporation of affected communities into such projects can be different from that for agricultural concessions, and also varies significantly across these different project types. The diversity of ways in which movements opposing land grabbing interact with the state, particularly in terms of the level of the state they engage with and their use of legal mechanisms to assert their rights (Hall et al. 2015: 475-6), are also echoed in the strategies of anti-land acquisition movements in India.

However, it remains unclear to what extent such diversity in mobilizations against land grabbing reflects attempts by less politically influential communities to challenge projects with relatively high public legitimacy, as I argue is the case in India.

Given the specific focus of this paper, on analyzing the variable nature of resistance across communities and project types in India, it places relatively limited emphasis on cases where such land acquisition does not emerge. This remains an importance agenda for future research. At the same time, the factors proposed in the present analytical framework are relatively broad and can potentially also be applied to understand instances of non-resistance.

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