Land Acquisition

Need for a More Progressive Discourse
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In the article titled “Land Acquisition: Need for a Shift in Discourse?” (EPW, 17 December 2016), by Dhanmanjiri Sathe, the author’s main argument is that the extant theories and policies on land acquisition are inadequate—and even flawed—in addressing the acute challenge of land acquisition in contemporary India. As a result, the author believes, farmers are not able to dispose of their lands more remuneratively, and neither is the country able to meet the growing need for land for rapid urban and industrial development, depriving many underdeveloped pockets of the opportunity of such development. The author vehemently argues that farmers have been wronged, that they are now more than willing to sell their lands, and hence cannot be coerced into accepting unremunerative propositions. Developing thriving land markets, which can help farmers realise fair compensation, is the way forward, given that capitalists are ready to shell out higher prices for land. This transition, according to Sathe, demands a new discourse on land acquisition, based on the economic rationality of farmers and a concomitant policy facilitated by an apparently farmer-friendly state.

Land acquisition has been contentious, both from the perspective of the general resistance of farmers to land acquisition and as part of the larger process of agrarian transformation. There is no doubt that the land question has not been addressed adequately either in the capitalist or communist models of agrarian transformation (Amin 2011). Farmers have been an aggrieved lot. There is no denying the author’s contention that a shift in the land discourse is required. However, the major concern is about the nature of the discourse the author proposes, purely from the angle of economic rationality. Given the multidimensional relevance of land, what would be pertinent is to engender a more holistic and progressive debate, one that keeps the larger interests of society in mind, rather than one based on narrow considerations. Settling the land question purely on the market-based rationale is bound to be disastrous for developing societies such as India’s, which are struggling to address the agrarian question amicably. This rejoinder attempts to critically evaluate the author’s arguments in favour of a more liberal land policy and explicate briefly the contours of an alternative debate on the land question.

A Contrived Argument

The author’s main argument is that farmers are more than willing to sell their land, especially if a better package is offered to them. Owing to growing agrarian distress because of the non-viability of agriculture, a large section of farmers, over 40%, are contemplating giving up farming in favour of other viable alternatives. Given such compulsions, land acquisition from farmers should not face...
much resistance, especially if land prices are made more attractive. While the author’s argument about agrarian distress could be true, that alone cannot form the basis of a more liberal land acquisition policy. Farming, especially commercial farming, has become unviable for many reasons, including declining land size, increasing costs and uncertain prices owing to growing marketisation. Many farmers may contemplate other alternatives under such circumstances, but may not really give up farming. Even if they do wish to give up farming, what are the more viable and sustainable alternatives available or possible for them? At best, many can manage some low-end jobs in the unorganised sector to supplement their farming. For a large section—about 70% of farmers own less than one hectare (GoI 2013a)—losing whatever land they possess is bound to make their livelihood more precarious. With their land intact, farming could continue to supplement their livelihood as well as give them an identity. A policy supporting unrestrained disposal of land owing to non-viability alone would prove ruinous in the absence of viable alternatives.

A more pertinent approach would be to make small farming viable and capable of generating a decent income through access to protective irrigation, adoption of suitable technologies and enhancing farmers’ control over value chains based on aggregation of input supply, production and marketing. There should also be some level of planning in allocation of land under different crops, given the demand, so that the rampant crisis in production is reduced, and farmers are able to get assured prices if they grow crops for the market.

Apart from some distress sales by the poor, generally the better-off and absentee farmers with limited livelihood stakes in farming are the ones who may be inclined to part with their land. Such farmers who try to dispose of their land in full or part of their own volition, would favour the development of land markets. It is this elite set of farmers, at times in connivance with the land mafia and vested interests, that tends to coerce or influence other farmers to give up land when land acquisition projects are mooted in their villages. Therefore, generalisations cannot be made about farmers’ inclination to part with their land without differentiating on the basis of their class, caste, and even gender. Small and marginal farmers, especially from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities, would not so easily think of giving up farming completely because they know that the alternatives are bleaker (Shylendra and Rani 2005). Moreover, even if a section of farmers is willing to give up land/farming it does not mean that farming per se has ceased to be relevant. Peasant farming will continue to be relevant as a source of subsistence for a considerable section of rural households for another couple of generations.

This leads us to another major concern of agrarian transformation, which cannot be ignored when dealing with the land question. This is about the fate of the landless, who constitute nearly one-third of rural households and who have been bypassed by various land reform measures in the country (GoI 2013a). A large section of the landless and near-landless, particularly tenants and women, are more than willing to participate in farming if they are given access to arable land (Agarwal 2002). Agriculture stills holds promise as a rewarding occupation, both socially and economically, for this segment of rural households, which tends to belong to the lower castes (Chakravarti 2016). A significant proportion of them resort to distress migration, forming part of the exploited informal sector labour force condemned to lead a harsh and undignified life (Breman 1996). If a certain section of upwardly mobile farmers were willing to give up farming as a vocation, the best option would be to move a chunk of the landless into full-fledged farming and other allied activities. This would require that access to land be transferred from those who want to give up farming to those who are willing to pursue it. Given the constraints in realising the much-vaunted agrarian structural transformation, such a shift would benefit society enormously, absorbing surplus labour as well as enhancing food security. Any new discourse on land in the country should also discuss the
possibilities for such a land transfer.

**False Promise**

Another argument articulated by the author is that farmers wanting to give up land are also desirous of being part of the promised industrialisation and urban development that goes with land acquisition. A similar argument is expressed by the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (LARR) Act, 2013, when its preamble identifies affected people as possible “partners in development” as an outcome of compulsory acquisition (GoI 2013b). The author even goes on to express her sympathies with regions and farmers who have missed such opportunities because of constraints faced in disposing of their land. This argument is in many ways far-fetched. Suggesting that land acquisition would be naturally transformational, leading to a more urbanised and industrialised kind of development for those who forego land, would be presumptuous. Not all acquired land is converted into successful projects capable of generating sustained employment. The accompanying article in the same issue of EPW very clearly brings out the uncertainties involved in delivering the promised results of special economic zone projects that involve considerable land acquisition (Dutta 2016). Even where displaced people are absorbed by such projects, it is mostly as low-end, unskilled and irregular workers. It is quite evident now that sustainable employment from such projects is a mirage, especially given the jobless growth of neo-liberalism. There are several irrefutable arguments now that what has been going on in the name of land acquisition is largely an exercise in land grab by the state and corporations meant to dispossess farmers (Bhaduri 2009). As regards the opportunity to be part of the promised urban development, while the existing towns and cities themselves are struggling to absorb the rural outflow meaningfully, how could the new ostentatious real estate and infrastructural projects be accommodative of the hapless farmers? More than these uncertainties, what cannot be ignored is the real nature of the transformation that awaits them. Even assuming that the promised transformation did materialise, what is ultimately in store for the displaced is quite likely an alienated development devoid of sociocultural moorings and freedom.

**Mistaken Logic**

Underpinning the author’s support for the development of land markets is the flawed characterisation of farmers as purely economic agents and land acquisition as a market relationship. The author views the development of land markets as a necessary precondition for setting the right price in order to compensate adequately the willing farmers. Farmers were an exploited lot in the past and the state had enabled capitalists to obtain cheap land using its power of eminent domain, which could facilitate only a quasi market for land. The author believes that competitive market prices alone should form the principal basis for land acquisition as they adequately reflect both current and future scarcities of land. This argument is unsound on several grounds. What is also startling about the assumption is that the author who seems so ambivalent in the article about whether farmers are a “political society” or not, has no hesitation in categorising them (and the state) as economic agents, especially when it comes to land transactions. Branding farmers economic agents ignores several other dimensions of peasant farming. A large proportion of farmers pursue agriculture for subsistence, and many of their decisions are not fully market-driven. The degree of dependence on the market for inputs or disposal of produce varies across different land classes. Land, especially for small and marginal farmers, is much more than a commodity, as it is also invested with several sociocultural values including bestowing an identity. The author’s thrust would push land allocation purely into a market domain. A market-based resolution of land allocation—including direct purchase of land from farmers—could easily unleash predatory forces
driven by speculative tendencies capable of dispossessing farmers on a massive scale. One needs to appreciate here the merit of some earlier policies that placed restrictions on the purchase of tribal land by outsiders and the conversion of farmlands for non-agricultural use (Shylendra 2012). These restrictions tried to prevent the excessive play of the market and external forces in grabbing the land of vulnerable farmers.

Further, deciding land acquisition purely on market prices distorts land allocation in many ways. Land as a natural resource has multiple use values that signify its relevance for meeting basic and diverse societal needs such as farming, grazing, shelter, forestry, and water and soil conservation. Land has to be allocated very judiciously, keeping in mind use values for present and future generations, and based on principles of equity/sharing, conservation and sustainability. The conversion of any land for industrial and other purposes that may irreversibly damage quality and use value has to be planned carefully. Determining land use on the basis of market price would escalate its exchange value at the cost of use value, wherein price would set the priorities of land allocation. There is also no guarantee that markets would determine the right price for natural resources like land, as markets are likely to be distorted by several factors (Amin 2010). While a certain section of farmers may realise remunerative prices and packages, society may pay a heavy price if the basic use values of land were to be destroyed beyond repair. Under the unfolding capitalistic mode of development, market forces are likely to gain prominence. More and more land will go into the hands of rapacious market forces (Hirway et al 2014). An overwhelming proportion of our rural population, which still wants to obtain some access to land for a more dignified life, can never hope to realise it if markets rule the roost. It would be a great tragedy of our times if we fail to appreciate this crucial aspect of land allocation despite witnessing a near jobless growth process (Bhaduri 2009).

Primitive Accumulation and Role of the State

Two other issues highlighted by the author need to be contested—first, the primitive accumulation process and second, the changing role of the (capitalist) state. The Marxian process of primitive accumulation leading to dispossession and alienation, especially in the initial phase of capitalistic transition, is a well-argued and largely proven concept (Marx 1978). No other concept can explain so well the various historical dispossessions and their negative fallouts on peasantry and craftspeople as primitive accumulation does. Though the author tends to appreciate the concept, she sees certain potential divergences in the process, especially in developing economies, that can tilt the historical disadvantages of farmers so as to negate the process. The author argues that though primitive accumulation may be dispossessive, progressive divergences can give farmers scope to bargain for a better deal in return for land acquisition rather than being silent sufferers of the process. Following Partha Chatterjee, the author argues that “… what is unfolding is qualitatively different from what could be subsumed under the notion of primitive accumulation …” (Sathe 2016: 54). Relationships between the state and peasantry are believed to have changed, even reversing the effects of primitive accumulation. The peasantry is now more empowered than in the past when it faced the onslaught. The author feels that this is because the present state is not fully pro-capitalist and has become benevolent enough to side with the farmers. It has become a “learning state” with a welfare orientation under the influence of civil society and rights movements. These are the changing conditions or divergences that the author identifies to justify the development of land markets and to hasten the capitalist development process. Both the explanations of the author are contestable, because they miss the wood for the trees.

The perceived benevolence of the state with its reformist welfare agenda having the potential to
reverse historical primitive accumulation cannot be accepted at face value. The notion ignores the fact that primitive accumulation could be a long-drawn process and that capitalism necessarily relies on several forms of dispossession and exploitation in its long march. The argument of the changed nature of the state as a safeguard is even more incredible. The welfare orientation of the state can be a mere facade or a palliative, with no transformative abilities. Though the author presents a few apparently successful examples of land acquisition to justify her argument, she fails to notice the larger picture that is emerging. She has ignored several tendencies of growing crony capitalism and policies that are being pursued by the central and state governments under the obvious influence of global capital (Bhaduri 2009). The blatant attempt by the present National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government at the centre to change many of the provisions of LARR Act, 2013 through backdoor ordinances is just one of many state misdemeanours that are clearly anti-farmer and pro-industry. Taking their cue from the centre, a few state governments have almost reversed LARR Act, 2013 through their own legislations.

**Progressive Land Policy**

What then could be the alternative to a market-based land acquisition policy? Despite its emphasis on transparency and rehabilitation, LARR Act, 2013 largely ends up rationalising the process of capital-led dispossession of farmers with active state support. Even the Draft National Land Reforms Policy (DNLRP), which argued for revisiting land reforms as a lasting source of peace and prosperity, reiterated the LARR Act, 2013 position. Nor did DNLRP propose any other measures radical enough to take land reforms to the logical end (GoI 2013a).

Given the larger role of land, land acquisition cannot be addressed in an isolated way. Land use/allocation has to be decided keeping in mind the wider interests of society. We cannot allow land to be converted into a purely economic commodity and private property. What is desirable is to treat land as a common property held in trusteeship by the state or its agencies, including gram sabhas. Pooling land as common property is a formidable task, but it can be forestalled only at enormous cost to society. In a democratic set-up, changing the landownership system is only possible through radical movements or through progressive policies by a committed regime.

As a corollary to a common property regime, peasants could be given only long-term access to arable land with inheritance rights subject to suitable ceilings. Inheritance can be allowed only within the family, without scope for benami transfers. Fragmentation can be allowed only up to a certain limit. Farming of allotted land should be made compulsory, with no subleasing and absentee operations, except in the case of the old and sick. If at all, land could be sold only to the state or its agencies, and land should automatically revert to the state if any family wants to give up farming or is unwilling to till the land. The state can pool all such lands and allocate the same to the landless, preferably women from such households, who are keen to pursue farming. Group farming should be the preferable mode for such allottees. The state should also allocate or reallocate land for other uses, based on a systematic land use plan. Any new conversion for industrial and other non-agricultural use must be based on the actual utilisation of land allocated for such uses in the past. Here also any unutilised land should revert to the common pool.

Only such efforts could ensure a more sustainable access to land for the vast section of society that yearns for a dignified livelihood. Otherwise, a social and ecological catastrophe of immense proportions possibly awaits us.

**References**


