

BOOK REVIEW

Michael Levien, *Dispossession without Development: Land Grabs in Neoliberal India* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 300 pp.

Forced acquisition of land for developmental projects is always a contentious issue in India, be it in the post-colonial or post-economic reform period. The book 'Dispossession Without Development: Land Grabs in Neoliberal India' published in 2018 by Oxford University Press and written by Michael Levien, explores the consequences of land dispossession in neoliberal India in general, through the lens of experiences of Rajpura, a small village 25 km away from Jaipur in Rajasthan, whose land mostly farmland and grazing commons were appropriated for the Mahindra World City, a Special Economic Zone project deemed to be one of the largest private investments in Rajasthan. Levien starts off by differentiating between two regimes of dispossession by discussing the developmental and the neoliberal eras in the Indian context, the former referring to the Nehruvian dispossession regime during the post-independence period when dams and heavy industry kind of projects were undertaken and the latter referring to the post-1991 period since the initiation of economic reforms. While bringing out this distinction, the book describes the state in the neoliberal regime as a 'land broker' for private capitalists as it caters to their land demands driven by factors like obstacles on the supply-side created by the fragmentation of rural land, lure of bureaucracy for both licit and illicit rents, and pressure of competition among states. This shift in the role is explored and explained in the second chapter. Here, the neoliberal regime of dispossession is said to be characterised by the commodification of land, switching from land for production in the developmental era to land for market. As a result of this, the rate of accumulation by dispossession which the author refers to as the difference between the price that is paid to farmers and the actual market value became the driving factor and a vindication for dispossessing farmers in the new era. The author points out how India's Special Economic Zone policy enacted in the 2000s became central in this transition to the new dispossession regime.

In chapter three, Levien proceeds by giving a detailed outline of the historical features of the agrarian milieu of Rajpura, where he draws reference to the largely profitable livestock and agrarian economy of it and the deeply entrenched caste inequalities in the social fabric of Rajpura caused by governmental failure to redistribute land in the post-independence period. Such deep level inequalities made diversification from farm activities difficult for the people causing the 'upper' castes and landowning groups to have greater access to cultural and social capital. These caste-class inequalities were supplemented by gender disparities characterising social relations and patriarchy deciding land ownership. Chapter four of the book then highlights how the process of dispossession led to disaccumulation for the inhabitants of Rajpura as they got deprived of farm income and grazing land which affected the already profitable livestock economy and access to basic necessities, vital to their subsistence like food grains, vegetables and drinking water. Hence the costs incurred by the villagers were huge relative to the nominal employment generation and infrastructure creation by Mahindra World City. Naturally, women and the marginalised sections of Rajpura bore the brunt of dispossession much more than men and privileged classes, which is explained by the author through his observations supplemented by research data. The detrimental impact of the neoliberal dispossession regime on marginalised sections marks a similarity with its developmental era counterpart. However, dispossession in the post-colonial period was relatively labour absorbing although it created huge costs for the dispossessed through poor compensation. During that period, insincere efforts were made by the public sector to ensure their employment even when the discretion rested with them. Hence Levien asserts that similar to the neoliberal regime, the Nehruvian era was yet another dark phase of dispossession, the only difference being a variation in the manifestation of the form of capitalism as the Nehruvian era qualified itself as state-directed capitalism.

Chapter 5 of the book observes that initially farmers' compliance to the project could be ensured as possibilities of gains through speculation in land markets appeared attractive to them as they received small plots of land as compensation. This helped avoid a land war unlike in other parts of the country where dispossessed farmers mostly received pitiful compensation. However, land speculation did not benefit all farmers alike and it only exacerbated the profound inequalities already in place. While most of the farmers from dominant castes and land brokers, neo rentiers and asset managers reaped benefits through speculation, the reality is that majority of the poor and 'low caste' villagers of Rajpura ended up being impoverished and proletarianised as they sold their assets cheaply amidst the land boom out of unawareness and poor access to information, especially the Dalit semi proletariat. In the neo-liberal

regime of dispossession, fluctuations in the global financial markets and their implications on land prices became the biggest source of volatility for the Rajpura farmers. However, beyond these land rents, these farmers could not even dream of accessing the fruits of the financialised and knowledge-intensive capitalism that was heavily disrupting and destabilising their lives. Due to poor skilling and lack of employability of rural youth, benefits of the knowledge economy were elusive to Rajpura, and whatever employment generation happened in the form of wage labour was grossly insufficient to ensure better life, indeed the dispossessed farmers earned more through rearing and farming prior to their displacement. This reality is very well brought out in chapter 6 of the book. The neoliberal dispossession regime reinforced the Marxist view of dispossession as a process of creating a class of wage labourers. The linkage effects of the Mahindra World City were largely limited as it ended up functioning as an enclave economy marking a sharp disconnect from the villages around. With limited scope for productive linkages in Rajpura with the IT industry dominating the SEZ activities, added by the negative fiscal linkages, Rajpura village was pushed to the margins of the SEZ as the 7th chapter title conveys. Hence development remained a mirage for the villagers.

The book also explores the reasons for the absence of collective action on a massive scale in Rajpura. The already exacerbated inequalities explain the reason for the mixed response of Rajpura to the project in the new economy, which neither acknowledged it as a path to prosperity nor rejected it through revolt. The inequity closed all possibilities of collective action in Rajpura. With the initiation of the Mahindra World City project, Rajpura villagers were hopeful and nurtured aspirations, but the bitter SEZ reality drenched them in greater despair and disappointment relative to their agrarian past. Hence, the absence of radicalisation of the proletarianised or their tendency to adjust does not point to complete consensus. The opposite has however been the argument of various anthropologists and theorists who are critical of anti dispossession arguments. There were some small attempts of resistance like filing lawsuits and formation of *sangharsh committees* to put up protests against the SEZ, however, mostly they were driven by vested interests of neo-rentiers and asset managers to increase their compensation plot size to be able to reap even more gains from land speculation and the matters affecting poor farmers largely went unvoiced. In the backdrop of this, the book also examines Rajpura's allegiance to political parties in its eighth chapter.

With regard to Rajpura's voting behaviour, it is revealed to the author that it largely favoured the BJP, the very political party which initiated the SEZ, as the people were desirous of better compensation. Most people in Rajpura shifted their support from the Congress party to BJP due to INC's indifference to their rival's flagship project which affected villagers' compensation, besides the food price inflation and the reversal of the land boom driven by the global crisis coincided with the UPA reign contributing to the erosion of their support base at Rajpura. However, the writer, drawing from the observations of Nielsen and Cross observes that although such behaviour points to the non-radicalisation of dispossessed peasants, it does not indicate their gesture of approval of the capitalist model of development that thwarted their lives. It can only be seen as a voting pattern driven by the comparison of the performances of both the parties as electoral choices were limited for Rajpura as both the political parties embraced similar economic policies. Towards the end, in the ninth chapter of the book, the writer summarises his observations by being emphatic about the fact that anti dispossession movements in reality steer true development and do not hinder it.

The book in short can be described as another attempt to lay bare the uneven consequences of unbridled capitalist development on the dispossessed. Through the method of ethnographic research with enough attention to history, the book provides a hairsplitting analysis of the issue dealt with. A detailed account, driven by evidence, observations and field survey data, give the readers an in-depth understanding of the nature and fallout of land grabs in post-reform India. The book's findings converge with the popular criticism of Special Economic Zones becoming drivers of exploitation. But such a generally prejudiced finding is never imposed on the readers, instead, it unfolds as the outcome of the systematic presentation of Levien's research in the book. The writer never tries to romanticise Rajpura's past nor blindly regret its departure from the agrarian and livestock economy. He attempts to make an objective assessment of the implications of the SEZ for the village by factoring in people's hopes, aspirations and expectations. By being able to come up with an extensive analysis of dispossession in Rajpura from multiple dimensions like caste, class, gender, politics etc., Levien's book turns out to be an important work in dispossession studies. Besides, Levien's book points to the necessity of accounting for the diversity and variations of agrarian settings in measuring the result of forced displacement regardless of the regime of dispossession. This is an important insight provided by the book for future researchers. At a time when Indian farmers have emerged victorious in their intense struggle to withdraw farm laws as they believe that the forces of

capitalism gaining more and more momentum in India are casting shadows on their lives, it is obvious that along with many other problems plaguing Indian peasants, dispossession for the sake of private capital is supposed to continue as a heated issue and the relevance of the book can't be understated in any manner. Hence, this book is suggested which has already received accolades like the 2019 Global and Transnational Sociology Best Book Award and the 2019 Political Economy of World System Distinguished Book Award to any enthusiast of agrarian political economy and land issues in countries of the Global South.

Niranjana CP
Centre for Development Studies