

# PROMISES OF DEVELOPMENT, LAND ACQUISITION, AND DISPOSSESSION: A CAR FACTORY PROJECT AND PEASANTS IN WEST BENGAL, INDIA

## ABSTRACT

This article examines how the futures promised by the postcolonial state through various projects leave peasants sceptical about a new government project at the rural margin of India. Focusing on a car factory project undertaken in 2006 by the government of the West Bengal Indian state, I explore how a half century-long project of land reforms shaped the dispossession politics of the peasants whose lands have been acquired for a car factory project. Based on an ethnography in Singur, this article explores how a car factory project at the very onset of its implementation instilled a sense of harm to life and livelihoods. Consequently, that project produced forms of spatiotemporal inequality between different socioeconomic groups in connection, not only with their ownership of land, but also with their respective vision of their work futures.

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**Keywords:** project form, dispossession, land acquisition, peasantry, India

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## INTRODUCTION

It was the month of May in 2006. Amidst the midsummer heat and the excitement across the eastern Indian state of West Bengal, a segment of citizens celebrated the Left Front's (LF) overwhelming victory. Simultaneously, news of a new project spread in the state. This new project planned to establish a Tata Motors, a global company, car factory on a stretch of 997 acres of agricultural land in Singur, a community development block situated around 45 km from the Kolkata metropolitan area. The newly re-elected chief minister of the LF government in West Bengal and the chairperson of Tata

Motors jointly declared this car factory project a panacea for the area's development deficit. Several villagers of Singur from all corners of the land earmarked for the car factory project, however, gathered in the next week to protest when news spread of the Tata Motors team and government officials' visit. Since that protest, Singur remained in the eye of a political storm that lasted until Tata Motors moved out of Singur and relocated the car project to Gujarat, a western Indian state, in October 2008.

The West Bengal government was resolute in acquiring these agricultural lands by virtue of the colonial Land Acquisition Act of 1894, according to which, lands can be acquired for the

purpose of the 'public interest' without requiring approval from the landowners. Nirupam Sen (2006), the then-industry Minister stated, '[I]t is a question of not just those who are losing land, but also of the economic growth of the state'. Notably, West Bengal's growth rate fell to 4.9%, below the India-wide average, which was 5.5% during the last decade of LF rule (2001–2010) (Ghatak 2021). The LF government, thus, sought, as Mohanty (2007: 2) noted, to 'change both gear and strategy in an effort to sustain the economic growth that West Bengal has seen in the last three decades or so'. However, when the government used the story of growth to justify its attempt at rapid industrialisation, scholars made a broader point related to rampant industrialisation and urbanisation in South Asia. Drawing from Harvey (2005), who argued that a shift in emphasis has occurred in contemporary capitalism from expanded reproduction to accumulation through dispossession, Banerjee-Guha (2008) suggested that the appropriation of lands purportedly aimed at industrialisation and generating employment have often been diverted by real estate speculation and elite consumption.

This article explores how both registered and unregistered sharecroppers, women, and landowners differ in their experiences during the anticipatory phase of dispossession. Under the compensation packages offered by the LF government, only landowners and registered sharecroppers (albeit minimally) are entitled to receive monetary compensation. Other groups, such as unregistered sharecroppers, landless peasants, and women, all individuals who depend primarily upon these lands, are situated beyond the purview of compensation packages, and, thus, participate in the anti-land acquisition movement. Since the beginning, these economically and socially marginalised people came together to forge a unified

anti-land acquisition movement against the state government. Much has been written about the effects of land acquisition on the marginal and low-caste people of India (see, for instance, Banerjee-Guha 2008; Jenkins et al. 2014; Levien 2018; Sud 2014) and, in the particular context of Singur, the location of my study (Das 2016; Majumdar 2018; Nielsen 2010; Roy 2014; Sarkar 2007; Sau 2018). Some recent research (Gardner 2018; Noy 2020, 2022, 2023; Oskarsson 2018) importantly examined the unequal consequences of dispossession and how compensation packages create new forms of discrimination. This article contributes to these studies by explaining how the threat of anticipated dispossession produces forms of spatiotemporal inequality between different socioeconomic groups connected not only to their ownership of land, but also to their respective vision of future work.

Contestations emerged when the Tata Motors' car factory project, which the government identified as in the 'public interest', mediated how different groups of people in the region live and pursue their livelihoods. Subsequently, anticipating dispossession and minimal compensation packages engendered a differentiated terrain in which people perceived and encountered land acquisition for a car factory project based on their respective positions. Various socioeconomic groups in Singur diverged regarding how they framed the meaning of land acquisition for their futures and responded accordingly to the anticipated dispossession. For instance, when I approached one of the affected villages, trudging along a muddy road, a sharecropper woman commented passionately:

[W]e have cultivated a small amount of land as unregistered sharecroppers for a few decades. The government is

about to dispossess us of these lands for Tata Motors, which has come to establish a car factory on the rural frontier. If that happens, how can my son survive without these lands? Our lives are almost over, what will happen to him? So, I shall fight till the end and, if necessary, sacrifice my life for the sake of defending these lands so that my son can live off them.

The question that arises is how a car factory project, which the government considered a remedy to several developmental deficits, permeates the social world of diverse segments of the peasantry. Projects involving an organisational technology are generally planned so that human intervention can achieve a particular goal within a specific timeframe. The project form can, thus, structure and transform social realities based on a particular template. The Singur car factory project, therefore, came into conflict ‘with the concrete experiences’ of the peasants and the ‘social rhythms of time’ (Bear 2014: 6–7). Abram and Weszkalnys (2011: 3–4) define a project as ‘the ordered preparation for development’ that operates ‘as a particular form of promissory note’. Knox and Harvey (2011: 143), scholars of infrastructures, showed in their study how a road construction project in Peru was promoted ‘as a way of mitigating some of the dangers of underdevelopment, economic isolation, and political volatility’. By promising a better future, this car factory project in Singur was also advanced as an attempt at rapid industrialisation. However, a rift emerged between the project and its implementation when the former permeated social worlds through its predetermined template of actions, mediating how different groups of people from the concerned project area live and pursue their livelihoods. That is, a rift emerges because

a proposed project usually presumes that the target people are rational actors presumed to work methodically across the segmented times to produce a new social reality that promises a better future.

Abram (2014: 129) noted that ‘multiple temporalities’ might exist within a project. Drawing from an ethnography of a movement against land acquisition, this article explores how various social forms in a project area engage with the promises of a better future promised by a project. Do peasants anticipate that a project template of actions does not consider their livelihoods and other concerns? Do they have a deep sense of insecurity for their future? These questions become significant given the influential arguments put forward by Bear (2017). Specifically, she asserted that the analysis of how a specific community, institution, and individual construct ‘pasts and futures to take action in the present’ is significant, but not ‘sufficient to understand and act on inequality’ (Bear 2017: 143). What we need, as she emphasised, is a critical political economy of capitalist time that traces forms of accumulation, the emergence of contradictory rhythms, and varying degrees of security and insecurity (Bear 2017, 2020).

Instead of dealing with issues related to capitalist accumulation alongside labour and work, project forms in neoliberal India often deal with issues that concern the management of populations who typically suffer from prioritising economic growth. As Li (2007: 7) correctly argued, ‘experts tasked with improvement exclude the structure of political-economic relations from their diagnoses and prescriptions’. Project forms, therefore, attempt to contain any disruptive temporalities that emerge during implementation. Given that the conflict between capital and labour lies within the purview of power dynamics, project forms

seldom attempt to intervene in the conflict between capital and labour. One of the relevant questions that immediately arises is whether certain kinds of issues always remain elusive simply because they lie beyond the purview of project forms. Both project planners and project executors instantly intervene in and manage any unwanted contingencies arising as a result of conflicting interests in the population during project implementation. But, planners and executors may play hardly any role in issues that often appear as part of the fundamental conflicts between capital and labour.

Moreover, a project might fail due to often conflicting timelines and agencies, while the promises, expectations, hopes, and deprivations a particular project form brings remain in the minds of the target populations. By contrast, people frame their expectations and aspirations related to any future projects based on the past and future, which took shape based on previous project forms. Thus, a disjuncture often arises between the ordered times that project forms layout and the multiple disorderly temporalities that exist during project implementation.

In this study, I conducted an ethnographic exploration in a village in Singur between 2006 and 2008. In doing so, I spent more than three months in this village, and remained in touch with the area and its people intermittently in subsequent years. I closely observed, sometimes as a participant observer, the intense struggle against land acquisition. In addition, I interviewed around 90 people from different strata and conducted several rounds of informal discussions. Among the interviewees, several were women, including young and elderly people since they stayed at home, while working men were away from home during the daytime. However, I attempted to visit their workplaces, the agricultural fields.

The first section examines the context of

imagining the time for industrialisation and how a car factory project planned on a stretch of fertile agricultural lands resulted from the promise of creating employment. The second section explores the contestations of futurity, guarantees, and values emerging from peasants' resistance to the proposed car factory and the subsequent land acquisition. The third section explores how peasants conceptualised dispossession based on the construction and reconstruction of their experiences of governmental policies, such as land reform programmes in the past. Finally, the fourth section summarises what we can take away from this narrative of project forms and their implementation, and what this research contributes to the work on projects and project forms.

## INDUSTRIALISATION: A PROMISE FOR THE FUTURE

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)], the dominant force of the LF government, represented an alliance of some left-wing political parties. In West Bengal, they aimed to write a new 'development' script based on their sense of time after their seventh consecutive electoral victory in May 2006. The new development script placed more emphasis on economic growth, industrialisation, and urbanisation. Their sense of time seemed linear, acting as a driving force for the capitalist conception of human history and Marxist (orthodox) communists. Nigam (2007: 1047) rightly argued that 'a certain narrative of progress and history that derives from a certain rendering (reading) of Marx' involves a well-entrenched notion that is 'shared by the bourgeois economics (...)'. This notion of time supposedly prioritises the future and rejects the past. Similarly, in the LF government's script, a stage perception existed in which industrialisation

follows agriculture. They assumed that agriculture in West Bengal had developed to its limit, and, now, it industrialisation's time. As Buddhadeb Bhattacharya (2007), the erstwhile Chief Minister, stated, industrialisation was the only viable path at that moment to create employment for the aspiring youth in West Bengal. Asserting his faith in the historical inevitability of capitalism, he thus argued, 'the process of economic development evolves from agriculture to industry. The journey is from [the] villages to cities (...) it is incumbent on us to move ahead; there will be the end of history' (2007: 3).

Time as envisioned by the LF government was also a temporality, whereby, as Abram and Weszkalnys (2011: 7) argued, 'as global corporations have become increasingly willing to move their activities to offshore, states have competed to attract their investment'. Steur and Das (2009: 67) stated that almost all countries in the global South, including the 'communist' countries 'have become "transition" countries, competing to attract foreign direct investment and reform according to the strictures of global capitalism'. The question that arises now is whether we can recognise the establishment of a private car factory through the acquisition of peasants' agricultural lands as an instance of exercising governmentality. In their study on road construction, Knox and Harvey (2011: 144) argued that we should consider the construction of a road 'an ideal example of the exercise of governmentality' since its implementation is 'oriented towards the freedom of the population'. The term 'governmentality' was used by Foucault (1991) to define the techniques of modern governments that 'have as [their] purpose not the act of government itself, but the welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health, etc (...)' (Graham et

al. 1991). In the same way, we can also consider industrialisation and investment as ways of managing underdevelopment, unemployment, and economic isolation along with promoting a sense of security in many developing countries like India.

However, a car factory and land acquisition for it as project forms could engender exclusion and harm in the minds of the people. For instance, comparing land dispossession for industrial development under state-level developmentalism and neoliberalism in India, Levien (2013: 381) argued that, in 'the present regime "land broker states" have emerged to indiscriminately transfer land from peasants to capitalist firms for real estate'. Central governments might have failed 'to achieve the ideological legitimacy of its predecessors', as he noted, reflecting 'a regime of land for production with pretensions of inclusive social transformation' (Levien 2013: 381). The question now arises, as Sanyal (2007) and Chatterjee (2008) indicated, whether small producers (principally the peasantry), who have been continually dispossessed of their lands and/or other means of labour, are simultaneously provided with some other means of livelihood as part of 'governmentality'. The car factory project in Singur and the ensuing resistance among dispossessed peasants against this project enlighten us as to how the factory project could mark a rupture in the system of governance lasted for more than three decades—from the late 1970s to the late 2000s.

After the economic reforms of the 1990s, industrial licensing policy in India underwent crucial changes due to the implementation of liberalisation policies and the subsequent decline in the role of the central government and planning commission in both conceiving and financing state-level developmental projects. Various state governments from the Indian

Union gained greater autonomy in economic decision-making as well as the opportunity to attract investors to their respective locations (Rudolph and Rudolph 2001). West Bengal was no exception. The then-LF government of West Bengal sought to turn the tide, albeit belatedly, by ‘unleashing capital from the reigns of red tape’, swinging ‘between favouring citizens and encouraging business’ (Abram and Weszkalnys 2011: 7) just after their victory in the assembly election in 2006. It took every effort to attract footloose capital and woo investors to strengthen the industrial sector of West Bengal. Investment from Tata Motors for a car factory in West Bengal was part of these rejuvenation efforts by the state and, thus, represented a breakthrough, easing the path for industrialisation and a considerable achievement in attracting investment.

While imagining this time period as the perfect juncture for switching from agriculture to industrialisation, the LF government never denied that segments of marginalised people would lose their jobs as part of this shift from agriculture to industry. However, the LF communists strongly believed that these job losses were indispensable in the historical transition from one stage to another. They presumed that it was the law of historical development, a trajectory one cannot change at will. Just after announcing this car factory project in May 2006, I conducted an exclusive interview with a district-level leader<sup>1</sup> of the ruling LF party at his residence in Singur. He explained how the government projected the establishment of a car factory on agricultural lands as a measure of enhancing development. He stated:

It is undeniable that some peasants have lost their land in many places as roads widened, industries came up. But, due to consequent

economic and social development, job opportunities have increased enormously. In such areas, even a day labourer now gets work on 300–350 days per year instead of only 100 days per year in agriculture. Many outside people will begin to stay here in quarters as industry develops, and they might require domestic help. Women from peasant families can earn more by working as maid-servants.

My conversation with this party leader also revealed that, since the beginning, the large landowners, most of whom were absentee, were ready to hand over their lands to the government for this project. By contrast, the marginalised peasants and some other people, most of whom did not have land but depended to some extent upon it for their livelihoods, were vehemently against the land acquisition (Roy 2014). Although this leader branded the anti-land acquisition movement as an offshoot of the provocation from opposition parties, he could not deny that marginal peasants were reluctant to give up making use of these lands. While the car factory project form promised a better future to the peasantry, the latter anticipated harm to their lives and livelihoods. Despite envisioning a promise to both the larger society and the local peasantry, the project form’s values were measured based on a capitalist logic. The temporalities of the peasants, thus, differed from the temporality of the project, leading to the anti-land acquisition movement.

The representatives of political parties and the ruling LF parties, including the dominant CPI(M) party in particular, imagined the present as a capitalist time, which should set aside other practices that act as a deterrent to capitalist accumulation. Marxist communists jumped at the chance for growth in the economic development of West Bengal, while the modern

time—or the neoliberal time—trumpeted an unleashing of capital and encouraging business beyond the reach of the state. Rapid investment and industrialisation represented an urgent call in that moment, no matter who was displaced resulting from this effort. Like the liberal or the neoliberal camp, Marxist communists presumed that some proportion of individuals would never directly benefit from this project. However, Marxist communists also believed that the marginalised people at this capitalist time could obtain work in various sectors arising from industrialisation.

The question lay in how the government as a protagonist of this project measured the value of labour. My research found that the government recreated forms of inequality as part of the project. Notably, the patterns of the plan for setting up a factory explicitly revealed that the landowning class privileged the project space at the cost of the marginalised or landless labourers. The planners never hesitated to state that this car factory project would displace a segment of marginalised people from their lands and livelihoods. They viewed the acquisition of lands and the subsequent ‘exclusion’ of marginalised peasants as part of this transition from agriculture to industrialisation. This specific segment of the peasantry was considered extra or ‘unwanted’, visibly beyond the main stage of the project performance. They were, rather, the footloose labourers who might be carried through the emerging stages in this transition narrative, placed in the service of the propertied class as labourers including as domestic help.

In this narrative, the project form considers the present as a capitalist time during which economic growth signifies economic prosperity. Governments pursued moving up to the stage of industrialisation since the contribution of agriculture to the gross domestic product (GDP) was receding, and agriculture was

collapsing. However, Mohanty (2007: 11) argued that, despite the decline of agriculture’s share in GDP to a little more than 20% (which later declined to 15% in 2022–2023 (Times of India 2023)), it still accounted for almost 60% of all employment. In the discourse of its promise, marginalised peasants found that those promises were, indeed, meant for the propertied class who possessed lands ready for acquisition and for the educated youth serving as skilled labourers in the car factory. In the sections to follow, I explore how the anti-land acquisition movement emerging as a part of implementing the described project compelled planners to consider them as similar stakeholders and rethink the efficacies of project forms in the existing project areas.

## CONTESTATION OVER THE PROMISES OF DEVELOPMENT

Singur village, the village under study, comprises 160 households and nearly 1000 inhabitants. Among these households, around 67 belong to Scheduled Castes (SC), 73 belong to the *Mahishya*<sup>2</sup> caste, and the remaining 20 belong to the *Gowala*<sup>3</sup> caste. SC are officially designated groups of people and among the most disadvantaged socioeconomic groups in India. SC families are primarily landless labourers although some have small plots of land. Around one-third of all households in this village have been sharecropper peasants for generations, but have not been registered as *bargadars*<sup>4</sup> in government records, betraying the limitations of the land reform programme of the LF government. The question arises regarding what kinds of contestations emerged as a consequence of the conflicting interests, contrasting visions of development, and contradictory values. Why did peasants contest this car factory project, which planners positioned as a ‘public interest’

project? Villagers who resisted the car factory project were unsure during the initial period whether they could ultimately save their lands from acquisition. For instance, an elderly woman, possessing no land, stated, '[W]e live off sharecropping and gathering food from these lands. We collect different types of edible herbs from different corners of these lands. We also rear goats and cattle that graze on these lands. We would not survive without these lands.'

A young agricultural labourer candidly offered this explanation:

Although I don't have land, I am entirely dependent on these lands to earn a livelihood. Thus, we won't allow these lands to be acquired. Even if the landowners agree to sell their lands, we won't leave these lands. I used to work in a rolling mill in an industrial area, and earned US\$12 per week. But, due to an illness I could not continue that work. Now, I am working as an agricultural labourer. Many have been working as day-labourer in industries and businesses in urban areas, but often they return [to the village] due to the closure of factories or some other troubles. Work outside the village is unstable and not reliable, while our income from agriculture is more secure and provides us with food throughout the year.

This agricultural labourer who previously worked in an industry knows the extent of insecurity faced by wage labourers. His words remind us of Parry's (2013: 348) findings, which showed how insecure wage labour is, even in public sector industries, and how it is differentiated from the regular (permanent) workforce.

Thus, when the then-Chief Minister of West Bengal, the Buddhadeb Bhattacharya-led state government, outlined the promise of the

project, declaring that this car factory project would create jobs for thousands of young peasants and shape the country's future, most of the peasants contested these job creation promises. Peasants contested the promise of jobs in future since they envisioned this project form as a source of greater economic precarity. Their own experiences in erstwhile land reform projects and in moving in and out of industrial work shaped peasants' opinions. Notably, a remarkable number of *bargadars* joined the crowd that blocked the passage of the team's visit mentioned above as a means of protest. Despite the land reform project promises, many *bargadars* in this village are not registered and, thus, have no legal right to the land they have tilled for generations. Villagers still recall the *Tebhaga* movement, via which the rights of *bargadars* were recognised by the government of West Bengal. The *Tebhaga* movement broke out in the undivided Bengal province in the late colonial period, demanding that two-thirds of crops should go to sharecroppers, which extended for some years into the postcolonial period. The erstwhile (Congress) government amended the Land Reforms Act in 1971, whereby *bargadars* would receive three-fourths of the crops they cultivated, enhancing the two-thirds share originally demanded during the aforementioned movement. In 1978, the LF government began the *Operation Barga*<sup>5</sup> campaign to register the names of *bargadars*, in an effort to prevent their eviction. Their hereditary rights to cultivate the land they sharecropped became legally protected.

But, in this part of West Bengal, the *Operation Barga* programme was not implemented in its true spirit. As such, a considerable number of unregistered *bargadars* illustrated the limit of the much-trumpeted project in one of LF's strongholds. What went wrong with this project? One of the LF leaders



in Singur placed blame on the *bargadars* for failing to register their names despite the best efforts of the party and the government. He argued that the unregistered *bargadars* wanted to maintain good relations with landowners and, thus, had no interest in registering their names. The question becomes why the ruling party could not ensure registration of *bargadars*? One elderly villager explained the phenomenon thusly: '[S]oon after the LF came to power, most of the landowners who were previously aligned with the erstwhile Congress party became supporters of the ruling LF party and, thus, the latter spared their lands from being registered under *Operation Barga*.'

Peasants now heard new promises regarding a car factory project, while the government failed to deliver on the promises granted through the land reform project. The LF government tried to acquire their lands through new promises for a better future, while unregistered *bargadar* peasants still yearned for the lands they had cultivated. *Bargadars* and landless labourers, thus, began to vehemently resist the land acquisition move by the government. They were at the forefront of this anti-land acquisition movement since they were not entitled to any compensation given their lack of land ownership as well as any formal recognition as a *bargadar*. Women *bargadars* and from landless families who previously toiled these lands also joined this movement. This typical combination of economically and socially marginal families were likely responsible for strengthening the movement from the very beginning.

It was not only women from the landless and *bargadars* peasant families who previously laboured on the lands resisted the land acquisition move by the government; women from small and middle peasant families who rarely laboured on the lands also participated in this resistance

in large numbers. When the dominant discourse engaged in debates on issues like the viability of agriculture or industrialisation as the only path towards 'development', these peasant women forcefully questioned the very discourse of 'development' and organised themselves into a resistance movement against 'development'-led dispossession. Just as women-led groups in peasant revolutionary organisations 'influence [the] movement trajectory' (Tyagi 2018: 123) amongst the Maoist in Telangana, India, the peasant women of Singur also became essential to protestors by 'creating [a] robust support system that can sustain' the anti-land acquisition movement.

The entire concern of peasant women revolved around issues of land, both private property and communal lands. They asserted that such lands were indispensable to their subsistence. For instance, I met an unregistered sharecropper woman who worked in a paddy field during my fieldwork in June 2006. She explained, '[T]his land is like a mother to us, feeding us throughout the year. Hence, we can't part with it at any cost. We would rather fight with all our might to defend the land.' Likewise, a woman from a modest landholding family stated, '[O]ur husbands are not educated enough and only know how to cultivate. You cannot force us to give up our land.' They seemed to fear being driven from all their means of livelihood, regardless of what they had enjoyed thus far from a subsistence level of agriculture. A woman from a small landholding family who owned one acre of agricultural land candidly explained, '[T]his piece of land belonged to my father-in-law. Now, this piece of land is the property of our family. We, all of our family members, cultivate and live off the land. Nobody can force us to part with this land.' She felt a deep attachment to this piece of land. While unaware of her legal entitlement prescribed by the Hindu succession

Act<sup>6</sup> vis-à-vis the widows of male successors, she correctly stated that she had a right to this piece of land belonging to her husband or her in-law's family, revealing that she would die to save it from the expropriators.

The women belonging to the sharecropper and landless families tell another story, rendering the situation of land rights among women multifaceted. Peasant women are generally not registered as *bargadars* or sharecroppers in West Bengal. Notwithstanding their high level of involvement in agricultural production, they are rarely recognised as a *bargadar* or sharecropper. However, the policy directive of the West Bengal government from 1992, pledged that, during the redistribution of land, 'to the extent possible' government-allocated land should be granted either to a woman individually or jointly to a husband and wife. However, the pattern of land redistribution suggests that the allocation of *pattas*<sup>7</sup> tends to reinforce existing gender inequalities in property rights (Brown and Das Choudhury 2002). This not only applied to the case of women's entitlement, but also to the implementation of the land reform policy as a whole.

Women within unregistered *bargadar* families felt more vulnerable and, therefore, vigorously participated in the anti-land acquisition movement. They perhaps anticipated that, once the acquisition was completed, they would become nonentities in relation to the lands upon which they cultivated for generations. Their families would not be entitled to any compensation or rehabilitation programmes offered by the government, since they have no legal rights to the land. Thus, when the government stepped forward to acquire the lands, peasant women, cutting across various landholding families as well as sharecropper and landless families, objected to the government move possibly by virtue of the 'subsistence

ethic'. Fearing a loss of subsistence barred them from buying the narrative of industrialisation. Subsistence security, which they achieved through consistent economic efforts in their everyday lives based mainly on the land regardless of their rights, has remained their primary importance. These practices related to the 'desire for subsistence security' stemming from their economic lives albeit experienced socially 'as a pattern of moral rights', as Polanyi (1957) argued. Scott (1976: 6) systematically followed this line of thought, arguing that such practices 'were nearly universal in traditional society and served to mark it off from the modern market economy'. While 'the subsistence ethic' is, in general, a given of peasant economics, as argued by Scott (1976: 5–6), peasant women are swayed more by this ethic.

Following the announcement of the car factory project in May 2006, between June and August, government officials tried to enter the villages on three or four occasions to distribute notifications to peasants whose lands were marked for acquisition. Each time, these women blocked entry to their villages. They arranged themselves in such a way that whenever and wherever they saw officials proceeding towards the villages, those first noticing the officials immediately blew conch shells from their houses. Both the conch and the conch's sound are sacred symbols in Hindu caste communities. Individuals belonging to this religious community use a conch in almost all of their religious activities. In Islam and Buddhism as well, the conch is considered a symbol of the divine realm. Once heard, other women would respond by blowing conchs so that the information could spread from one hamlet to another, covering the entirety of the earmarked area. Immediately, women rushed to where the officials were approaching holding broomsticks<sup>8</sup> in their hands. Women's vigilance previously

continued throughout the day. Such resistance took place several times in the months preceding land acquisition. In addition, they creatively applied newer forms of protest demonstration, at times employing traditional weapons and holding the brooms in their hands and at other times wearing garlands of vegetables. These types of demonstrations obviously carry some traditional meanings and concepts. Holding a kitchen knife in one hand was more likely to symbolise an attempt to resist an approaching enemy. By contrast, holding a broomstick in hand symbolised sweeping or cleaning nasty things from the area, which included the threat to their way of life posed by the land acquisition.

While contestations related to the promises of development and the peasants' resistance against the car project expanded, members of the ruling political party began to garner peasants' consent to acquire land in writing. In July and September 2006, the government issued notifications for land acquisition and distributed monetary compensation to willing landowners. In addition, the government seized the opportunity to set up several police camps immediately in and around the villages. All of these camps were supposedly established to tighten the grip of the administration on the situation. The government acted, indeed, in a definitive way to acquire the land for the car factory project. On 1 December 2006, the government began fencing off land earmarked for Tata Motors. The next day, a few thousand police forces swooped down on the fenced land, fired teargas shells, and chased away villagers who gathered there to protect their land.

The government fenced in lands, surveilling them by a few thousand police posted to temporary camps established around the area. The farmlands virtually turned into a battlefield with around 1000 acres cordoned

off from all sides to prevent any movement of the villagers inside the fenced-in areas. The aggrieved peasants attempted to smash the fence and enter the lands once cordoned off, and permanent police camps, including watchtowers, were erected across the boundaries allowing for day and night surveillance. However, the strong police force guarding the fenced-in lands always overpowered the peasants. Subsequently, the steam of the movement slowly dissipated. The only hope among the agitating land losers rested in court cases, pending in both the High Court and the Supreme Court, which challenged the legality of land acquisition in Singur. Specifically, the petitioners challenged the land acquisition move by the government 'in the name of the public interest'. They argued that the government acquired the lands in Singur in the interests of a large industrial party.

Finally, amid the controversy regarding the land acquisition and the pending cases in the courts, Tata Motors decided to move out of Singur in October 2008, when the Supreme Court delivered a final judgment, declaring that the land acquisition move was illegal and void. The peasants engaged in various efforts to sabotage the car factory project and its narrative of progress. They stalled the project by disrupting its time-conscious temporality through break-ins and court challenges. They also increased the cost of and risks to the project by compelling the government to hire guards to protect the acquired lands. In addition, the court cases challenged the narrative of promised economic development, asserting that it was at best in the interest of the private sector, but never in the public interest. The court cases ultimately succeeded, but the peasants had already doomed the project by undermining its temporal, operational, and narrative logic.

## PERCEIVED EXPECTATIONS, HARM, AND DISPOSSESSION

It is now clearer how multiple temporalities—that is, the car factory project, the erstwhile ruling LF, and the peasants' own temporalities—were at play and how those temporalities contested 'notions of progress and betterment embedded in the plan' (Abram and Weszkalnys 2011: 14). Latour (1996: 23) argued that a project form is 'a fiction since at the outset it does not exist'. Since it does not exist, 'the relationship between spatial plans and the realities imagined in them is always fragile and multivalent' (Abram and Weszkalnys 2011: 15). We now see how the peasants conceptualised the project forms and the subsequent dispossession based on the construction and reconstruction of their past. One leader of the anti-land acquisition movement stated as follows:

The landless peasants supported the movement because they knew that their survival depended on safeguarding the lands. If a car factory is constructed, they won't get a job, but will lose their livelihoods instead. The 1000-van rickshaw pullers would be jobless in that case. They carry crops such as potatoes from the field to the local cold stores.

Another person who lived off his 2.33-acre plot of land was also highly doubtful of the promise offered by the government of a job in the car factory. He argued, 'Being farmers, we know only the plough and the sickle and nothing about a car factory. So, how could we get jobs there? We are against the acquisition of this land.' Another marginalised peasant contested the logic of the government vis-à-vis its land acquisition move. He asked, 'Why is a car industry set up in this area? What benefit would the farmers get from such an industry? Why isn't an industry to produce farming equipment or fertiliser and pesticides set up, such that the

farmers can access cheap agricultural products?' Thus, these peasants were sceptical about the project's promise that land-losers would obtain jobs in the proposed factory.

Majumder and Nielsen (2016: 79) found that the long-term formation of land-based identities and subjectivities in West Bengal 'embody contradictory and very ambivalent aspirations insofar as they simultaneously produce a desire for land *and* for respectable off-farm employment'. These scholars might not have simply posited a binary between these two kinds of aspirations, but also considered off-farm employment respectable. In the case I describe here, we see how a prosperous *Mahishya* family possessing around four acres of land and two submersible tube wells for irrigation set up an off-farm enterprise alongside agriculture. One member of this family stated the following:

[W]e purchased one acre of land, two submersible tube wells, and a power tiller using our savings generated from agriculture. Along with our cultivation work, we began to invest in manufacturing porcelain insulators used as non-conductors for high-voltage electricity transmission. We have employed about ten women for this household industry and are planning to expand production. But, all of the enterprise activities are upset by this acquisition of land, which threatens both our agricultural as well as industrial activities.

Another landowner-cultivator with 2.5 acres of land asserted,

We appealed to the government to save our multi-crop land and, instead, acquired low and marshy land available a few kilometres away. That will save the peasants and

facilitate setting up an industry. We are also in favour of industry, but not on multi-crop land.

These landowners are neither against farming nor against industries; instead, they favour both farming and industries. In other words, unlike the LF communists who believe the perception that industrialisation must follow agriculture, landowners do not believe in the linear historical perception whereby industrialisation must follow agriculture. Instead, they realise that, as a part of their everyday experiences, farming or industries alone cannot create employment for all.

Notably, among 160 households in the village, 135 almost fully depend on agricultural activities to earn their livelihoods. However, a few substantial landowners engage in jobs and businesses, while their lands are tilled by *bargadars*. They commute to adjacent towns to do odd jobs in factories, shops, and small businesses. Around 30 villagers have migrated to cities like Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore to work principally as goldsmiths or construction workers. In addition, I noted ten cases of reverse migration, whereby migrants returned to their own village after the factory or enterprise in which they worked closed down or upon finding it more profitable to work on the land than to work in small factories and petty businesses. Villagers are quite aware that industries shed 'surplus' workers occasionally in the name of rationalisation and modernisation. Thus, they had coined the slogan 'open the closed factories and build up new factories, but not at the cost of agriculture', to oppose constructing a car factory on agricultural lands.

An elderly villager made another point:

I am a marginal farmer. None of my sons has been able to find a job. The government

is talking about jobs. Even if some people are provided jobs in the Tata [Motors] factory, at most one member from a family may get a job; but if they leave the family behind, what will happen to the rest, especially the older members like us? No one cares to look after other members of the family. On the contrary, if we can retain the land, it will give us security in old age. Because the land belongs to the entire family, including the old members, it can ensure that the elderly are protected.

He also argued,

[T]he government suggested that peasants can deposit the money they receive as compensation in a bank and live off the interest. But, the interest rates are decreasing day by day. One day might come when people will have to pay the bank for saving their money in it. So, what benefits would a peasant gain from saving money in a bank?

Thus, this car factory project formulated through a narrative based on the universal time of capitalism ignores the multiple peasant temporalities existing at the frontier. From these statements and arguments from peasants, we see that the rural economy with all its facets was poorly impacted and all types of peasants were united against the land acquisition move of the government. To quote Cernea (1999: 17), it seemed that the '[e]xpropriation of land removes the main foundation upon which people's productive systems, commercial activities, and livelihoods are constructed'. As such, Harvey's (2005) arguments ring true, whereby a shift in emphasis occurred in contemporary capitalism from expanded reproduction to accumulation by dispossession.

The people's representatives often acted as ardent advocates of the narrative for capitalism. While they actively engaged in the discursive field of capitalism, they merely ignored the conflicting interests of multiple temporalities. The president of Singur Panchayat Samiti<sup>9</sup> stated, 'Although we, the local self-government officials, were not consulted during the initial process of selecting the location, we subsequently got involved in the process through a meeting called by the District Magistrate and became part of the process'. This, thus, demonstrates that the local self-government and the people's representatives did not matter much in the narrative of industrialisation and investment in India. This is to say, the people's representatives and the local party functionaries were initially in the dark about the project although they later acted as a 'shadow state'. This adheres to Das's (2016: 2) arguments following Harriss-White's (2003) analysis of the local state, 'with the declared objectives of industrial development'. Abram and Weszkalnys (2011: 7) refer to this as a neoliberal government trying to unbind capital from red tape, whereby '(...) democratic states swing between favouring citizens and encouraging businesses'. However, when investment becomes most important, governments do not ignore state and non-state institutions, but call upon them for mediation in the messy zones of confrontation between the government and divergent social forms.

This narrative reveals that economic interests were often contradictory and conflicting among individuals from a single locality. Multiple temporalities existed at any given time, producing several conflicting interests. Capitalism acts as a universal measure of value, indeed, homogenising these multiple interests, with the former always coming into conflict with the latter. Thus, when measured in terms of economic interests, a village

society is divided into separate interest groups, cross-cutting their castes, religions, and party affiliations. Singur provided us with one such example, where conflicting interests associated with land acquisition polarised villagers, castes, and even party loyalties. It reveals how peasants conceptualised the issues related to dispossession based on the construction and reconstruction of their past and their future. Whenever they explained the extent and forms of dispossession as part of the car factory project, they relied on their past experiences to create consistent narratives for the anti-land acquisition movement. Thus, their previous experiences of deprivation resulting from the implementation of various other governmental projects shaped their perceptions of dispossession. The future previously promised by the government that failed to materialise haunted them as they attempted to interpret the promises scripted in present project forms.

## CONCLUSIONS

Through my analysis of the Singur car factory project, we observe how a space, both temporal and spatial, has been reproduced as part of the interventions, which influenced how people viewed their future and assumed roles in transforming their social realities. The car factory project imagined a temporal frame and intervened in the lives and livelihoods of peasants to bring about a new future. Yet, the latter vehemently resisted this project intended to transform their social realities into 'time-conscious' industrialised realities. Whether their resistance promoted 'alternatives to the neoliberal post-reform models of development pursued in India' (Nielsen 2010: 145) is not a relevant question here. What is significant in this context is how a disjuncture emerged between the normative template of planned

project actions and the disorderly temporalities that exist during project implementation.

In a context in which governments prioritise economic growth and consider the rate of GDP as a marker of development,<sup>10</sup> this project form considers these GDP-related issues while framing its objectives for implementation. It designs a normative template that generates the desired values for a well-defined future. The specific template does intervene in the ethnographic realities to structure the human and non-human resources to produce a new social reality. The project forms consider human resources as acting methodically according to the rules and rationalities inscribed within them. Nevertheless, the time that the project forms predict as appropriate for the transition to industrialisation in our case contrast with the temporality of various actors who imagine their time in their own ways. The temporality of the project forms in which planners design actions for the targeted actors differs from the temporalities of the targeted actors. The social process that emerged as a part of the implementation of project forms cannot always succeed in managing the unruly temporalities at the grassroots level.

Thus, during the project planning, the actors in the project area confronted the time template of the project forms. Various actors in the ethnographic situation hardly believed in the project forms' conception of time, which predicted that the current time was appropriate for industrialisation. Contestations over promises of development that emerged as part of the peasants' resistance against the proposed car factory and the subsequent land acquisition aptly illustrate how people belong to their own plans for their future. People construct their futures based on the spatiotemporalities of the ethnographic space. Divergent segments of a population often imagine their future viewing

their position in a particular sociopolitical structure. Despite its promises, the project forms hardly won over all of the people. The crucial reason for its failure was that one size did not fit all. In other words, 'the capitalist time is a dense and heterogeneous historical product' (Bear 2014). Its promises do not always relate to peasants' desires and their consciousness of time, and, thus, do not seem to matter in their lives and livelihoods.

The ethnographic reflections on the social processes that emerged during the implementation of these project forms demonstrate that the conflicts of interest were not simply a product of contrasting values, but, instead, represented a product of deprivation. In an ethnographic situation, diverse segments of the peasantry who did confront or accept the car factory project not only placed different values against parting with their lands and the impact of a car factory, but also raised concerns over their dispossession. Despite belonging to different segments of the population, they considered this project a cause of inequality. That is, it was an event that unravelled issues related to inequality. A sense of deprivation or dispossession overwhelmed their perception surrounding the factory project. Peasants were overwhelmed by the imminent threat of dispossession shaped by their experiences from past projects. They interpreted issues related to dispossession and acted accordingly to thwart the implementation of the car factory project by constructing and reconstructing their pasts and futures based on past projects promised. Despite being viewed as a magical panacea capable of saving the country, industrialisation and investment hardly bothered to heed people's wishes.

Finally, we can take away from this narrative of project forms and the dynamic process of project making how project forms

constitute several conflicting temporalities extricated from an ethnographic situation. This mirrors Carse and Kneas's (2019: 10) study of an infrastructure project, which showed how unbuilt and unfinished infrastructures 'can become the axes of social worlds and sites where temporalities are knotted and reworked in unpredictable ways'. In addition, project forms endeavouring to control the future often end up being futile. In fact, this futility results since, as Li (2007) correctly argued, some 'problems that are deemed structural or political' and are considered intractable for project forms often render the ethnographic space messy. Projects are likely to reframe problems in technical terms (Li 2007: 7). As such, the primary finding from this narrative of project forms is that, amidst the contestation over values, what becomes predominant is the way in which issues of inequality haunt a segment of people who are not even considered a direct beneficiary of that project.

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#### NOTES

- 1 The leader belongs to the district committee of Hooghly, in which the Singur block is located.
- 2 *Mahishya* is one of the agricultural castes in West Bengal, ranked as the middle caste in the caste hierarchy.
- 3 *Gowala* belongs to the other backward caste category (OBC). They are traditionally milkmen or herdsmen and considered a prosperous caste.
- 4 The sharecropper *bargadar* is a type of tenant who borrows land from landlords or other landholding classes for cultivation with the condition of giving a specific fixed share of the crops produced on the land to the landowners. The stipulated share of crops is three-fourths to the sharecropper and the rest to the landlord.
- 5 In the initial days of the Left Front government of West Bengal's reign, they launched the 'Operation Barga' programme to register the names of sharecroppers so that landowners could not evict them.
- 6 Under the Act, if a Hindu male died intestate, in the first instance, all of his separate or self-acquired property devolves equally to his sons, daughters, widow, and mother. However, the laws governing property inheritance are exceedingly rarely implemented and the devolution of land property—specifically, agricultural land—in rural India primarily follows prevailing local customs.
- 7 *Patta* is a piece of paper recognising the ownership right of a beneficiary to a plot of land distributed by the government under the Land Reforms Act.
- 8 A broom in the local culture is also considered a symbol which could sweep away bad fortune and evil forces.
- 9 Panchayat Samiti is an intermediate level of the Panchayat Raj Institution or local self-government in India.



10 Recent developments show that the increase in the rate of economic growth alone cannot ensure prosperity among populations. Notably, despite the state's lack of economic dynamism, as Ghatak (2021) states, 'the rate of growth of purchasing power in rural areas of West Bengal has been higher than the national average' over the last decade. He attributed the increased growth of purchasing power as well as a sharp dip in poverty levels in West Bengal to the cash transfer programmes of the state government.

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