

## FRAGMENTS OF THE RURAL: LAND DISPOSSESSION AND TRANSFORMED LIVELIHOODS IN INDIA'S VILLAGE

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India's villages have undergone unprecedented social and economic transformations with the focus of the state and capital shifting from agriculture to industry and commerce. The accumulation from independent landowners has neither stopped in the time of advanced capitalism nor has the existing agricultural economy been fully transformed into an industrial mode. Consequently, the mass of farmers displaced from their traditional agrarian pursuits was not completely absorbed into the new production relations of industry and commerce, causing categories of farmer, proletarian and petty trader to often apply simultaneously to the same individual engaged in multiple occupations.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have investigated how changing modes of accumulation have decoupled agrarian labour from the fields but have only led to a partial—and often gender-selective—absorption of the labour force into the new economy. This disparity has caused a fragmentation of the collective moral economy of the village and altered the dynamics of gender, power and space within the community. The migration of men to the city in search of jobs—a consequence of the partial absorption of displaced labour—has brought women in *de-facto* control of the field and finances in many households and changed how they interact with male-dominated public spaces within the village.<sup>2</sup> The inadequate and unequal incorporation of displaced workers in the new productive space, however, has caused existing occupational and caste inequalities to translate into labour relations of the new economy: inequalities that manifest in marginal groups being employed in precarious jobs while dominant castes occupying managerial positions.

Asawarpur is located in Sonipat district of Haryana and occupies an area of 452 hectares, with a population of 2,652 spread over 543 households. As per the Census of 2011, the village has about 145 hectares of land given to non-agricultural practices and 138 hectares of fallow land. The remaining 169 hectares are used for agriculture, all of which are irrigated by electric pumps.<sup>3</sup> This is a significant decrease

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Bernstein, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change* (New York: Fernwood Publishers, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Directorate of Census Operations, Haryana. 2001. *Census of India 2001 - Haryana - Series 07 - Part A and B - District Census Handbook, Sonipat* (New Delhi: Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India).

from the 2001 figure of 392 hectares under irrigation, indicating a general movement of the village away from agriculture. The same trend is shown by the number of people directly engaged in agriculture, which decreased from 324 to 133 for total cultivators.<sup>4</sup> The major commodity produced in the village—in addition to agricultural products—has also changed from milk and milk products in 2001 to silk goods in 2011, indicating a shift from agro-pastoral to commercial pursuits.<sup>5</sup> This study will study these changes in view of the large-scale land acquisitions between 2006 and 2009 for the construction of the Rajiv Gandhi Education City near the village.

### **Accumulation by Dispossession and the Displaced Farmer**

In its traditional sense, primitive accumulation—the catalyst of capitalist development—refers to the accumulation of land and other means of production by large farmers and industrial capitalists from petty-commodity producers.<sup>6</sup> D’Costa and Chakraborty argue that this problematic provides a sound understanding of the growth of capitalism in England, but not in postcolonial India, where accumulation involves the active participation of the state in dispossessing farmers of their lands and handing them to big capital. Furthermore, the decoupling of farm labour from agriculture does not lead to the formation of a uniformly pauperised industrial proletariat in India as Marx hypothesized for England.<sup>7</sup> The complexities of accumulation in India have led to the formation of groups of workers simultaneously engaged in various forms of labour, complicating class categories, and modifying social relations in the village.

In India, the accumulation of capital occurred by dispossessing farmers through land grabs that—aided by the active participation of the state—formed a permanent feature of the developing postcolonial economy. D’Costa and Chakraborty argue that capital continuously dispossesses those living beyond the commodity economy, but this accumulation does not resolve the agrarian question by developing a new mode of production.<sup>8</sup> Instead of being the feature of a certain *point* in economic development, capitalist dispossession of land in India forms a *process* that continues into advanced capitalism. Hitherto actively invested in welfare, the Indian state began to withdraw from the market by lifting trade barriers and

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<sup>4</sup> Directorate of Census Operations, Haryana. 2011. *Census of India 2011 - Haryana - Series 07 - Part XII B - District Census Handbook, Sonapat* (New Delhi: Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, (London: Penguin, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Anthony P. D’Costa and Achin Chakraborty, eds., *The Land Question in India: State, Dispossession, and Capitalist Transition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

allowing land and urban development through private capital in the 1990s. Global economic corporations, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Asian Development Bank (ADB), charged with preventing a global depression, pressurised developing economies into greater integration with the world market by enforcing free-trade policies and sanctioning governments which were not doing enough to maintain their share of global aggregate demand.<sup>9</sup> The increasing domination of private enterprise in India's economy culminated in the Indian's state's neoliberal character: a state which intervened in the economy selectively to maintain the quality of its currency, set up political and legal structures necessary to allow private accumulation of land and productive capital, and produce a market in a sector where there is none—such as those in land, water, education, or healthcare.<sup>10</sup>

In this stage of advanced capitalism, land accumulated from India's agrarian sector is used for non-industrial purposes that are neither as labour-intensive nor as organised as the commodity-producing industrial economy. Dispossession as such produces an economic system that renders the labours of many rural dispossessed superfluous. The land that is accumulated from India's farmers is often used for developments in the scientific, financial, or housing sectors.<sup>11</sup> Private capital's increasing investment in agrarian land makes it necessary for the Indian state to actively (and selectively) dispossess farmers of their land. The fragmented nature of India's rural landholdings and resistance by civil society organisations, opposition political parties, and labour unions make it difficult for private corporations to acquire large swaths of land contiguous by market forces. As a result, the neoliberal Indian state must provide the conditions necessary for private capital to accumulate land and reproduce the labour relations needed for production.<sup>12</sup> Hence, housing complexes, research facilities, and corporate offices are built on former farmlands acquired by urban development authorities. Agricultural workers are therefore left economically displaced by the sectors that replace their agrarian economy given the exclusive demand for highly skilled labour. The ex-farmer is thus forced into the informal economy to seek employment as a contracted wage labourer or take up a small commercial pursuit, and usually, no single occupation yields an income enough to sustain the entire family.

Men and women from India's villages are often found managing multiple occupations simultaneously: working at the small plot of land they still own with the

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002), 12.

<sup>10</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-54.

<sup>12</sup> Raju J. Das, "Looking, but not seeing: The state and/as class in rural India." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 34, no. 3-4 (2007): 430-431.

rest of their family, working as unskilled employees in the new economy<sup>13</sup>, and running small businesses to earn an adequate income. Hence, class categories that distinguish groups on the basis of distinct labour relations—that is, social relations of production growing out of primitive accumulation—become inadequate to understand the situation of the dispossessed farmer. Levien argues that accumulation in India differs from the primitive accumulation hypothesised by Marx in that the state becomes actively involved in dispossessing the small farmer from their land and handing it to big capital in the former. In view of the displacement of the farmer and their loss of livelihood as a result of not being absorbed into the new economic system, India's state-assisted land accumulation takes the shape of a regime of dispossession.<sup>14</sup>

Asawarpur has shown a marked decrease in the number of people pursuing agriculture as their primary occupation between 2001 and 2011: from 324 to 133 total cultivators (but an increase in the number of agricultural labourers). Large-scale projects of land accumulation have been undertaken in the region towards the end of the same period, with land acquisition for an 819-hectare Rajiv Gandhi Education City starting around 2006 to house at least thirteen institutes of higher education. The land allocated for the project also houses four villages within its boundaries—Aurangabad, Seoli, Jakhauli, and the village under study, Asawarpur. According to the residents of Asawarpur, the state purchased land from the farmers in the region until most of the landowning farmers of the village had sold large sections of their plots. The form of land accumulation that occurred in Asawarpur and its adjacent villages closely characterises Levien's thesis of accumulation by dispossession.<sup>15</sup> Land acquired from the farmers was bought first by the state at cheap rates and then handed over to private ventures. This state-sponsored accumulation was planned not for the construction of industries or factories of any kind, but for private education—a feature of an advanced commodity economy. Naturally, the unskilled agricultural workers who lost their lands in and around Asawarpur were unable to find employment in any of the universities at an adequate scale.

The land acquisition project for Rajiv Gandhi Education City thus resembles a pattern of accumulation of land by dispossession facilitated by the state in favour of big, private capital. At the second stage of accumulation, that is, at the point of

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<sup>13</sup> Such an employment in a sector that requires highly skilled labour makes the position of the unskilled worker extremely precarious, because a) they receive extremely low wages on account of their unskilled work, and b) their position is rendered vulnerable given the large market of unskilled labour that exists to replace them.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Levien, "The Land Question: Special Economic Zones and the Political Economy of Dispossession in India," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 39, no. 3–4 (2012): 937, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2012.656268>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

restructuring the erstwhile economy, the agrarian production relations of the village were not replaced by industrial production but by the education industry which did not completely replace the previous economic structure but left many in possession of small plots of farmland. These farmlands, according to one resident of the village, were not enough to sustain the entire family. As a result, more residents—unable to find adequate employment in the universities or earn enough from their harvests—were pushed into unorganised labour, migration, or multiple occupations.

A speculative land market, constituting the sale of compensation land, often emerges as the major economic spillover of land acquisitions. In the absence of adequate absorption of the local, dispossessed farmers into the new economy, land markets become one of the few paths to success for large landowning households while marginal farmers, lacking education and political capital, fall by the wayside.

The Mahindra World City SEZ in Rajasthan created a land market that witnessed a rapid rise in land prices, which surged from about \$16,000 per hectare to over \$280,000 per hectare. The upper castes, who had held more land than the SC/ST, were thus geared to profit more from the boom. Furthermore, those with less land (dominantly the SC/ST)—unable to get formal employment in the SEZ and inadequately diversified into small businesses unlike the Jats and Brahmins—were forced into a quick distress sale of land at low prices. On average, larger landowners (Jats and Brahmins) received a sales price that was over \$44,000 per hectare more than the small landholders. More dominant-caste families had land brokers (25% of large-holding families) than the small-holding families (8%), thus placing the dominant groups in a better position to siphon profits from the land market. 39% of small-holding families were pushed into wage labour compared to 15% of large-holder families. Besides an increase in income inequality between caste groups, inequalities of access to food and lifestyle were also exacerbated, with 61% of small-holding families reportedly having ‘less food’ after the land acquisitions as opposed to 38% of large-holding families.<sup>16</sup>

The accounts of land acquisition and development in Rajpura and Asawarpur show that, with time, caste inequalities translated to land inequality and were manifested in increased inequalities of labour absorption, capital, occupation, income, and living standards. As a result, private development enabled through regimes of dispossession further marginalises disadvantaged communities and causes older, feudal patterns of inequality to translate into structural inequalities of neoliberal land-labour relations.

### *Transformed Occupations*

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<sup>16</sup> Levien, “The Land Question”, 933–69.

Incomplete and partial absorption of a dispossessed group of workers, coupled with economic changes, lead to complexities in the relations of production in a village. In turn, these changes culminate in the transformation of the social ordering and moral economy of the erstwhile agrarian society. The inability of the worker to support their family through farming or employment has led many in Asawarpur to engage in agriculture, small businesses, and the unorganised sector. One respondent revealed that she and her family used to own around ten acres of farmland before the government bought the majority of it to build the Education City. Whatever land remained with them was not enough to sustain the entire family. Consequently, both her sons took jobs in the laundry of a university within the Education City while simultaneously managing the farm. She herself set up a cigarette shop opposite the university to help her family make ends meet. Another resident of the village also responded with a similar narration of events: sale of farmlands at low rates, inability to get absorbed into the new private sector economy, setting up a small fast-food and grocery store, and her husband ferrying eatables along the adjacent highway.

It is evident that simultaneously losing agricultural land to state-induced dispossession and failing to get fully absorbed in the new economic structures of the Education City are forcing the residents of Asawarpur to turn to unskilled labour in unorganised sectors and self-employment in small businesses to make ends meet. The entire process of dispossession and decoupling of labour from agricultural land is made complicated by yet another finding: according to Census 2011, Asawarpur witnessed an increase in the number of landless agricultural labourers from 59 to 69 between 2001 and 2011.<sup>17</sup> Such a trend seems queer in a village that has experienced a net decrease in agricultural land during the same period.<sup>18</sup> This disjuncture may be explained by the pauperisation caused by the fragmented nature of the village's economy, which may have forced the unskilled dispossessed farmers to seek employment in the remaining farms.

Asawarpur has witnessed a rapid proliferation of small businesses since the construction of major universities in the vicinity and the subsequent arrival of students and faculty—an economic transformation that has created a consumption community with anomalous demands; a community whose consumption needs has led to shops selling cigars, birthday cakes, imported liquor, pizzas, and burritos to prop up in this village.<sup>19</sup> Increased competition has also caused many such businesses to shut down. While a demand for new consumption goods has created income opportunities for small businesses, those who are unable to make such ventures

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<sup>17</sup> Directorate of Census Operations, *Census of India 2011*.

<sup>18</sup> From 392 hectares in 2001 to 169 hectares in 2011.

<sup>19</sup> It is safe to say that these shops depend almost entirely on the consumption community of the region's universities.



profitable may be turning to waged labour on whatever agricultural fields remain. This makes the situation of the dispossessed farmer even more dire: their occupation vacillates between a blue-collar job in an insecure and unorganised employment sector lacking job security and workers' unions, and a low-wage high-supply sector of unskilled farm labour. Consequently, the working population of Asawarpur no longer fit into the traditional analytical categories of classes distinguished by their relation to labour.

The combination of labours that one sees Asawarpur's dispossessed farmers perform is, far from being unique to this village in Haryana, a characteristic of the working poor of the Global South. Bernstein states that South Asia's villages are defined by insecure and precarious informal economies, wherein individuals depend on a combination of unorganised wage employment and self-employment. The labour of these workers is often spread over various contradictory sectors—urban and rural, marginal self-employment and wage labour, and agricultural and commercial. Consequently, the worker is situated at the intersection of class categories such as “proletarian,” “farmer,” and “petty trader”.<sup>20</sup> The dispossessed farmer is thus forced into multiple political hierarchies of labour relations at once while not being a part of any such relation in particular. Consequently, they are subjected to structures of class oppression in multiple areas—in the employment sector in the form of their dispensability; in the agricultural sector in the form of large landowners.

Politically, the fragmented nature of labour performed by the dispossessed farmer prevents the development of a common experience of class oppression faced by all members of the labour group: firstly, there is no common labour group, and secondly, the experience of oppression—coming from a combination of economic structures—appears distinct to each worker. It is possible to argue from this inference that the intersectionality of the dispossessed worker prevents the development of a common class consciousness in the fragmented village economy, thus preventing the formation of a class in itself. Barbara Harris-White and Nandini Gooptu explain such a phenomenon as yet another anomaly to the classical movement of capital. Fragmentation of labour in the rural community maintains a dispossessed workforce in a state of internal class struggles *over* their class identity and prevents a consolidated working-class consciousness *against* the antagonistic, oppressive class.<sup>21</sup>

The situation of the waged agricultural labourer is determined by the domination of the large landowners that remain. Farming in these plots is often

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<sup>20</sup> Bernstein, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*, 111.

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Harris-White and Nandini Gooptu, “Mapping India's World of Unorganized Labour,” *The Socialist Register* 37 (2001): 89–118.

mechanised to produce an additional season of harvest. Consequently, dispossessed farmers reverting to agricultural labour are rendered casual workers and their real wages decline. Those who had maintained smaller plots of land and sold the majority of their holdings are “obliged to work”—by reduced profits on their own fields and precarious salaried work in the new economy—as “wageworkers in thin disguise”.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, a low household income and a large number of dependents compel the entire family to work, including children, the elderly, and the disabled. This pattern of fragmented household labour is common in Asawarpur, where the low turnover from the field and diminishing wages of the men force the entire family to some form of employment<sup>23</sup>. In other cases, the lack of job security in the new education sector has caused men to migrate to the nearby cities of Sonipat and Delhi for informal physical work.

The inferences from Asawarpur can be read with evidence by various scholars to suggest that land acquisition-based development compels the local ex-farmer—often lacking the skills to get incorporated into a secure job in the new economy—to pursue multiple precarious, low-paying jobs simultaneously. Such fragmentation of livelihoods is not only seen in non-industrial development through land acquisitions but also in industrial, productive development through the prized method of globalising economies—Special Economic Zones. Marginalised groups such as small farmers and SC/ST households are further disenfranchised due to the lack of labour regulations and wage assurances in their contractual and casual jobs in these zones.

Samantha Agarwal, in her study of the Polepally Special Economic Zone (SEZ), Telangana, finds that the SC/ST, OBC, and Reddy households of Polepally village had unequal means of diversifying their occupations after the establishment of the SEZ. This unequal absorption and unequal returns from the new economy for different caste groups were, in turn, results of inequalities in compensations granted to different castes, the selective dispossession of SC/ST and OBC households, and a near monopoly of the Reddy households over borewells and the appreciating land market of the region. The Dalit and Lambada households were absorbed into the SEZ through precarious, casual labour. In contrast, the labour of the OBC households was fragmented: these pluriactive families were simultaneously engaged in small businesses, casual labour, cattle rearing, and small farming.<sup>24</sup> The petty

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>23</sup> The entire family of one respondent—including her eleven-year-old girl granddaughter and pregnant daughter-in-law—must work through the day to run a small shop to earn enough for the household.

<sup>24</sup> Samantha Agarwal, “Indebted by Dispossession: The Long-term Impacts of a Special Economic Zone on Caste Inequality in Rural Telangana,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 21, no. 3 (2021): 459–84, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12409>.



commercial enterprises of these communities were almost completely dependent on the market created by the SEZ<sup>25</sup>.

In contrast to the OBC and SC/ST households, the Reddy households diversified from their primary source of income—input-intensive agriculture—to “rentiership”<sup>26</sup> and brokerage in the upcoming land market and began working as labour contractors for the SEZ. Furthermore, they were well placed to profit from the scarcity of clean drinking water, which gave birth to a market for potable water. The dominant caste households extracted and supplied water to the SEZ and the residents of Polepally.<sup>27</sup>

The patterns of land acquisition, indebtedness, compensation, and occupational diversification indicate that existing caste inequalities continued to exist and were indeed aggravated in Polepally. The historically landless SC/ST households were further marginalised as they could only find employment in the new economy in the form of casual, precarious wage labour. Their livestock—the bulwark of their financial security—was liquidated and they were pushed into indebtedness to the dominant Reddy moneylenders. These households saw their standards of living, food security, and assets decline in the face of unequal compensations and inadequate employment. In contrast to the OBC and ST/ST households, the dominant Reddy group were not dispossessed of their large landholdings, giving them a monopoly over the lucrative land market arising out of the SEZ economy. Their control over wells enabled them to profit from a market for packaged drinking water, while the marginalised SC/ST households were forced to buy water and borrow money from their former feudal overlords. The inequalities in land acquisition and compensation in Polepally thus exacerbated structural inequalities between castes and aggravated the vulnerabilities of women, Dalits, and Lambada households while enabling the dominant Reddy families to better integrate with the new land and water market.

Agarwal further notes that the main outcome of the dispossessions for the SEZ and unequal absorptions was a cascading indebtedness of the SC/ST and OBC households to the dominant Reddy moneylenders. She argues that three central mechanisms give rise to a debt trap for the Dalit families in particular: first, low and discriminatory compensation which prevented the SC/ST families from investing in productive means and instead spent it to repay existing debts; second, the proletarianisation of already marginalised groups by the loss of their livestock assets; third, their inadequate absorption into the new economy as low-wage, casual, and

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<sup>25</sup>This pattern of fragmented labour diversification was also identified in Asawarpur by this author and in Rajpura by Michael Levien in “*The Land Question*”.

<sup>26</sup> Agarwal, “*Indebted by Dispossession*”, 474.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

precarious labourers.<sup>28</sup> This caste-stratified indebtedness of historically marginalised, disproportionately dispossessed communities to the landed, dominant, former feudatories—who, despite having larger holdings, had been spared dispossession—indicates a significant aggravation of existing caste inequalities in land, income, standard of living, and food security.

*The Labour of Women in a Village Undone*

The fragmentation of labour in the village sparks structural and ideological changes in its social constitution. Dipankar Gupta argues that the general departure from the rural economy and complex non-farm employment relations leads to the loss of the traditional economic and moral dynamics of the village. Falling sizes of land holdings and wage employment causes the loosening of caste hierarchies, which in turn leads to the growth of scheduled caste political assertion. According to Gupta, the dominant castes of the village—once the employers of agricultural wage labour—can no longer assert their authority over landless peasants as dominant landowning groups due to their own dispossession, causing a breakdown of traditional class relations in the village. This reconfiguration opens up the space for the landless workers—the majority of whom are from the lower castes—to mobilise through their respective political affiliations and demand higher social status.<sup>29</sup>

In Haryana, agricultural transformation has weakened the traditional, caste-based *jajmani relations* between patron and client classes. However, traces of caste-based occupations remain. According to Surinder Jodhka, agriculture—especially as the primary occupation—remains the prerogative of the dominant castes, albeit at a smaller scale. He also suggests that agriculture as a caste identity is one of the reasons why Haryana's upper castes retain small plots of land, even if it does not yield considerable returns.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the picture of the Indian village, in the face of land dispossession, is characterised by a general loosening of caste boundaries due to a breakdown of the structure of interdependent caste-based occupations. Caste identities are preserved semiotically by former landowning families in their retention of small plots of land. The same trend is observed in Asawarpur, where the majority of the groups which retain agricultural land—though in small plots—are the dominant caste of *gotra Jats*.

Bina Agarwal argues that the migration of men out of the village in search of jobs and the breakdown of marriages increasingly cause women to become the heads

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<sup>28</sup> Agarwal, "Indebted by Dispossession", 473-474.

<sup>29</sup> Dipankar Gupta, "Whither the Indian Village: Culture and Agriculture in 'Rural' India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 8 (2005): 751-755.

<sup>30</sup> Surinder Jodhka, ed., *Agrarian Change in India* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2022).

of rural households. The loosening of patron-client relationships and a shift of the rural economy from an agrarian to a commercial and industrial orientation decreases the chances of all members of the village being employed within the community itself.<sup>31</sup> The traditional moral economy of the village is seen by Agarwal as a structure that restricts the woman's use, ownership, and control of both land and agricultural technology. Customs such as *purdah* exclude women from participating in predominantly 'masculine' public spaces—such as the local panchayat or the village market—in large sections of rural North India. However, it is in these public spaces where capital is exchanged and the connections necessary for credit facilities are established. Agarwal states that women, in the traditional village morality, are cut off from the nucleus of the community's economy and their ability to control land is diminished. With the breakdown of traditional relations of production—as characterised by changes in the rural economy caused by dispossession and male migration—the barriers to women's control over production diminish; the absence of the man allows her to move into the public space and actively participate in the productive relations of the community.<sup>32</sup>

The women of Asawarpur, however, have experienced a very subtle transformation in their lived experiences with the rural community. When asked whether women have become more dominant in the public spaces of the village since the men took jobs in the universities, one respondent stated that women of the village, much like her, would only work outside the house if men in the family were not earning enough. Surinder Jodhka contends that, with a loosening of traditional restrictions on the movement of women and the social space granted to them, India's villages have witnessed an increased emphasis on women's education.<sup>33</sup> The rate of female literacy in Asawarpur has indeed increased between 2001 and 2011<sup>34</sup>, but practices of *purdah* and rules of avoidance remain. Women in the village are still expected to withdraw into the house or cover their heads when a stranger—especially a man—arrives. However, three of the respondents affirmed that women's bargaining power and respect have increased in the village, and one stated that she feels equal to the men in the *mandi*<sup>35</sup> when she goes there to buy vegetables for her shop, while an elderly resident lamented the loss of the rural ethos and culture and complained that the youth of the village are being “influenced by

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<sup>31</sup> Bina Agarwal, *Gender Challenges: Agriculture, Technology, and Food Security* (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2016): 122-123.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Surinder Jodhka, “Emergent Ruralities: Revisiting Village Life and Agrarian Change in Haryana,” essay, in *India's Villages in the 21st Century: Revisits and Revisions*, ed. Surinder S. Jodhka and Edward Simpson (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019), 147–82.

<sup>34</sup> From 51.91% in 2001 to 64.23% in 2011 (Census 2001 and Census 2011).

<sup>35</sup> Marketplace

what they see on their phones.” The cultural and moral transformation of Asawarpur that accompanies its economic reconstitution affects meaning systems and moralities—and people’s adherence thereof—along with the lives of the women in the village. A shift from agrarian to commercial pursuits as well as the loosening of traditional moral constraints have brought the labour of women, albeit often due to poverty, to the public sphere hitherto dominated by men. However, their position is not that of one in control of their labour. They are still considered casual, secondary workers. Residents also express anxiety over the changing ethos of the village which, especially to the elderly respondents, appears to morally corrupt young girls and destabilise households. While the dull compulsion of economic forces has increased women’s work participation and made them more prominent in the social life of Asawarpur, the new, profit-driven private economics of the region has not created the social awareness necessary for it to translate into their empowerment.

Special Economic Zones and land-acquisition-based developmental projects are often hailed for their potential to increase women’s participation in the labour force and thus decrease gender inequalities. Parwez argues that, while SEZs reveal a feminisation of the workforce, SEZ employers often favour young, unskilled women in gender-typified sectors such as garment manufacturing, sewing, and diamond polishing. This preference is the result of women’s perceived vulnerabilities: women are considered easier to dispose of as they are viewed as secondary workers, are less likely to unionise than men, and can be made to work at far lower wages than men.<sup>36</sup> These hypotheses are demonstrated by Parwez through high rates of exploitation—both sexual and professional—in the Apparel SEZ and diamond industry SEEPZ in Gujarat.

Michael Levien finds that husbands, unable to find formal employment in the SEZ, often resort to violence to expropriate dowry and women’s earnings from NREGA work when the money earned from the sale of their land would run out.<sup>37</sup> Low levels of absorption in the new sector were disproportionately adverse for women, as many families suggested that the jobs available were typically for the “male son”, leading to the rest of the family being rendered as unemployed. Women felt “particularly marginalized” by the “loss of land and livestock”.<sup>38</sup> The enclosure of environmental commons and grazing land, as noted by Levien in Rajpura, can impact women more than men and increase gender inequality as women are more dependent on environmental commons and livestock rearing than men, who exercise

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<sup>36</sup> Sazzad Parwez, “Labour and Labour Welfare in Special Economic Zones in India with Special Reference to Gujarat,” *South Asian Survey* 23, no. 2 (2016): 135–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971523118765826>.

<sup>37</sup> Levien, “The Land Question”, 969.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 949.

more control over agriculture and land usage.<sup>39</sup> Levien states that “cutting across castes, women are almost universally excluded from negotiations over land sales, even in cases where the title is in their name”.<sup>40</sup> This suggests that the women rarely benefit from the land markets that emerge in the transforming village. Instead, the former agricultural economy—over which women exercised some degree of control—is replaced by an entirely male-dominated real estate economy. Levien thus concludes that such a transformation weakened women’s position within the household, exacerbated domestic abuse, and increased gender-based inequalities of production control and income. Therefore, it is not in the nature of Special Economic Zones to employ more women; rather, it is the nature of certain jobs in the SEZ—casual, low-wage, and gender-typified—that makes female labour cheaper for the contractors and easier to exploit during the production process. As such, SEZs’ propensity to employ women cannot be considered proof of its purported ability to reduce gender inequalities.

#### *Conclusion*

Accumulation of land by dispossessing farmers is an economic transformation that has deep political undertones and social and structural implications for the village community. This essay has demonstrated the unique nature of land accumulation through regimes of dispossession in postcolonial India and the complexities of labour relations arising from the changing economic focus of the Indian village. These processes have been understood in conjunction with changing social structures and moralities in India’s villages—a movement intricately linked to the disintegration of caste-based occupations. The traditional identity of the village has indeed been reconstituted, both ideologically and economically. The moral precepts that order rural society, however, linger in less obvious forms through continued restrictions of women’s movements in the public space and participation in economic activities. This study has drawn a line of causal relationships from land accumulation by dispossession to fragmented village economies, complex labour relations, and then to the changing status and participation of women in production. The case of Asawarpur serves to illustrate how India’s countryside is transformed as land grabs—state-driven dispossessions continuing well into advanced capitalism—displace agricultural labour, and the displaced labour is only partially absorbed into the new economy. The findings of various scholars studying land dispossession and rural development in India corroborate the conclusions drawn from the case of Asawarpur: that rural transformation by land acquisitions fragments

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<sup>39</sup> Agarwal, *A Field of One’s Own*.

<sup>40</sup> Levien, “The Land Question”, 959.

labour into multiple low-paying, casual, and precarious roles, aggravates existing caste and gender inequalities, allows unequal access to safe and profitable occupations to different caste and class groups and brings about a sudden extinction of traditional rural livelihoods without adequately absorbing the dispossessed into the new economy.

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