

Book Review

Abhijit Guha. *Encountering Land Grab: An Ethnographic Journey*. New Delhi: Manohar (2022). ISBN 978-03-90729-38-8. Pages 186. Hard Bound: 1195

When I was mounting on research on everyday politics and resource allocation in West Bengal, I came across a series of publications by Abhijit Guha especially in *Economic and Political Weekly*. Apart from his methodological meticulousness, one can learn a lot from the formulation of far-reaching arguments from a specific field site which Guha has shown in the book. Hence, one can comprehend the fact that it was not until the popular movements in Singur and Nandigram that attracted attention of the Kolkata-based intellectuals, that land was seen as a really serious issue in West Bengal politics. Peasant resistance, at rather 'unknown' villages was largely overlooked. His continuous work on land-related issues have generated a literature on several aspects of land acquisition ranging from issues of compensation and, public sentiment to political transformation and forced displacement. While his first monograph (2017) *Land, Law and Left* speaks more generally of the 'disempowerment' of the 'weak' peasants facing powerful 'globalisation', writing at par with the existing literature and ends with a list of 'recommendations' for better handling of the issue, Guha nevertheless acknowledged the weapon of social networking and global attention through movements like Singur and Nandigram. With this new book on the shelf, Guha more strongly takes a critical political position and uses the word 'grab' – and not the more polite and polished word 'acquisition.' The issue of land immediately becomes a subject of political manipulation and critical analysis. Guha successfully walks through a rather difficult terrain of ethnography. His ethnography enables him to gain a deeper and richer experience around land grab. *Encountering Land Grab* is an effective tale of Guha's rich and deep probe into the issue. The eight chapters of the book unearth multi-layered and multifaceted dimensions of 'land grab' through ethnography. An engaged foreword by Michael M. Cernea adds a fantastic overview of the issue at large and sets the stage for the readers to experience his journey.

The book begins with a personal touch almost like an auto-ethnography, Guha speaks about his rather incidental and much fortunate accidental interface with the issue. Although it

was not truly a tabula rasa moment in the mid-1990s when the classical anthropological tradition was not quite over that attempted to describe 'a people', and a new generation of anthropologists with all sorts of experiments were slowly unfurling themselves, a vertical journey on a single and multi-layered issue is hard to find in existing literature even today. The book gives an overview of the issue, and how it has been dealt with in disciplines like economics, geography, history and political science and even by the legal experts. Guha, talks on them, uses and criticises them and effectively shows how his research becomes a journey from the village to the Parliament. His methodology remains the same and yet unique, his role kept shifting like an identity continuum between a conscious self, a researcher, an activist, a bystander and sometimes a lonely spectator. He writes, "My journey... began from the villages in which the land acquisition took place... My trip continued through the various domains, which stood in some kind of relationship with the village and families which were affected by land acquisition..." (p.39). Like a long-lost friend, Guha takes us through the loss, designing of the loss (policy), designers of the loss (policy makers and parliamentarians) and rather dry documentation of the loss (Land acquisition department of Medinipur to the proceedings of the Assembly). While he identifies government reports and recommendations as 'artefacts' reflected in terms of policies and decisions, his descriptive account of the village rapidly transforms into interpretation. An interpretation that links acquisition, land reform, pro-peasant politics, rapidly changing political-economy of the country and policy paradoxes. Though, he is quite explicit at the fag-end of his *Introduction* stating that he is addressing a '*policy failure* of a pro-peasant government', his analysis is much more nuanced and talks about both pros and cons of land grab. The Chapter before the concluding one perhaps justifies the paradox of 'why land?' and simultaneously 'why not land?'

Each of the chapters offers multi-dimensionality of the issue and as he moves 'vertically' through 'multiple sites' a perspective of close and micro to distant and macro becomes apparent. For example, in 'the villages' his encounter with rather incapable-to-resist people portrays peasants facing global forces – taking a cue from his previous monograph. His encounter to the officials reveals 'bureaucratic inefficiency' and the changing political discourse of the left. However, this encounter speaks little about the systemic or 'structural violence' through bureaucracy that has a rich literature and ethnographic details by scholars like Akhil Gupta (2012), which of course has much more to offer to understand the compulsions and contested dimensions within bureaucracy that is beyond the rubric of 'bureaucratic inefficiency. Guha, however, made a significant methodological argument for future ethnographers when he claims that land acquisition files are not only the rich sources of information, but should be seen

as cultural artefacts *crafted* and *manipulated* by human beings to meet their purposes. He notes, “It was interesting to observe how the concerned officials of the Land Acquisition Department *overruled all the objections*, the officials, however, *recognised the severity and magnitude* of the acquisition” (p. 115 emphasis added). As the book takes us further, the reader can see that Guha was working meticulously in the Assembly library as the library itself becomes his site of ethnography. Finally, he utilises a rare opportunity of having a talk with the politicians at the national level. With his meticulous reading of the Assembly proceedings and documents he unravels the dialectics of debate and decisions related to land within administrative proceedings and with dry sarcasm he titles this chapter as “clever dialogues of the politicians.” He unearths the naked truth of the 'debates' where the issues like increasing impoverishment of the displaced population, and unjust allotment of the benefits are never brought upon by people belonging to any political party let alone seriously considering the same. Facing 20 Parliamentarians in 2008 and giving his expert opinion makes Guha transform his identity as being an ethnographic describer to an ethnographic activist. His primary recommendation was, as he writes, “I emphasised the recognition of local self-government, while getting consent of the affected people for land acquisition, protection of food security at the household level and avoidance of agricultural land from the scope of land acquisition for private profit-making industries” (p. 139). What the Deputy Chairman of the standing committee stated was perhaps a good summary of the whole situation, that Guha has raised certain 'basic issues and philosophy' but land expropriation cannot be stopped, “since private companies were already purchasing huge chunks of land in the rural areas of the country...it was clear... standing committee might not be interested in increasing the role of local governments, household-level food security and all other local issues...” (pp. 139-140).

Encountering Land Grab therefore is a meticulous description of an ethnographers' decades-long journey from the field site to the policy-making site. Anyone interested in landgrab, peasant resistance, impacts of land acquisition, understanding of the complexity of the issue at bureaucratic, policy-making and field level should read this account. The book doesn't say any conclusive words, nor does it give a list of recommendations which Guha's previous book meticulously undertook. No book can say a final word on anything, let alone an ethnographic one that deals with a perennial and extremely dynamic issue, however, Guha's *Encounter* would be remembered for its methodological uniqueness of studying the interchanging sites and his flexible movement vertically and horizontally in the broad spectrum of the field of land and land grab. The book exemplifies the ways in which one can use

ethnographic field level narratives, policy dynamics and assembly discourses. Guha shows the impossibility to grasp 'reality' and while one ends reading this piece, one is already questioning the bewildering nature of reality, understanding of reality, multiplicity of the actors and agencies and the historical forces like the expansion of profit driven market capital which are impossible to ignore and yet difficult to accept and digest.

REFERENCES

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- Gupta, Akhil 2012. *The Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence and Poverty in India*. Hyderabad, Orient Blackswan.

One can see Abhijit Guha's publications at *EPW* here: <https://www.epw.in/author/abhijit-guha>

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