

# **Resistance to accumulation by dispossession: Struggles for land by the poor peasantry in rural Bangladesh**

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# Accumulation by Dispossession (ABD)

- ‘Organic or dialectical link’ between
  - (i) accumulation of capital through expanded reproduction and
  - (ii) accumulation by dispossession
- ABD as principal form of accumulation under contemporary globalization and neoliberal capitalism [Harvey]
- Dispossession of land as critical facet of ABD

# Land Seizure and Land Denial

- Land grabbing or seizure of existing lands
- Land denial – thwarting the gaining of land or restitution of occupied lands
- Complementary processes – depriving poor peasantry of access to land
- Can happen simultaneously or sequentially
- Affecting poor peasantry including landless peasants and indigenous peoples

# Local and Global Factors in the context of Bangladesh

- Role of state and domestic classes and interest groups more prominent than those of foreign governments and transnational corporations
- Critical influence of factors at global level
  - Neoliberal policy regimes
  - World market demand and global supply chains
  - Surveillance and certification of agricultural exports by international regulatory bodies
- Since 1980s, structural adjustment policies and promotion of agricultural exports, notably shrimps
- Affecting allotment of state lands and property rights

# Overt and Covert Resistance

- Resistance to expropriation of land by private interest groups and public agencies backed by state power
- Overt and violent forms: peasant rebellion, revolutions, insurgency
- Covert forms: invisible and silent
  - Avoidance protests [Michael Adas]
  - Weapons of the weak [James Scott]
- Do poor peasants use only covert forms of resistance?
- Conditions of transformation of covert to overt resistance
- Interplay between domination and resistance involving entire structure of power
- Dynamics of land struggles and shifts in balance of forces



# Noakhali Char Lands

- Unstable land formations resulting from river and tidal activity – erosion and accretion
- Afforestation to stabilize soil and consolidate land for productive use
- Large tracts of ‘new’ land constituting frontiers of settlements
- Remote and inaccessible – distant from centres of state power
- Char areas susceptible to capture by private powerholders using extra-economic coercion







# Option 1: Land Reform

- Series of attempts during 1970s and 1980s to allot state lands to landless peasants
- Ineffective due to lack of political will
- Enlarging eligibility to wealthier groups
- Corruption of land administration
- Redirecting landless to seek alternative avenues for land

# Option 2: Illegal land gains through Powerholders

- Enterprising powerholders (*Jotedars*) forcibly taking over char lands with armed gangs
- Settling landless migrants as sharecroppers: *de facto* possession
- Attempts to legitimize illegal lands through fake cooperatives
- Holding office in local self government – Chairmen Members of Union Councils

# Option-3: Land Allotment through Development Projects

- Dutch-assisted Land Reclamation Project (LRP) during 1970s and Char Development and Settlement Projects (CDSPP) during 1990s
- Allotted state lands to landless peasants through cooperative associations
- Landless groups attacked by Jotedars since they had been bypassed by the project
- Only benefited tiny fraction of landless population, who remained vulnerable to violent dispossession by local power structure
- Need for alternative avenues of accessing land for vast majority of landless peasants

# Option-4: Access to Land through 'Forest Bandits'

- Illegal clearance of state forests by armed groups under enterprising powerholders known as Banadasyu or Forest-Bandits
- Recruited landless peasants to cut down forests and provide rent and services
- Landless households given de facto possession of small plots – illegal squatters on state lands
- Forest-Bandits defied police and administration
- Protection from patrons in powers structure including political leaders and business houses interested in land

# Option-5: Routine Land Settlements

- Landless and poor peasants applied for *de jure* land settlement to the administration
- Routine process, not land reform or development project
- No match for influential interest groups with influence over land administration and local powerholders

# Option-6: Shrimp Zone Rules Declaration, 1992

- Pressure from wealthier groups to change land allotment policy to gain state lands
- Imposition and adoption of neoliberal policies promoting agricultural exports
- Declaration of shrimp zone rules in 1992 for coastal areas
- Provided legitimation for allotment of state lands to wealthier groups to set up large shrimp farms for supplying export market
- Pre-emptive grabbing of land and eviction of poor peasants and squatters during 1992-2003

# Option-7: Establishment of Shrimp Zone in Noakhali in 2003

- Combined pressure of domestic interest groups and donor agencies promoting agricultural exports
- Noakhali Shrimp Zone with 12,000 acres of state lands declared in May 2003
- Assertion that Shrimp Zone is on 'empty lands' despite formal settlements and de facto possession by peasants
- Large-scale land seizure to evict landless and poor peasants so that shrimp farms could be established with formal de jure titles subsequently
- Combined strategy of land grabbing and land denial
- Resistance of landless and poor peasants to both forms of land dispossession





# Crushing of Forest Bandits: Eviction and Enclosure

- Forest bandits unwilling to evict peasant squatters since they provided their support-base and sources of income
- Contradiction within power structure
- Former patrons of the Forest Bandits mobilized security forces against them with backing of MPs, Ministers, national-level political leaders
- Co-ordinated operation by security forces with support from poor peasantry
- 40 forest-bandits killed and hundreds injured in presence of political leaders and security forces during two weeks in December 2003
- Large-scale eviction of poor peasants became much more feasible after elimination of the Forest-Bandits

# Resistance and Public Action

- Expropriation of land would have gone further had it not been for resistance
- Procedural protests: petitions, demonstrations
- Action-oriented: blockades or gherao, as after establishment of Shrimp Zone
- Counter-violence by poor peasants in the face of attacks on their lives and property
- Little scope for covert resistance
- Transformation of non-violent to violent resistance
- Class-based organizations on both sides
- Shifts in the balance of forces determining outcomes

# Options for land gains or dispossession

- Policy choices by state: Could cut both ways
- Outcomes of state laws and policies influenced by structures of power
- Seven options for land gains mediated by state and/or power structure
- Legal pluralism: *de jure* and *de facto* land rights

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# Role of Judiciary and Supporting Coalitions

- Support to poor peasantry from a handful of NGOs, public interest organizations, committed lawyers/legal aid group
- Submission of Writ Petitions leading to a series of stay orders by High Court against eviction of poor peasants by district administration for the Shrimp Zone
- Significance of higher judiciary as the only institution capable of resisting pressure from administration and national level power structure

# Partisan Roles of Administration and Policy-Makers

- Through land laws and land policies as well as the nature of their enforcement
- Subject to pressure of powerful political and commercial interest groups
- Influenced by neoliberal policies imposed by donor agencies, leading to changes in land and agricultural policies, affecting land conflicts
- Deploying security forces to crush opposition to shrimp zone and land seizures

# Changes in Property Rights: Land Laws and Policies

- Changes in rules of eligibility and priority order in the allotment of state lands
- Privileged rights to powerful interest groups simultaneously undermined the value of land rights given earlier to poor peasantry
- Changes in laws and policy encouraged powerful classes to pre-emptively grab or deny lands to poor peasantry
- Actual outcomes of land laws and policies determined by contestations between dominant groups and resistance by poor peasantry and supporting coalitions

# Interactive dynamics of domination and resistance

- The nature of attacks on poor peasantry ruled out covert forms of resistance – overt activities constituted forms of everyday resistance of the poor peasantry
- Created conditions for the transformation of non-violent and procedural protest into counter-violence for sheer survival
- Dynamics of land struggles based on interaction between domination and resistance
- The balance of forces changed at particular conjunctures
- Actual outcomes of accumulation by dispossession remained contingent
- Power relations as primary determinant of the outcomes of land laws and policies, including land reform and development projects for land settlement