

## I. Introduction

As conflict over dams shaped the politics of India's state-led development, so battles over Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are defining the politics of its neoliberal era. SEZs are privately-run political entities carved out from the sovereign territory of a country in order to allow exceptionally "free market" policies to function (Ong 2006).<sup>1</sup> Inspired by the Chinese SEZ model, the Indian government has in recent years promoted the rapid establishment of hundreds of such zones across the country, hoping to catalyze exports, industrial growth, and infrastructural development. Yet, in hundreds of villages nationwide, farmers have militantly resisted this latest element of India's economic liberalization.

What has proven to be most controversial about these zones is not what will happen inside their borders, but rather the acquisition of agricultural land that is necessary to establish them. Farmers across India have opposed the Indian state's use of *eminent domain* to seize their property and transfer it to private companies for SEZs. The breadth and tenacity of this resistance has led many observers to worry that farmers might become the largest obstacle to India's industrialization.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that the state's forcible expropriation of farmers' land remains the central point of contention for SEZs, as it was for large dams, attests to the continued centrality of the "agrarian question" to the political economy of development in India. Dams and SEZs exemplify modernization schemes that require large-scale displacement of agrarian populations. Because both rely on extra-economic coercion to make resources available for capital accumulation, dams and SEZs can be characterized as what Marx (1976) called "primitive accumulation," or what David Harvey (2003) has called "accumulation by dispossession."<sup>3</sup> I define primitive accumulation as the use of extra-economic power to wrest productive resources from non- or minimally capitalist agrarian producers, and I argue that it is central to India's modernization project, from the developmental state to neoliberalism.

My dissertation, however, will analyze the *differences* in primitive accumulation in India between

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<sup>1</sup> These policies include tariff liberalization, unrestricted foreign investment, income tax holidays, the "flexibilization" of labor laws, streamlined bureaucracy, and administrative rather than representative government.

<sup>2</sup> To take just a few recent titles of articles in the international press: "India grapples with how to convert its farmland into factories." *The New York Times*, September 17, 2008; "India's biggest industrial barrier? Farmers." *Globe and Mail*, July 10, 2008; "India's Divisive Economic Zones." *BBC*, September 24, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> I take these two terms to be synonymous. For the purpose of clarity, I will use primitive accumulation here.

state-led development and neoliberalism. I consider large dams and SEZs the emblematic forms of primitive accumulation under these respective political economic models. My research asks: *what is distinct about the character, distributional consequences, and politics of primitive accumulation under neoliberalism compared with state-led development?* How have these distinct political economies shaped the forms and consequences of dispossession? And, how do these political economies shape the politics of primitive accumulation? Protests against land expropriation have been more intense and successful in the neoliberal era than under state-led development. Why is consent for the developmental model embodied by SEZs more fragile than that for dams? The growing social science literature on accumulation by dispossession (e.g. Harvey 2003; RETORT 2005; Hart 2006; Glassman 2006) has yet to grapple with these shifts in the political economy of dispossession.

To understand the changes in primitive accumulation from state-led development to neoliberalism in India, my dissertation research will compare the Sardar Sarovar (Narmada) Dam in Madhya Pradesh to an SEZ in Uttar Pradesh. I will test three claims regarding the character, distributional consequences, and politics of primitive accumulation: 1) Compared to dams, primitive accumulation for SEZs is more speculative than productive and creates “jobless” growth; 2) SEZs enclave development, intensifying rural inhabitants’ marginality and forsaking the Nehruvian ambition of modernizing the countryside. This enclavization, combined with the speculative character of SEZs, produces what I call “dispossession without development.” 3) As a result, India is struggling to produce consent for SEZs, resulting in more widespread and successful resistance to SEZs than was the case for large dams.

My research, for which the Human Rights Fellowship allowed me to conduct pre-dissertation fieldwork, will focus on ethnography and surveys of an SEZ and its surrounding areas in the state of Uttar Pradesh. I will compare these findings with existing scholarship on the Narmada and other large dams in India (e.g. Baviskar 1995; Singh 1997; Khagram 2004), combined with my own participant observation and interviews in and around the Narmada Valley. I will also use statistical data to make general claims about the political economies of dams and SEZs. Comparing primitive accumulation for dams and SEZs will illuminate what is distinct about the political economy of dispossession, and the increasingly

contentious politics it is generating, under India's "new economy." After providing context, I will describe the preliminary research that the Human Rights Center Fellowship allowed me to conduct in Summer 2008 with India's National Alliance of People's Movements.

## II. Context

Large dams, which Nehru called "the temples of modern India" (Khagram 2004), embodied India's post-independence ambitions of transforming the countryside to promote modern agriculture and industrialization. From 1951 to 1982, the Indian government constructed 882 large dams to increase irrigation, generate electricity, and control floods (Khagram 2004: 37). In classic "high modernist" (Scott 1998) fashion, the Nehruvian state envisioned that through these grand schemes of social and environmental engineering, benevolent state authority could modernize the nation (Chatterjee 1986).

By the late 1980s, the failures of the Nehruvian developmental project, combined with a capitalist political offensive, pushed India towards more market-oriented economic policies (Kohli 1989; Chibber 2003). Under the "New Economic Policies" (NEP), the state was to transition from agent of social and economic transformation to facilitator of private capital accumulation. Yet, India's level of poverty and its strong socialist tradition made this transition difficult; no sizeable electoral constituency supported abandoning social protection in favor of private competition (Kohli 1989). The NEP inflamed political opposition, slowing down India's economic reforms compared to other countries (Kohli 1989; Sachs et. al. 1999; Ahluwalia 2004). Given the political infeasibility of comprehensive liberalization, India sought a compromise in Chinese-style enclaves of liberalized capital accumulation. China's SEZ model has given the Indian government a way to conduct politically-insulated experiments with extreme liberalization.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the 531 approved SEZs in India are becoming an archipelago of neoliberal laboratories whose social and economic consequences have yet to be studied.

My dissertation seeks to understand the political economy of land dispossession for these neoliberal laboratories. It also seeks to put such dispossession in a historical perspective by comparing it with land dispossession for large dams. My background argument is that the extra-economic

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<sup>4</sup> This liberalization involves removing perceived impediments to growth such "labor inflexibility," steep tariffs, high income taxes, bureaucratic red tape, and poor infrastructure (Sachs et. al. 1999; Ahluwalia 2004).

expropriation of resources from agrarian populations (primitive accumulation) has been and continues to be a major component of accumulation under both state developmentalism and neoliberalism. Both liberal economists and conventional Marxists have failed to acknowledge this centrality of extra-economic expropriation to the political economy of development. This omission has been reflected in scholars' inability to anticipate or theorize the importance of political struggles over land (rather than labor) under neoliberalism in India. I argue that the lens of primitive accumulation allows us to better understand the consequences of state-led development and neoliberalism for the 70% of Indians living in rural areas.

### **III. My Work with NAPM**

The Human Rights Center Fellowship allowed me to travel to India and conduct research in collaboration with the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM). NAPM is India's largest and most sustained attempt to organize India's non-party, left "people's movements" into a national level political force against neoliberal globalization. Its constituent movements are comprised of peasants, indigenous communities, fisherpeople, slumdweller, Dalits, and other marginalized and exploited communities who have joined forces against the dislocations of neoliberal globalization. Beneath all their diversity, what most of these movements hold in common is displacement from homes, fields, forests, fisheries, water sources, and means of livelihood by dams, mining projects, slum demolitions, Coca Cola factories, urban renewal schemes, Special Economic Zones, steel plants, forest enclosures, new industrial technologies, and various other forms of dislocation and dispossession which have intensified in the neoliberal era. This list shows the predominance of displacement from land, or natural resources more broadly. Whether it is against slum demolitions that turn people's homes and communities into real estate developments, or against private corporations appropriating people's forests, fields, or water, fighting for community control over land and natural resources is central to NAPM's agenda. NAPM seeks, in the words of its founding document, to create, "A people's democracy

based on people's control over resources," in which, "the basic principle will be that the first claim on the use of resources will be with regard to the satisfaction of basic needs and the protection of livelihood" (NAPM 1996). Thus, NAPM calls for a radical decommodification of land and the re-embedding of natural resources within the direct democratic control of communities.

It was thus natural that with the emergence of SEZs in the past 5 years, NAPM would take a leading role in opposing them. NAPM's leaders have traveled across the country, supporting and trying to unite the scattered resistances of local communities to the expropriation of their lands and resources for these zones. Because I had worked with NAPM leaders previously, having volunteered with the large anti-dam movement in the Narmada Valley and conducting my MA research on NAPM itself, I contacted them to propose undertaking some joint research on SEZs. They indicated it would be useful for me to write some case studies and begin to research the political economy behind these projects. So, I travelled first to Mumbai and consulted with NAPM leaders on which sites I should visit and write about. They provided me with contacts of activists organizing against SEZs in various parts of the country, and I tried to visit as many as I could. The result was that I visited the sites of 6 SEZs in three states (Maharashtra, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh). I also visited the site of a large mining project in Jharkhand and met with a movement resisting a water privatization scheme in Chattisgarh to get some broader context on how dispossession is changing under neoliberalism across different sectors. I will present just some brief summaries and the general conclusions of these visits.

My first stop was Gorai, Maharashtra, a fishing village just North of Mumbai. A boat trip across wetlands and creek brought me from the congested and sprawling Mumbai to a collection of fishing and farming villages on this small island. Here, a private Indian company called the SL Group had proposed to turn 10 villages (totaling 5,700 ha.) into a Tourism SEZ. According to their plan, the Indian government would forcibly acquire almost all the villages on the island, pay compensation to the villagers, and build luxury hotels, resorts, and water and theme parks. The first segment of the project,

comprising two villages, had received in-principle approval from the government. Approximately 150,000 people would be displaced. Understandably, the local villagers saw no benefit to themselves from this proposition and had militantly dug in their heels in opposition. The village was tense and I was told I had to walk around accompanied so no one would mistake my intentions. I met leaders of the local fishing cooperatives and talked to villagers who insisted that they made a good living through fishing (though not as good with recent increase in pollution) and farming, and did not want to go anywhere. There was already some locally owned, small-scale tourism in the villages that brought them some additional economic activity. They certainly didn't stand to gain from outside developers coming in, expropriating their land and waterfront, and profiting immensely from real estate speculation. They vowed to fight the project to the end, and I attended one of their protests in Mumbai.

After Gorai, I travelled to three SEZs on the highway connecting Mumbai and Pune, Maharashtra's second most important city. As both cities are expanding rapidly towards each other, this corridor is prime real estate for new housing subdivisions, second homes, and commercial development, as well as industrial uses given its location and good quality road. The SEZs included a multi-purpose zone proposed by the car giant Mahindra in Kandla, a Videocon zone in Vagoli, and a Bharat Forge zone in Pabal, a remote part of Pune district. All of these projects sought to expropriate vast amounts of farmland from villages for various forms of "industrial use." However, the vast amount of land proposed for these sites (which was totally out of proportion to any possible industrial use), combined with the growing real estate interests in the corridor, lead many villagers and this researcher to believe that the prime interest was real estate speculation. The villages near Kandla were set in a beautiful valley, near the tourist hill station of Lanavla, and its abutting hills contained an ancient Hindu temple popular among middle-class Indian tourists. Nearby several luxury second-home developments had sprung up, offering a cool climate getaway for the wealthy of Mumbai and Pune. The farmers I spoke with saw absolutely no benefit to the project for themselves, as they doubted they would get jobs and insisted that they would become paupers without land. They were resisting the expropriation of their lands vehemently. The situation was much the same in the other sites along the highway. Though they were in the preliminary

proposal stage (they were granted in principle approval subsequent to my visit), I attended meetings in surrounding villages in which very strong opposition was fairly unanimously expressed.

I next traveled north to Delhi and its perimeters where I visited two SEZs being set up by the two (recently divided) fractions of the Reliance empire. Reliance Industries is India's largest corporation, and Mukesh Ambani, its CEO, is the world's fifth richest man. His brother Anil is CEO of Reliance Capital and various other Reliance subsidiaries. The two divided their father's empire after a well publicized dispute. Mukesh Ambani's Reliance has proposed setting up a huge, 10,000 hectare multi-purpose SEZ in Jhajjar, Haryana. The SEZ would comprise what are currently 38 villages and displace as many as 250,000 people in a fertile green revolution area just northwest of Delhi. It would be the second-largest SEZ in the country. Jhajjar is just beyond Delhi's rapidly expanding, hyper-modern satellite city of Gurgaon. A drive through Gurgaon gave me a sense of the real economic interests behind the SEZ. Gurgaon offers an immense skyline of glassy high-rise apartment buildings, mega-malls, and large offices for multi-national corporations doing business in India. Some have been completed, many more are in the process of construction. Jhajjar lies just beyond these areas, and its agricultural land will undoubtedly be worth a lot more money in the coming years. The SEZ would allow Reliance to forcibly acquire the land from farmers at concession prices with the help of the government. Then it will be perfectly positioned to profit immensely from the further expansion of Gurgaon.

Unfortunately, my visit to Jhajjar was cut short because of a police dragnet underway in the villages. Local villagers had formed a movement to resist the project, and had suffered beatings and harassment from the police at a protest several months ago. The police, however, had filed charges against the leaders for the attempted murder of police officers and were combing through the villages to arrest the leaders. So, while we made it as far as the villages, we had to turn around before police barricades and could not talk to many resident.

The story was not unsimilar in Anil Ambani's Reliance SEZ near Dadri, UP. This SEZ was to be set up on farmland just beyond the special industrial zone of NOIDA. Here, Reliance was trying to take 2, 500 acres of fertile agricultural land from farmers and create a 10,000 MW power project with ancillary

development. The government had already required land at below-market prices and then sold them at a subsidized price to Reliance. The farmers claimed that they were coerced into signing. They either wanted to reverse the land acquisition or receive higher prices for the land that was acquired since the prices were inadequate for buying replacement land nearby. They also wondered why Reliance needed 2,500 acres when similar power plants elsewhere had required only 100 acres of land. The dozen make-shift realty shops lining the approach road to the village strongly suggested the company's motivations. Real estate values were escalating immensely, making proper compensation for land all the more important. I talked to many people in the village who all spoke vehemently against the project, seeing no benefit in it for themselves. There was a division, however, between those who rejected the land acquisition altogether and those who simply wanted higher prices.

In sum, these preliminary visits strongly suggested to me that the SEZs are motivated above all by interests in real estate speculation. It seems dubious to most villagers that the zones will bring any tangible benefit to themselves. People are being forced to give up their land, often at concessionary rates, and the appearance is that all the benefits will go to large private corporations. There seems to be little if any consent in these villages to the proposed projects, and there are organized social movements of varying strength in all of them. In many cases, violence has ensued as resistant farmers have been repressed by local police and company thugs.

Based on these visits, I am preparing various “public sociology” articles that I will submit to Indian periodicals in the coming year. The background research has also lead me to formulate various research hypotheses about land dispossession for SEZs, and the role of “primitive accumulation” under neoliberalism more generally (in contrast with the previous era of state developmentalism), which I will investigate in the next year for my dissertation. In conclusion, I provide an overview of the hypotheses I draw from my visits, which I hope to test with more evidence after conducting my fieldwork.

#### **IV. Hypotheses for Further Research**

##### ***i) Political Economy of Development***

One of the key distinctions between the political economy of state-led development and

neoliberalism is the role of the state. Whereas in the old Nehruvian model the Indian state directly undertook economic transformation, under the neoliberal model it seeks to nurture private capital accumulation (Evans 1994). With dams, the Indian state directly managed large-scale infrastructural improvements in order to expand agriculture and industry through irrigation and cheap electricity.<sup>5</sup> With SEZs, in contrast, the state's role has shifted to carving out “spaces of exception” (Ong 2006) where private capital can accumulate with minimal hindrance—though tremendous subsidies—from the state.

A second major difference between the political economy of dispossession for dams and for SEZs is in the agents of economic transformation and the forms of accumulation. While the state was the primary agent of transformation with large dams, the developmental efficacy of the project was tied to the productive activities of (mostly large) farmers who would receive subsidized irrigation, and industrialists who would receive cheap electricity. While the transfer of resources from subsistence farmers living in remote river valleys to such classes was undoubtedly distributionally regressive, the Indian government could make a much more plausible claim that the beneficiaries were progressive classes in the sense of contributing to the productive core of the economy. I argue that, contrary to the claims of many economists and policy-makers, this is hardly the case with SEZs.

While SEZs are intended to catalyze export-oriented industrialization (Ministry of Commerce 2008; Pyare 2007), I hypothesize that these zones will be more lucrative for real estate speculation than for industrial production. I argue that this is tied to the ascendance of finance capital under neoliberalism in India. Over the past six years, India has dramatically liberalized investment in real estate development, now allowing foreign direct investment and venture capital in this sector. Regulations allow for up to 50% of SEZ land to be used for commercial and residential facilities; in other words, half the land in an SEZ can be sold as real estate. Most SEZs are near urban centers or satellite cities with skyrocketing property values, and the Reserve Bank of India has classified lending to SEZs as real estate investments. Speculative real estate development, rather than industrial production, may account for the bulk of the

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<sup>5</sup> The actual contributions of large dams toward these goals have been called into question. See McCully (1996) *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams*, and World Commission on Dams (2000), *Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision-Making*.

accumulation generated by SEZs.

Moreover, the production inside SEZs is geared towards high-value technology rather than labor-intensive industry. Sixty-two percent of approved SEZs are in the IT sector and another nine percent are in the pharmaceutical and biotech sectors.<sup>6</sup> The development of a globally integrated and sophisticated IT sector in a country where 39% of people are illiterate, 47% of young children are malnourished, and 75.6% live off of less than two dollars a day, attests to the contradictions of India's "new economy" (UNDP 2008; World Bank 2008). The polarization inherent in such a model has made analysts question its potential to lift the standard of living of the millions of poor, rural, Indians (Dreze and Sen 1995; D'Costa 2002). The fact that Indian SEZs are disproportionately geared toward such sectors, whereas in China they involved highly labor-intensive industry (Jao and Leung 1986), raises questions about their developmental efficacy for rural inhabitants whose farm and common lands are being expropriated.

These characteristics of the political economy of SEZs suggest that, while dams redistributed resources to the agrarian bourgeoisie (and secondarily to the industrial bourgeoisie), the economic benefits of primitive accumulation for SEZs will flow to the financial and industrial bourgeoisie. While sociologists have treated primitive accumulation as a process of agrarian transition to capitalist agriculture (Dobb 1947; Moore 1966; Brenner 1976, Patnaik 1986), the neoliberal form of primitive accumulation in India aims at leapfrogging the modernization of the countryside altogether and plunging directly into the financial and high-tech economy. To the extent that SEZ development is productive rather than speculative, it will concentrate in non-labor intensive technology, resulting in jobless growth. Following Sen's (1995) concerns about the limitations of such an economy for helping most people in India, I argue that this model threatens to create "dispossession without development." Whereas Marxists look at primitive accumulation as the means to produce a class of wage laborers, I argue that "dispossession without development" in the context of Indian SEZs separates agrarian producers from their means of subsistence without the privilege of wage-labor exploitation or other benefits of economic transformation.

***ii) Geographies of Accumulation: From high-modernism to enclavization***

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<sup>6</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Commerce and Industry website on "Special Economic Zones in India."

SEZs also seem to represent an “enclavization” or “zonification” of the Indian state’s developmental ambitions.<sup>7</sup> There is a growing literature on the emergence of enclaves or “spaces of exception” as political units and sites of capital accumulation under neoliberalism (Ferguson 2005; Ferguson 2006; Alsayyad and Roy 2006; Ong 2006). In the context of oil extraction enclaves in Africa, Ferguson (2005) argues that the homogenizing, high modernist national grid described by Scott (1998) is fast disappearing in favor of enclaves of extraction and accumulation that are more integrated with the global economy than their surrounding societies. In this sense, global capital “hops” more than it flows.

I argue that indeed SEZs represent a retreat from the high-modernist ambition of transforming the entire nation. Instead, the state is setting up entrepôts of capital accumulation disconnected from most of Indian society. I suggest that this fragmentation of development makes primitive accumulation for SEZs less developmentally beneficial than dams for rural populations. Even if dams never benefited displaced people, at least their irrigation canals and electricity thickly permeated the countryside.

Moreover, I contend that the political exceptions created by SEZs create tiered political membership (Ong 2006; Holston 2007), in which those contributing to economic activity in the zones will receive the rights and entitlements of modern civil society, while those displaced by or living outside the zones will become mere welfare claimants. SEZs exacerbate the distinction between civil society and what Chatterjee (2004) calls “political society,” a liminal realm where the state treats people as objects of administration rather than as rights-bearing citizens. By comparing the administration of development inside and outside the zones, I will show how SEZs bifurcate administration and produce distinct political subjects. On one hand, some members of civil society will successfully command state support for their economic role; on the other, those excluded from the economy will become objects of welfare projects.

### *iii) Consent and the Politics of Dispossession*

Recently, scholars of anti-neoliberal social movements have turned to Polanyi’s (1944) theory of the double-movement (Watts 2000; Hart 2002; Burawoy 2003). Polanyi argued that disembedding

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<sup>7</sup> In addition to SEZs, the government is promoting other “zoning technologies” (Ong 2006) for various economic activities, such as Coastal Management Zones, Petrochemical Investment Regions, and Special Mining Zones.

markets from social controls produced social strains that would unleash counter-movements for social protection. The struggles over primitive accumulation for SEZs in India can be described in Polanyian terms as countermovements against the commodification of land under neoliberalism.

Yet, how are these counter-movements different from those that occurred against land commodification and dispossession for large dams under state-developmentalism? While resistance against SEZs looks similar to that against dams, and both movements have united in national-level alliances (Levien 2007), SEZs have generated more broad, rapid, and successful resistance than anti-dam movements ever did. The most famous anti-dam movement in the world, the “Save the Narmada Movement” attracted widespread support, but in the end it failed to stop the Sardar Sarovar Dam. In contrast, in just a few years, farmers have blocked several SEZs, including all zones proposed for the state of Goa. State violence against farmers protesting a SEZ in West Bengal attracted media outrage, forcing the state government to cancel the project. Whereas the central government never responded rapidly to anti-dam activists, resistance to SEZs has forced the government to revise its land acquisition and resettlement policies. I argue that this difference is due to the aforementioned features of the political economy of SEZs, which have undermined consent for this form of primitive accumulation.

As the political economy of the Indian state’s development ambitions have shifted, the government has had to alter its justifications for land dispossession. It has had to redefine the terms “national development” and “public interest” legally and discursively, to legitimize the use of force to transfer resources from farmers to corporations. I argue that the distinct political economy of SEZs has made it difficult for the Indian government to build such consent.

In the post-independence era, the discourse of development was closely tied to post-colonial Indian nationalism, in which the state was seen as the primary instrument for national progress (Chatterjee 1986; Frankel 2004). Dams were not just instruments of economic development, but symbols of the nation’s march towards modernity. While dams displaced an estimated 42 million people since 1947 (Fernandes 1989), such large-scale dispossession was justified as a worthwhile and necessary sacrifice for

the national good (Baviskar 1995; Khagram 2004).<sup>8</sup> This appeal to national progress was so hegemonic that serious critique of dams did not emerge until the 1970s. This collapse of developmentalism into nationalism, and the nation into the state constituted an “overwhelming ideological consensus” (Khagram 2004) that resistance to large dams had to confront.

But, the discursive underpinnings of primitive accumulation and development are changing as India moves from state-led development to neoliberalism. The tight nexus of development-state-nation is being disarticulated. Extending Chatterjee (1986), I ask what happens to development nationalism as the Indian state shifts responsibility for progress and modernization onto private corporations in zones that are considered foreign territory? While India has used national interest to justify large-scale displacement for development projects such as dams, I contend that when the sacrifice is for private and even global capital accumulation that may be minimally beneficial to rural inhabitants—as in SEZs—these justifications prove less successful. I argue that, instead, Nehruvian nationalism will be a resource for anti-SEZ struggles. It is nearly impossible in India to produce consent around forcibly expropriating farmers’ land for zones of private speculation and technology-intensive industry.

I hypothesize that for this reason, movements against SEZs have more successfully attracted public support and defeated projects than anti-dam movements. Producing consent for primitive accumulation is more difficult under neoliberalism than it was for the state-led development project.

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<sup>8</sup> For example, while laying the foundation stone for the Hirakud Dam, Nehru told assembled villagers, "If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country." (Quoted in Khagram 2004: 37).

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