Behind Dispossession: State, Land Grabbing and Agrarian Change in Rural Orissa

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Land Grabbing as ‘Foreignisation of Space’

• Global dimensions of land grabbing- cross-border transfer of property rights, a significant phenomenon - not the only way land grabbing is carried out

• Land Grabbing as ‘primitive accumulation’- multiple forms of land grabbing and dispossession

• linkages between catastrophic land grabbing and the classic processes of land alienation
Poverty, Hunger and Underdevelopment in Orissa: The Context

• Orissa -the poorest state in India; it is at the bottom in terms of many indicators of social and economic development.

• Slower decline in poverty.

• Poverty is spatially and socially concentrated in Orissa- Districts of Northern and Southern Orissa have higher incidence of poverty; SCs and STs have remarkably higher levels of poverty

• Historical roots of poverty
Orissa (Odisha)
History: Colonial Period

• Interior Orissa under princely states: predominantly tribal
• Efforts to raise revenue by inviting upper caste cultivators and traders; land alienation from tribals to upper castes
• Curtailment of community rights over forests, grazing lands and water bodies
• new taxes over forest products; tribal uprisings
Post-independence developments

• Feudal lords as new leaders of the people, landed elites maintained their hold over the agrarian economy
• Development projects (Dams, steel plants); large scale involuntary displacement; poor compensation
• Low agricultural investment, low productivity
• Slower growth of rural non-farm economy
• Massive deforestation by state agencies and corporate houses
• By 1980s: Kalahandi-Balingir-Koraput region came to be known as the ‘hunger belt’
Dispossession-in-slow-motion: 
Agrarian Change in Orissa

• pre-dominantly small-holder’s agriculture: (85% were marginal less than a hectare of land in 2003)

• tenancy is higher than the national average (13.15%, 2003)


• a neat correspondence between land-ownership status and caste-status

• land-lease market was found to be dominated by small and marginal farmers
Agrarian Change

• Labour relations: permanent labour contracts present but declining; segmented casual labour market- by gender, tasks; piece rate contracts with migrant labour in irrigated villages
• various forms of ‘unfreedom’ in labour market
• Exploitative informal credit; interlocked transactions:
• Sources of credit: shopkeepers, moneylenders, grain traders and input-dealers
• Caste (Dalit or ST), low land ownership, low education and less access to non-farm income significantly related to participation in exploitative interlinked transactions
Field Survey: 2010

• Declining profitability of paddy cultivation. (water shortages, less reliable and timely supply of water through the canal system, increase in prices of inputs such as fertilizer and pesticides, under-pricing of paddy in the post harvest period, and finally a rising cost of labour).

• Labour out-migration, both seasonal and long-term increased- a large number of small and marginal cultivator families are simply unable to survive without short-term migration or remittances from members who have already migrated.

• Inadequate state support: Employment Guarantee not enough

• Elements of coercion (implicit and explicit)
Neoliberalism meets Chronic Poverty

• Mining and mineral based industries as the basis for market-led economic growth- infrastructure (linking industries with ports or railway networks)
• Privatisation of electricity and other utilities
• Development model under neo-liberalism: states competing against each other to attract foreign and domestic capital
• New concessions- land, raw materials, water, infrastructure; environmental concession
From A report by
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Development as Dispossession

Land grabbing in Orissa: different forms and for different purposes

• mining, industrial, and infrastructural projects (Kashipur, Niyamgiri, Kalinganagar, Jharsuguda), including SEZs (POSCO);
• military projects (Saintala)
• Construction of dams (Upper Kolab, Indravati, Lower Suktel and many others)
• Conversion of forest lands to agro-industrial plantations (Coffee plantations in Koraput);
• state-initiated enclosures for conservation projects
• illegal enclosures by non-state actors.
Land Grabbing as Primitive Accumulation

• Role of state power crucial in the on-going process of primitive accumulation
• Relaxation of environmental regulations, non-compliance with standard norms and statutory provisions, submission of misleading and false information
• Development as mining and industrialisation; dispossession as the price of development
• Violent suppression of dissent (routine police brutality)
• Role of local elites (a rentier class?): legitimizing primitive accumulation- non-state/ informal sources of coercive power
Role of State and Non-State actors...

• Action against civil society groups, NGOs, individuals- deregistration, physical attacks

• Maoist insurgency and movements against displacement: increased attention but increased repression as well

• State and Central governments: Vedanta/Niyamgiri case- environmental clearance as centre-state conflict

• Conflicts over water: farmers against industry
Concluding Remarks....

• Global dimensions of cross-border land transfer a significant phenomena, but it is on-going primitive accumulation under globalisation

• accumulation-by-dispossession not limited to displacement of people from land through coercive state action.

• dispossession through gradual, but systematic undermining of resources upon which the poor depend also significant – these two forms are linked and often mutually reinforcing.