

The Land Question: Political Economy of Dispossession and Rural Livelihoods

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Abstract

Land dispossession under the neoliberal capitalist development has become a focal point of debate across the states in India and West Bengal is no exception. Based on primary data collected through three rounds of household-survey in 2009, 2014 and 2016 in Rajarhat, West Bengal, this paper examines the mechanism of land acquisition executed by the former Left Front Government (LFG). It illuminates the impact of large-scale land acquisition for a planned township for Information Technology (IT) parks, business centres and dwelling units. The study shows that the government had substantially diluted several legal provisions laid down in the Land Acquisition Act (LAA) of 1894 and denigrated the Rehabilitation and Resettlement (R&R) benefits recommended in the National Policy for Rehabilitation and Resettlement (NRRP). The ensuing transformation in livelihood activities of the dispossessed in the post-acquisition stage came forth with two key characteristics: first, there had been a sudden increase in the share of non-farm workers; and second, a bulk of this increase in non-farm activities comprised both menial and flourishing livelihood activities. The transitional informal employment opportunities in the form of 'syndicates' created by the government for the dispossessed households were 'non-inclusive', which kept three quarters of dispossessed households outside their circuits. Comparatively well-off households well-linked with the local authority and political leadership had better access in gaining these opportunities.

1. Introduction

The government of India has always attempted to uphold a commitment to higher industrial growth and infrastructure development ever since the end of colonial rule (Bapat, 2009). This commitment became stronger with the liberalisation and globalisation of the Indian economy – what Levien (2013: 383) calls 'neoliberal regime' that is focused more on capital-centric growth model and has given birth to emerging investment opportunities to large capital giants. This led many Indian states to compete with each other for attracting industries and infrastructure developers by giving them lucrative incentives in the form of easy access to natural resources (land and mineral resources), lower cost of incorporation, and easy credit and tax benefits.

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The incidences of land acquisition for private capital-intensive industrial enterprises, infrastructure development projects and new townships in the contemporary regime, unlike the regime of post-colonial state capital-driven development ventures what Nehru called ‘temples to India’s industrial modernity’ (Parry and Struempell, 2008: 47; Sharma, 2010), have become far more numerous than ever before. Studies across the world, especially in developing countries, reflect that land acquisition for development projects results in deprivation of property rights, marginalization (Cernea, 1996; 1999 and 2000; Fernandes, 1998 and 2005; Amirthalingam and Lakshman, 2009) and social exclusion of the affected people (Mahapatra, 1999; De Wet, 2001; World Bank, 2004; Council for social Development, 2008 and Sharma, 2010).

In the last few decades, particularly after the economic reforms in 1991, vast tracts of agricultural land have been acquired by state governments under different ruling parties including left front government (LFG) of West Bengal in the name of public interests. The data from the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India, shows that the country had registered a decline of 4.06 lakh hectares of cultivable land due to various development activities only over a short span of four years between 2007-08 and 2010-11 (Mohan, 2013). The conflict between farmers and the states over land has thus become a central locus and a focal point of debate across the nation. Although, with the legislative power under the constitution of India, several states have made some procedural amendments and made laws with regards to acquisition of land, surprisingly the substantive parts of these amendments and enactments contribute in accelerating the process of land acquisition (Upadhyay and Sinha, 2009).

In the second half of its political hegemony, the LFG successfully acquired or attempted to acquire vast tracts of land in many places (e.g. Rajarhat, Kharagpur, Baruipur, Singur, Nandigram, Uluberia, Dankuni, Durgapur, Salboni, Haldia, Purulia and so on) in West Bengal. Among them, Singur and Nandigram are the only two places that gained national attention and led to debate and controversy for land-based capitalist development in current times. Surprisingly, the place that witnessed the largest dispossession of farmers from their means of subsistence due to a forcible acquisition of cultivable land is Rajarhat where the LFG under the purview of public purposes laid down in Part-II of the LAA of 1894 had acquired 6933.72 acres of agricultural land and fisheries in order to establish private capital-driven world-class business centres, financial and Information Technology (IT) hubs, and dwelling units in the form of a planned township that would resemble what Sassen (2001) called ‘global cities’. This planned township was subsequently named in 2010 as ‘Rajarhat Newtown’ which now comes under the jurisdiction of Rajarhat-Gopalpur Municipality. The acreage of land acquired in Rajarhat is about seven times greater than that of Tata Motors² in Singur (997.11 acres). The dispossessed farming households in Rajarhat were severely affected by such a large-scale, state-mediated acquisition of land, which almost eradicated cultivation from the project affected villages. Even then, Rajarhat did not come to limelight as Singur did. Most of the work on land acquisition (Sarkar, 2007; Banerjee and Roy,

²The Tata Motors Small Car project in Singur is a ‘gone down’ project. The strong and violent peasant uprisings forced the Tata to pull out its project from West Bengal to Gujarat in 2008.

2007; Fernandes, 2007; Mohanty, 2007; Chandra, 2008; Sau, 2008 etc.), and empirical (Ghatak et al, 2013) has so far focused largely on Singur and only a handful of studies had focused on Rajarhat. However, no study has looked into the implementation of various aspects of important legal provisions concerning the acquisition of land and rehabilitation of the dispossessed households in Rajarhat. N have they analyzed the changes in livelihoods of the dispossessed at individual level. The present study had been taken up at Rajarhat as a case study to enquire into these issues and understand the effect of this acquisition. Specifically the paper attempts:

1. To look into the process of land acquisition designed and executed by the Left Front Government in Rajarhat in West Bengal, and
2. To assess the pattern of change in livelihoods of dispossessed farmers caused by the conversion of agricultural land into non-agricultural land in the post-acquisition stage.

2. Study Area and the Data source

Rajarhat in North 24 Parganas district is a C.D. Block with a population size of approximately 0.19 million (Population Census, 2011). It is about 12 kilometres away from Kolkata Metropolitan City and adjacent to the Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose International Airport (Kolkata Airport). Agriculture was not well developed and major portion of the acquired agricultural land had been cultivated by the farmers with two types of paddy :aman and boro, used successively during the rainy and summer seasons. A section of the farmers cultivated several vegetables (e.g., potato, cabbage, cauliflower, brinjal, carrot, mooli and some leafy vegetables) on the higher land adjoining their homesteads in the winter season.

In 1993–94, shortly after the liberalisation of Indian economy, the former LFG planned to develop an eco-friendly township mainly for IT parks, business centres, institutions, and planned dwelling units on a large tract of rural land in Rajarhat located in the north-eastern rural-urban fringe of Kolkata (Roy, 2014). Under Part II of the LAA of 1894, the LFG had acquired 6933.72 acres of agricultural land and fishing embankment from 15,000 land owners and registered tenants of 26 revenue villages in Rajarhat (Figure 1 and Table 1) over a period of sixteen years from 1995 to 2011. Rajarhat is now undergoing a massive transformation. It was predominantly a rural landscape in 2001 with 95.37 per cent of its population being rural in character while in 2011, 52.81 per cent became urban. The rapid urbanization has now almost eradicated agricultural cultivation from the project-affected villages.

The data for this study had been gathered through household survey conducted in Rejjuani revenue village in Rajarhat in 2009. 117 households had been randomly³ drawn. A series of informal discussions with many dispossessed peasants were also undertaken while revisiting Rejjuani in 2014 and 2016 as follow-up visits to comprehend the

³The sample households were randomly drawn because of two reasons. First, the list of dispossessed households was not provided by the concerned offices (panchayat office, block development officer's office, block land revenue office, district land acquisition cell or West Bengal Housing Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited Office). Second, not every dispossessed household wished to provide the required information. Many dispossessed farmers were suspicious about the political affiliation of the strangers.

overall changes among the villagers. Rekjuani comes under the jurisdiction of Rajarhat-Bishnupur-I panchayat in North 24 Parganas district. Although the sample households were randomly selected, a careful attempt was undertaken to draw them from all pockets of the revenue village. The household information was also complemented by a discussion with the Panchayat Proddhan and members, local school teachers and state government authorities including Rajarhat Block Development, and Block Land Revenue Officers. Based on the mean size of landholdings (1.95 acres) among the sample dispossessed households at the pre-acquisition stage, all sample households have been grouped into four categories: large (more than 2.65 acres), medium (1.65 to 2.65 acres), small (0.65 to 1.65 acres) and marginal (less than 0.65acre) farmers/farming household.

3. Land Grab in West Bengal: Understanding the LFG's Rationale

Since independence through the 1970s West Bengal was entrapped in an 'agrarian impasse' (Boyce, 1987; Rawal, 2001). In the 1970s West Bengal was one of the slowest growing states in agricultural sector in the country, whereas in the 1980s it became the fastest growing state (Sen and Sengupta, 1995; Bhalla and Singh, 1997; Khasnabis, 2008) with a growth rate of 6.50 per cent per annum in food grains production (Saha and Swaminathan, 1994). The Net State Domestic Product (NSDP) of West Bengal (at 1993-94 prices) grew at 4.70 per cent per annum in the 1980s, whereas it was only 3.10 per cent in the preceding decade (West Bengal Development Report, 2010). The scholars mostly believed that this remarkable growth in agriculture was primarily an upshot of two ventures initiated by the communist government. First, the successful implementation of land reforms and redistribution of surplus land without ownership among the landless and land-poor in rural areas which gave them title to land and provided an immense impetus to work harder; and second, the adoption of new technologies in the form of HYV seeds, fertilizer, plant protection chemicals and most importantly the expansion of both private and government-owned tube well irrigation for assured supply of water to crops (Harriss, 1993). Moreover, the rights of sharecroppers to land were secured by the LFG through a programme called 'operation barga'. The share of landless households in rural areas declined sharply in the first half of its political power in the state. The rural poor were substantially empowered. By 1988, fifty eight per cent of panchayat members in West Bengal belonged to the poor peasants or agricultural labourers (West Bengal Human Development Report, 2004: 48). However, the development policy of the same government in West Bengal started changing dramatically in the 1990s after the liberalization of the Indian economy. The communist government made a substantial stride by introducing industrial policy reforms in 1993-94 that promoted large scale private investments, foreign technologies and foreign investments, in which land acquisition on a large-scale played a central part. The government contended that the growth in agriculture and service sector can't be sustained over a long period without an increase in growth of manufacturing sector (Commerce and Industries Department, Government of West Bengal, 2008: p3); growth in organised manufacturing industries increases per capita value of output at higher rate which accelerates the per capita GDP of a state and prospers its economy. In West Bengal where a pro-peasant Communist Government began its career in 1977

with a vision of social, political and economic changes by bridging a gap between the poor and the rich seemed to be more interested in acquiring agricultural land since the second half of the 1990s for capital. The government which kept on winning the state assembly election in a regular fashion primarily owing to an enormous support of the farming communities ever since its ascend in power started grabbing their means of subsistence (land) and livelihoods contingent upon in the name of development. It would be noteworthy to mention that West Bengal is one of those few states which have the most fertile agricultural land in the country. Population density is very high. Share of barren and uncultivable waste land (0.23 per cent) to total geographical area is extremely low (Ministry of Agriculture, GOI, 2010). Moreover, agriculture, as per standard categorisation of landholdings size, is dominated by marginal farming households (88 per cent). However, despite having acquired a large tract of agricultural land from about fifteen thousand of owner cultivators and registered tenants and almost eradicated cultivation from the project affected villages in Rajarhat, the former state government neither brought forth an inclusive and lucrative policy intervention to secure the livelihoods of dispossessed and other project affected people nor complied with the existing rehabilitation and resettlement policies enforced by the Government of India in 2003 and 2007.

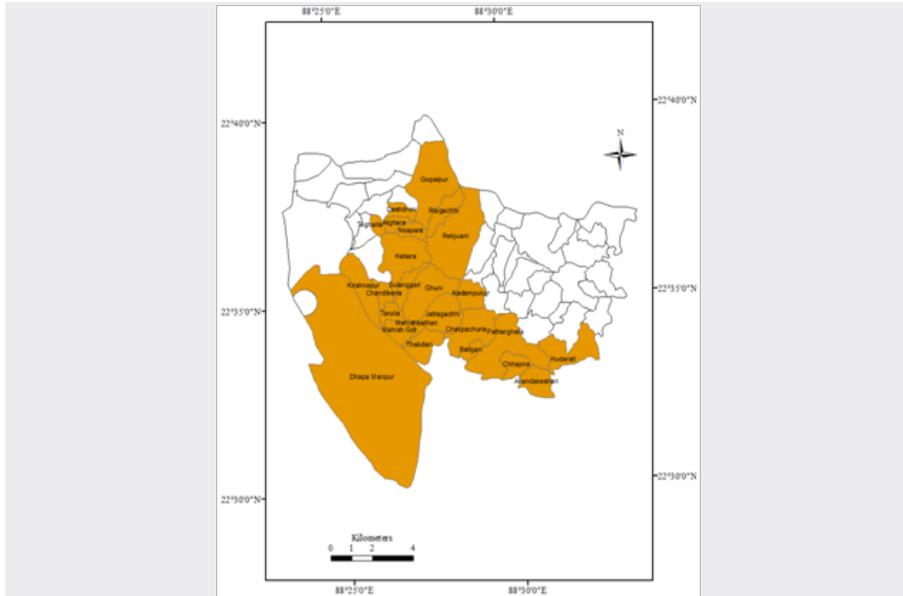
4. Execution of Land Acquisition in Rajarhat, West Bengal

The legal process of acquisition of 6933.72 acres of agricultural land and fishing embankments in Rajarhat commenced with the publication of preliminary notifications (more than a hundred) under the section 4(1) of the LAA between 1995 and 2011 in the Official Gazette and two daily newspapers. The government intended to acquire the specified land in the name of employment generation and socio-economic development under the purview of public purposes. Although a section of unwilling farmers registered their objections under the section 5A of the act within a month from the date of publication of preliminary notifications, the collector published a declaration of the purpose of acquisition under section 6 of the LAA without any concluding judgment to the filed objections. Subsequently, he issued public notices under the section 9(1) of the same Act about the government's intention of taking possession of the notified land. The total compensation for a particular land to be acquired was estimated by him as the sum of four following components: (a) the basic price (market value) of land at the date of publication of preliminary notification, (b) a solatium at the rate of 30 per cent of the basic price, (c) an interest at the rate of 12 per cent per annum for the period between date of publication of preliminary notification and the date of the declaration of compensation award, and (d) a compensation for the standing crops on notified land.

In 1993-94, the LFG of West Bengal under veteran communist leader Jyoti Basu planned to develop an eco-friendly township in Rajarhat block in the north-eastern rural-urban fringe area of Kolkata. In view of the commencement of land acquisition process, the Government imposed restrictions on 'selling, purchase and registration of land' in these villages in Rajarhat in the second half of 1995 under the Land Registration Act (West Bengal Amendment), 1981. The restrictions prevailed in a particular revenue village until the acquisition completed. To obviate the possibility of speculative appreciation in

the market value of land in subsequent years, the available sales proceeds for 1995 were taken as the base data for calculation of the market rate with an annual premium of five per cent for 1996 and thereafter (CAG, 2007).

Figure 1: Project-affected revenue villages in Rajarhat from where lands were acquired



The restriction on land registration kept real estate agents, housing developers, land mafias and speculators away from the land market until the acquisition was over in a particular revenue village. In April 1996, the LFG entrusted the work of land acquisition to the West Bengal Housing Board (WBHB); but after a period of over two years in August 1999 the government handed over this work to the West Bengal Housing Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (WBHIDCO) under the West Bengal Town Planning and Development Act, 1979. The WBHIDCO prepared a project report for the acquisition and development of 7598.33 acres of land for five different purposes, namely residential (50.50 per cent), industries (6.50 per cent), New Business District (4.60 per cent), roads (9.70 per cent), open spaces and water bodies (28.70 per cent). In 2004-05, the WBHIDCO extended the project area to 13343.40 acres with a new Action Area-IV of 5745.08 acres in the fourth phase but it could acquire only 6933.72 acres of land under Action Area-I, II, III and IV till March 2007 (CAG, 2007). Although the process of acquisition was initiated in 1995 in Teghoria Mouza, it begun in the sample revenue village Rejjuani in 1998 and the process was completed in 2005. In 1998 the collector paid only a sum of rupees (Rs.) 3.60 lacs per acre of land as a total compensation regardless of its type and quality. In 2003 the total compensation was revised and increased to Rs. 7.80 lacs. The collector also acquired the notified land from those owners who did not accept the compensation award. In such cases, the collector deposited the amounts of compensation awards to the court under section 31(2) of the LAA. During the course of interaction with the dispossessed farmers in

Rajarhat, a few who went through these experiences bemoaned that the retrieval of compensation money from the court was an extremely difficult and painful task. Instead of being assisted by the officers in the land acquisition cell, they often faced harassment in respect of legal proceedings. The difficulties in retrieval of compensation award from the court made many farmers frightened in the successive phases of acquisition, and consequently they gave up their land in despair.

Table 1: Revenue villages in Rajarhat from where land was acquired

Panchayat	Project Affected Revenue villages	Area Acquired (Acre)
1. Patharghata	1. Patharghata	948.97
	2. Akandakeshari	267.59
	3. Baligari	34.61
	4. Chakpachuria	724.32
	5. Chapna	176.14
	6. Kadampukur	342.265
2. Jyangra – Hatiara-II	7. Ghuni	473.29
	8. Jatragachhi	537.797
	9. Sulanggari	26.83
	10. Hatiara	249.624
3. Mohisbathan-II	11. Tarulia	157.06
	12. Mohisgot	196.77
	13. Thakdari	314.01
	14. Mohisbathan	85.54
	15. Dhapamanpur	42.44
4. Rajarhat – Bishnupur-I	16. Rejuani	945.52
5. Chandpur	17. Hudarait	n.a.
6. Rajarhat – Gopalpur @	18. Atghara	8.581
	19. Chandiberia	23.54
	20. Dashdron	n.a.
	21. Gopalpur	193.95
	22. Kaikhali	1.76
	23. Krisnapur	1.95
	24. Raigachhi	204.02
	25. Noapara	150.466
	26. Tegharia	8.349
Total	26 Revenue Villages	6933.72

Source: WBHIDCO, 2014.

Note: (1) @ indicates Municipality; (2) n.a. indicates not available.

5. Scenario of Voluntary and Involuntary⁴ Households: A Lens of Political Economy

In terms of actual consent, the dispossessed households were of two types: voluntary and involuntary. While voluntary households sold or gave up and alienated their land to the land acquiring body (government) with their consent (willingly), involuntary households refrained from giving up or alienating their land willingly; it was acquired by the government forcefully.

The government had acquired agricultural land from the majority of dispossessed households in Rekjuani mouza without their consent (Table 2). A small proportion (8.55 per cent) sold their land willingly; and they did so due to economic and political reasons. For the majority, cultivation was the sole source of income before acquisition. Farmers often sold off their land when they were in dearth of money in their urgent needs, such as marriages of family members, medical treatment, performing Hajj etc. Although the process of acquisition in Rekjuani mouza started in 1998, getting money through land sales by the villagers became impossible after 1995 due to government's ban on private sales of land and registration. Therefore, some farmers had to take loans from banks, cooperatives, moneylenders etc. at higher interests at the time of such urgencies. Repayment of loans within the stipulated time often became difficult as the net return from primarily rice-based cultivation was not remunerative. This led to an accretion of the burden of interests over time. In such a situation when government offered them market price calculated on the basis of 1995-sale deeds of similar land in the area and promised an assured job for at least a member of each dispossessed household in the upcoming industries on acquired land, some farmers gave up their land willingly. In addition, a section of households with a strong faith in the then ruling communist party also sold their land voluntarily.

While interacting with project affected villagers during the surveys, it was found that the voluntary sellers were mostly a section of large, powerful and politically well-connected landlord cum farmers for whom cultivation was a secondary activity whose lands were mainly cultivated by tenant farmers. These farmers through a series of close-door meetings with the land acquisition officers and the top-level ruling CPI(M) political leaders were convinced to keep the state-mediated acquisition an easy and hassle-free affair in order to accomplish the LFG's most desirable development project-famous as 'Rajarhat Newtown'. These agricultural households worked as catalysts for the LFG and secured the most profitable post-acquisition employment opportunities as syndicate businesses and contractors when the WBHIDCO started urban development work on the acquired Rajarhat area. No less important was the game of local cadres of the ruling CPI(M) in the affected villages who not only helped channelizing land for the Newtown project but often intimidated those who were not ready to part with their means of subsistence: land. The immediate 'societal' aftermath was that the once

⁴The dispossessed households had been categorised on the basis of their actual consent/opinion about selling or giving up land for the project, not on the basis of their written consent on the government's record at the time of receiving compensation money under Section 11(2) of the LAA of 1894. To be noted that dispossessed households obtained compensation money from the government only after giving their consent in writing on the official document.

traditionally closely-knit and mutually reciprocal farming communities in Rajarhat fell apart. The affected villages are no more rural villages they were two decades earlier, they are now what Vasudevan (2013) calls 'urban villages' surrounded by occupied or yet to be occupied multistoried housing colonies, corporate and government offices, and institutions.

Most of the dispossessed households received full compensation from the government (Table 3). A small proportion (8.55 per cent), of the sample households on the other hand, reported that the government did not offer them any compensation for their acquired plots that were subject to litigations or had ownership issues.

Table 2: Scenario of voluntary and involuntary households in Rajarhat

Landholding Size wise Household Category	Voluntary Selling		Involuntary Giving up		Total
	Household	%	Household	%	
Large (Above 2.65 acres)	4	18.18	18	81.82	22 (100.00)
Medium (1.65 to 2.65 acres)	1	3.23	30	96.77	31 (100.00)
Small (0.65 to 1.65 acres)	4	7.69	48	92.31	52 (100.00)
Marginal (Below 0.65 acre)	1	8.33	11	91.67	12 (100.00)
Total	10	8.55	107	91.45	117 (100.00)

Source: Household survey.

Table 3: Responses to receiving compensation award by the dispossessed households

Landholding Size wise Household Category	Full compensation received		Did not get compensation for a part of acquired land		Total
	Count	Per cent	Count	Per cent	
Large (Above 2.65 acres)	17	77.27	5	22.73	22 (100.00)
Medium (1.65 to 2.65 acres)	27	87.1	4	12.9	31 (100.00)
Small (0.65 to 1.65 acres)	51	98.08	1	1.92	52 (100.00)
Marginal (Below 0.65 acre)	12	100.00	-	-	12 (100.00)
Total	107	91.45	10	8.55	117 (100.00)

Source: Household survey.

6. Dilution of the Regulatory Guidelines of the LAA and NRRP: Implementation Aspects

The process of land acquisition in Rajarhat was completed in March 2011; and in 2005 for sample village (Rekjuani). The Government of India (GOI) brought in the National Rehabilitation and Resettlement Policy (NRRP) 2003 and NRRP 2007 into force in February 2004 and October 2007 respectively. The acquisition on a large-scale was executed under the legal provisions laid down in Part-II of the LAA of 1984. Hence, one may logically assume the fulfillment of two crucial legal aspects: first, that the acquisition of land in Rajarhat would accomplish following the legal guidelines of the LAA; and second, that the LFG would have either offered a superior Rehabilitation and Resettlement (R&R) package over the NRRP 2003 or at least complied with it. Keeping these two aspects in view, this section attempts to bring forth the nuances and

discrepancies with regard to implementation of several important legal provisions of the LAA of 1894 and the NRRP 2003 while expropriating lands from the peasants in Rajarhat. In so doing, it also draws a comparison between the different R&R components of the NRRP 2003 and those of the NRRP 2007, and the lately enacted 'Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013' (RFCTLARRA, 2013). The comparison broadly portrays the changes in R&R components over time and helps to capture the degree of grandeur the latter two embodied.

There are eight parts to the LAA of 1894, of which the Part-II and Part-VII were used for acquiring private land. While the former was used by the central /state government or companies owned or controlled by the government for acquiring land for public purposes, the latter was used for both the public and non-public purposes by the non-government companies. Notably, the scope of acquiring land for non-public purposes under the latter was very limited (Choudhary, 2009). Acquisition of land on a large scale in Rajarhat had been accomplished by the government for the private sector IT and corporate giants and real estate agents. Hence, acquisition was legally meant to be accomplished by the LFG under Part-VII of the Act. While interacting with the dispossessed peasants in Rajarhat and looking upon the acquisition notices served to them by the collector, it, however, came to light that the state (government) actually acquired lands from them under Part-II of the LAA of 1894. This, in other words, underpins a legal violation.

One of the few grounds⁵ on which project affected persons could file objection against the preliminary notification under section 4(1) was that the land acquiring body had notified religious places or graveyards (section 5A). The collector notified a Muslim community graveyard in Rekjuami (sample revenue village) for acquisition. Although the concerned Muslims filed objections in writing to the collector, the government acquired the community graveyard for the Rajarhat Newtown project. The section 23(1) of the LAA directed the land acquiring body to pay reasonable expenses to the displaced persons who were compelled to change their place of residence or business due to the execution of acquisition. In Rekjuami mouza, a homestead with a house of a family headed by a widow was acquired by the collector. However, the collector neither offered any resettlement site to the displaced family for its lost one, nor rendered any monetary support for constructing a new house and shifting its belongings to the new place of living. Moreover, based on the market value of agricultural land, the collector determined the final compensation for its homestead.

The Act did not embody any written clause or sub-clause restricting private sales of land following the publication of preliminary notification in a specified area where lands

⁵The affected stakeholders were allowed to file their objections against the acquisition on the following grounds: (i) the purpose for which land was sought to be acquired was not a public purpose; (ii) more land was being acquired than the actual requirement of proposed project; (iii) the project could be accomplished on an alternative piece of land (e.g. wasteland instead of fertile cultivable land) which would affect people to a lesser extent; (iv) the notified land contains historic monuments, graveyards, religious buildings (e.g. tombs, mosques, temples) etc; and (v) the amount of compensation being offered to the persons interested in lieu of their land was meagre or insufficient (Mahalingam and Vyas, 2011).

were to be acquired. Nonetheless, in order to make the acquisition process in Rajarhat easier and hassle-free, and to keep the land market ‘monopsonistic’ and controlled, the LFG imposed restrictions on private sale of lands and their subsequent registrations. One of the central goals of the NRRPs was to effectively minimize the displacement of people and to deliver a better standard of living to the project affected families by generating sustainable income to them. The LFG, unlike the post-colonial Nehruvian developmental state, indeed minimized the displacement in Rajarhat to a miniscule level. Only one of the 117 sample households in Rekjuani mouza was found displaced. However, the government did not provide any resettlement benefits to this household (Table 4)

Before commencing the legal processes of land acquisition in Rajarhat, the LFG promised to provide assured employment to at least one member of each dispossessed household in the upcoming project. Clause 6.18 of the NRRP 2003 and clause 7.13.2 of the NRRP 2007 also mandate necessary training facilities for project affected families to develop entrepreneurship. The same has also been scripted in the RFCTLARRA 2013. However, despite having acquired a large tract of agricultural land in Rajarhat that had perpetually uprooted a majority of the project affected families from their primary livelihood activities in Rekjuani mouza, the government had neither taken any initiatives to provide permanent livelihood opportunities to them, nor provided any necessary training facilities for developing entrepreneurship, technical and professional skills to be engaged in self-employment projects/ activities.

Interestingly, the rapid urbanisation in Rajarhat has developed a unique source of temporary employment—an unorganised employment—in the form of supplying mortar to a large number of undergoing construction sites locally known as ‘syndicate’⁶. The former government in assistance with the concerned project affected panchayats entitled this opportunity only to the dispossessed households. This employment opportunity was, however, not inclusive in nature. The syndicate happened to be a source of employment to only a quarter (24.79 per cent) of the dispossessed households in Rajarhat (Table 5); and surprisingly, a majority of the households involved in syndicates were from the comparatively better-off large and medium dispossessed farm households who could gain access due to their comparative larger propensity to invest and acquiring a better political linkage with local governance. These phenomena reflected a negligence of the state government to adopt proper equity measures to benefit the poor dispossessed households equally. Therefore, aim of providing better standard of living and sustainable income opportunities envisioned by the central government in the R&R policies did not deliver the expected results in Rajarhat acquisition. The rehabilitation components were not properly delivered to the dispossessed households of Rekjuani mouza in Rajarhat. The initiative indeed was much inferior one as compared to the R&R benefits recommended by the GOI in both the NRRP 2003 and 2007 (Table 6).

⁶A syndicate is a cooperative formed by a group of members (generally 10-20 members) from the PAFs under the aegis of the concerned project affected village panchayats. Its only function is to supply construction materials.

Table 4: Comparison between key resettlement benefits recommended by the Central Government in the NRRP 2003, 2007&RFCTLARRA 2013 and the benefits offered by the LFG in Rekjuani mouza of Rajarhat

Sl. No.	Benefit	NRRP 2003	NRRP 2007	RFCTLARRA 2013	Benefits offered by the LFG
1	House or homestead	A 150 square metres of land in rural areas free of cost for an affected family whose house has been acquired.	A house site to the extent of actual loss of area of the acquired house but not more than 250 square metres of land in rural areas.	A constructed house satisfying the Indira Awas Yojana specifications for a family that lost its house in a rural area; or a constructed house with no less than 50 square metres in plinth area for a family that lost its house in an urban area	Nil
2	Onetime resettlement allowance	-	-	Resettlement allowance of Rs. 50,000 to each affected family.	Nil
3	Alternative land for cultivation	Agricultural land or cultivable waste land to the extent of actual land loss but not more than one hectare of irrigated land or two hectares of un-irrigated land /cultivable waste land to the affected family whose cultivable land has been acquired, subject to availability of the government land in the same district.	If government land is available in the resettlement area, every affected family owning land in the affected area will be allotted agricultural land or cultivable wasteland equivalent to the actual lost land but not more than one hectare of irrigated land or two hectares of un-irrigated /cultivable wasteland in the name of khatedar(s) of the acquired land.	In case of irrigation projects, each project affected family whose owned land has been acquired and has been reduced to the status of a marginal farming household or agricultural land less would be given at least one acre of land in the command area. However, regardless of the types of projects, the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) would be given land equivalent to the owned land acquired or 2.50 acres whichever is lower.	Nil
4	Provision of developed land in the project	-	-	25 per cent of the total land acquired for urbanisation projects would be reserved and offered to the owner households in proportion to the area of their acquired land after development, and at a price equal to the cost of acquisition and cost of development.	Nil

5	Grant to develop waste land into cultivable land	A financial assistance of Rs. 10,000 to each affected family to develop an allotted wasteland into a cultivable land. Onetime monetary assistance of Rs. 5,000 to each affected family for agricultural production in case of allotment of agricultural land.	A financial assistance of Rs. 15,000 to each affected family to develop the allotted waste or degraded land. One-time monetary assistance of Rs. 10,000 to each affected family for agricultural production in case of an allotment of agricultural land.	-	Nil
6	Grant for cattle shed or petty shop	Financial assistance of Rs. 3,000 for construction of cattle shed to the affected families having cattle.	Financial assistance of Rs. 15,000 for construction of cattle shed to the affected families having cattle.	An amount no less than Rs. 20,000 for the construction of cattle shed or petty shop to each affected family.	Nil
7	Transportation cost for shifting belongings	Financial assistance of Rs. 5,000 for shifting belongings, building materials and cattle to the resettlement area.	Financial assistance of Rs. 10,000 for shifting belongings, building materials and cattle to the resettlement area.	Financial assistance of Rs. 50,000 for shifting belongings, building materials and cattle to the resettlement area.	Nil
8	Infrastructure amenities	-	-	The act mandated the following infrastructures and basic minimum amenities that are to borne by the land acquiring body: a) Roads within the resettled villages, and an all-weather road linking to the nearest pucca road; b) Proper drainage and sanitation plans to be executed before resettlement; c) One or more assured sources of safe drinking water for each resettled family and provision of drinking water for cattle; d) Grazing land as per the proportion acceptable in the state; e) A reasonable number of fair price shops; f) Panchayat buildings and village level post offices with facilities for opening savings account; g) Seed and fertilizer storage facilities; h) Irrigation facilities to the agricultural land allocated to the resettled families; i) Proper transportation facilities connecting the resettled villages with the nearest urban centre; and j) Burial or cremation ground, depending on the castes and communities.	

Table 5: Scenario of Employment of Dispossessed Households in Syndicates in Rajarhat

Category	Dispossessed households	Employment of dispossessed households in syndicates			
		Involved	Percent	Uninvolved	Percent
Large (Above 2.65 acre)	22 (100.00)	11	50.00	11	50.00
Medium (1.65 to 2.65 acre)	31 (100.00)	7	22.58	24	77.42
Small (0.65 to 1.65 acre)	52 (100.00)	11	21.15	41	78.85
Marginal (Below 0.65 acre)	12 (100.00)	-	-	12	100.00
Total sample households	117 (100.00)	29	24.79	88	75.21

Source: Household Survey. Note: Figures in parenthesis indicate their respective share.

7. Land Dispossession and Rural Livelihoods

Agricultural land as ‘pre-eminent asset’ (Bardhan et al., 2011: 1) has always played a central role in shaping the pattern of rural livelihoods in India, particularly in West Bengal (Roy, 2016: 36). It would, therefore, be of utmost significance to capture how state-mediated acquisition of agricultural land from the peasants on a large scale in Rajarhat and its subsequent conversion for urban development largely driven by capital dramatically transformed the livelihood structures of both the dispossessed households (by farm size) and individual dispossessed work force.

(A) Changes in Livelihood Structure among the Dispossessed Households

Alternative livelihoods for those affected by land acquisition projects have been central to the debates on modern development ventures by expropriating land from the farmers. In near absence of agriculture in rapidly changing and urbanising social milieu in Rajarhat, a large section of dispossessed households, regardless of their agrarian status (landholding size) in the pre-acquisition stage, established a foothold in non-farm economic activities (Table 7) that included a wide range of employment as construction labour, mason, carpenter, grill maker, e-rickshaw driver, taxi-driver, conductor, motorbike mechanic, security guard, housekeeper, gardener, salesman in the malls, and so on. On the other hand, one-third of the households preferred to be engaged in self-employed activities which included both petty and flourished businesses. It was observed during the survey that the petty businesses were mainly run by the small and marginal dispossessed households who were primarily involved in merchandising of vegetables, fruits and coconuts; operating tea-betel-cigarette stalls; selling of afternoon and early evening snacks on the mobile trolleys or in the unauthorised structured/semi-structured road side food stalls (dhabas) mainly erected at the bus stops or around the corners of the newly constructed multispecialty hospitals, academic institutions, corporate offices, hotels and gated housing complexes. Rapid urbanisation, ever-growing urban population, changing market structure and progressively increasing count of new families in hundreds of newly emerged real estate housing complexes in Rajarhat have generated such demands which encouraged the dispossessed small and marginal households to undertake these employment opportunities. These economic activities are, however, largely menial and contingent upon the daily needs of the new townships— what Sanyal (2007), and Bhattacharya and Sanyal (2011) call ‘need economy’. The dispossessed labour forces in the need economy virtually ‘survive at the

Table 6: Comparison between key Rehabilitation Components recommended by the GOI (in NRRP 2003, 2007 and RFCTLARRA 2013) and Rehabilitation Components offered by the LFG in Rejuani mouza of Rajarhat

Sl. No.	Benefit	NRRP 2003	NRRP 2007	RFCTLARRA 2013	Benefits offered by the LFG in Rejuani
1	Financial assistance to self-employed persons	A financial assistance of Rs. 10,000 for construction of shop to the project affected family (PAF) comprising self-employed person or rural artisan or small trader.	A financial assistance of Rs. 25,000 for construction of shop to the PAF comprising self-employed person or rural artisan or small trader.	A financial assistance of at least Rs. 25,000 to each affected family of an artisan, small trader, self-employed person or a family that owned commercial or industrial or institutional structure and has been involuntarily displaced.	Nil
2	Onetime grant where employment not offered	A rehabilitation grant equivalent to 750 days minimum agricultural wages to each dispossessed household for losing entire agricultural land where neither agricultural land nor regular employment to one member of the household has been provided.	A rehabilitation grant equivalent to 750 days minimum agricultural wages to each dispossessed household for losing entire agricultural land where neither agricultural land nor regular employment to one member of the household has been provided. PAF may, however, keep upto 25 per cent of its rehabilitation grant amount in the form of shares and debentures if the land requiring body is a company.	A onetime rehabilitation grant of Rs. 5,00,000 per affected family if job is not given.	Nil
3	Financial assistance for becoming a marginal farmer	A financial assistance of 375 days minimum agricultural wages to each PAF whose agricultural land has been acquired partially and consequently become a small farmer.	A financial assistance of 500 days minimum agricultural wages to each PAF whose agricultural land has been acquired partially and consequently become a marginal farmer.	-	Nil
4	Rehabilitation allowance	A onetime rehabilitation assistance equivalent to 625 days of minimum agricultural wages to each PAF belonging to agricultural labourer or non-agricultural labourer.	-	A onetime rehabilitation allowance of Rs. 50,000 to each PAF belonging to agricultural labourer, tenant, sharecropper, artisan who had been working in the affected area for at least three years prior to the acquisition of land, and whose livelihood primarily remained dependent on acquired land.	Nil

5	Subsistence allowance	A monthly subsistence allowance equivalent to 20 days of minimum agricultural wages per month for a period of 1 year to each displaced family from the date of its displacement.	A monthly subsistence allowance equivalent to 25 days of minimum agricultural wages per month for a period of 1 year to each involuntarily displaced family from the date of its displacement.	A monthly subsistence allowance of Rs. 3,000 per month to each affected family for a period of one year from the date of compensation award. Additionally, an amount of Rs. 50,000 would be given to each SC and ST family displaced from the Scheduled Areas.	Nil
6	Skill development training	Necessary training for enhancing or developing entrepreneurship among the members of affected families to help them engage in self-employment projects or livelihoods.	In case of a project involving land acquisition on behalf of a requiring body, the requiring body has to arrange training of the affected persons to develop their skills for suitable jobs.	Necessary training to the members of PAFs for taking up suitable jobs in the project will be given by the land acquiring body.	Nil
7	Employment	No provision for providing jobs to the project affected families.	If land is acquired by the government on behalf of a requiring body, the requiring body has to provide job to at least one person per nuclear family in the project, subject to the availability of the vacancies and suitability of the affected persons for employment.	If jobs are created in the project, at least one member per affected family would be given job after providing suitable training and developing skills in the required field.	Nil
8	Scholarship during training	-	Provision of scholarships to the eligible persons of the PAFs during the training programme.	-	Nil
9	Livelihood options (other than job in the project)	-	The project affected persons or their groups or cooperatives would be given preference in allotment of outsourced contracts, shops and other economic opportunities coming up in or around the project site.	-	About 25 per cent of the dispossessed households gained opportunities for supplying required construction materials (see Table 5). The construction labourers, however, have been hired by the contractors or builders from outside, primarily from Murshidabad and Malda districts of West Bengal).
10	Choice of annuity	-	Annuity policies at the cost of project authorities that pay a pension for life time to the vulnerable and affected persons, such as disabled, destitute, widows, unmarried girls, orphans, abandoned women or persons above fifty years of age; who are not provided or cannot immediately be provided with an alternative livelihood, and who are not otherwise covered as a part of a family.	An annuity of at least Rs. 2,000 to each project affected family for 20 years with an appropriate indexation to the consumer price index for agricultural labourers.	Nil

margin of subsistence through political negotiation and struggle' (Bardhan 2018: 19).

The flourished businesses, on the contrary, had been hegemonized by the comparatively larger and better off dispossessed households who were involved in garment shops, mobile and electronic shops, household ware shops, supplying construction materials, rentiers, property dealers and real estate agents. The cross section analysis, brought forth two reservations. First, although a section of dispossessed households from each category chose business as their primary activity in the post-acquisition stage, the share of dispossessed households belonging to large farmer households (36.36 per cent) had surpassed all others. Second, the proportion of dispossessed households engaged in low profile casual and non-farm wage earning activities reflected an increasing trend with a decreasing size of landholdings. Thus far, many global capital giants and corporate have set up their enterprises in Rajarhat Newtown and a handful are yet to come. However, there was very little opening for those from the sample dispossessed households, to take hold of the benefits of white collar employment in the corporate enterprises.

(B) Changes in Livelihood Structure among the Dispossessed Work Force

Agricultural land is a coveted resource to the farming communities. Although agriculture in Rajarhat, unlike much debated Singur, was not highly developed due to low lying nature of the major portion of its vast agricultural field, the working population of dispossessed households was predominantly engaged in agriculture-based livelihood activities in the pre-acquisition stage (Table 8). Noticeably, despite being closely located to Kolkata metropolitan city and the Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose International Airport, a meagre proportion of the work force of sample dispossessed households was engaged in non-agricultural activities. This was because the majority lacked technical or professional skills, and possessed low level of education.

Some dispossessed households in Rekjuani even continued cultivating crops on their acquired land for a few years that followed the completion of acquisition in the village (2005), because the entire acquired land was not brought under urban and infrastructure development activities by the government at once. The filling and leveling of the low lying land with soils and constructions of roads, drainage, sewerages, electric poles and built-up areas for the planned urban development progressed from the south to north. Cultivation on acquired land in Rekjuani was completely stopped in 2007. Consequently, in absence of agricultural cultivation, livelihoods of the dispossessed work force underwent a dramatic transformation after 2007.

The eradication of cultivation, conversion of agricultural land into non-agricultural land and rapid urbanisation compelled and led a majority of unskilled workforce of the dispossessed households to establish their foothold in various diversified non-farm economic activities (Table 8) stated in the preceding section. A few dispossessed workers turned into real estate brokers and contractors who are working as middlemen between the land/flat/house sellers and the buyers by fixing the deal at 2 to 3 per cent

Table 7: Farm Size Category wise Change in Prime Economic Activity of Dispossessed Households after Acquisition

Landholding Size wise Category of Dispossess Households	Change in prime household activity in the post-acquisition stage							Total Households
	No change in main occupation	Cultivator to casual and non-farm worker	Cultivator to business	Cultivator to others (driver, conductor, e-rickshaw puller & security guard)	Cultivator to agricultural labourer	Cultivator to jobless	Cultivation was not prime activity in pre-acquisition stage	
Large(Above 2.65 acre)	-	7	8	5	-	-	2	22
%	-	31.82	36.36	22.73	-	-	9.09	100.00
Medium(1.65 to 2.65 acre)	1	12	10	6	-	-	2	31
%	3.23	38.71	32.26	19.35	-	-	6.45	100.00
Small(0.65 to 1.65 acre)	-	25	16	7	2	1	1	52
%	-	41.08	30.77	13.46	3.85	1.92	1.92	100.00
Marginal (Below 0.65 acre)	-	6	2	3	-	1	-	12
%	-	50.00	16.67	25.00	-	8.33	-	100.00
Total households	1	50	38	18	2	2	5	117
%	0.85	42.74	33.33	15.38	1.71	1.71	4.27	100.00

Source: Household survey.

commission on each sale agreement from both the parties⁷. Similar scenarios have been reported by Reddy and Reddy (2007), and Levien (2012) in two distinct case studies carried out in acquisition-torn villages near Hyderabad and Jaipur.

Private capital-intensive urbanisation in Rajarhat Newtown had developed a new and unique source of supply chain economic opportunities. A massive construction work for the corporate enterprises, real estate housing complexes, offices and infrastructure facilities demanded supply of construction materials like bricks, iron rods, cement, stones, tiles, marbles, sand etc. To supply these materials, many unregistered cooperatives with 10 to 20 members (or sometimes even more) of dispossessed households were formed under the aegis of concerned village panchayats locally called as ‘syndicates’. Most of the members of a syndicate are comparatively from better-off large farm households and with good network with the local authorities and politicians. Although a single person is not entitled to be the sole owner of a syndicate, no provision is there for ‘a fixed share’ among its members either. Therefore, a large proportion of the capital invested in a syndicate is primarily contributed by the better-off dispossessed households. And the profit earned by a syndicate is distributed among the members as per their share to the total capital invested. Although the syndicates are temporary and informal in nature, they are important sources of income for a section of dispossessed households in the post-acquisition stage.

A considerable proportion (17.49 per cent) of the dispossessed workforce in Rejjuani in the post-acquisition stage became jobless (Table 8). The jobless workers fell under two particular categories. The first category included those who belong to the lower end of working age population and was from comparatively better-off dispossessed households. A majority of them were literate but not well-skilled and well-educated. They were ambitious about their sought after work and conscious about the status of menial employment, such as construction labour, domestic servant etc. The second category included those who had reached the upper end of working age limit, and were unskilled with diminishing physical strength, resembling the ‘stagnant reserve’ of the unemployed (Bardhan, 2018: 19). Illiteracy or very low level of education made this group ‘permanently excluded’ (Bardhan 2018: 19) in a process of economic change largely driven by neoliberal capital-intensive urbanism that deprioritized traditional rustic labour force. No woman, unlike the Mahindra World City SEZ near Jaipur in Rajasthan studied by Levien (2012, 949), were rendered unemployed. On the contrary, some women of comparatively indigent dispossessed households— who were only housewives earlier— became sentinels in the malls; or got engaged in care work and housekeeping activities in the newly constructed high-rise apartments, which in turn contributed to their household earnings.

⁷A broker may fix the deal in two ways. First, he can bargain for his commission with both sellers and buyers. The price of the property will be determined by the seller only. Broker will find the buyer. Accordingly, sales agreement will be finalised between the seller and buyer and the broker will earn his commission on the total value of the sale agreement from both the parties. Second, broker himself first fixes the selling price with the seller and look for the buyer. But the broker will always keep higher price before the buyer than the price desired by the owner and the excess amount over the price demanded by the owner (seller) will go to the broker’s pocket.

Table 8: Change in livelihoods of the working population of dispossessed households in Rajarhat

Livelihood activities	Occupation before Acquisition		Occupation after Acquisition	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Cultivators	233	88.59	1	0.38
Agricultural labours	1	0.38	3	1.14
Non-agricultural workers and waged non-agricultural labours, maid servants	2	0.76	62	23.57
Dairy and fishing	-	-	6	2.28
Carpenters, painters and mason	2	0.76	30	11.41
Syndicate business	-	-	19	7.22
Divers, e-rickshaw drivers and conductors	-	-	13	4.94
Business (other than syndicate)	2	0.76	49	18.63
Brokers	-	-	2	0.76
Security Guards	-	-	5	1.90
Government / Private company employees	11	4.18	10	3.80
Teachers	4	1.52	3	1.14
Electricians and mechanics	2	0.76	2	0.76
Others (Anganwadi helper* , private tutors, Tailors etc)	6	2.28	12	4.56
Jobless	-	-	46	17.49
Total Workers	263	100.00	263	100.00

Source: Household survey.

Note: Here those workers have been considered whose age was above 15 years and below 60 years at time of acquisition and who were engaged in economic activities.

8. Conclusion

While dispossession of peasants and tribal from land in India has a long drawn history, it is under the neoliberal regime that a clamorous debate, controversy, and wide media and political attention have been observed. Whether for infrastructure, industrial or neoliberal urban development, dispossession of land for capital today is seemingly a fickle socio-political issue in India, and many other developing countries in the Global South. Redistribution of agricultural land through its expropriation from the producers has long been identified as a condition of successful capitalist development (Arrighi et al, 2010: 411). And surprisingly, the land-based development ventures undertaken by the neoliberal Indian states over the last two and half decades have been overwhelmingly private capital-intensive, reflecting an ‘underlying’ feature for restructuring of rural spaces largely on the capitalist line. Contemporary dispossession of peasants has thus become a central focus of public debates across the states, flaring up a contestation between the two polarized propositions: (1) ‘the villagers are willing to desert the fields for a better future outside their mud-walled home’ (Gupta, 2005), and (2) ‘the villagers still prefer the rustic life over the urban one’ (Roy, 2007). And the central to this contestation have always been the legal maneuver of execution of dispossession,

and the viable post-acquisition alternative livelihood.

The findings from the Rajarhat reveals that several legal provisions laid down in the LAA of 1894 had been diluted by the LFG while acquiring lands from the peasants for capital-intensive urbanism in Rajarhat. In doing so, the government not only fell short of creating secured and viable alternative livelihoods for the dispossessed households (a promise that it made) but remained indifferent in the post-acquisition stage to cater any skill development training as to facilitate them undertake new economic opportunities arising from a process of economic change. Additionally, the implementation of rehabilitation benefits remained substantially mean-spirited.

With the near eradication of agricultural cultivation followed by a large-scale private capital-intensive urbanisation, the livelihood activities of the dispossessed households in Rajarhat went through a dramatic transformation, whereby majority of the dispossessed (both at household and individual worker level) established their foothold in a wide range of non-farm livelihood activities that include employment as carpenter, mason, grill-maker, sentinel, taxi driver, e-rickshaw driver, gardener, housekeeper and care labour, and both petty and flourished businesses. Discussions with the dispossessed peasants revealed that the flourishing small businesses were primarily hegemonized by the comparatively large and better-off dispossessed households while the small and marginal households secured the ascendancy in petty businesses that largely relies on the daily demands of Rajarhat Newtown— what Kalyan Sanyal (2007) calls ‘need economy’. The transitional informal employment opportunities in the form ‘syndicates’ created by the government for the dispossessed households were non-inclusive, whereby comparatively larger and better off dispossessed households with networks and political connections secured better opportunities.

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