

**AGRARIAN ELITES IN URBAN REAL ESTATE:  
URBAN AND LAND TRANSFORMATIONS ALONG NEW ECONOMIC CORRIDORS  
IN LIBERALIZING INDIA**

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## A LOCATIONAL PUZZLE

In 2001, the newly liberalized Indian state<sup>1</sup> launched one of the most ambitious infrastructure development programs the country has ever seen: the building of economic corridors. Comparable in scale only to the massive railway building enterprise of colonial India, post-liberalization policy makers see the new economic corridors as necessary world-class infrastructure that will transform a lethargic, state-led agrarian society into a globally competitive urban economy. The new economic corridors are reorganizing the agrarian countryside into sprawling conurbations of new cities interspersed amidst fertile crop lands. These juxtapositions of crop and city defy the smooth ‘urban transects’ that are familiar to Western scholarship: of discrete land uses (residential, industrial, agricultural) arranged in neat discrete spatial adjacencies (Alonso, 1964; Park, et al., 1984; Duany & Talen, 2002).<sup>2</sup> The urban growth along the new economic corridors raises some key questions. How, for instance, do we make sense of these seemingly schizophrenic built environments of colliding cities and crop lands? Relatedly, as the new economic corridors expand into the agrarian countryside, how do existing diverse agrarian property regimes influence trajectories of contemporary urbanization? To answer these questions, I want to start with a locational puzzle.

India is no stranger to large-scale infrastructural development. In the 1950s, the Nehruvian state embarked on a massive modernization program in the 1950s of building large dams and steel towns. Unlike these earlier eras of infrastructural development that displaced politically unorganized agrarian and forest constituents from their lands in the pursuit of modernization and development (Baviskar 1999, Fernandes 2008), the new economic corridors are being routed through the fertile lands of some of the most organized agrarian propertied classes in the country. A broad-brush map

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<sup>1</sup> Though economic reforms had started more a decade earlier, the Central Government of India officially announced its economic liberalization policy in 1991.

<sup>2</sup> These urban models are also being challenged by contemporary scholarship in the west, such as the Los Angeles school of urban theory which interrogates the urban conurbation of L.A.

of some of the most volatile land conflicts of the past decade reveals their territorial overlap with former Green Revolution regions. The Green Revolution program of the 1960s and 1970s was pushed through by international development agencies with the aim of modernizing agriculture and food production in Third World countries (Frankel, 1971; Visvanathan, 2003; Lipton & Longhurst, 2010). India's Green Revolution program infused state-subsidized inflows of water, seeds and fertilizers to certain strategic geographic regions and produced a new geography of fertile food-producing regions. At the same time, the Green Revolution also helped transform regionally specific agrarian propertied castes/classes from a constituency with modest economic power in the 1940s into a surplus-producing electoral powerhouse with their affiliated regional political parties by the 1970s.

With economic liberalization, private capital has replaced the state as the main driver of economic growth. Post-reform private capital is clustering around the already market-integrated agriculturally valorized regions that benefited from the Green Revolution (Chakravorty, 2003). The clustering of private capital echoes a wider global shift of national economies shifting from the normative ideal of balanced economic growth to what Brenner has called territorial competitiveness (Brenner, 2012) in the context of post-1970s globalization. But unlike the West, in contemporary India, the regions that are attractive to post-liberalization flows of capital are also controlled by an agrarian landed constituency that has the electoral power to resist any new urban development that is not favorable to them. Herein lies India's locational challenge: the agrarian regions that are ripe to leverage the benefits of market-oriented urbanization are also the regions where land is controlled by an agrarian constituency that cannot be alienated without grave consequences at the ballot boxes.

This locational overlap has triggered some of the most volatile land conflicts of the past decade. Take for instance, the land conflict over the building of the 160-kilometer economic corridor, the Yamuna Expressway, that connects the north Indian cities of Delhi and Agra. Land acquisition for the economic corridor erupted in violent protests between farmers and the police, resulting in

casualties on both sides. In the subsequent 2012 state legislative elections, the Chief Minister, Mayawati, was ousted from power, partly because her “dream project” of the Yamuna Expressway provoked a backlash from the ‘farmer’ protestors who belonged to the powerful agrarian constituency of Jat landowners (Mahaprashasta, 2011; Vishnu, 2011). The Bangalore-Mysore economic corridor in south India has been mired in similar conflict both on the streets and in the courtroom (Goldman, 2011; Balakrishnan, 2013). This corridor is also known as the NICE corridor, named after the acronym of the concessionaire consortium, the Nandi Infrastructure Corridor Enterprises (NICE). During the height of the protests in the mid-2000s, protestors hung banners and posters around the under-construction corridor calling it the “not so NICE corridor.” The opposition to the NICE corridor was led by the powerful agrarian constituency of Vokkaliga landowners; the proposed NICE corridor cities remain undeveloped to this day. These land conflicts have escalated into a major legitimacy crisis for the state. Faced with a public backlash, the Central Government was forced to finally initiate an amendment of the antiquated, century-old, colonial era Land Acquisition Act, the eminent domain law that the postcolonial state has extensively mobilized for over sixty years of its developmental history, including for the building of the big dams during the Nehruvian era.

This locational puzzle – of the routing of new economic corridors through fertile lands controlled by powerful agrarian landowners – opens up new narratives of contemporary urbanization. If we start with the new economic corridors, rather than the city, as the unit of analysis for urbanization, we realize that we cannot understand contemporary urbanization without paying attention to agrarian change. A view from India brings in agrarian propertied classes as key protagonists in the making of urban real estate markets. It stubbornly defies “methodological city-centrism” (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015; Brenner & Schmid, 2015) and asks what new urban theories emerge when older histories of agrarian capitalism and caste/class formation collide, collude and recombine with the new economic corridors and corridor cities? To delve into this question, this

article focuses on the land transformations along the Mumbai-Pune expressway, India's first economic corridor that was completed in 2000. The region around the Mumbai-Pune Expressway is an ideal site for excavating the political economy of land across the urban-rural divide as it home to the urban capitalist class that dominates Mumbai and an agrarian propertied class of sugar elites which is one of the strongest agrarian lobbies in the countries. Before analyzing the Mumbai-Pune Expressway case, the next section makes an argument for why a view from the global south is needed to make sense of India's contemporary land and urban conflicts. I then focus on the land transformations along the Mumbai-Pune Expressway, mainly relying on the land prices collected from 242 villages around the new economic corridor to map how the land market has changed from 1996 to 2016. In conclusion, I connect the Mumbai-Pune corridor case to a critical analysis of India's amended national level eminent domain law, the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act (LARRA), to articulate the key role of agrarian property regimes in shaping contemporary trajectories of urbanization in liberalizing India.

### **LAND-USE CHANGE: A VIEW FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

The new economic corridors are reorganizing the agrarian countryside into unfamiliar juxtapositions of crops and cities. But what are the familiar theories on the relationship between agrarian and urban land markets, and how does India's contemporary urbanization depart from these theories? Straddling across multiple cities, villages and in-between gray zones, the new economic corridors open new empirical and methodological entryways into a new framework for the political economy of land that cuts across the otherwise siloed fields of urban studies and agrarian studies. I briefly outline how urban and agrarian studies have approached urban-rural linkages in land markets

and then show how India's contemporary urbanization along new economic corridors is situated at the intersection of these urban-rural divides.

### **The land question in urban studies**

The field of economic geography has long pondered over the question of why cities look the way they do and how land markets shape the structure of cities. An early canonical work in economic geography comes from the nineteenth century farmer, Von Thunen (von Thünen, 1966). Von Thunen, and later land economists after him, were intrigued by what they saw as the demonstration of the 'invisible hand' of the market in structuring land-use. Von Thunen was struck that even though the farmers in southern Germany did not know one another and there was no coordinating planning agency that regulated land-use, the farmers arranged themselves around the central market place in a pattern that was strikingly similar not just across southern Germany but across the industrializing societies of the West (which formed the sole empirical basis for Thunen's work). Von Thunen systematized his observations into a mathematical model that predicted the spatial ordering of land-use. Von Thunen was writing at a time before refrigeration when it was imperative for farmers of intensive agriculture (dairy, orchard, market gardens) to get their commodities to the market place as soon as possible. These farmers were sensitive to distance and they would bid as highly as possible to access the land closest to the central market place. Farmers growing less perishable commodities would be outbid by those growing more ones, with the result that agricultural land-uses sort themselves out in space in similar patterns of concentric circles: closest to the market town is the zone of intensive agriculture, then is the ring of extensive agriculture (wheat), then the zone of livestock raising, then the zone of trapping/hunting/Indian trade, beyond which is "wilderness."

The Von Thunen model laid some fundamental foundations for the field of economic geography. A key insight from the Von Thunen model is that the land market, and more precisely, the

price system, is the most efficient allocator of land-uses, inspiring Alonso's (1964) and Muth's (1969) works on the bid rent theory which continues to be used in residential land-use analyses to this day. Writing more than 150 years later, Fujita et al. marveled at the prescience of the Von Thunen model in demonstrating the invisible hand of the market: "the concentric rings will emerge even if no farmer knows what anyone else is growing, so that nobody is aware that the rings are there...this unplanned outcome is efficient, is indeed the same as the optimal plan" (Fujita, et al., 1999, p. 17).

These later urban economists, however, are rarely explicit about the property rights assumptions underpinning their models, an assumption that Von Thunen himself was deeply aware of. The first volume of Von Thunen's book was published in 1826, but in the decades leading up to the 1848 revolutions, Von Thunen admitted that his theory represents the views of "the owning classes" and that class conflicts will arise between landowning farmers and the laborers who work on their land (Dempsey, 1960; Harvey, 1981; Samuelson, 1983). The later economic models omit and normalize these normative assumptions on property. Alonso's bid rent theory, for instance, which predicts a land price gradient from the city center to the city edge assumes that 'consumers', i.e. those who have the market power to bid for land, sort themselves out efficiently in urban space.

If (geographical) economists are blind to the institution of private property in arbitrating land uses, (economic) geographers start their theories with the role of land in capitalist urbanization. Marxist geographers have focused on the often contradictory role of landed fractions of capital vis-à-vis other capitalists and the role of the state in mediating these conflicts amongst various fractions of capital (Lamarche, 1976; Scott, 1980; Fogelson, 2014). These theorists point to the contradictions inherent in urban planning as the state is both expected to protect private property rights but also socialize land for the collective coordination of capitalist activities. Unlike the (geographic) economists, the (economic) geographers show us how markets and the price system are socially constructed and how the sociology of urban property relations shapes the structure of cities (Logan

& Molotch, 1987; Fainstein, 2001). However, most of these urban theories were written with a view from predominantly urbanized western contexts when landed fractions of capital included urban actors like real estate developers, construction contractors and mortgage lenders, but not agrarian landowners. These urban theories, derived as they are from the experiences of Western cities, assume that capital is always private capital (and not state capital which has dominated pre-liberalization development politics in India) and these theories have no place for agrarian landed fractions of capital in their analyses of urban real estate markets.

### **The land question in agrarian studies**

If western urban theories draw sharp dividing lines between city and village, scholars in the global south have long experimented with neologisms to capture the intertwined urban-rural linkages of postcolonial urbanization. McGee, for instance, characterized the “integrated transactive urban-rural environments” of 1970s Southeast Asia as *desakota*, a Baha Indonesian word that combines *desa* [village] and *kota* [city] (McGee, 1967). These scholars stress that the western models of the urban transition do not travel well to postcolonial contexts where the uneven incorporation of agrarian systems into the world economy during the colonial era continue to shape the trajectories of postcolonial urban growth (Ibid; (Bremen & Mundle, 1991; Hart, 1996; Roy, 2016).

In the context of India, the decades between Independence and liberalization, i.e. between 1947 and 1991, involved key urban-rural debates on the linkages between agriculture and industry. As part of the Third World political project (Prashad, 2007), India’s national elites were confronted with problems of capital scarcity. As national boundaries were kept tightly regulated in pursuit of import substitution industrialization, the contribution of agriculture – in terms of food, savings and labor – became critical for state-led industrialization. India’s “agrarian question” revolved around how surpluses from agriculture could be transferred to industry in the context of an electoral democracy

(Varshney, 1995). During this period, the Indian variant of *desakota* emerged in the form of specialized industrial clusters in the midst of agriculturally prosperous regions (Epstein, 1975; Harriss-White, 1996; Tewari, 1998; Chari, 2004). Scholars writing during this period coined new social categories for these agrarian-industrial capitalists - dominant castes (Epstein, 1975; Srinivas, 1987), bullock capitalists (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987), provincial propertied classes (Balagopal, 1987), subaltern capitalists (Chari, 2004), masters of the countryside (Harriss-White, 1996). Instead of the term 'agrarian bourgeoisie,' these new categories marked the departure of India's postcolonial capitalism from European history. These studies showed how new regionally specific agrarian caste/class constituency emerged which derived its surpluses from state-subsidized inputs of seeds, fertilizers and water and which reinvested in these surpluses in a dense network of agrarian-industrial clusters in the countryside.

In the post-liberalization era, as non-agrarian sources of capital rush in to fuel economic growth (Bernstein, 2006; Lerche, et al., 2013), the question of urban-rural linkages is being reformulated from agricultural-industrial linkages to agricultural-real estate linkages (Sathe, 2011). Agricultural land, which was one of the least fungible commodities in a state-controlled agrarian economy, is now being transformed into a transnational real estate market (Chakravorty, 2013; Searle, 2016). What difference then does the presence of an agrarian propertied caste/class make to the production of emergent real estate markets? How does the Indian state mediate the land conflicts that erupt when both industrial and agrarian fractions of capital, which earlier derived their surpluses from industrial and agricultural development, now compete to stake their claims on fertile agricultural land for real estate profits? How do we conceptualize these new geographies of urbanization where real estate, and not industrialization, is the main driver of agrarian land-use change (Hsing, 2011; Levien, 2012)? Since most, if not all, of the works that dealt with India's "agrarian question" focused on a period before the 1990s, before agricultural land markets were opened to market relations, they do

not travel far enough into the post-liberalization period to answer the questions that are central to this article.

India's unique sequencing of development - of the country achieving universal suffrage when it was still a predominantly agrarian economy and of introducing market reforms in the context of an electoral democracy – poses unprecedented planning challenges as democratic and market imperatives collide in these economic corridor regions. In this context, the market-oriented urbanization of the Indian countryside cannot be reduced to some neutral 'distance coefficient' on an economic model. Nor can urbanization be fully grasped by restricting our analyses to actors and processes within city limits. Instead, urbanization in the corridor regions will be shaped by vigorous contestations on the ground as enfranchised agrarian groups suffuse their own aspirations of what it means to be global and urban into the new changing meanings of land. As the next section on the Mumbai-Pune economic corridors shows, the same economic corridor produced varied distributional urban outcomes as it passes through diverse agrarian propertied regimes, each with their own configurations of agrarian caste/class/land-based forms of social power.

### **RECALIBRATING LAND PRICE:**

#### **FROM BIG DAMS TO NEW ECONOMIC CORRIDORS**

Protests over land acquisition are a common occurrence in western Maharashtra. The frequency and intensity of land conflicts is high because the new economic corridors, airports and ports are sited or proposed to be sited on some of the richest sugarcane-growing lands. India is the second largest exporter of cane sugar after Brazil and more than 40 percent of India's sugar for exports comes from the western Maharashtra region. These sugarcane fields are owned by the electorally powerful Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster. The politics of building new corridor cities on thriving

sugarcane lands takes us back to the puzzle with which I started the article: why are the new economic corridors and corridor cities being routed through the fertile sugarcane fields of an organized agrarian propertied constituency? This question begs a prior question of how these geographies of fertile and waste land were produced in the first place.

This prior question is strikingly relevant when we compare the geography of agrarian land markets in the state of Maharashtra in the early 1900s and in the 1970s. At the turn of the twentieth century, what we now call the western Maharashtra region (then called the Bombay Presidency) was so arid that commercially viable agriculture was not possible. During that time, it was the eastern region of Maharashtra with its assured rainfall and black cotton soil that was a thriving agricultural center of cotton production. By the 1970s, the map of agriculturally productive and unproductive land got almost completely flipped, with the arid western region becoming one of India's richest agricultural zones in the country and the eastern region declining into one of the poorest and most economically backward regions. Most striking about the transformation is the choice of crop for an arid region: that of water guzzling sugarcane. In short, if we must answer the question of why capitalist urbanization is accreting onto the valorized regions of a past agrarian economy, we need to understand the production of uneven agrarian capitalism in the first place. Linked to the production of uneven agrarian land markets is the making of the agrarian constituency of Maratha sugar elites who are now emerging as key power brokers in the urban real estate markets along the new economic corridor. In order to historicize and politicize land markets in western Maharashtra, I periodize capitalist development in the region into three phases: the colonial era (late 1800s to 1947); the early decades of postcolonial agricultural modernization (1950s to 1980s); the post-liberalization era of urban- and market-oriented development (post-1991).

One of the earliest and most comprehensive mappings of agrarian regions in colonial India was the "ecological and agrarian atlas" prepared by Daniel Thorner in collaboration with Chen Han-

seng (Thorner, 1996). The atlas described and divided agrarian regions in what is now South Asia (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) into 21 regions based on conditions – including topography, soil conditions, water supply and proximity to cities - as they existed around 1930. One of these regions is the Maratha region which includes most of the present-day state of Maharashtra and segments of present-day Karnataka, Telengana and Andhra Pradesh. The atlas describes the western Maratha region – comprising the hinterland of Bombay city – as an arid region where the “life of the people is a ‘gamble on rain’” (Ibid, 122). In the late nineteenth century, this region could only support dry-crop subsistence cultivation. The eastern-most part of the Bombay Deccan has “rich black soil unsuitable for irrigation but especially favorable to cotton cultivation” (Ibid, 122). Under colonial rule, this region was the epicenter of the empire’s cotton trade. As part of the global capitalist web of cotton production, it was from this region from which the world rates for cotton were declared (Beckert, 2004; Tripathi, 2004).

The geography of crop cultivation under colonial-era global capitalism started changing in the mid to late nineteenth century. During this period, India witnessed grave famine outbreaks amidst an agricultural boom (Sen, 1981). To placate an agitated peasantry that had organized themselves into ‘riots,’ such as the 1875 Deccan Riots, the colonial state started investing in major irrigation works in select famine ridden regions (Guha, 1985; Ludden, 1999). These major public works of hydraulic engineering fundamentally transformed the geography of agrarian capitalism: it was no longer rain-fed regions but the irrigated regions that became the sites of profitable cash crop cultivation (Amrith, 2016). In the Bombay Deccan, the first of these canals was the Mutha Canal Project of 1879 in drought-prone Poona (now Pune) district. This was followed by four other major irrigation public works, including the Nira Left Bank Canal (which irrigates present-day Baramati).

The newly irrigated lands opened up what Donald Attwood calls the ‘irrigation frontier’ (Attwood, 1985). The generous flows of irrigation canals valorized these arid lands, prompting owner-

cultivators to shift from dry-crop millets and sorghum to the water guzzling cash crop of sugarcane. Studies during the period show that in 1917, for instance, an acre of dry millet or sorghum would fetch a gross income of about Rs. 12. Under canal irrigation, the same plot of land could support a perennial crop like sugarcane that would fetch an income of nearly Rs. 618 (Ibid, 66). The ‘irrigation frontier’ however was small in terms of its total land area: by 1936, the six major canal systems in the Bombay Deccan had irrigated less than two percent of the net sown area. These colonial-era irrigation works facilitated the emergence of a peasant capitalism with locally dominant owner-cultivators reaping “the benefits of what may be called the unearned increment” (Thorner, 1996, p. 123). Who then were the peasant capitalists that benefited from the “irrigation frontier?”

The peasant capitalists belonged to intermediate-caste groups, i.e. they were located somewhere between the Brahmins and Kshatriyas at the top of the sacralized caste hierarchy and the Dalits at the bottom. There were a number of these intermediate-caste groups struggling for local dominance, but by the time India gained Independence in 1947, two intermediate castes in Bombay Presidency, the Marathas and the Kunbis, had fused into a new political constituency of the Maratha-Kunbis (Lele, 1981; Palshikar & Deshpande, 1999). The Maratha-Kunbis established their political legitimacy both by being part of the anti-colonial and anti-caste struggles of that time. During the peak years of the anti-colonial nationalist movement in the 1930s, some of the most prominent Indian nationalist leaders were Maratha landowners from the western Maharashtra region, including Y.B.Chavan who went on to become the first Chief Minister of the post-Independence state of Maharashtra. At the same time that the nationalist movement was locked in a struggle against external colonizers, the Maratha-Kunbis and other regionally specific intermediate-caste peasants were engaged in a parallel struggle against internal colonizers, the Brahmins. By the time the state of Maharashtra was formed in 1960s, Maratha leaders like Chavan had forged together regional caste groups that dominated local areas into a state-wide political constituency. The Maratha-Kunbis, constituting

almost 36 percent of the population of Maharashtra, are dispersed across the state but the epicenter of their power is western Maharashtra. This is partly because they are an unrivalled caste group in the western region and because of the nationalist history of this region.

The uneven geography of agrarian capitalism of the early twentieth century got further entrenched in the first three decades post-Independence. Since the first democratic elections in Maharashtra in 1960, the Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster sends the largest number of elected representatives to the state legislature. At the state government, Maratha politicians controlled the key portfolios of Irrigation and Public Works. The Maratha politicians exerted their political power to unevenly allocate resources, including water resources, to the regions that benefited their constituency at the expense of other regions. If we had to map social power within Maharashtra state, one could well map the routing of irrigation canals to see whose lands they passed through and who got left out. In other agrarian regions of the country, similarly valorized irrigated zones helped consolidate the intermediate-caste peasantry – such as the Jats (Jodhka, 2017), Kammas and Reddys (Balagopal & Haragopal, 1988; Upadhyay, 1988), Vokkaligas (Epstein, 1962) – into agrarian capitalists, but the institutional processes varied. In western Maharashtra, both the Maratha elites and the then nascent Congress party consolidated their power over the agrarian countryside by diverting irrigation waters to sugar cooperatives that became the institutional bedrock of Maratha-Congress politics (Baviskar, 1985) (Attwood, 1992; Jadhav, 2008). The sugar cooperatives got an extra fillip during the Green Revolution decades when Vasant Rao Naik, another Chief Minister also of sugar origins from western Maharashtra who is hailed as the father of the Green Revolution in Maharashtra, concentrated the seed, fertilizer and water subsidies of the agricultural modernization program in the sugar belt.

By the 1980s, colonial and postcolonial hydraulic infrastructures had almost flipped the geography of agrarian capitalism into a mirror image of what it had been in the early twentieth century. After liberalization, the state government has been concentrating its “marquee infrastructural projects”

in the western region (see Figure 1). The locational decision of the state aligns with the preferences of post-reform firms that want to locate in regions with existing investment from the pre-reform period. Unlike the Nehruvian era when the Central Government defied the logic of uneven development and located industries in economically backward regions, investment in the post-liberalization period is driven by firms which have no incentive to locate in poorer regions (Chakravorty, 2003). Part of the draw to western Maharashtra is its proximity to the financial capital to Mumbai, but also that the rural hinterland of Mumbai has already developed dense market linkages from the Green Revolution period. However, the western Maharashtra region also has a critical mass of Maratha-Kunbi agrarian propertied classes that are powerful enough to interrupt any new development that is not favorable to them. As the new economic corridors accrete onto unevenly irrigated agrarian land markets, they produce some fundamental land-based social transformations, including the unraveling of the Congress-Maratha sugar politics.

The new economic corridors are recalibrating the price of land in western Maharashtra, but in ways that defy the clean concentric ring model that is familiar to western scholarship. To delve into the making of new urban real estate markets along economic corridors, I mapped out the changing land price along the Mumbai-Pune economic corridor by collecting the land prices for 242 villages over a twenty-year period, from 1996 to 2016.<sup>3</sup> Agricultural land in Maharashtra is classified into seven

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<sup>3</sup> The land prices used here are the ready reckoner rates. The ready reckoner rate, also known as the annual schedule of rates, circle rates or guidance values, is a government defined rate for land. Every year, the state government's Department of Registration and Stamps revises the ready reckoner rate based on market studies. These ready reckoner rates serve a number of purposes. They set the benchmark for land transactions so that buyers are not cheated by sellers charging exorbitant rates for property. More importantly, these ready reckoner rates are used for revenue purposes: stamp duty is levied on every property transaction based on these rates; urban local governments charge property tax based on these rates. The ready reckoner rate varies for different categories of agricultural land. I collected these ready reckoner rates from each of the eight taluka's Sub-Registrar office, which maintains the land cadastres and transactions at the taluka-level. I then digitized the land prices for the 242 villages from the soft-copy files to Microsoft Excel, and then linked these excel data to GIS maps. I obtained these village-level GIS maps from the Maharashtra Remote Sensing Applications Center

categories: i) irrigated multi-crop land (*bagayat*), ii) rainfed dry-crop land (*jirayat*), iii) waste land (*dongarpad*), iv) forests (*jungle*), v) common grazing land (*gairan*), vi) area under non-agricultural use (e.g. land occupied by rivers, roads, canals and land reserved for new urban/industrial use; often marked as MIDC land) and vii) land for village settlement (*gaothan*).<sup>4</sup> This elaborate system of land classification has its provenance in colonial-era land revenue systems when agricultural land was one of the main sources of public revenue. Note that the main difference between these land categories is often the presence or absence of irrigation. *Bagayat* lands, for instance, are those lands where more than 50 percent is irrigated by either canals or wells. These lands were taxed higher than the rainfed *jirayat* and *dongarpad* lands, the only difference between the latter two being their elevation since colonial administrators assumed that the “relative agricultural value between lands situated on the tops or spurs of hill ranges [*dongarpad*]...must clearly differ considerably...[from] those situated at a lower elevation [*jirayat*]” (Gordon, 1917, p. 315). Though agricultural land tax was abolished in post-colonial India, these land categories are still used and they have now become the basis for determining compensation price for land acquisition. Of these seven land categories, the two categories that I focus on in this article to highlight the mediating role of irrigation canals in calibrating the economic value of land are the irrigated multi-crop land (*bagayat*) and waste land (*dongarpad*) categories.

I selected the years 1996 and 2016 because the Mumbai-Pune economic corridor was proposed in 1996. In anticipation of the new corridor cities, land prices had sporadically started increasing by 1996, but in general, it was not till after the new economic corridor was completed that we can start discerning some clear trends in the changing land prices. The 1996 land prices are from a time when agricultural productivity was still the main metric of land markets and the land markets had not yet

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(MRSAC), Nagpur. These GIS maps were then imported into the Rhinoceros 3D software and the two-dimensional village boundaries were extruded to reflect the land price gradients.

<sup>4</sup> Source: Maharashtra Land Revenue Code 1966. Also, the various Pune district census handbooks, accessed online at <http://www.censusindia.gov.in>.

started adjusting to the new development priorities of the economic corridors and related logistics infrastructures.

*Figure 1: Map of the state of Maharashtra and the Mumbai-Pune economic corridor*

FIGURE 1: MAP OF THE MUMBAI-PUNE CORRIDOR REGION FOR WHICH LAND PRICES WERE COLLECTED

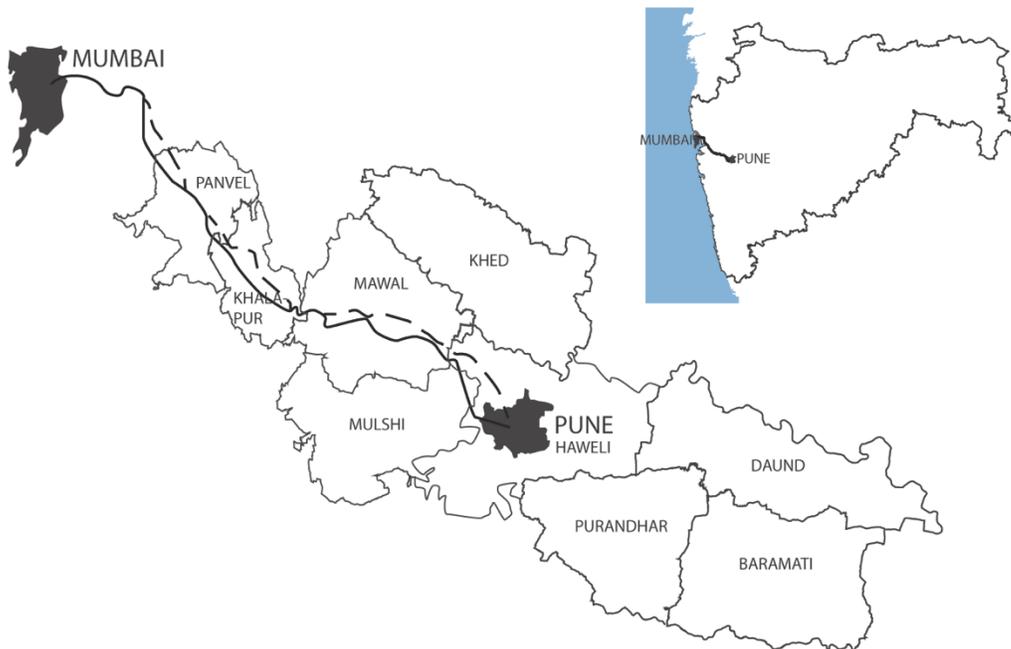
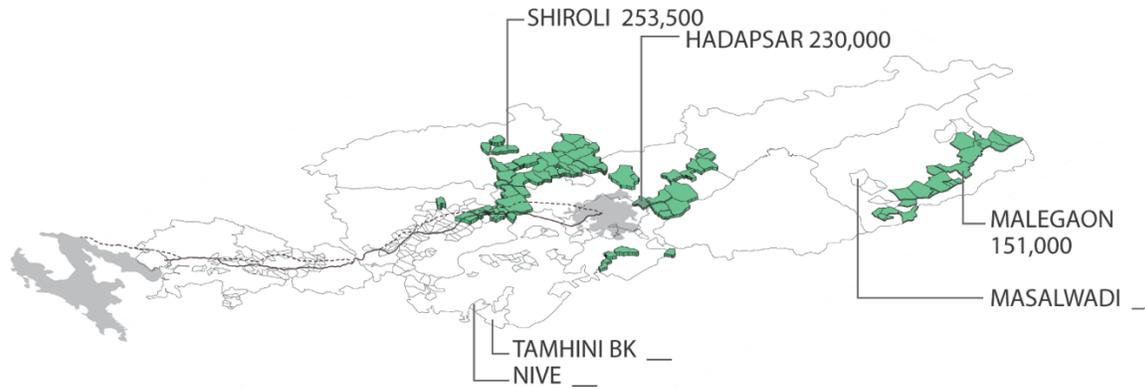


Figure 2: Land prices in the corridor region in 1996

LAND PRICES OF IRRIGATED MULTI-CROP LAND IN 1996



LAND PRICES OF WASTE LAND IN 1996

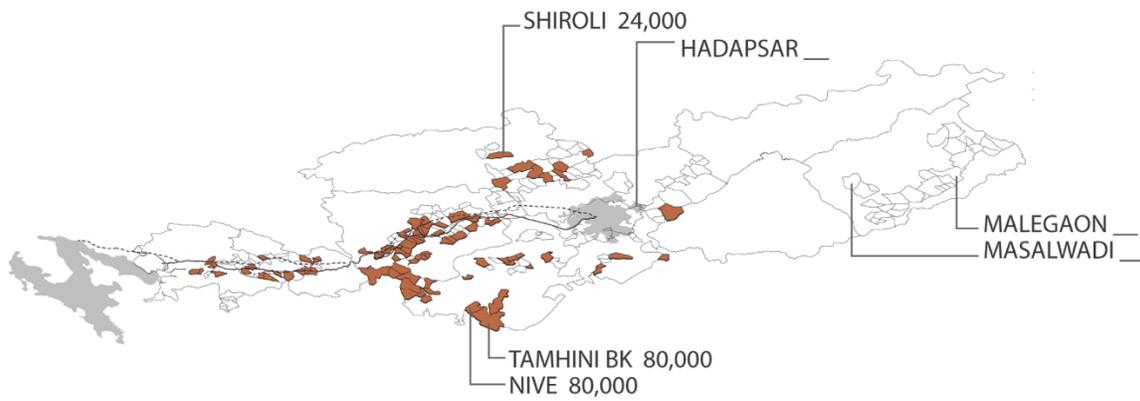
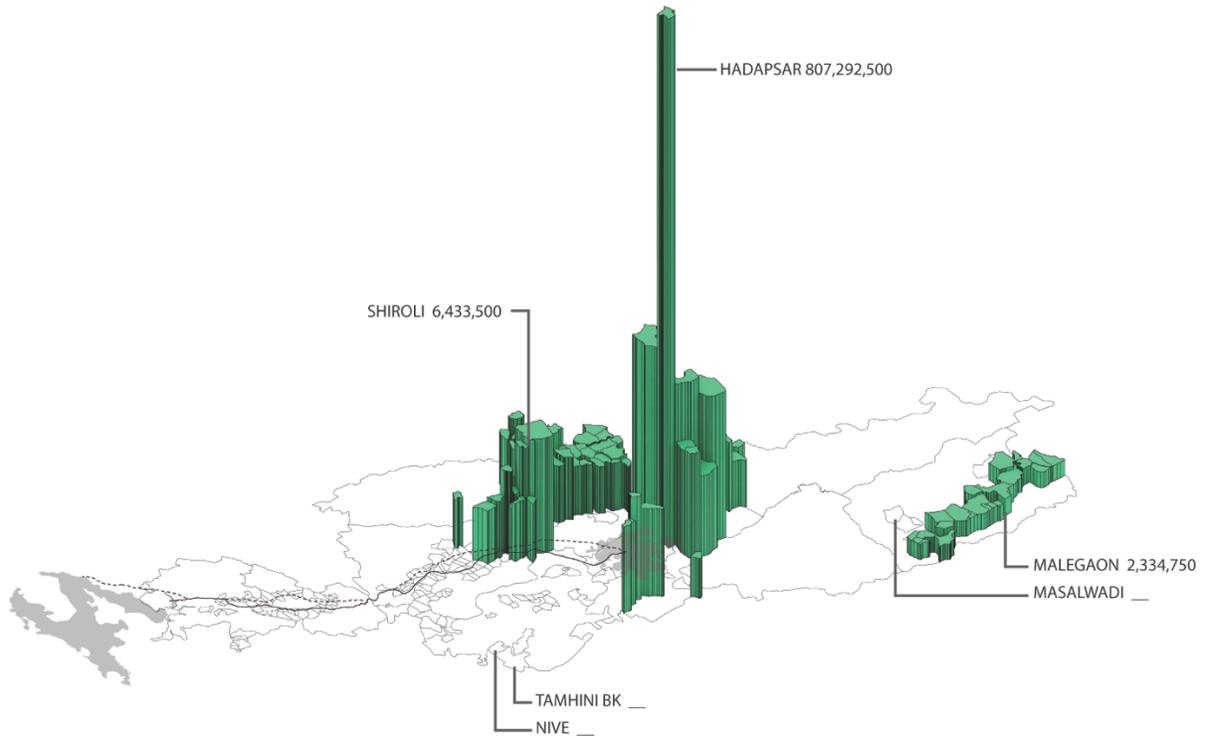
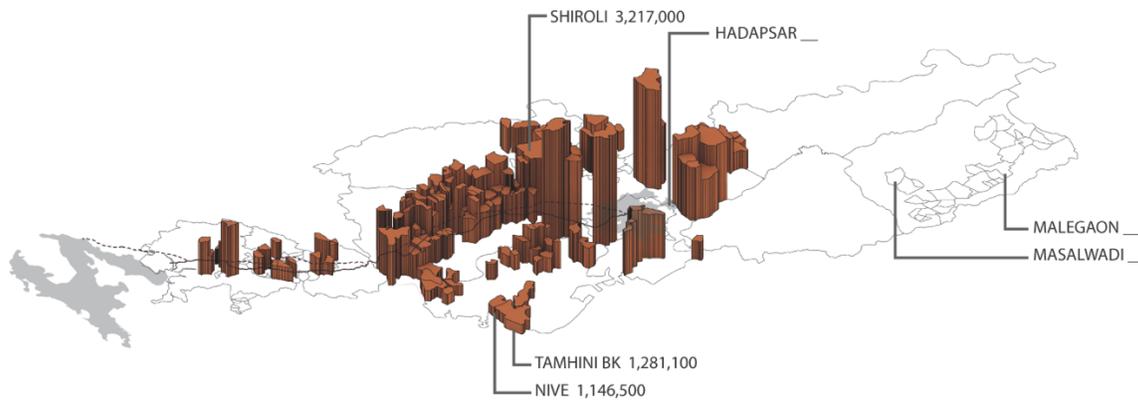


Figure 3: Land prices in the corridor region in 2016

LAND PRICES OF IRRIGATED MULTI-CROP LAND IN 2016



LAND PRICES OF WASTE LAND IN 2016



**Table 1: Land prices of some representative villages/census towns in the corridor region**

Location		Land prices in Indian Rupees			
		1996		2016	
Taluka	Village/ Census town	Multi-crop land	Waste land	Multi-crop land	Waste land
Mulshi	Nive	–	80,000	–	1,146,500
	Tamhini Bk	–	80,000	–	1,281,100
Baramati	Malegaon	151,000	–	2,334,750	–
	Masalwadi	–	–	–	–
Haveli	Hadapsar	230,000	–	807,292,500	–
Khed	Shiroli	253,500	24,000	6,433,500	3,217,000

Note: These land prices have not been adjusted for inflation. If one wants to calculate the land price increase, the following method of compounded rate can be used:

The compounded rate of increase for Hadapsar, for instance, works out to 62%. Corresponding inflation during this period was about 6% per annum. So the percentage increase in land price from 1996 to 2016, adjusted for inflation, is  $(62 - 6) = 56\%$ .

A look at the 1996 maps reveals the uneven geography of agrarian land markets and the mediating role of irrigation canals in producing them. The most devalorized agrarian regions are the Mulshi and Mawal talukas (taluka is an administrative division which is made up of a cluster of urban and rural local governments). The Mulshi and Mawal talukas are located in the ecologically rich Western Ghats mountain range and they receive heavy monsoon rains. These talukas are also the source of some major rivers and large dams that provide water to three states in southern India. Notice the land prices of the villages or census towns (settlements that meet the urbanization criteria but that continue to be governed as rural local governments)<sup>5</sup> Nive and Tamhini Bk located in Mulshi taluka. These villages were flooded with the building of one of the biggest dams in the region, the Mulshi dam, in the early 1900s. Despite bearing the most direct cost of dam infrastructure, irrigation waters

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<sup>5</sup> For more on census towns, see, inter alia, Eric Denis and Zerah, Marie-Helene (eds.) *Subaltern Urbanisation in India: An Introduction to the Dynamics of Ordinary Towns*, Springer (2017).

bypassed this region and these villages have no multi-crop land. In 1996, the only category of land in Nive and Tamhini Bk in 1996 was waste land, priced at a low ₹ 80,000 per hectare.

In contrast, notice that Baramati taluka has only multi-crop land and no waste land. The Nira Left Bank Canal, first introduced for colonial-era famine-protection but expanded for postcolonial agricultural modernization, conveys water from the Western Ghats dams to Baramati. Baramati is the home constituency of Sharad Pawar, an influential sugar elite and founding member of the political party, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). Pawar's family has retained a stronghold over the state irrigation department for the past thirty years. Baramati is a dense and thriving cooperative complex with three sugar cooperatives, a grape cooperative geared towards the wine export market, dairy cooperatives that supply milk to conglomerates like Britannia Industries and Schreiber Foods, 31 district cooperative banks that channel funds into these commodity cooperatives, an education trust that controls a 150-acre education complex that has now expanded into an information technology, biotechnology and engineering college.

Malegaon, the epicenter of Pawar's cooperative complex, has rich agriculturally productive land which, in 1996, is priced at ₹ 151,000 per hectare. Notice that though Malegaon is the heartland of the state-subsidized sugar economy, the price of the most abundantly irrigated, fertile sugarcane land in Malegaon is only around double that of the arid, waste land in Nive and Tamhini Bk. In the pre-liberalization tightly regulated land markets, agrarian landowners derived their surplus from agricultural profits rather than agricultural rent, i.e. it was profits from food produced on the land rather than the monetization of land itself that was the source of land surplus. The density of the cooperative complex also points to the investment of these agrarian surpluses. Given the very limited fungibility of agricultural land, the agrarian propertied classes could not and did not invest agricultural profits into land redevelopment or real estate. Instead, they invested their surpluses in other cooperative industries that were also under Maratha control.

Irrigation waters however do not flow evenly within Baramati taluk. The richly irrigated sugarcane fields and the cooperative complex are concentrated in the south-eastern parts of Baramati taluk; as one travels towards the northern and western boundaries, the irrigated countryside gives way to dry fields. See for instance that the cluster of villages to the northwest, such as Masalwadi, do not have any multi-crop land.<sup>6</sup> Unlike Baramati where irrigation canals are routed through the southeastern cluster of villages but bypasses the northwestern ones, the talukas of Khed and Haweli have more sporadic outlays of irrigation with canals watering the low-lying lands on the plains but not the higher elevation waste lands on hillocks. See in the map the mix of both irrigated and waste land in the Khed and Haweli villages.

The 2016 data reveals how the new market- and urban-oriented development priorities are recalibrating the price of land. The proximity to the new economic corridors now becomes a key determinant of land price. The most advantageously located taluka in the region is Haweli. The city of Pune exerts its agglomeration shadow on its neighboring villages, and it is also the one of the book-ends of the Mumbai-Pune Expressway. Notice that all land categories in Haweli have registered a skyrocketing increase from 1996 to 2016. See for instance the land prices for Hadapsar. Hadapsar is the site of one of the most feted real estate projects, that of Magarpatta City. In Hadapsar, in the 1990s, as land prices started increasing in anticipation of urban expansion, the sugar elites of the region convinced the surrounding small and marginal Maratha-Kunbi sugarcane growers to convert their fields into an urban township (Balakrishnan, 2013). The sugar elites leveraged the same political and social networks that had made possible the sugar cooperatives of the earlier agrarian era to prevail upon the state legislature to make regulatory changes to land-use laws and to facilitate the entry of sugar elites into the emerging urban real estate market. Magarpatta City exemplifies the pathways of

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<sup>6</sup> Masalwadi has only the *jirayat*, i.e. rainfed dry-crop land, category. The price of the dry-crop land in Masalwadi in 1996 was ₹ 22,000; in 2016, it was ₹ 958,500.

former sugar elites into a market-oriented urban economy. The township has now been incorporated within Pune Municipal Corporation. Hadapsar's land prices have shot up in price from ₹ 230,000 per hectare in 1996 to ₹ 807,292,500 in 2016. Notice that Hadapsar's land price far overshoots the land price of adjacent villages because it has been incorporated within municipal boundaries.

Not all sugarcane growing regions, however, are registering the same rate of land price increase. One of the most unexpected findings from the 2016 land prices is the revaluation of advantageously located waste vis-à-vis disadvantageously located multi-crop land. Compare, for instance, the 2016 price of waste land in Khed with that of the multi-crop land during the same year. Certain villages in the Khed taluka have advantageous locations proximate to the Mumbai-Pune Expressway. One of these villages is Shirol. Multi-crop land in Shirol has increased at a faster rate than the waste land, the former at ₹ 6,433,500 and the latter at ₹ 3,217,000. A surprise finding, however, is that the waste land in Shirol now fetches a higher market price than even the most irrigated land in Malegaon, the former at ₹ 3,217,000 and the latter at ₹ 1,556,500. These waste land revaluations are unsettling settled caste hierarchies. Long histories of socio-spatial segregation have produced a land-based form of social hierarchy, with the Maratha-Kunbis appropriating the irrigated multi-crop land and politically unorganized caste groups being relegated to the undesirable waste land. Now, the rising value of appropriately located waste land is disrupting these agrarian sources of land-based power. The waste land in Khed taluka, for instance, is owned and occupied by an Adivasi subgroup called the Thakkars.<sup>7</sup> The Thakkars, who earlier worked on the irrigated lands of the Maratha-

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<sup>7</sup> The term Adivasi is a self-appellation that translates into 'first inhabitants'; India's Adivasis are recognized by the United Nations as indigenous people, but the Indian government counts them in the census under the colonial category of 'Schedule Tribes.' On the political meanings of the terms Adivasis and Scheduled Tribes and their relationship to wider global indigenous movements, see Amita Baviskar, *In the belly of the river: tribal conflicts over development in the Narmada Valley*, Oxford University Press (1999); Nandini Sundar, *Subalterns and sovereigns: An anthropological history of Bastar, 1854-1996*. Delhi: Oxford University Press (1997); Sumit Guha, *Environment and ethnicity in India, 1200-1991*, Cambridge University Press (2006).

Kunbi landowners, now find themselves to be the owners of a highly desirable market asset that has acquired a higher price than even the most irrigated lands owned by their former agrarian employers. The recalibration of location-specific waste land vis-à-vis fertile land is leading to a new politics of recognition amongst the Khed Thakkars. The younger generation Thakkars are capitalizing on the rising market price of their former ‘waste’ land to break away from their patron-client relationships with Maratha-Kunbi agrarian landowners, leading to a common refrain amongst Maratha-Kunbi landowners that “mazdoor nahi milte”<sup>8</sup> [we cannot find laborers].

The new economic corridor is recalibrating not only land price but also land-based social relations. The creation of a new land market that derives its economic value not from proximity to irrigation canals but to new economic corridors is unraveling the carefully constructed Maratha-Kunbi caste bloc of the earlier agrarian era. Maratha elites in an earlier state-controlled sugar economy ensured that small and marginal sugarcane growers were allocated a share of the agrarian profits. Now, economic liberalization and the entry of new firms in agrarian land markets has weakened the monopoly control of Maratha elites over resource allocation. These agrarian elites exert their regulatory power to facilitate their foray into urban real estate markets, but the disadvantageously located Maratha-Kunbi peasantry is left out of the process (Deshpande, 2006) (Deshpande & Palshikar, 2016; Mhaskar, 2016). If the recalibrated land markets open up new routes for an emancipatory politics for advantageously located Adivasis, they are also simultaneously fueling violent anger amongst disadvantageously located Maratha youth. Trapped between agrarian distress on the one hand and the lack of urban opportunities on the other, the excluded Maratha youth are getting embroiled in “politics of frustration, anxieties and outrage (Deshpande, 2006). Nativist political parties like the Shiv Sena and the its frequent coalitional partner, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), are capitalizing

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with author, 8 May 2011.

on this sense of alienation to fan the flames of a violent and brittle new form of caste- and identity politics. The Maratha discontent reached a tipping point in 2016 when, following the abhorrent rape of a 15-year old Maratha girl allegedly by Dalit youths in Marathwada, the Marathas from across the state came together in a seemingly spontaneous silent march that they dub as the “Maratha Arab Spring.” One of the demands of the Maratha protesters was that the Marathas should be included in the Other Backward Caste (OBC) category which provides affirmative action quotas for excluded and underrepresented groups in local governments, government jobs and educational institutions. The recent Maratha unrest and OBC demand points to a sense of alienation for an agrarian landed constituency that earlier economically benefited from their caste privilege but that now feels disfranchised both by their declining status and the rising power of formerly subordinate groups in the midst of market- and urban-oriented change.<sup>9</sup>

## **THE LAND QUESTION IN CONTEMPORARY URBANIZATION**

How do these experiences along a specific economic corridor speak to wider land-use and urbanization trends in contemporary India? In the concluding section, I make connections between the more localized land conflicts along the Mumbai-Pune economic corridor and the national level eminent domain law, the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act (LARRA).

An analysis of land prices along the Mumbai-Pune economic corridor can be summarized as follows. In a state-controlled agrarian economy, the most economically productive agricultural land

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<sup>9</sup> Though post-1970s globalization affects social groups of dominant ethnic/racial identity differently in varied parts of the world, the politics of the poorer Marathas bears some semblance to the wave of global populism including Trump’s victory and Brexit.

has high fertility and low transportation costs. As the geography of agrarian land markets in western Maharashtra illustrates, fertility did not derive from some natural attribute like soil conditions or rainfall, but instead was politically mediated by the flows of water. Where irrigation canals went, they transformed arid lands into agriculturally prosperous ones; where they did not go, the bypassed lands declined into economic waste. The geography of multi-crop and waste land mapped neatly onto social power: the agrarian propertied classes appropriated the irrigated land and relegated the waste land to marginalized groups. In an urbanizing and liberalizing context, location trumps fertility as the main calibrator of land price. In this changing context, proximity to economic corridors starts to matter more than proximity to irrigation canals. As both former agrarian and industrial elites compete to stake their claims on these corridor-proximate lands, the Central Government has adopted a market-oriented approach to resolving land conflicts: the idea that if land allocation is left to the market, the market mechanism will allow for the most efficient allocation of resources.

In an effort to get prices right for the newly liberalized land markets, the LARRA debates have been going back and forth on trying to determine the right compensation price for land. In the course of these debates, compensation price has been marked up to two or four times the market rate of land. In a context where the state sets compensation price by diktat, often expropriating land from vulnerable owners and occupiers giving them little or no recourse to contest the price of acquisition, the debate on arriving at the right price of land can empower peasants in the throes of urbanization. However, in turning to the market as the arbiter of land conflict, the Indian state may be locking itself into land-use choices that are skewed towards those that are capable of efficient cost recovery. We see this in the case of the new economic corridors, where the high cost of land acquisition is passed on to the users of the economic corridors and the corridor cities. The tolls along the Mumbai-Pune economic corridor, for instance, are so high that only private cars can afford them. Along the Yamuna Expressway, the public authority had earlier promised manufacturing industries and affordable

housing along the economic corridor but is now prioritizing high-end luxury housing as a way of recovering the high cost of land acquisition. These land-use changes contravene the very justification for the new economic corridors which are supposed to be the spines of world-class power, water and transport networks along which can develop globally competitive export-oriented manufacturing hubs. Instead, with the high price of land, it is not manufacturing nodes but “speculative urbanism” (Goldman, 2011) that has taken hold in the corridor regions.

In the ongoing debates around LARRA, a new clause has been introduced which could well be the result of these volatile encounters between agrarian and urban elites. The LARRA clause on the “Special Provision to Safeguard Food Security” mandates that “no irrigated land shall be acquired under this Act...[and] such land may be acquired subject to the condition that it is being done under exceptional circumstances, as a demonstrable last resort.”<sup>10</sup> Purportedly introduced in the interest of food security, the clause also institutionalizes a new geography of agricultural land acquisitions. By mandating that “irrigated multi-crop” land be acquired only as a “demonstrable last resort,” the act bypasses the lands of organized agrarian constituencies from expropriation and indirectly targets the ‘waste’ lands that are often owned/occupied by marginalized, often Adivasi, groups for expropriation. However, private capital is not equally attracted to all waste lands. In the state of Maharashtra, the eastern region continues to be neglected by the new market-driven development; these rushes of private capital are clustering on the waste lands within the already valorized agrarian regions of western Maharashtra.

In regions like Khed, the new price of waste land cracks open slivers of possibility for a new emancipatory politics for formerly excluded agrarian groups. But not all waste land occupants

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<sup>10</sup> *The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013*, No. 30 of 2013, Ministry of Law and Justice (Legislative Department), the Gazette of India, 27 September 2013, Chapter III.

experience the changing price of their land in the same way. The Hadapsar area, for instance, saw an inflow of distress migration from surrounding drought-prone districts in the 1970s. These migrants worked as agricultural labor on the lands of the sugarcane growers. With Hadapsar now incorporated within Pune municipality, the agricultural laborers live in informal settlements and have not partaken in any way in the urban land benefits of the Magarpatta township. Further west, the Mulshi taluka has a high incidence of landlessness, with nearly 50 percent of the Western Ghats forest lands being occupied by Adivasis without titles to their land. In these regions with higher incidences of urban informality and agrarian landlessness, the already excluded non-propertied caste/class groups are further excluded from the gains of urbanization. The same economic corridor, depending on the existing agrarian property regime through which it passes, sometimes reproduces agrarian caste/class hierarchies in a new urban context and sometimes disrupts them. But despite the varied distributional outcomes in western Maharashtra, what is common is that the new claims by formerly excluded groups on urban land gains is premised on prior property claims: only those agrarian groups that have private property rights to their meager plots of land benefit from these restructured land markets.

In deciding on the new geography of market-oriented urban growth, the Indian state is relying on those very land categories which were themselves socially produced by previous colonial and postcolonial uneven development policies, not least by the politically mediated flows of irrigation waters during the Green Revolution period. In short, the new LARRA – with its marked up compensation and its ‘food security’ clause – missed the opportunity to correct uneven land markets. If, for instance, through a process of public deliberation, land is acquired at low compensation price for the building of irrigation canals through the drought-prone districts surrounding Hadapsar, these subsidized canals could stem the flows of distress migration and change the economic choices of those like the informal residents in Hadapsar who owned marginal plots of land in the devalorized regions but had to migrate to the more valorized regions for work.

The planning questions that confront liberalizing and urbanizing India are not technical ones for which the market has easy answers. What types of public infrastructure – tolled economic corridors or subsidized irrigation canals– should the Indian state prioritize in the countryside? What should be the geographies of expansion of these infrastructures: should subsidized irrigation canals be routed through waste lands; should new economic corridors pass through multi-crop land? Which geographies and categories of land should be acquired for the building of these infrastructures? These are difficult questions rife with trade-offs and further complicated by different normative meanings attached to land and land-use. Most importantly, who decides on these land-use changes? What new political possibilities are opened up in this moment of large-scale social change for new alliances amongst marginal landowners and non-propertied classes to coalesce around new imaginations of development? Such political formations are not an unrealizable utopia: in the neighboring state of Gujarat, the poorer intermediate-caste group of the Patidars is aligning with Dalits and Muslims in a joint struggle for land redistribution against the exclusionary politics of the incumbent party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The transition to a market-oriented urban society in the context of electoral democracy means that India's 21<sup>st</sup> century urbanization will not adhere to the smooth rent gradients of the Von Thunen model. Petty propertied and non-propertied agrarian castes/classes may not have the market power to contest these land-use changes but they are armed with the power of the vote. The democratic challenge for India's 21<sup>st</sup> century urban transition is to ensure “the Von Thunen theory of the urban land market [does] *not* [come] true” (Harvey, 1973, p. 137). In other words, how can India's liberalizing land markets be organized in ways other than a sole reliance on the price system? How can normatively freighted planning questions like which categories and geographies of land should be exposed to market price and which should be protected from the market be made more open and

contestable?<sup>11</sup> If India is committed to its normative obligation of democratic problem-solving, these are the planning questions that should be entrenched back in the public sphere where they belong.

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<sup>11</sup> On the contestability of property regimes, see (Pistor & De Schutter, 2015).

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