Special Economic Zones in India: Reconfiguring Displacement in a Neoliberal Order?

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Abstract

In this paper I explore some legal and political strands in the schema of Special Economic Zones in India with specific reference to an immediate fallout of serious concern and contestation—the imminent displacement of thousands of people and livelihoods in the countryside where large SEZs are slated to come up. I examine the issues emerging from the peasant resistance to SALIM SEZ in the Nadigram block in West Bengal, to SEZs in Goa and ethnographic material from the Mumbai SEZ area of Raigad district in Maharashtra to offer a synoptic picture of the controversies around SEZs in India. In view of the developing scenario of dispossession and/or distress, I argue for an anthropological praxis of political economic engagement. [Keywords: India, Special Economic Zones, displacement, resistance]

In a large scale effort transforming India’s competitiveness in the global market, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in power enacted the Special Economic Zones Act (SEZ) in 2005. 1046 approved SEZs thus far comprising thousands of hectares of land (GoI 2007), announce the new mantra of growth and development in elite national discourse across all party lines, in keeping with the global neoliberal “consensus.” The growing role of the state as the promoter of corporate led economic growth is underlined by the acquisition of land for SEZs under the legal land acquisition framework and the transfer of ownership of this land to corporate developers’. Displacement is pushed to a private arena, with largely cash compensation negotiated by the market and without the state’s responsibility for resettlement and rehabilitation, leaving the accountability of the state beyond the pale of the SEZ framework. At the same time, land acquisition of thousands of hectares, with a mandatory minimum of 1000 hectares for multi-product, 400 hectares for sector-specific and 100 hectares for service sector SEZs; no restrictions on contiguous SEZs or the total numbers of SEZs in any given area (or the country for that matter) have sounded an alarm across the countryside and outside metropolitan centers where many of these SEZs are located. The displacement and disruption of livelihoods caused by SEZs and their grave implications are emerging even as the country witnesses steadfast resistance by peasants and state violence and repression or coercion in West Bengal, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Goa or Maharashtra. These emerging
configurations are throwing open contests over land, development and economic growth, configuring new legal entitlements for transnational capital, and shifting the way internally displaced persons (IDPs) are conceptualized and treated in a neoliberal era.

In this paper I explore some legal and political strands in the schema of SEZs in India with specific reference to this immediate fallout of serious concern and contestation—the imminent displacement of thousands of people and livelihoods in the countryside where these SEZs are slated to come up. Most of the large SEZs are in a nascent stage of land acquisition often bitterly, and in varied instances successfully contested. Hence it is not possible to accurately gauge the trajectory of displacement that they will eventually cause. Having said that, given the long standing experience of displacement due to development projects in India that have time and again impoverished tribal communities and small peasants and workers in the countryside, it is possible to gauge the implications of this large scale vision of neoliberal development (Fernandes 2002; Baviskar 2004). If the evidence accruing since the SEZ Act was passed is any indication, SEZs are a key arena of conflict around capitalist modernity as it unfolds in its neoliberal form in India.

I begin with an outline of the emergence of enclaves as an economic model for export promotion across the globe and situate the emergence of this model in the Indian context at this time. I then go on to explore the questions around the exercise of the power of eminent domain for forceful acquisition of land and violent repression of democratic rights in the case of Nandigram in West Bengal; examine questions of legality and corruption as they emerge in the state of Goa—the only state to have announced the revoking of the SEZ policy in India. Then I look more fully to the mobilization of resistance and peasant movements through the case study of the Mumbai SEZ (MSEZ) on the outskirts of Mumbai in Raigad district of Maharashtra where farmers have successfully managed to resist land acquisition so that the period of approval for the MSEZ (three years) has lapsed. I conclude the paper with some thoughts on anthropological praxis given the emerging gravity of the phenomenon.

Legislating for “growth” and “development”

Export-led economic growth has been an important part of the economic strategy prescribed to and subscribed by Southern countries in their path to progress and development especially since the 1970s. While the first Export Processing Zone (EPZ) was set up in Ireland in 1959, the first Asian zone was the Kandla EPZ established by the Indian government in 1965. Offshore assembly in Southern countries started in the 1950s in Hong Kong and Puerto Rico, followed in the 1960s by Taiwan, Singapore, Philippines, Mexico and the Dominican Republic. Following the example of Shannon Airport in Ireland, many of these governments set up special industrial parks, called export
processing zones, in order to attract foreign investment. Within the boundaries of these zones, firms were allowed to process goods for export without paying duties on imported components. Hong Kong, following its tradition as a commercial hub, designated the entire island as an export processing zone. By the end of the 1960s, eleven developing countries had export-processing zones. By the end of the 1970s there were fifty-seven zones in twenty-nine countries. By the mid-1980s there were seventy-nine zones in thirty-five countries, with substantial assembly activity occurring outside designated zones as well (Currie 1984). By the early 1990s, Asia accounted for over half of the world’s zone employment; Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America about 30 percent (with Mexico over half that amount); South America (Brazil, Colombia and Chile) about eight percent; while Africa, the Mediterranean and the Middle East accounted for the small remainder. The main products of these assembly industries were electronics (consumer goods and components), textiles, apparel and footwear. Originally conceived as zones of experiments with the “free market” in an otherwise protected economy, these zones were implemented with increasing intensity and varying results in Asia since the 1970s (Amirahmadi et al 1995; Yuan et al 1992).

While an extensive body of literature has dealt with the labor and employment conditions in such zones across the globe since the 1980s with specific regard to women (see Fernandez-Kelly 1983 for Mexican maquiladoras; Ong 1987 for Malaysia; Wright 2006 for Mexico and China), it is interesting to note that nowhere has the story of dispossession of peasants to institute these zones emerged in such stark ways as in India. While there is strong indication to suggest a similar trajectory of dispossession in China (Harvey 2005), the evidence from there is hard to lay hands upon and a comparable case hard to find even in the institution of maquilas in Mexico. The Indian story of dispossession for SEZs thus stands out in marked ways to other experiences across the globe.

While EPZs have been in existence in India since the 1960s (a total of six in varying degrees of functionality), the central SEZ policy in the country was only drafted in 2000, inspired by the Chinese model of SEZs and indeed posited in competition with China in the global economy. In June 2005 the SEZ Act now in place was approved in a near unanimous decision in the parliament “...to make SEZs an engine for economic growth supported by quality infrastructure complemented by an attractive fiscal package, both at the Centre and the State level, with the minimum possible regulations” (GoI 2007).

The justifications of this large-scale, unprecedented establishment of SEZs despite severe reservations and resistance from several quarters find resonance in the neoliberal discourse on economic growth dominant in political establishments across the globe today but are also located to a large extent in an elite and historical national corporate-political consensus. Thus, in his sociohistorical analysis of the history of capital and the developmental state in India, Chibber (2003) showed the decisive
role of the business elites in shaping India’s weak developmental state and the calls for dismantling it in the reform period of 1990s. Bhaduri and Nayyar (1999) pointed to the business elite and state nexus that has ruled the neoliberalization of the Indian state. Corbridge and Harriss (2000) argue that India’s business elites have played a decisive role in the direction of the reforms in the country since the 1990s and seen to it that the liberalization of the economy has been skewed to their advantage with strong state support (Bhaduri 2008).

Working closely with neoliberal capital of largely Indian origin, the ruse of competition in the global free market seems to work like magic in policy arenas with the unequal premise of that competition itself going largely unchallenged within dominant institutions in the interests of growth. As a result, states find themselves in collusion with transnational corporations (TNCs), whether of Indian origin or from elsewhere, who are the drivers of this economic growth and possess the advantages of scale, technology, mobility and wealth. Countries with large populations of uneducated poor and/or educated unemployed people have the advantage of poor people willing to work at low, in other words, competitive wages (Sampat 2003). The profit earned by corporations as they compete in the global market is thus drawn out of these low, competitive workers’ wages. A fact that is so obvious, that in a classic Lefebvrean “blind field,” it escapes the established mainstream (Lefebvre 2003). Add to these competitive wages tax and tariff rebates, fiscal incentives, infrastructure developed by private developers on lands of people acquired by the state for “public purpose” and we have SEZs. It is also worth mentioning here that Indian corporations have the added advantage of intimate knowledge (and often hold) of the prevailing market and resource conditions as well as the ways of the political system, effectively using these to profit.

A major, though officially unstated part of the growth envisaged in the SEZs is through real estate and infrastructure development for which private developers are being given many incentives. Thus, only 50 percent of multiproduct and sector specific SEZs (i.e. anywhere between 400 to thousands of hectares of land) require to be delineated as processing areas. The rest can be used for “infrastructure development” according to the law, leaving room for a sizable area for real estate and infrastructure development. Given the coercive laws of competition, the requirement of surplus capital or profit to regenerate itself through fresh investment (for an argument of this form of absorption of surplus value, see Harvey 2007), thus gets met through real estate and infrastructure development. These “improvements” of an otherwise “underdeveloped” countryside, further create the environment for investment and fuel economic growth.

Along with industrializing the countryside, development serves to urbanize or modernize the countryside. Smith (2002) has pointed out that urban real-estate (re)development or “gentrification writ large” has become a central motive force of urban economic expansion in the age of neoliberal urbanism through urban redevelopment and regeneration plans. One may extend this argument to make the claim that another

Special Economic Zones in India

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aspect of this neoliberal urbanism is real estate development in these enclaves, with an inherent gentrification process in the SEZs’ gated townships where only persons carrying approved identification are to be allowed entry. This real-estate led urban revolution of the countryside then, has been envisaged in the “legal” transfer of land for “development” as a SEZ—to private developers who are also being offered incentives parallel to corporations setting up units in the SEZs.

Eminent domain, displacement and the “larger common good”

Fundamentally linked to the discourse on growth and urbanity is the idea of modernity, progress and development associated with the technological superiority and the wealth of Northern capitalist countries. These ahistorical renditions of modernity and progress on the one hand fail to grasp the realpolitik of the road to progress of the North, and on the other, in their very real enactments of the road to modernity, continue to dispossess and exploit larger numbers of people, while claiming, in a tragic-irony, their ultimate upliftment. If the growth of capital and industry in the North was premised on colonial and working class exploitation as well as slave plantations, modernity and progress travel to the South today, as we see below, with stories of displacement, dispossession and resistance.

It is worth noting that while a factsheet on SEZs on the Government of India website gives details of the number of approved and proposed SEZs, their land requirements as well as export and employment potential, there is no mention of the number of people to be displaced by these Zones, let alone how the government intends to attend to the issues of displacement. Indeed, the entire website dedicated to SEZs by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry makes no mention of this necessary first step for the establishment of an SEZ. In fact, in a special issue of Seminar magazine dedicated to SEZs in February 2008, the Minister for Commerce, Kamal Nath, has gone so far as to say that SEZs have nothing to do with displacement (Gopalakrishnan and Shrivastava 2008). This silence, as we shall see below, is in keeping with the discourse of independent India’s development “for the greater common good” that phrase enshrined in the developmental state’s history by independent India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, as he charted his vision of progress and modernity for India. It is a silence, however, that in fact has been bitterly contested in the country especially since the 1980s with the emergence of people’s struggles for justice against large scale development induced displacement (the struggles against large and medium dams across the river Narmada are a case in point; Baviskar 2004; D’Souza 2002; Nilsen 2008).

Exercising the powers of eminent domain as articulated by the colonial government, the state has dispossessed at least fifty million people of
their land and livelihoods under the colonial Land Acquisition Act 1894. Most of these people are now untraceable and they or their descendants form the millions living in urban shantytowns across the country. Years of popular and mature agitation on the issue, however, have not translated into a law on the issue of displacement, resettlement and rehabilitation (R&R) in the country. The first central policy on R&R was put in place in 2004 and the newest one, National Rehabilitation and Resettlement Policy (NRRP), more recently towards the end of 2007. Predictably, the NRRP 2007 states:

There should be a clear perception, through a careful quantification of the costs and benefits that will accrue to society at large, of the desirability and justifiability of each [development] project. The adverse impact on affected families—economic, environmental, social and cultural—needs to be assessed in a participatory and transparent manner. . . . The aim should be to minimize large-scale displacement, as far as possible.

Only the minimum area of land commensurate with the purpose of the project may be acquired. Also, as far as possible, projects may be set up on wasteland, degraded land or un-irrigated land. Acquisition of agricultural land for non-agricultural use in the project may be kept to the minimum; multi-cropped land may be avoided to the extent possible for such purposes, and acquisition of irrigated land, if unavoidable, may be kept to the minimum.

Despite these caveats of concern for the displaced and democratic process, nowhere is the right to informed consent legalized in the policy or in any other related law such as the LAA 1894. Iyer (2007), outlining some basic principles for a policy and law regarding displacement emerging from the struggles of the people displaced by large dam projects argues,

where the LAA 1894 is used for acquiring land, the acquisition needs to be made (a) contestable (not merely in regard to compensation, but also in relation to the public purpose which is the justification for displacement), (b) procedurally more humane and equitable, and (c) juster in terms of compensation, with due regard to the amount needed for buying land or property (house, shop) in the resettlement area.

He adds,

There is a cruel irony in describing the involuntary and helpless victims of a project as stakeholders, and this is compounded when they are put on the same footing as those who stand to benefit from the project. Let us not forget that while in the case of the former existing rights (i.e., natural and often centuries-old rights of access and livelihoods) are taken away, in the case of the latter the project, by diverting river waters through canals, confers new rights not earlier enjoyed. The former are stake-losers, whereas the latter are stake-gainers.
SEZs are also interpreted as “public facility or infrastructure” where in fact they are enclaves for transnational capital to flourish in the “free market” competition inherently skewed to capitalist advantage. While in the decades following independence, land was acquired mostly by the state for development projects and deemed the property of the state, hence public, the shift that the SEZ Act in 2005 marks is the acquisition of land by the state for “public purpose” and the transfer of the ownership of this land to private developers. The trajectory of neoliberal corporate growth through “accumulation by dispossession” thus becomes clearer in this land acquisition process.

“Consent and the Right to Land”: Estimates of numbers of people to be displaced by the approved SEZs are as yet unavailable. People's struggles against displacement to be caused by SEZs however, are already intense and in some cases, violent. The violence witnessed in Nandigram in the state of West Bengal (a CPI (M) ruled state), is a case in point. In March 2007, fourteen people died in police firing when protesting notification of land acquisition of 25,000 acres of land under the LAA 1894 for an SEZ towards a chemical hub slated for the Salim Group of Indonesia. None of the local residents whose lands were to be acquired had been consulted or informed prior to this notification by the concerned authorities and the people of the area organized themselves by blocking access to their area only to encounter violent state retaliation. The government backed out of its claim of approval for the SEZ in the aftermath of state- and nation-wide protests and inquiry by concerned citizens' groups and the media, and even as the violence quieted in the following months, people organized under the banner of the Bhumi Uchhed Pratirodh Committee (BUPC) to resist any further land acquisition moves by the state. Things reached a violent climax again in November 2007 as political factions and the BUPC struggled to assert control over the area and the entire region became a battlefield of sorts when a non-violent protest march of around 15,000 people by the BUPC was met with violence by ruling party and other political party cadres; many people died (reported estimates vary between 7-100) and around a thousand houses were damaged or burnt down. Even as investigations and fact finding missions to Nandigram were underway, the government, under enormous pressure, promised to move the controversial SEZ to Nayachar, a less fertile and cultivated stretch of land. As this controversial project along with others is borne out, what must be noted, is that there is little regard for the democratic right of citizens to disagree; to determine their own course of development; or mandatory prior informed consent instituted in the land acquisition process (for the Nandigram episode, see Basu 2007; Chenoy 2007; EPW 2007; Gandhi 2007; Independent People’s Report 2007; Patnaik 2007; NHRC 2008).

Interestingly, one of the most progressive legislations in the country for decentralized rule, the Panchayati Raj 73rd Amendment Act of 1992 entitles the right of residents of a panchayat (the administrative village unit) to determine their own course of development, levy their own taxes
and make decisions based on the local village meetings (gram sabhas). In the scheduled indigenous areas, the Panchayat Extension to the Scheduled Areas Act 1996 further empowers the rights of the indigenous people for self-rule. The concept of eminent domain, however, bearing down in the form of the colonial land acquisition legislation of 1894, supersedes this right of the people to determine their own future and development, ironically, in independent India and alarmingly, in an increasingly neoliberal India. Backed as it is by the interests of private transnational capital in the case of SEZs, the state further removes itself from the realm of accountability to the people it (ostensibly) represents in an electoral democratic system.

The “legality” of land transfer

The case of the state of Goa further reveals where the buck lies, so to speak, in the process of land transfer to SEZs. Concerted protests and action over the land allotment to SEZs by citizens and activists groups like Goa’s Movement Against SEZs and SEZ Virodhi Manch resulted in mounting pressure on the state government to cancel all approved SEZs in the state. Years of corruption and uneven industrial development in the state resulting in environmental destruction, loss of pasturelands, forests and hills have made for an active and vigilant citizenry. The key initiators of the struggles were from the villages Lutolim, Nagoa, and Verna, in the Verna constituency of the state. As they examined village plan documents for suspected anomalies with a local development scheme, they realized that their common lands were being slated for acquisition for SEZs. Unearthing a series of legal irregularities with these project sanctions through documents obtained under the Right to Information Act 2005, they also studied the SEZ law and began organizing in their villages and across the state to prevent land acquisition caused displacement, environmental destruction and corruption in the entire SEZ creation process. In one instance, nearly 400 acres of land were given to four SEZs in Verna in South Goa: The Ashok Piramal Group’s Planetview Mercantile Private Ltd; Piramal’s Inox Mercantile Private Ltd; K Raheja Corporation Limited (one of Mumbai’s largest construction firms); and K Raheja’s Paradigm Logistics And Solutions Private Ltd. Documents obtained under the Right to Information Act by citizens from the Goa Industrial Development Corporation and the directorate of industries reveal many irregularities in the allotment of land, with four SEZ applications that were allotted land technically incomplete. The company seal on documents were missing and the crucial bank finance guarantee was missing. The Goa government meeting in which the four SEZs were sanctioned did not even have the mandatory quorum (full attendance), which makes all its decisions null and void. Further a Cipla (Indian Pharmaceutical giant) subsidiary, Meditab Specialities Private Limited, which was given an SEZ had not even made a formal application for an SEZ.
In another instance, residents of the villages of Sancoale and Verna in south Goa and Kerim in north Goa approached the Bombay High Court at Goa seeking a directive from the court to the State-owned Goa Industrial Development Corporation (GIDC) to revoke the land allotted by it to the promoters of the special economic zones in their respective areas: Meditab Specialities Private Ltd., K. Raheja Corporation and Peninsula Pharma Research Private Ltd.

Six developers have so far paid two of the three installments for SEZs in the state amounting to Rs 280 crore (28 million) to the Goa Industrial Development Corporation (GIDC) for about 600 acres allotted to them. They have made investments of about Rs 500 crore (50 million) over and above this. Three of these six SEZs—K Raheja Corporation, Peninsula Pharma Research Centre and Meditab Specialities—are notified under the SEZ Act 2005 by the Centre (notification of an SEZ is the next step after formal approval is granted to an SEZ under the SEZ Act 2005).

The Goa government has been repeatedly asking the Centre to denotify them due to staunch political opposition to SEZs in the state. The Commerce and Industry ministry at the Centre, after initial resistance, finally said that the state could denotify the SEZs if the state seized the land allotted to developers and returned their money along with interest and compensated them for investment already made on the ground. The Centre would then be able to denotify these SEZs since they would not have any land to execute the projects. The matter is at a stalemate at the moment as Goa refuses to compensate the developers and is yet to initiate talks with them with mounting public pressure that the state government delivers on its promise of the cancellation and denotification of SEZs. (For details on the Goa developments, see Angre 2008; The Hindu 2008; Singh 2008; The Times of India 2008; Ojah 2008; Mumtaz and Sardar 2008).

Resistance in the rice bowl

Traditionally called bhatyacha kotha (rice bowl), large parts of Raigad district in Maharashtra lie along the coast of the Arabian Sea making them fertile areas for rice production, fish and salt pans, mostly for subsistence or local markets. A large majority of the land owners also have at least one person in the family with a job either in government departments or small enterprises. Yet the farm land forms a crucial part of their livelihood support strategy. The land owners also employ tribal communities from nearby villages who come and work on the fields for daily wages during the rainy season.

Panvel, Pen and Uran tehsils (administrative blocks) of the district are also along the outskirts of Mumbai city, making them prime targets for real estate and industrial development as the city expands to make room for more and more migrants and economic activity. A majority of the small farmers of the region are from the Kohli or Aaghri castes, traditional fisherfolk and cultivators, who received land for cultivation
under the land reforms undertaken by the state especially since the 1960s. Ironically, this same land is now under threat of acquisition by the state for SEZs coming up in the area, notably the Mumbai SEZ (MSEZ).

Located strategically close to Mumbai city with its ever-expanding real estate market, with four ports (existing and planned) in the surrounding area and a proposed bridge across the sea connecting downtown Mumbai, the MSEZ until recently was to comprise 11,300 hectares of land. Despite the introduction of the ceiling of 5,000 hectares to the SEZ Act, there was no clarity among local officials and residents if this meant the MSEZ would be split into two contiguous SEZs or sized by a little over half, and which part would be retained as MSEZ. Perhaps it may not be too far out to claim that the MSEZ in Raigad district of Maharashtra envisages, ostensibly in the name of a multi-product SEZ, a real estate zone to serve the needs of the growing metropolis.

As I conducted my fieldwork in the area covering 45 villages in the summer of 2008, resistance had been fermenting for three years since the intention to create an SEZ in the area had become publicly known in 2005. Villages in different tehsils (administrative blocks) organized independently and adopted different strategies for mobilization and resistance.

The struggle of the residents of twenty-two villages in Pen tehsil against their inclusion in the MSEZ reveals the irregularities in the land allocation and acquisition process for the SEZ. As land acquisition processes began in the area of the twenty-two villages, farmers not in favor of the land acquisition who had been waiting for water from an irrigation project (Hetavne dam) for over two decades realized that under law, irrigated land could not be acquired for any public purpose. While official records showed that the land in question was unirrigated and even barren (despite standing crops of rice at the time of fieldwork), people from the area argued that their lands were fertile and that their villages were to be covered under the Hetavne scheme and hence their land ought to be considered irrigated. This was not an easy battle with a series of road blockades, protest marches and negotiations with the state. They were joined in this effort by a local political leader from the Workers and Peasants Party, N.D. Patil, and other local and regional leaders. The people from the twenty-two villages waged an effective campaign that ultimately pressurized the Government of Maharashtra (GoM) to exempt these villages from the MSEZ area in July 2008.

Ganesh Thakur, a prominent local leader of the struggle against MSEZ from Vadav village in Pen revealed that he was initially contacted by an agent of the MSEZ company to help secure land for the company without being informed of the proposed SEZ that would take over the entire farming and common lands of twenty-two villages. As he began negotiations and even helped sell thirty acres of land, section four notices (disclosing preliminary interest in the land to be acquired) under the LAA 1894 were released in the tehsil in August 2006, revealing the enormity of intended acquisition and the scope of the MSEZ. This revelation catalyzed resistance in the area, and Ganesh Thakur is now one of the foremost opponents of the project.
Rajan Jemse, another local activist from Vashi village in Pen has made use of the Right to Information Act 2005 to unearth project related documents from a number of state departments and concerned offices. He revealed that the Hetavne irrigation scheme that was awaited for nearly twenty years and was still incomplete would be diverted to the MSEZ if the project acquired the lands in Pen tehsil. This in effect was a transfer of resources from public investment and ownership to the private sector. Further, all the agricultural support schemes and investment in the area over the years would similarly be appropriated for the use of private developers. Objecting to this transfer of land and resources, residents from the villages organized themselves into the twenty-two Goon Sangharsh Samiti (village struggle organizations), that led the agitation against the MSEZ that culminated in the exemption of these villages from the project in July 2008.

The remaining twenty-three villages are in Uran (22) and Panvel (1) tehsils. Since they do not come under the Hetavne irrigation scheme, residents from these villages decided to go the court route and filed a Public Interest Litigation in the Maharashtra High Court challenging the MSEZ and the SEZ Act with the help of senior legal experts. Sanjay Thakur of Khopta village in Uran tehsil discovered the MSEZ plans in a newspaper announcement of section 4 of the LAA 1894 in December 2005. When the formal notices were released in the tehsil in early 2006, people from the area organized and submitted formal objections to land acquisition to the land acquisition officer in Uran. In August of 2006, 5000 people from the villages demonstrated in front of the Uran tehsil office. Forming the Shetkari Sangharsh Samiti (peasant struggle organization), they contacted lawyers and senior legal experts and filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the High Court of Maharashtra.

Dr. Subhash Gharat, resident of Chirner village in Uran and active in local resistance to MSEZ, summed up the predicament that the residents face. He said that the need of the hour in the area was development, but this forced acquisition of land and resources and their transfer to the private sector belied the concerns of the residents and fundamentally threatened their livelihood and support strategies.

Along with questions of forcible land acquisition and inadequate cash compensation, the residents of the area repeatedly raised issues of survival strategies for people who are ill equipped with skills to survive outside of land cultivation and pointed to the limited utility of cash. MSEZ claims that the habitation sites in villages will be left untouched. This was perceived as a rather facetious argument by residents, given that the habitation sites would fall within the boundaries of the SEZ. The low lying SEZ area was to be “developed” by land filling to secure construction from flooding through nearby creeks. Residents claimed this would create havoc with access to habitation sites as well as increase threats of flooding in the habitation sites.

The fate of the PIL has remained undecided with MSEZ lawyers requesting that the case be clubbed with all other SEZ related cases in the country and be transferred to the Supreme Court of India for a single
hearing on the SEZ Act. Even as the popular struggle continued with periodic agitations and demonstrations, MSEZ continued to try and buy land in the area from peasants who, when hard pressed for cash sell pieces of land to overcome immediate contingencies. The intent of the developers was clear and strong. As they negotiated this conflict between an erstwhile agrarian model of development and a new consensus on industrial development, people in the area negotiated their lives amid extreme uncertainty and insecurity. Given their steadfast resistance, however, starting in July 2009, the period of in-principle approval for MSEZ began to lapse in village after village (the approval period of three years starts from the date of official notification to each village of its inclusion in an SEZ and hence is not necessarily the same date for each village) with the developer having acquired 20 percent of the designated land. As the MSEZ developers applied for an extension of the period, the central (federal) Board of Approval of SEZs rejected its appeal and advised the developer to submit a fresh proposal if it wished to continue attempting a SEZ in the area.

That the developer will apply for a fresh proposal in the same area and continue their effort given the prime location of the villages on the outskirts of Mumbai, is a moot point. What seems definitive is that this conflict is representative of the trajectory of neoliberal modernity as it evolves in India today. Economic growth and development serve as foils for dispossession and displacement. Resistance strategies straddle a multiplicity of approaches, from direct confrontation to legal recourse. As the neoliberal economy unfolds, myriad contestations negotiate its formation. The nexus of legality, state power and neoliberal capital that SEZs represent, is a deadly combination of wealth, brute force and legislative sanction. However, a thriving living history of myriad people’s resistance to oppression, a democratic constitutional structure (despite being riddled with corruption), and a strong media capable of a fair degree of independence and critical engagement, are powers that the state and neoliberal capital have to contend with, and accommodate in India. There is hope to assume that this nexus of power will find itself much more challenged by popular resistance than say, the bureaucratic-capital nexus across the border in China.

Towards an anthropology of relevance

In the face of this nearly limitless economic inequity and dispossession, it would seem we are forced to take informed, critical and engaged political positions. An anthropological praxis that reveals these processes of impoverishment and immiseration can prove immensely valuable in aiding processes towards a just and humane world. In this paper I attempted to employ such praxis while examining an important phenomenon of neoliberal growth in the “competitive” free market enclaves of SEZs in India that threaten to dispossess and displace thousands of people of their livelihoods, cultures and lands, in the exercise of “public
purpose,” handing their land over to private corporations for economic growth and development—indeed, for the “greater common good of all.”

While the turn to reflexivity in anthropology has opened up a host of questions regarding the politics and privilege of the anthropologist as a researcher, one does not often find an appreciation of the structural privileges that a Northern researcher enjoys and what sorts of projects those privileges hinge upon. The cultural turn in the social sciences helps interrogate the underlying assumptions of positions, but it also threatens to banish to the vacuum of personal relativity structural injustices experienced coherently by communities aligned along the cross-cutting axes of political economy and identity.

Edelman (1999) in his work on peasant movements in Costa Rica pointed out that Understanding the human tragedy of the contemporary Third World, to mention just one, is better served by a social scientific practice that attempts, however imperfectly and incompletely, to document and to come to grips with the forces creating, resisting and reconceptualising change . . . This requires an examination not just of the ephemeral, plural, and hybrid realities (or representations thereof) cherished by postmodernists, but of the countervailing, culturally and politically homogenizing [emphasis in original] tendencies inherent in contemporary capitalism.

Theorizing engagement, Smith (1999) argues that the political must be center place in the anthropological encounter through the study of experience and “the system”:

Being politically engaged is intimately tied to political practice. Political practice is a certain kind of experience, so one should not deny or push aside the importance of experience in politics . . . But is seems to me that what might be a healthy corrective change of course for such social sciences as economics and geography [i.e. a stronger emphasis on fieldwork], may in fact be more of the same for anthropology. . . . Much harder for us is the move in the opposite direction—toward engagement with systemic and historical forces that, in Marx’s words, lie behind the backs of people. It is a move we fear to make lest we have to abandon something, something usually rather unarticulated: a kind of contact with the other that is exclusively ours. This I think explains the easy dismissal by many cultural anthropologists of any move away from experience. Yet political praxis seems to urge us towards engagement with the gears of system as well as to a pledge to experience.

The phenomenon of large scale dispossession of people underscores the role of a politically engaged anthropological researcher situated in a global context where stakes are so high. We need only to look a little beyond our immediate environments, wherever we may be, to realize that unequal power results in, and from, injustice and exploitation rather than any preordained order of nature. As such, all our locations as actors are implicated in these unequal and unjust structures of power and any effort
towards transformation requires a keen appreciation of one’s structural location as well as individual and collective agency. With exponentially widening global disparities of privilege and power (perhaps commensurate with the exponential growth of the global economy itself), the academic project becomes even more charged, imbued with and implicated in political power differentials. Not recognizing and interrogating these differentials renders academic inquiry incomplete and, despite claims of objectivity, necessarily political—by omission.

Further, being concerned with a transformative political agenda implies a certain vision of an alternative society and some idea of the means to get there. Without an overly utopian inclination, I think it is possible to work towards such alternatives keeping in one’s line of vision not only the alternative one is working towards, but also the immediate spaces one occupies and uses. It is through the inherent dynamic of social process, indeed, the dynamic between axes of identity and political economy, as much as structures and practices that inform life processes in complex and messy, yet coherent and structured ways that this vision can unfold—always mediated by access to or lack thereof, power.

Notes

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1 While this position is now being reversed with some states (notably Maharashtra and West Bengal) encouraging the private sector to acquire land on their own, in other states (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu), land is being acquired under the state land acquisition for industrialization framework.

2 I would like to clarify here that my use of the terms global North and South are done with a ready appreciation of the complexity of such positioning given the existence of the South in the North and vice versa. Indeed, I would put the Indian capitalists driving the SEZ phenomena in the category of the North.

3 As Harvey (2005) has described, accumulation by dispossession includes “the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations . . . ; conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights . . . ; suppression of the rights to the commons; commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; colonial, neocolonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources); monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; the slave trade (which continues particularly in the sex industry); and usury, the national debt and, most devastating of all, the use of the credit system as a radical means of accumulation by dispossession. The state, with its monopoly of violence and definitions of legality, plays a crucial role in both backing and promoting these processes . . . .”

4 Through a series of land related legislations in the 1960s a number of Indian states sought to secure land rights to cultivators who were tenants of big farmers or
landlords. In Maharashtra this was done through the implementation of the Maha-
rashta Agricultural Land Ceiling Act 1961, the Bombay Tenancy and Agricultural
Act 1948.
I conducted fieldwork in the MSEZ area from June 30-July 25, 2008; for more
details on the struggle of the twenty-two villages, see Kale (2008).
There is a provision under the Maharashtra Project Affected Persons Act
whereby if a company is able to secure 70 percent of land required for its project, the
rest of the 30 percent land can be acquired by the state under the LAA 1894.
For formal approval and then notification, each SEZ is to acquire all of its
designated land in its entirety within three years of the date of in-principle approval.

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