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Sales in the Periphery of Chennai**

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# Dispossession by Neglect: Agricultural Land Sales in the Periphery of Chennai\*

M. Vijayabaskar and Ajit Menon\*\*

## Abstract

*The emergence of active land markets in the periphery of Chennai has resulted in large tracts of agricultural land being bought by non-agricultural actors who seek returns primarily on speculation. We argue in this paper that the financialisation of land and consequent spurt in the sale of agricultural land are central to what scholars have termed 'land grab'. Recent literature on land grabs has focused primarily on processes of accumulation by dispossession and the coercive role of the state. Our contention is that land grabs more commonly occur due to the state under-investing in agriculture, resulting in 'dispossession by neglect' of especially marginal and small farmers. Dispossession by neglect better captures the fluid boundary between the coercive and the voluntary in contemporary land grabs.*

**Key Words:** *Dispossession, Land market, Land grab, Financialisation of land.*

## 1. Introduction

Raghavan (name changed) has been practicing as a civil lawyer for several years in metropolitan Chennai, India. Since the late 1990s, he has slowly moved out of his legal profession and floated a small real estate services firm in a posh neighbourhood in South Chennai. His clientele is made up of 150 clients, many of whom are non-resident Indians. The remaining are wealthy individuals, mostly based in Chennai. He trades in land on their behalf and brokers the purchase and sale of 'high-yielding' land, mostly south of Chennai. Not only does he ensure for his clients that the lands they buy

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have clear titles and are devoid of encumbrances but he also negotiates the prices and safeguards his clients' property by fencing them and putting them on constant vigil by security personnel to prevent illegal encroachments. He studies the market for land and advises his clients when to sell and where to invest in new land. The overlaps between the work of a mutual fund manager and his profession are hard to miss.

The process of wealthy individuals acquiring land for speculative investments has been taking place in several parts of India since the early 2000s (Chakravorty 2013; Rajshekar 2013) at a time when land markets are being financialised globally (Fairbairn 2014). The activation of land markets has been made possible through a set of policy shifts geared towards enhancing both demand and supply of land. Equally important, the financialisation of land has led to farmers selling their arable land in order to meet a number of different household expenses, in the process facilitating the conversion of agricultural land into a non-agricultural one.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to contextualise the financialisation of land and the consequent large-scale sale of agricultural land by farmers in India within the wider debate about land grabs that has solicited attention from both scholars and activists recently.<sup>2</sup> A set of concerns underlies the land grab literature and efforts to conceptualise the process as one of accumulation by dispossession (ABD) (Harvey 2003, 2005; Levien 2011, 2012; Hall 2013). First, what is the role of the state in land grabs? Second, are land grabs coercive in nature or can they also involve 'voluntary' sales of land as a result of financialisation of land? And finally, what is the nature of accumulation that takes place? The broad argument put forward in this paper is that processes of financialisation in contexts of significant inequality result in land grabbing in the form of farmers being dispossessed of their land through market-based transactions.<sup>3</sup> The state not only encourages this process by liberalising land markets and availability of credit for real estate but also contributes to the process by neglecting agriculture, resulting in farmers effectively pushed to sell their land. We call this phenomenon 'dispossession by neglect'. By neglect, we suggest that the state privileges non-agricultural modes of accumulation and undermines agricultural livelihoods despite the fact that the bulk of Indian rural labour is dependent on agriculture, either as wage labour or as peasants. Since the beginning of the 1990s, there has been a steady decline in public investments in agriculture and an undermining of public institutions that were instrumental in sustaining a period of commercialisation of agriculture and capital accumulation in the Indian countryside (Reddy and Mishra 2009a). The politics of neglect is therefore tied to policy shifts in the post-reform period. Dispossession by neglect is also useful conceptually because it captures the fluid boundary

between the coercive and the voluntary, and state and market processes and therefore undermines the dichotomy suggested in literature on ABD (Levien 2012).

The paper is structured as follows. To begin with, we review the ‘land grab’ literature to foreground the importance of processes of financialisation and ‘dispossession by neglect’. In the next section, we introduce the case region and the method adopted in our study. We then proceed to discuss the factors that have led to farmers ‘volunteering’ to sell their lands. We argue that the production of the ‘voluntary’ seller is rooted in the changing trajectory of state support for capital accumulation. We highlight the accrual of differential gains, and hence a differentiated process of dispossession and repossession among sellers. Following this, we identify the nature of buyers and the change in land use that has resulted following land transfers. We point to the prominence of the ‘shadow’ buyer who occupies a nebulous space between the formal state apparatus and the market and illustrate how, apart from ‘voluntary’ sales, coercion too can be a part of market-based land transfers. Finally, we dwell on the key features of a post-sale local economy and draw parallels with that observed in the case of lands acquired by the visible hand of the state. In doing so, we make a case for incorporating market-based instruments of dispossession within the ‘regimes of dispossession’ framework put forward by Levien (2015).

## **2. Market-based Dispossession as a Form of Land Grabs**

A vast literature has emerged recently on global land grabs that highlights the large-scale takeover or alienation of land, particularly rural land, by transnational actors and national governments in parts of Asia, Latin America and Africa (Harvey 2005; Von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009; Zoomers 2010; Borras et al. 2011; Cotula 2012; Daniel 2012; Sauer and Leite 2012). While much of the early literature on contemporary land grabs focused on the ‘foreignisation’ of agriculture in the context of a global food crisis, the later literature has highlighted the diverse factors that drive land grabs by both foreign and domestic actors. Growing demand for biofuels (Borras et al. 2010) and food (Cotula 2012; Daniel 2012), the creation of environmental zones such as protected areas (Benjaminsen and Bryceson 2012; Fairhead et al. 2012), tourism (Gardner 2012), special economic zones (SEZs) (Levien 2012) and the use of land as financial assets to hedge risk among financial actors (Pearce 2012; Fairbairn 2014) are some of the key drivers of this phenomenon.

One of the criticisms of the land grab literature has been that it is all inclusive and hence conceptually too open-ended (Levien 2012; Hall 2013). Subsequent efforts to conceptualise the drivers of this process using the

ABD framework have been ambiguous about the extent to which some of the mechanisms of dispossession may be brought under the ambit of this framework. While scholars like Levien (2012, 2015) are clear that land grabs do not include everyday forms of dispossession by differentiation, there remains a lack of clarity with regard to the location of land grabs within processes of capital accumulation, role (or lack of) played by the state in land grabs, whether land grabs have to be coercive in nature or can involve 'voluntary' exchanges and what the actual consequences of land grabs are in terms of concentration of capital (within or outside agriculture) and dispossession of small farmers. To an extent, the lack of conceptual clarity arises because scholars have originally studied this phenomenon as a large-scale process involving transnational actors in geographically diverse locations. If globalisation is constituted simultaneously through interactions between the global and the regional (Crouch and Streeck 1997), it is important to recover the role of the regional to understand the differentiated processes and outcomes of globalisation. While literature on land grabs has focused on larger macro-level factors such as globalisation or neoliberal reforms, the response of local actors to these changes or their role in enabling this process has not been examined adequately (Hall 2013; Levien 2013).

Levien (2013, 2015) has recently tried to bring more clarity to the land grab debate by talking about 'regimes of dispossession' in the context of ABD. He argues, based on his observations on India, that land grabs take particular forms in specific historical periods of capitalism and that current land grabs are part of neoliberal capitalism. What is distinctive about contemporary land grabs, according to Levien (2015), is that the state facilitates this process, that it makes land available not for public purposes but for private actors and that it uses extra-economic coercive measures by acquiring land from farmers.<sup>4</sup> Though Levien's characterisation of the state's role in the neoliberal land grab is important, it does not adequately capture the breadth of the phenomena in countries such as India. First, it is important to note that compulsory acquisition of land by the state for SEZs was met with large-scale resistance in several parts of the country (Jenkins et al. 2014). In response to this resistance, regional governments and private capital often resorted to the market to mobilise land for such projects, possibly seeing the market mechanism as a path of less resistance as compared to coercive acquisition (Vijayabaskar 2014).<sup>5</sup>

It is therefore important to understand the processes through which market mechanisms are mobilised and the role of different actors and institutions in working these mechanisms. Within the land grab literature, while Levien (2012) clearly locates loss of land through market-based and voluntary processes outside the ambit of the ABD framework, Hall

(2013) and Akram-Lodhi (2012) contend that such processes too ought to be interpreted within an ABD framework. We build on this by arguing that Levien's (2012) collapsing of economic and non-economic means of dispossession or his distinction between market-mediated dispossession and state-mediated dispossession is limiting. As Harriss-White (1997) points out, in economies such as India marked by a high degree of informality, the relationship between the state and the market may not be one of antagonism, but rather marked by a complementary relationship that prevents clear-cut disentanglement between the two institutions. Further, if state actors tend to significantly shape and participate in market relations, identifying pure state-led strategies of dispossession is difficult. The distinction between economic and non-economic drivers that seems to be at the heart of the debate on whether dispossession is due to capitalist means or non-capitalist (read non-economic forms of coercion) mechanisms may, therefore, be hard to make, as Hall (2013) and Akram-Lodhi (2012) point out. This is particularly important in India where market-based processes of dispossession have a long history.

In India, this ambiguity was identified in the process of commercialisation of agriculture in the colonial period. Literature on agrarian relations in colonial India identified the processes of forced commercialisation leading to dispossession that were driven by state policies but achieved through market mechanisms. Peasant differentiation and dispossession took place, but not through Leninist or Chayanovian means but with outcomes quite similar to that anticipated by Lenin, namely capitalist expansion in agriculture. Scholars pointed to the possibility of peasants forced into market-based transactions that are dispossessive in nature (Bharadwaj 1985; Bhaduri 1986; Krishnaji 1991). Termed as 'forced commercialisation', the colonial government, by imposing cash rents on the peasantry, forced peasants to sell in the market on adverse terms that pushed them into debt and transactions in inter-locked markets, which finally pushed them to sell their lands. Li (2009) too, in the context of Indonesia, talks about how the state facilitates these market-mediated processes of dispossession by promoting oil palm cultivation that pushes smallholder farmers into debt and consequent sale of lands. Market-based transactions may, therefore, be backed by mediated state coercion or policy-induced stress, and may resemble processes commonly discussed under ABD.

The market, moreover, might, in fact, be a greater provisioner of land in post-reform India than the state. Mohan (2013) highlights that between 2007 and 2011, the area of cultivable land reduced by 790,000 hectares, most of which was due to conversion of agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes. On the other hand, the total amount of land notified under SEZs

accounted for only 45,635.63 hectares.<sup>6</sup> Levien's (2015) criticism that Harvey's conceptualisation of ABD is overly tied to global capital's need to invest is extremely valid. Often processes of dispossession, especially involving domestic actors, are linked to economic and political imperatives of national or regional governments and accumulation needs of domestic capital.

More focus also needs to be placed on why farmers sell land and its consequences. Of course, while it is possible that lands are being taken out of agriculture by farmers themselves, micro-level evidence suggests that these processes are dominated by non-agricultural actors buying rural lands (Vijayabaskar 2014). This returns us to the question of 'voluntary sales'. What has been relatively understudied by scholars looking into land grabs is how state priorities vis-à-vis agriculture and neglect of supportive policies around irrigation, for example, have driven farmers to sell land because agriculture is no longer remunerative (Woodhouse 2012). This requires a more detailed micro-level analysis of not only state policies but also a segmented analysis of which farmers have been affected by state neglect. The next section maps these policy shifts and outcomes at the all-India level and in Tamil Nadu where our case study sites are located.

### **3. Policy Shifts, Financialisation and Neglect of Agriculture**

It is well recognised that livelihoods sustained by agriculture have been subject to increasing vulnerability since the onset of economic reforms in India (Reddy and Mishra 2009b). This has compounded vulnerabilities emanating from the previous phase of agricultural expansion such as land degradation due to soil erosion and inadequate expansion of irrigation sources due to low investments (ibid.). Further, irrigation-related policies have seldom focused on drainage issues. The consequence of this approach has led to water logging in several parts of the country. Indiscriminate use of fertilisers and pesticides due to poor information dissemination and faulty price setting, and driven by a certain techno-economic paradigm of agricultural development, has further contributed to decline in soil fertility. Decline in institutional credit, reduction of agricultural subsidies due to pressures of trade and fiscal reforms and importantly reduced state support for research and development and extension services that were at the heart of promoting accumulation in Indian agriculture since the mid-1960s have all led to erosion of livelihoods.

This neglect of agriculture is apparent in Tamil Nadu as well and has translated into a poor set of indicators related to agriculture in the state. Despite being a model state that has been able to combine high levels of growth with human development (Dreze and Sen 2013; Kalaiyarasan 2014),



the agricultural sector has stagnated at least partly due to under-investment. Agricultural income declined from 24.82% of total state domestic income in 1993–94 to less than 8 per cent in 2012–13, the lowest in the country after Kerala. Returns to farming have consistently declined. The median annual income for a farmer in Tamil Nadu in 2012–13 was less than Rs. 20,000 (net of cultivation costs) per year as opposed to over Rs. 1 lakh in states like Punjab or Haryana. Tamil Nadu is one of the 17 states that fall in the less than Rs. 20,000 category in India (Government of India 2015:73). Despite the state having relatively higher productivity levels, growing costs of cultivation and fragmented land holdings have led to declining returns. Under such cost-price conditions, it is not surprising to find high levels of indebtedness. Seventy-five per cent of rural households are indebted, which is second only to Andhra Pradesh (Narayanamoorthy 2006). The difference in income and cost of cultivation is also much higher than the all-India average. In Tamil Nadu, marginal land holdings accounted for more than 77% of total landholdings and small land holdings for another 14.6% in 2011–12.<sup>7</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that farmers become ‘voluntary sellers’ or exit agriculture on adverse terms. Real capital expenditure made by the state as a percentage of net state domestic product from agriculture was lower than and just half of the all-India average for all the plan periods from 1993–94 to 2004–05 (Reddy and Mishra 2009b). In addition, there has been a steady decline of tank-based irrigation systems, on the one hand, and over-exploitation of ground water, on the other. One outcome of all these developments is the decline in the amount of land cultivated in the state.

This voluntary selling of land is reflected in the decline of gross-cropped area in the state from 73.8 lakh hectares in 1970–71 to 58.24 lakh hectares in 2008–09. The share of land devoted to non-agricultural uses has increased from 11.4% in 1970–71 to 16.6% in 2008–09 (Government of Tamil Nadu 2013). The amount of land classified under culturable waste, current fallows and other fallows cumulatively has increased from 21.36 lakh hectares in 1969–70 to 28.43 lakh hectares in 2008–09.<sup>8</sup> Conversion of agricultural lands into real estate is visible in several parts of the state. In fact, according to the Employment and Unemployment Survey undertaken by the National Sample Survey Organization, 3.9% of the state’s workforce was engaged in real estate activity, which is almost double the all-India figure of 2% (National Sample Survey Office 2012–2013, Table S35). This was the highest share among all south Indian and fast-growing states such as Gujarat and Maharashtra.

At the other end, the demand for agricultural land has been on the rise, as reflected in rising rural land prices. Chakravorty (2013), contending that the price levels of farmlands in states like Punjab are one of the highest in

the world but hardly reflecting the productivity within agriculture, argues that markets are activated largely by non-agricultural and non-rural actors. Rajshekar (2013), based on data gathered from seven states, highlights that rural land prices have risen 10 to 20-fold in recent years due to more attractive returns of speculative land markets vis-a-vis investments in stocks or gold.<sup>9</sup> These high returns, he argues, are due to spillover effects of urban price increases, which are again one of the highest in the world. Expansion of money supply due to liberalised norms of credit for real estate since the early 2000s is another reason for relatively high land prices (Chakravorty 2013). The state, moreover, provided cheap land to attract investments (ibid.).

Increased income inequalities too must be factored in to fully understand why the speculative land market has taken off as it has. The late 1990s and beyond witnessed growing inequalities of incomes in the country, which resulted in a class of wealthy individuals seeking to invest their savings in land, gold or financial instruments. According to the Credit Suisse's Global Wealth Databook 2014, the share of national wealth held by the richest 10% of the population increased from slightly above 65% in 2000 to close to 75% in 2014 (p. 33)<sup>10</sup>. Further, wealthy individuals in India tend to invest more in property than their counterparts in other countries.<sup>11</sup> This group of individuals has been increasing in number in recent years. Evidence of other relatively less wealthy actors investing in land, particularly farmland, is provided by Rajshekar (2013) who points to the spurt in farmland prices driven by urban demand, largely from individual buyers. National actors, such as real estate firms, small and not so small property developers, and high networth individuals seeking outlets for investing their savings tend to, therefore, play a significant role in rural land markets. Hall (2013) has written about a similar widespread phenomenon in parts of Africa.

Given the downward stickiness of land prices, investment in land is seen as a hedge against inflation and a means to reduce portfolio risks (Fairburn 2014). The political class too plays an important role in boosting demand and supply. They constitute a growing source of demand given their ability to invest large sums of black money in land.<sup>12</sup> Land sales, amidst a regime of such high prices and demand from elites, may exclude marginal and small farmers from buying lands for agriculture. In a context of an increasingly vulnerable agriculture, such conditions foster a land market regime that incentivises marginal and small farmers to sell their lands rather than consolidate their holdings. They may, however, gain through higher prices as sellers. 'Dispossession by neglect' highlights the possibility that farmers might sell land because the state has not adequately invested in agriculture, potentially forcing farmers to exit. Neglect can work either in terms of poor production infrastructure, leading to land degradation, or as

a result of the failure to bolster marketing infrastructure to address price volatility or realisation. It is necessary, therefore, to examine both processes and actors involved in buying and selling land. Doing so, we suggest nuances the distinction between state and market and coercive and voluntary transactions.<sup>13</sup> This builds on Hall's (2013) contention that it is problematic to draw rigid boundaries between the economic and the non-economic.

This is where the question of financialisation of land becomes important as it ties the state and market together well. The state, as Zoomers (2010) argues, creates demand for land through policy shifts such as liberalisation of land markets and the creation of transparent rules governing titling and transactions. Once the state relaxes the norms, other actors including private individuals and institutional investors such as large private firms in different sectors enter the picture. Mapping out the processes through which agricultural land is sold to speculative buyers requires attention. Cotula (2012) and Hilhorst et al. (2011) argue that it is necessary to move beyond examining the role of global actors and also undertake a disaggregated analysis of the role of national actors. Sud (2015) highlights the role of middlemen in land transactions and land acquisition. As she points out, central to the financialisation of the land market are the micro-dynamics of land sales that involve a wide set of actors at various levels including the local.

As important as examining the role of local actors is analysing the outcomes of land sales for different actors at the local level. Who gets dispossessed and who benefits from land sales? What happens in the post-sale local economy? We argue, building on Rajshekar's (2013) and Chakravorty's (2013) work, that a useful starting point to such analysis is the distinction between buyers with investment interests in agriculture and those that acquire land largely for speculative purposes. Fairbairn (2014) speaks of the role of high networth individuals in buying up land but does not analyse the implications of such processes. The implications of small-scale 'land grabs' by local and/or national level actors with little incentive to invest in agriculture are therefore yet to be understood. While there are bound to be context-specific variations in this regard, an empirical examination of such small-scale rural land sales is likely to throw up a few tendencies that may be valid within the larger national economy. This is especially true given the recent surge in such land sales all over the country.

#### **4. Study Area and Approach**

The questions and assertions made above are substantiated by evidence drawn from primary field research undertaken in a set of panchayats – Manamathy, Amoor, Kunnappattu and Paiyanur in Kancheepuram district, Tamil Nadu,

bordering metropolitan Chennai and off the Old Mahabalipuram Road, a corridor of industrial and service sector growth. We decided to locate our study in the periphery of Chennai as this area has been undergoing significant land use change as a result of the expansion of the city and the growth of the industrial and service sectors. Our main aim was to locate a set of panchayats in which agriculture continued to play a relatively important role but also in which land use change has taken place and shifting livelihood strategies are key.

Macro-level data for Kancheepuram substantiates the wider phenomena of land use change that we had viewed while selecting our specific case study area. Table 1 presents the nine-fold land use classification for Kancheepuram district as a whole at two points of time, namely 2000–01 and 2010–11. The most significant changes were the increase in current fallow from 10,054 ha (2.3%) to 32,802 ha (7.4%) of the total land area and the decline in net sown area from 150,036 ha (33.9%) to 118,635 ha (26.8%) of the total land area, respectively. These figures viewed collectively suggest that much less land was put under cultivation in 2010–11 as compared to 2000–01. There was also a slight increase in both land put to non-agricultural uses and culturable wastes. While the increase of current fallow is not necessarily indicative of land being taken out of agriculture, it is suggestive of increasing difficulties that farmers face in cultivating their land, something that might eventually result in the sale of their lands.

**Table 1:** *Land Use in Kancheepuram District between 2000–01 and 2010–11(ha)*

	2000–01	2010–11
Total geographical area	443,210 (100.0)	443,210 (100.00)
Forest	23,856 (5.4)	23,856 (5.4)
Barren and unculturable	10,948 (2.5)	10,948 (2.5)
Land put to non-agricultural uses	142,216 (32.1)	147,349 (33.3)
Culturable wastes	10,876 (2.5)	11,008 (2.5)
Permanent pastures	18,428 (4.2)	18,286 (4.1)
Miscellaneous tree crops	14,448 (3.3)	13,420 (3.0)
Current fallow	10,054 (2.3)	32,802 (7.4)
Other fallow	62,348 (14.1)	66,906 (15.1)
Net sown area	150,036 (33.9)	118,635 (26.8)
Area sown more than once	33,187 (7.5)	13,851 (3.1)
Gross sown area	183,223 (41.3)	132,486 (29.9)

*Source:* Data provided by the State Planning Commission, Government of Tamil Nadu.

Thiruporur block, in which all the four panchayats are located,

witnessed a similar phenomenon of land use change. The area under current fallows increased from 873 ha (2.1% of total land area) in 2002–03 to 2,751 ha (6.7%) in 2011–12. Other fallow also increased from 12.8% of total land area to 15.2%. Land put to non-agricultural use too marginally increased. It may be appropriate at this stage to state that rural land sales and land use change is governed by a set of regulations that vary across land types such as wet versus dry lands, and are often violated on the ground. While sales without land use change are relatively easy, land use change requires the owner to show that lands have been left fallow for at least five years and to get permission from the Department of Town and Country Planning (DTCP) for any construction projects apart from clearances from other departments. According to key informants, such procedures for land use change are seldom adhered to and consent obtained through corrupt practices.

The four panchayats have a combined population of 12,447 people (see Table 2). The Scheduled Caste (SC) population in Manamathy, Amoor and Paiyanur comprise well over 50% of the total population. In Kunnappattu, Vanniyars (a most backward caste) constitute the vast majority of the population while the SC population is small. The selected cluster of panchayats represents a mosaic of change from agriculture to non-agriculture. Agriculture is more important in Manamathy and Amoor than in Kunnappattu and Paiyanur. Also land sales appeared to be more significant in Kunnappattu and Paiyanur. In Kunnappattu, Amoor and, to a limited extent in Paiyanur, a private industrial park spread over roughly 600 hectares labelled by local residents as ‘Japan City’ and officially known as One Hub has commenced operations. Paiyanur is closer to the Old Mahabalipuram Road and has witnessed a more gradual change with lands being sold over a longer period of time to wealthy buyers from Chennai who have put up farm houses in the area.

**Table 2 : Population Details of Four Case Study Panchayats (2011)**

Panchayat	Total	SC	ST	Others
Manamathy	5,866	2,979 (51%)	122 (2%)	2765
Amoor	1,863	1,293 (69%)	-	570
Kunnappattu	1,170	130 (11%)	114 (10%)	926
Paiyanur	3,548	1,869 (53%)	-	1679
Total	12,447	6,271 (50%)	236 (2%)	5940

Source: Data provided by Block Office, Thiruporur.

We adopted a mixed method approach to study land sales and land use change. Apart from detailed interviews with key actors like panchayat representatives, real estate agents and other private individuals and government functionaries pertaining to the history of the area, changes that

had taken place in the state of agriculture and land market transactions, we conducted a detailed household survey that was aimed at understanding the importance (or not) of agriculture to livelihoods and whether and why households had sold land.

A total of 173 households (approximately 5% of total households) were interviewed in the four panchayats. We tried our best to interview a somewhat representative set of households in terms of caste composition but only those households who depended to a large extent on agriculture or agricultural labour. As our other main aim was to analyse land sales, we ensured that our sample households included a number of households who had sold land. Finally, our selection of households depended on practical factors such as availability and willingness to be interviewed. In that sense, the households interviewed were not fully representative of the wider population. The majority of interviewed households were either Vanniyar or Scheduled Caste. They were mostly marginal and small farmers, or landless.<sup>14</sup> Many marginal farmers had sold lands and settled in Thiruporur or Chennai and hence they could not be included in our sample.

### 5. Land Sales Driven by Neglect: A Differentiating Process

Most households we interviewed had either left their land fallow this current year (2014–15) or had cultivated far less land than they had 10 years ago (Table 3).

**Table 3 :** *Cultivated Land and Fallow Land (Acres): Present and 10 Years Ago*

Name of Village	Extent of Present Cultivated Wet Land	Extent of Wet Lands Cultivated 10 years Ago	Extent of Present Fallow Land	Extent of Fallow Land 10 years Ago
Amoor	2.7	14	38.6	16
Kunnappattu	11	34	63.1	10
Manamathy	3	47	36	58
Paiyanur	3	33	17.5	18
Total	19.7	128	155.2	102

*Note* : By wet lands, we refer to lands that are classified as those irrigated by tanks or canals.

*Source* : Field Survey, 2014.

‘There is no income from agriculture’ and ‘we have not had rains for the last five years, how can we do agriculture without water’ were standard responses to questions that we posed to farmers about their abandonment of agriculture. As the above quotes indicate, there are a number of reasons why less land is cultivated today than 10 years ago in our study region.

First, sources of irrigation have run dry. Open wells and borewells are either empty, or water is only available after drilling to significant depths. While some of the agricultural land is in the command area of tanks, these tanks have for the most part silted due to neglect by the departments in charge of maintenance.<sup>15</sup> There is a clear decline in collective action vis-à-vis maintenance of village tanks, which has resulted in high levels of siltation, broken and dysfunctional bunds and irrigation channels, and encroachments along such channels. There has also been extensive sand mining in tank beds. The decline in agriculture, apart from a result of policy neglect in the domain of irrigation, has also been due to the inability of farmers to consolidate land holdings into optimal-size holdings. The sample respondents in the villages, as mentioned above, were mostly marginal and small farmers with many of them holding not more than one or two acres of land. In the literature on the political economy of agrarian India, uneconomical size of agricultural land holdings was seen as an outcome of inter-locking of factor markets (Bardhan 1980) that prevented the development of lease and sales markets. However, in the study villages, despite sales markets being active, they have not served to render agriculture viable. Clearly the poor returns from agriculture on account of neglect of irrigation institutions have created a strong disincentive for farmers to continue to invest in agriculture. In addition, the rising land prices on account of demand from non-locals, which, in turn, can be attributed to policy shifts, prevents such consolidation of holdings through land markets.<sup>16</sup> Lease markets too are constrained by the fear among potential lessors that they may lose their land given the demand from the real estate sector. None of the households in our sample bought or leased additional lands over the last decade.

To explore the decline of agriculture further, we looked into the main sources of livelihoods for all the working people in the 173 households interviewed. Out of a total of 326 working people, only 13 people (4%) said that cultivation on their own land was their main source of livelihood. This can be indicative of two possibilities. First, returns from agriculture have declined in this area. Second, there has been a growing diversification of livelihoods among members of the household. On the other hand, 137 (42.0%) people indicated that agricultural labour was their main source of livelihood. This suggests that people either work on others' farms within the village or in neighbouring villages. It is worth noting that agricultural labour is more prominent in Manamathy than in the other panchayats. This can be explained by the fact that Manamathy is a village where land sales have not taken place to the same extent as in the other villages because agriculture is still seen to have potential because of the prominence of tank-irrigated wet lands. The other main sources of employment were services

that accounted for 31.9%, construction work 10.4% and industrial work 4.3%. This process of proletarianisation of the peasantry is clearly therefore not a 'natural' process of capitalist development but a process driven by macro policy shifts at the national level, on the one hand, and the neglect of irrigation institutions that have undermined the viability of agriculture in the region, on the other.

Of the sampled households, 42.8% sold at least parts of their land in the recent past. Most of these sales took place from 2004 onwards. According to key informants, till 2004–05, there were hardly any market transactions with outsiders and, in fact, there were only a few sale transactions as a whole. What did then exist to some extent was a lease market. Equally important, those who sold land did so before the boom in land prices took place. Most sales occurred between 2004 and 2009. Land was sold at prices ranging from approximately Rs. 9,000 a cent to Rs. 16,000 a cent.<sup>17</sup> At present, land in the same area is being sold at Rs. 1 lakh per cent. Informants and brokers in Paiyanur even cite prices of nearly Rs. 5 lakhs per cent for lands close to the Old Mahabalipuram Road. In villages other than Paiyanur, the bulk of the sales also took place between 2004 and 2009, a period when declining returns in agriculture and increased non-agriculture employment were accompanied by increased land prices. Land prices would escalate even further between 2009 and 2014.

We observed three differences between farmers with marginal and small-medium sized holdings. While marginal farmers sold their entire holdings except homesteads and more often in the first phase, the relatively better off farmers often sold only a portion of their lands and managed to wait for better prices. Some of the marginal farmers whom we could not speak to, but for whom we gathered information from key informants, had even sold homestead land and moved out of the locality. Finally, among sections of small farmers and generally also most farmers with more than 5 acres of land holdings, proceeds from land sales have been reinvested in land elsewhere. Such re-investments were absent in the case of those with two or fewer acres of land. Thus, land markets in these villages appear to have led to greater differentiation among sellers. This is clearly a manifestation of differences in bargaining power between the two sets of farmers. Distress induced diversification into informal employment in the non-farm sector has been a feature of marginal farmer households since the late 1990s. Ill health, marrying off daughters and fee payments for higher education (driven by large-scale entry of private players into this sector since the 1990s) have all led to farmers selling their lands. Less burdened by such immediate consumption requirements, other farmers have waited longer to sell and often have been able to bargain for better prices. Some of the interviewees delayed



selling land for more than a year while others continue to wait in the hope of even better prices. A couple of medium farmers (holding between 2 and 4 hectares) who had refused to part with their lands<sup>18</sup> were offered land parcels in another part of the village in addition to money by the buyer. A farmer with medium-sized holdings bought lands from neighbouring marginal farmers and then sold them as a consolidated holding to a non-local buyer. A few of the larger farmers (holding more than 4 hectares) and/or locally powerful actors have also become 'middlemen' (Sud 2014), thus gaining from the process of land sales.

## **6. Speculation, Coercion and Land Use Change**

The entry of non-local buyers started around 2004 in at least three of the villages. Paiyanur, as mentioned above, is situated along the Old Mahabalipuram Road and as a result has seen land transactions for a relatively longer period. Data on land transactions in three of the panchayats available with the registration department support this claim. Till 2002–03, there were no transactions except in Paiyanur. Since then, a steady increase in the number of transactions is visible. Importantly, none of the respondents in the sample panchayats had bought land in any of the four study areas, indicating that land market dynamism has essentially emanated from external buyers. While nearly 1,500 acres of land have been sold in two of the panchayats towards the setting up of a private 'industrial township', smaller plots of land have also been sold to other individuals and institutions. Few sellers knew who they sold their lands to, except that they were a 'Chennai party'. According to key informants and middle level brokers, Chennai buyers invested in lands in anticipation of appreciation of prices. Although it was difficult to triangulate the information provided by the brokers, they are likely to be suggestive of actual trends. Real estate brokers in Chennai city too seconded the information given by local brokers.

In Paiyanur, about 200 acres have allegedly been bought by *benami* holders for a leading political family in the state, with its members also rumoured to have acquired an additional 60 acres in nearby villages such as Karanai and Sirudhavur. In fact, a farm house owned by family members of a close associate of the current Chief Minister in Sirudhavur has been in the midst of a controversy for some time now.<sup>19</sup> It has been alleged that a portion of the lands on which the bungalow was built belongs to SCs. Lands allocated to SCs by the government are not meant to be alienated even in 'voluntary' exchanges.<sup>20</sup> The same buyer is rumoured to own 25 acres in Paiyanur as well. A number of other land transactions have taken place in Paiyanur. Twenty acres of land have been developed into real estate property by a builder called Green Peace, although no construction activity

has taken place yet. About 90 acres of public lands have been distributed by the government of Tamil Nadu as housing plots for members of the Tamil Nadu Film Employees Federation.<sup>21</sup> A leading multi-speciality hospital and a medical college have acquired 350 acres of land, out of which about 60 acres are within the village boundaries. A retired district collector allegedly holds 70 acres of land. Similarly, stories circulate of a few film personalities having bought about 15 acres and a subsidiary of a leading business group acquiring 50 acres of land.

Importantly, a bulk of the lands acquired through the market has been left fenced and fallow. Apart from the fact that fencing cuts off access to those traditionally dependent on such lands for grazing, lands acquired through the market have been left unused, suggesting that speculative motives play a major part in land deals. The rise of internet-enabled land commerce has allowed brokers to reach out to distant buyers, including those residing outside the country. In a couple of cases, buyers have invested in growing fruit trees. The construction of the 'Japan city', now called as 'One World Hub', is seen as the project that is likely to drive up land values in the area. Even in the case of 'Japan City', the sellers did not interact directly with the final buyers of the land. Lands were acquired on behalf of 'Japan City' by a real estate developer called NCC (name changed). The firm itself had deployed a team headed by a lawyer not directly employed with the firm. The lawyer, according to local informants, has powerful links to the two main political parties in the state, and was the face of the buyer. Negotiations between NCC and locals always had a political tone to them. In fact, when one of the sellers refused to part with his land, he was allegedly threatened. Selvam (name changed) owned about 4 acres of land that the industrial park wanted to acquire. Although he did not want to sell it, he told us that high-ranking police officials threatened to harm his family if he did not. When he still refused to sell, a false case was foisted on him. Such coercive strategies were finally supplemented with negotiations and Selvam getting a compensation of Rs. 25,000 per cent when the going rate was Rs. 22,000. He also received 4 acres of compensatory land nearby. In other words, underlying such a 'positive' market outcome were a set of processes that call into question the distinction between the state and the market, between voluntary and coerced transactions. Selvam continues to worry that the company (that acquired his property) might not ensure the flow of water to his new lands through the channel that passes adjacent to the firm. Though the Ministry of Environment and Forests' (MoEF) clearance letter stipulates that the park's construction and functioning should in no way obstruct the natural flow through the canals, Selvam believes that the firm may create trouble for him in the future. That such coercive tactics are increasingly

becoming part of land deals in the region was recently highlighted when a Senior Citizens Group of Besant Nagar (a posh locality in southern Chennai) convened a meeting to discuss how best to deal with threats being made to the elderly to grab their property.<sup>22</sup> While such overt coercive tactics are rare, many respondents who sold lands did state that their 'willingness' was conditioned partly by a perceived fear that the government may take over their lands if they did not sell to the powerful buyer.

### **7. Dispossession and Elements of the Emerging Post-Land Sale Local Economy**

Expenditure on education, health and weddings appear to be the other main reasons for the distress sale of lands. Such expenses, especially educational expenses, in relation to household income have increased over the last decade or so because of a growing privatisation of education, particularly higher education in the state. Variations, of course, exist across farm-holding sizes in terms of such expenditure. While the less endowed invest in polytechnic education, those who managed to get better prices and sold larger plots tend to prefer and importantly afford more expensive engineering college seats.

Increased land sales and the overall decline in agriculture more generally have meant that households have had to search for other forms of employment. There are striking parallels in our case study villages with what Levien (2012) observed in the case of farmers dispossessed of their lands due to the Mahindra SEZ near Jaipur, Rajasthan (2012). Though households have been diversifying their livelihood options by entering into the urban economy of Chennai even before land sales, the bulk of current post-sales employment options are highly insecure. Most male members are employed as construction workers, painters, plumbers, electricians, toll booth operators, sculptors, fence constructors (an outcome of land sales) and taxi and auto-rickshaw drivers. Women are mostly employed in housekeeping in educational institutions, hospitals and software parks not too far from their villages, and to a limited extent in unskilled jobs in pharmaceutical firms located nearby. Importantly, most of the employment opportunities are subject to age-based barriers; no one above the age of 45 we interviewed managed to get service sector jobs other than that of a security guard. None of these jobs, moreover, are protected in any sense and are either of a casual nature as in the case of construction jobs or temporary and contractual as in the case of drivers or housekeeping staff. Prior to land sales, most households could afford to sustain their households through complementary agricultural incomes, however meagre. Dispossession through land sales, especially among the marginal farming households, means that such possibilities cease to exist. Dispossession included a certain amount of proletarianisation of the peasantry but more generally differentiation and new patterns of

inequality. The famed social security net in the state may partially cushion the vulnerabilities emanating from dispossession and insecure employment.

In addition to precarious wage employment in the non-farm economy, rent-based income-earning activities have been a feature of the post-land sales landscape. Several youth have worked as real estate brokers but most have stopped with the recent decline in land sales. Brokers attribute declining lands sales to increased guideline values, which may dampen the land market, but others point to the already high rates and decline in demand at such price levels. A few men from relatively better off households and with access to bureaucratic and political party networks, however, continue to engage in real estate activity. Sellers with relatively more land tend to buy either agricultural lands in interior villages in the district or lands in Thiruporur town where they have built small tenements for rent. They do not cultivate their agricultural lands but instead lease them out. Incomes from purchase of equipment or vehicles that can be rented out have also become more common. This includes digging equipment for construction work, known in local parlance as JCBs, harvesters, tractors and transport vehicles like cars and vans. Money lending is also common whereas some of the older farmers draw on interest income from sales proceeds deposited in banks.

## **8. Conclusions**

Pushed by declining returns in agriculture, rural households have sought to diversify into employment in the urban economy and by undertaking non-agricultural work such as construction in the nearby villages and towns. This has further contributed to risks within the agricultural sector, which have been partially offset through reliance on machines for several operations such as transplanting and harvesting. However, several households continue to report that they have left lands fallow at present. Simultaneously, driven by demand for cheaper land and helped by policies such as provisioning of credit for housing and real estate development, there has been a growing land sales market in the region. The entry of non-local actors and non-agricultural demand for land has meant that the value of land is determined more by location than by its productivity within the domain of agriculture.

At present, while the small and marginal farmers produce for the market, policy shift-induced crises in commercial agriculture creates conditions for a new set of processes of dispossession that work through market mechanisms rather than through direct state interventions. Moreover, a bulk of the lands sold continues to remain fallow. Buyers tend to fence off lands and close off pathways for movement of machines and cattle for currently cultivating farmers. Gains from land sales are also skewed with marginal farmers benefiting the least because large real estate firms are

better placed to consolidate smaller holdings into large land parcels, get legal permission for conversion of land from agriculture to non-agricultural use and hence sell off the acquired land at a much higher margin compared to what the original sellers of the land obtained. Finally, we have tried to show that in the absence of productive investments in the lands sold thus far, income-earning opportunities in the study area tend to assume a rentier character.

The fact that most lands have been transferred from local farmers to non-local actors is clearly suggestive of a process of land grabbing accomplished primarily through ‘voluntary’ sales. Further, there are strong overlaps between our observations on elements of the post-sale economy and that mapped by Levien (2012) in his study of the impacts of Mahindra World City, Jaipur. Processes of differentiation between larger and marginal land holders, a higher degree of dispossession among marginal farmers, differential access to higher education and possibly the non-agricultural economy in terms of employment and emergence of livelihoods through rentier activities are common to both landscapes. The overlaps suggest that market-based processes of land grab may generate outcomes similar to outcomes produced by acquisition of land through coercive mechanisms. Further, we have highlighted how apart from policy shifts generating incentives for ‘voluntary’ sales, actors are also forced into sales through illegal coercion blurring the boundaries between forced and voluntary transfers of land. By pointing to the fluidity of boundaries between the coercive and the voluntary and market-led and state-enforced mechanisms of land grab, we have argued a case for incorporating seemingly ‘market’-led processes of dispossession within the ambit of ABD or the ‘regimes of dispossession’ suggested by Levien (2015). Finally, our paper strengthens calls to pay attention to ‘below the radar’ processes of land grab (Hilhorst et al. 2011) that have generally been ignored in the literature.

### Notes

- 1 By ‘financialisation of land’, we refer to the process of land being bought more for its possible appreciation of value than for its value generated in production. We follow Fairbairn (2014) in this regard who points out that land generates values both through its productive use and as a store of value through passive appreciation. The two processes of value generation are, however, intertwined as its value appreciation over time can happen only if there is a perceived possibility of increase in its productive value.
- 2 For literature on land grabs, see *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 37(2), 38(2), 39 (3–4) and *Third World Quarterly* 34(9).
- 3 By ‘land grab’, we refer to the ‘capturing of power to control land and other associated resources like water, minerals or forests, in order to control the

benefits of its use' (<https://www.tni.org/en/publication/the-global-land-grab#whatislandgrabbing>; accessed 30 April 2016).

- 4 Others scholars such as Borras and Franco (2012) and Fairbairn (2014) too have highlighted the important role the state plays in land grabs.
- 5 Recent efforts by the Maharashtra government to acquire land through negotiation with sellers rather than through use of the LARR 2013 are a case in point ([http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/maharashtra-govt-decides-to-acquire-land-through-negotiations-115051300027\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/maharashtra-govt-decides-to-acquire-land-through-negotiations-115051300027_1.html); accessed on 18 February 2016). Also see [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-09-12/news/66465703\\_1\\_land-acquisition-law-land-pooling-excess-land](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-09-12/news/66465703_1_land-acquisition-law-land-pooling-excess-land) (accessed on 18 February 2016) for this emphasis on market-based purchases.
- 6 [http://www.saiindia.gov.in/english/home/Our\\_Products/Audit\\_Report/Government\\_Wise/union\\_audit/recent\\_reports/union\\_performance/2014/INDT/Report\\_21/Chap\\_4.pdf](http://www.saiindia.gov.in/english/home/Our_Products/Audit_Report/Government_Wise/union_audit/recent_reports/union_performance/2014/INDT/Report_21/Chap_4.pdf) (accessed on 7 December 2015).
- 7 Statistical Handbook of Tamil Nadu, 2013.
- 8 <http://www.tn.gov.in/dear/4.%20Agriculture.pdf> (accessed on 7 April 2013).
- 9 [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-11-12/news/43981081\\_1\\_farmland-prices-rs-10-lakh-land-acquisition](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-11-12/news/43981081_1_farmland-prices-rs-10-lakh-land-acquisition) (accessed on 18 September 2014).
- 10 [http://economics.uwo.ca/people/davies\\_docs/credit-suisse-global-wealth-report-2014.pdf](http://economics.uwo.ca/people/davies_docs/credit-suisse-global-wealth-report-2014.pdf) (accessed on 4 May 2016).
- 11 'India's ultra rich top the world in property investment, Times of India, 10 March 2015, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/Indias-ultra-rich-top-the-world-in-property-investment/articleshow/46511034.cms> (accessed on 4 May 2016).
- 12 A recent expose of how political actors invest unaccounted money in real estate and how they seek rents through promoting SEZs or industrial parks can be found in (Jacob 2011).
- 13 If the state is not adequately supportive of farmers because it does not ensure the maintenance of irrigation systems or adequately build up marketing infrastructure, farmers have little option but to sell land and/or seek other more gainful employment. This is a 'voluntary' decision but in a sense forced upon farmers.
- 14 According to Agricultural Census categories, marginal farmers are those who have less than 1 hectare (2.47 acres) of land and small farmers between 1 and 2 hectares of land. While our secondary data is mostly given in terms

of hectares, our primary data refers to acres as farmers usually report landholdings in terms of cents and acres.

- 15 The factors leading to decline in tank based irrigation has been discussed at length. See Janakarajan (1993) for more details.
- 16 Most city-dwellers who invest in land on the OMR do so as an additional investment, i.e. they mostly do not build houses or move there. In that sense, such investments cannot be construed of as investments in housing.
- 17 A cent is one-hundredth of an acre.
- 18 One of them represents the case of coercive sale that we discuss later.
- 19 <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/siruthavur-land-grabbing-panel-finds-sasikalas-kin-guilty/article767218.ece> (accessed on 17 November 2015).
- 20 These lands were not panchami lands, but lands distributed to SCs (Dalits) in 1967 by the state government.
- 21 ‘HUDCO to give loan for building houses for film fraternity, Chennai, 8 January 2011, <http://news.webindia123.com/news/articles/India/20110109/1663702.html> (accessed on 16 November 2015).
- 22 <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/plan-to-combat-landgrabbing-threat-to-elderly/article8213675.ece> (accessed on 15 March 2016).

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