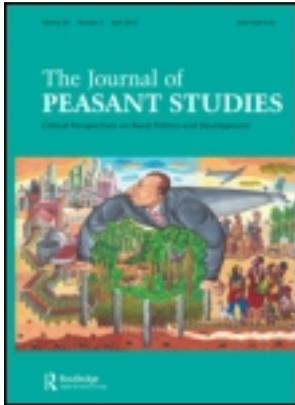


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### Land grabs and primitive accumulation in deltaic Bangladesh: interactions between neoliberal globalization, state interventions, power relations and peasant resistance

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## Land grabs and primitive accumulation in deltaic Bangladesh: interactions between neoliberal globalization, state interventions, power relations and peasant resistance

Shapan Adnan

This essay provides theoretical and empirical analysis of the interrelationships between land grabs, primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession (ABD) in the context of capitalist development. Evidence from a multi-class peasant formation in deltaic Bangladesh indicates that land grabs have been propelled by interactions between neoliberal globalization, state interventions, power relations and peasant resistance. Key roles have been played by illegal violence and de-linking of poor peasants from production organization and clientelist relations providing access to land. Establishment of a shrimp zone for export production has led to systematic eviction of the poor, backed by state power. Poor peasant resistance has shifted towards overt forms involving coalition-building and collective action. It is argued that the concept of primitive accumulation can subsume both market and non-market mechanisms as well as voluntary and involuntary transactions involving different degrees of intentionality, inclusive of deliberate dispossession, unintended consequences and negative externalities. Primitive accumulation and ABD correspond to distinct historical phases of capitalism and are subsumable under a *generic* concept of ongoing *capitalism-facilitating accumulation*. The dynamics of ‘actually existing capitalism’ display a *two-way* and *recursive* causal relationship in which continuing primitive accumulation is as much a *consequence* of expanding capitalist production as its *precondition*.

**Keywords:** land grabs; primitive accumulation; accumulation by dispossession; peasant resistance; capitalist development; Bangladesh

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## 1. Introduction

### *The issues*

Attempts to analyse contemporary land grabs within a suitable theoretical framework have drawn upon Marx's (1976, 2010, 500–502) concept of *primitive accumulation* in the paradigm of capitalist development, as well as the derivative notion of *accumulation by dispossession* (ABD), put forward by Harvey (2005) in the context of neoliberal globalization. Both concepts have been the subject of considerable debate, raising a number of critical questions. These can be specified as follows.

Primitive accumulation is widely regarded as involving use of force through extra-economic and non-market mechanisms.<sup>1</sup> While that may well be so in most cases, is it a necessary characteristic in analytical terms? Could the notion of primitive accumulation also subsume voluntary transactions involving the market and non-coercive mechanisms? Furthermore, does primitive accumulation necessarily involve deliberate dispossession, or can it subsume indirect mechanisms leading to similar outcomes? In particular, what *degrees of intentionality* are integral to the notion of primitive accumulation? Does it refer to a discrete event or a continuous process? The answers to these questions depend upon clear specification of the theoretical relationship between primitive accumulation and the expansion of capitalist production.

Comparable questions also pertain to the notion of ABD. An additional issue is whether ABD adequately incorporates changes in the institutional mechanisms and features of primitive accumulation that have taken place since the concept was originally formulated by Marx. In comparative terms, what are the substantive analytical differences between primitive accumulation and ABD, as well as their relative merits in interpreting contemporary land grabs?

In this essay, I have addressed these issues in both theoretical and empirical terms. The theoretical analysis has involved critical review of the concepts of primitive accumulation and ABD, as well as specification of their linkages with the expansion of capitalist production. The possible mechanisms and forms of primitive accumulation have been explored, inclusive of alternatives to deliberate dispossession through the use of force and other means. The theoretical framework has been adapted to deal with the unique properties of land as a means of production and distinguish analytically between the mechanisms of 'land seizure' and 'land denial'. The possible significance of resistance to land alienation in influencing the pace and outcomes of primitive accumulation has been indicated.

The empirical analysis has attempted to assess the relevance of these theoretical ideas by applying them to evidence from a case study of land grabs affecting the peasantry in deltaic Bangladesh. This has involved tracing the diverse and intricate mechanisms through which lands have been gained and lost in this concrete social–historical context. Complex interactions between factors operating at the local, national and global levels have had to be disentangled.

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<sup>1</sup>The domain of the 'economic' is defined to consist of markets *and* non-market institutions involved in production and distribution such as state agencies and enterprises, operating according to agreed price rules without involving force. In contradistinction, 'extra-economic' pertains to other kinds of mechanisms involved in the allocation and transfer of resources, inclusive of the use of force and violence.

These include the roles of the world market and international agencies promoting neoliberal policies, state interventions, contentions among land-grabbing agencies, as well as resistance by the poor peasantry against land alienation and the power structure driving such processes. The findings of the empirical analysis, in turn, have provided theoretical insights into the relevance and limitations of these two concepts, as well as their complex causal relationships with the expansion of capitalist production.

### **Research design**

In this essay, I provide an *exploratory* analysis of the factors and processes underlying land grabs and their outcomes in a particular social–historical instance in order to assess whether these can be validly interpreted in terms of the notion of primitive accumulation and ABD. The specific objectives are:

- (i) to provide *in-depth qualitative* analysis of the diverse ways in which land grabs have taken place in this concrete social–historical context; and
- (ii) to assess the relative merits of the concepts of primitive accumulation and ABD in *interpreting* the empirical evidence.

It should be noted that the study is *not* concerned with *quantitative* empirical assessment of these issues or confirmatory analysis based on representative data. Instead, the exploratory analysis of the case study is expected to generate insights about the nature of the causal processes involved, which could provide hypotheses for further research.

The study area is located in the coastal belt of the ‘old’ Noakhali district<sup>2</sup> of Bangladesh. It is part of the delta of the Ganges–Brahmaputra–Meghna river system and lies at the frontier of the mainland with the Bay of Bengal (Figure 1). The area belongs to the wider agro-ecological zone known as *char* lands, characterized by continuous formation and erosion of land due to river and tidal activity (de Wilde 2011). It is inhabited by rich and poor peasant classes interrelated through the social organization of production and clientelist power relations.

In the study area (and Bangladesh generally), land grabs by foreign governments and transnational agencies have not been particularly significant compared to those by domestic corporations, private interest groups and state agencies. However, alienation of land has been indirectly influenced by factors at the global level, inclusive of policy and development interventions promoted by international financial and donor agencies. In particular, the study area has been impacted by the establishment of a special economic zone to promote export-oriented shrimp farming, triggering a chain reaction of land grabs and violent political conflicts. The essay analyses the factors and processes leading up to these critical events and their consequences during the 35-year period, 1972–2007.

Given the aims and scope of the study, a *qualitative* research design has been used. The evidence consists of primary data generated through fieldwork as well as secondary data collected from a variety of documentary sources. In view of the

<sup>2</sup>The area of the (old) Noakhali district, dating from the preceding British and Pakistani periods, has been divided under latter-day Bangladesh into three smaller administrative units designated as the (new) Noakhali, Lakshmipur and Feni districts.

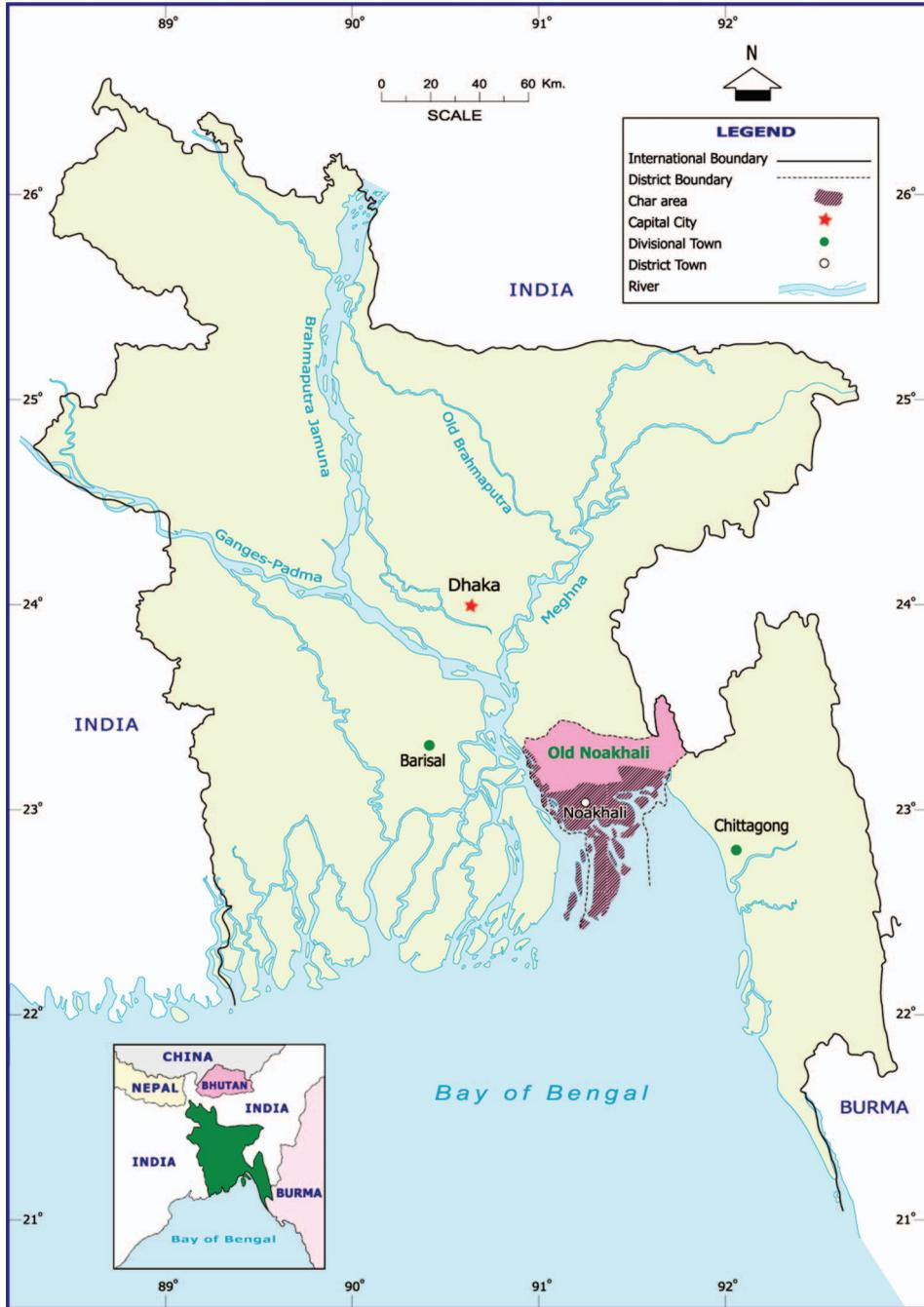


Figure 1. The *char* lands of the old Noakhali district in the Ganges–Brahmaputra–Meghna delta of Bangladesh

exploratory nature of the study, a very brief round of fieldwork for data collection was undertaken in Noakhali during one week in July 2005. Within this limited timeframe, the most feasible methods of collecting data were unstructured interviews

and group discussions. These were undertaken in several sites in rural areas, as well as the district town of Noakhali (Maijdee Court). Among the respondents were groups of landless and poor peasants, government officials, journalists, lawyers, researchers, as well as leaders and activists of peasant organizations, NGOs and legal aid groups. Following the fieldwork in Noakhali, interviews and group discussions with key informants were held in Dhaka, the capital city.

A wide variety of relevant documents were collected in the fieldwork sites in Noakhali and in Dhaka city. These included government publications, agency reports by donor organizations and NGOs, books and articles, official letters and reports, memoranda, petitions, press clippings and statements, handwritten notes and write-ups. Triangulation of the data was undertaken through cross-checking of these distinct streams of primary and secondary evidence. This combination of methods and procedures provided the basis for reconstructing the story of land contentions and political conflicts in Noakhali narrated below.

Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework used in the study by critically reviewing the concepts of primitive accumulation and ABD, as well as indicating the significance of resistance in different forms and modalities. Section 3 sketches out the distinctive agro-ecological and socio-demographic features of rural Noakhali, changes in forms of landed property, and the policy options for allotment of state lands. Section 4 analyses the alternative avenues of gaining access to land by poor peasants. Section 5 traces the factors propelling land grabs by the state and private agencies, focusing upon the declaration of a shrimp zone in Noakhali. Section 6 analyses the resultant contradictions within the class and power structures as well as the state machinery. The forms and modalities of resistance to land alienation by the poor peasantry are incorporated in context in sections 4–6. Section 7 integrates the conclusions of the different parts of the essay and puts forward theoretical reflections on primitive accumulation and ABD and their interrelationships with the expansion of capitalist production.

## **2. Primitive accumulation, accumulation by dispossession, and the significance of resistance**

### *The role of primitive accumulation in the process of capitalist development*

In Marx's (2010, 535–536) model of capitalism, the analytical role of primitive accumulation is postulated in contradistinction to that of capitalist accumulation. The latter is activated once capitalist production has begun, when the surplus from one cycle of production can be invested in the next, resulting in accumulation based on production on an increasing scale, i.e. expanded reproduction. Furthermore, centralization of capital takes place whenever the resources of capitalist enterprises going 'out of business' through market competition are taken over by the surviving units (Marx 2010, 536). The concept of capitalist accumulation thus subsumes both expanded reproduction and the centralization of capital. However, such accumulative processes cannot explain the source of the resources that need to be mobilized at the origin of capitalism, i.e. *before* the first cycle of capitalist production can begin. It is precisely to break out of the circularity of a 'chicken and egg' argument in explaining the origin of capitalism that Marx puts forward the innovative concept of primitive accumulation, which 'precedes capitalist accumulation; an accumulation which is not the result of the capitalist mode of production but its point of departure' (Marx 1976, 873–895).

Marx's account of primitive accumulation draws largely upon the historical experience of the separation of peasants from their lands in Britain through acts of 'enclosure' (Marx 2010, 503–514, Moore 1966, 9–12, 20–29). In this particular instance, the emergence of a propertyless class that becomes available for wage employment in capitalist production constitutes the very *obverse* of the process of *concentration of land* among the expropriating classes (Dobb 1963, 185–186). The *simultaneity* of these 'two transformations' (De Angelis 2004, 62, Levien 2012, 937) is integral to Marx's construct of primitive accumulation and constitutes something of a special case. In the general case, however, this disarmingly compact model of primitive accumulation need not hold.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, Marx's (2010, 536) conceptualisation of primitive accumulation entails not only the *quantitative* transfer of resources, but also their *qualitative transformation* in terms of property rights. Resources held under non-capitalist property relations are extracted and converted into forms of property that are compatible with deployment in capitalist production. Primitive accumulation therefore involves a process of separation such that different classes come to control (i) the resources to be converted into capital and (ii) 'doubly free' labour power, as their respective properties. Under such conditions, these classes are systematically constrained to combine their resources (i.e. capital and labour) in capitalist production, because their conditions of survival (reproduction) do not leave them with better options. Viewed in this perspective, such 'transformation of social property relations [constitutes] the real primitive accumulation', providing the prior basis of 'distinctive social relations of production, which compel economic agents to behave in specific ways' characteristic of capitalist production (Dobb 1963, 185–186, Wood 2002, 31–37, 2006, 19–20).

These general traits of primitive accumulation need to be adapted in specific ways when the concerned resource is land. As a means of production, land is unique in being non-producible and location-specific (Marx 1981, 915–924, Kautsky 1988, 72, 145, Banaji 1976, 17–39, Adnan 1985, PE-57). These imply that there can be only a fixed stock of land in a given location, so that its loss by one party usually amounts to an equivalent gain by another, corresponding to a zero-sum game situation. Consequently, when non-capitalist classes already hold ('pre-occupy') landed property, capitalists wanting to produce in the same location must necessarily establish their rights on such holdings by whatever means are feasible (Kautsky 1988, 146–147, Banaji 1976, 31, Brenner 1977, 74, Hussain and Tribe 1981a, 124–125, Adnan 1984, 27, 1985, PE-57).

This also raises the question of whether *involuntary* transfer of resources through extra-economic coercion or non-market mechanisms must be a *necessary* or *defining* feature of primitive accumulation (Khan 2004, 97–98, Levien 2012, 940). This issue calls for explication because Marx's description of its historical instances entails some ambiguity. While it emphasizes the role of violence, extra-economic coercion and non-market mechanisms, it also includes mechanisms of expropriation that do not involve the explicit use of force, such as manipulation of the public debt, the international credit system, financial speculation, 'stock-exchange gambling',

<sup>3</sup>As discussed elsewhere, a stratum of landless peasants existed in colonial Bengal (Bangladesh) *without* any prior enclosure process being involved – reflecting its very different social-historical circumstances (Adnan 1985, 63, fn 17, 2012).

restrictive practices in market transactions inclusive of price manipulation, etc. (Marx 2010, 528–532, cf. Harvey 2005, 145).

There are, of course, excellent reasons for the use of force through extra-economic and non-market mechanisms under certain circumstances. As Brenner (2006, 98–99) has argued, voluntary transactions may not be effective in converting the land, labour and cooperant inputs already incorporated under non-capitalist property rights and production relations into commodities that are freely available for deployment in capitalist production. For instance, peasants may not be willing to sell or otherwise part voluntarily with land, given its location-specificity and social and cultural significance, inclusive of emotional attachment to ancestral holdings. Furthermore, resistance to acquisition of land by capitalists can come from not only the producers directly holding such plots (e.g. peasants), but also the entire constellation of surplus appropriating classes and the state machinery having stakes in the pre-existing structure of landed property (Brenner 2006, 99, Adnan 1985, PE-57). Consequently, in practice, capitalists may well resort to various forms of social and political coercion, including violence, to capture required lands that may not be available through voluntary transactions (Luxemburg 2003, 348–351, Adnan 1984, 28, Brenner 2006, 99).

However, despite these considerations, deliberate use of force for direct expropriation is not the only possible way in which the objectives of primitive accumulation can be attained in terms of procuring land and labour power for capitalist production (Kautsky 1988, 146–147, Banaji 1976). For instance, mechanisms of *forced commoditization* through imposition of money taxes or interlocked debt contracts (Bhaduri 1983, 41–42, 85–87, 106–107, Burawoy 1985, 216–219, De Angelis 2004, 78) can intensify the pressure on self-employed occupational groups to buy production inputs and subsistence goods from the market, correspondingly increasing the need to sell more of their products and services. The capability of households to provision their subsistence needs can also be undermined by restricting their rights of access to common property and ‘open access’ resources such as forests and wetlands (Perelman 1984, 11, 46–58, Guha 2000, 185). At the limit, such processes can lead to the sale of their land and labour power, inclusive of instances of ‘distress’ sale (Burawoy 1985, 217–219, Deininger 2003, 96–97). Such outcomes could also be the ‘byproducts’ of policy and development interventions undertaken for very different purposes, constituting ‘negative externalities’ (De Angelis 2004, 78–79) or *unintended consequences* (Adnan 2012).

Thus, the emergence of a propertyless class, as well as the concentration of the resources formerly used by them among other classes, can also come about because of processes that do not involve ‘the arbitrary application of power’ in the form of deliberate dispossession (Perelman 1984, 58). Such alternative mechanisms of primitive accumulation display *different degrees of intentionality* on the part of the forces indirectly triggering the expropriation processes (De Angelis 2004, 77–78), as well as *varying degrees of unwillingness* on the part of those whose lands are taken over.

On the basis of these considerations, the key features defining primitive accumulation, as well as distinguishing it from capitalist accumulation, can be specified as follows. First, the accumulative mechanisms must be analytically distinct from expanded reproduction and centralization of capital characterizing capitalist accumulation. Second, these must make available resources in forms of property that

can be potentially deployed in capitalist production, i.e. as capital and labour power. Provided both these conditionalities hold, all such mechanisms – whether *market* or *non-market*, *coercive* or *voluntary* – can be regarded as optional means that can be flexibly deployed in alternative strategies of primitive accumulation (cf. Burawoy 1985, 214–215, Harvey 2006, 159).<sup>4</sup> The crucial theoretical distinction between primitive and capitalist accumulation postulated here is specified in terms of the *nature* and *purpose* of the accumulative process, rather than the specific forms and institutional mechanisms involved.

However, given this wider range of possible mechanisms, a further conditionality needs to be specified to distinguish analytically between instances of land alienation that correspond to primitive accumulation and those that do not. For instance, land grabs can be propelled by political and particularistic conflicts based on race, ethnicity, caste or religion. The ‘accumulation of land’ can provide the means of extracting (precapitalist ground) rent, as well as the basis of traditional social status and political power among the peasantry. In these varied instances, the expropriated lands are not incorporated into the circulation of productive capital. Consequently, the *processes of their prior acquisition* do not correspond analytically to the concept of primitive accumulation. Correlatively, the expropriation of land can be regarded as corresponding to primitive accumulation only when it feeds into the expansionary dynamic of capitalist production. Unless this conditionality is explicitly stipulated, instances in which expropriated lands are deployed in capitalist production would become lumped with those used for entirely different purposes, blunting the analytical clarity of the concept.

Furthermore, even in contexts where a capitalist sector has emerged and co-exists with non-capitalist forms of production, there may not be any systematic necessity for incremental supplies of land to be deployed in capitalist production, as contrasted to alternative avenues such as extraction of precapitalist ground rent (Adnan 1985, PE-58). No deterministic or teleological presupposition of the outcome is warranted, which would depend upon the balance of forces between the contending capitalist and non-capitalist classes in the given social–historical context (cf. Dobb 1963, Brenner 1976). In the general case, therefore, the expropriation of land is a *necessary*, but *not sufficient*, condition for the emergence and expansion of agrarian capitalism (Adnan 1984, 8, Khan 2004, 97). Accordingly, the realisation of primitive accumulation in terms of deployment of the expropriated lands in capitalist production cannot be taken as a foregone conclusion. Rather, in a given social–historical context, it has to be empirically assessed on the basis of *broad trends* in a *long-term perspective*.

There is also a certain ambivalence in Marx’s (2010, 501–502, 527–531) treatment of primitive accumulation in terms of whether it is (i) a one-off event at the ‘genesis of capitalism’, or (ii) an ongoing historical process that takes place *repeatedly* over time in different countries and economic sectors (Perelman 1984, 8–12). However, it is self-evident that primitive accumulation *must* be an ongoing process when capitalist expansion takes place in the context of co-existing non-capitalist sectors.

<sup>4</sup>While extra-economic force has certainly been used in many cases, there are also historical and contemporary instances in which transactions involving credit, alcohol, drugs and other resources have been used to orchestrate alienation of the lands of poor peasants and indigenous peoples through market or non-market processes that involve persuasion or temptation, rather than *the use of force* (e.g. Adnan 2004, Adnan and Dastidar 2011).

This is because the expansion of its scale of production generates incremental demand for land which, given its non-productibility and limited stock, must necessarily be procured through a continuing process of ‘*ex novo separation*’ (De Angelis 2004, 63–64) from the classes holding it in the ‘residual’ non-capitalist sectors (Adnan 1984, 28, 2012).

Consequently, primitive accumulation not only creates ‘the conditions for capitalism’ at its historic origin, but also *renews* the conditions of its expansion over time (Perelman 1984, 8–10, De Angelis 2004, 70). Viewed in this perspective, it is an *ongoing* process which is integrally related to the expansionary dynamic of capitalist development. On the one hand, primitive accumulation is *logically prior* to capitalist production; on the other, it both precedes and follows the expansion of capitalist production in historical time (Adnan 1984, 28, Harriss-White 2006, 1241–1246). This consideration also has certain theoretical implications for the *direction of causality* between primitive accumulation and the expansion of capitalist production, which I take up in the concluding section of the essay.

### *Accumulation by dispossession*

The institutional arrangements and mechanisms supplying resources for the expansion of capitalist production have undergone change as the capitalist system as a whole has evolved in terms of its objectives, scale and institutional structures. Such changes have provided theoretical space for reformulation of the concept of primitive accumulation in order to (i) ‘update’ the features initially noted by Marx, as well as (ii) incorporate the new mechanisms and institutional arrangements that have emerged during the subsequent historical trajectory of capitalism. Harvey (2005, 144–161) has attempted to fill up this gap partially by putting forward the notion of accumulation by dispossession, focusing on the impacts of neoliberal globalisation during the period since 1973. While ABD has been viewed as having ‘revived’ and broadened Marx’s construct of primitive accumulation and demonstrated its contemporary relevance by explicating the accumulative processes characterizing ‘neoliberal imperialism’ (Brenner 2006, 102, Ashman and Callinicos 2006, 117, Fine 2006, 143–144), the concept has not been entirely uncontroversial.<sup>5</sup>

In conceptualising ABD, Harvey highlights the impacts of structural adjustment programmes and their derivatives, inclusive of devaluation, imposed on vulnerable countries by international regulatory institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, as well as powerful capitalist states. Such interventions result in forced commoditization, privatization and undervaluation of resources such as land, making these available at artificially cheapened prices for profitable recycling into capitalist production (Harvey 2005, 150–156). The notion of ABD also incorporates the unprecedented manipulation of the global financial and credit system during the neoliberal era, particularly the role of financial speculation and fraud as critical mechanisms of dispossession (Harvey 2005, 147).

There is a considerable overlap between the processes subsumed by primitive accumulation and ABD, even though each has some exclusive components. Unlike

<sup>5</sup>Harvey’s conceptualisation of ABD has also given rise to theoretical debates about conflation of its mechanisms with the normal workings of capitalism and the questionable status of ‘fictitious financial accumulation’ (Brenner 2006, 98–102, Ashman and Callinicos 2006, 119, Fine 2006, 143–146, Harvey 2006, Adnan 2012).

the former, the latter does not address the transformation of pre-existing production relations at the *origin* of capitalism, being primarily concerned with the expansion of an *already existing* capitalist sector. However, ABD does incorporate new mechanisms and institutional arrangements feeding resources into capitalist production under neoliberal globalisation which did not operate in Marx's time.

However, the very focus on neoliberal globalisation means that the concept of ABD does not necessarily incorporate mechanisms of dispossession feeding capitalist expansion during the *preceding* historical period, particularly the middle decades of the twentieth century. These include policies and interventions pertaining to land reforms, property rights and access to open access resources as well as development interventions having counterproductive impacts on people and the environment. Such outcomes have subjected peasant households to forced commoditization and land loss, undermining their capability for self-provisioning and self-employment and constraining them to undertake wage labour for survival (Adnan 2012).

Given these limitations in the applicability of ABD, I have used the *term* primitive accumulation in the present analysis. However, I have *redefined the concept* to include the whole range of institutional arrangements and mechanisms feeding resources into capitalist expansion *before and during* the phase of neoliberal globalisation.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Land seizure and land denial***

Both primitive accumulation and ABD have been conceptualised in a way which implicitly presumes that the expropriated resources are initially owned or held by the dispossessed groups. However, deprivation of assets can take the form of *denial of entitlements that have not yet been realized*, as contrasted to actual dispossession. For instance, *not implementing* (re)distributive land reform deprives landless households from receiving parcels of land to which they are, or might have been, entitled (Borras and Franco 2010). The notion of 'accumulation by denial' thus pertains to the kind of deprivation resulting from *pre-emptive* capture rather than actual transfer of resources. While the notion of denial may be implicit in Marx's primitive accumulation and Harvey's ABD, it needs to be explicitly articulated to highlight the analytical difference between (i) the expropriation of resources that are *already possessed* and (ii) barring access to resources to which there is *entitlement* (Adnan 2012).

Accordingly, I have divided the mechanisms of land grabbing into two analytically distinct categories. First, when an area already owned or possessed by a group is taken over by others, the process is termed *land seizure*. Second, when a group is prevented from gaining access to land to which it is *entitled*, the mechanism is regarded as *land denial*. Despite these differences, both processes result in outcomes that have similar consequences in terms of *deprivation* of land and can be regarded as constituting complementary strands of the broader category of land alienation. Furthermore, the processes of land seizure and land denial can take place simultaneously, or sequentially, in the actual dynamics of land alienation.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>The term primitive accumulation has also been used by scholars in the analysis of *contemporary* land grabs and capitalist expansion in China (Walker 2006, 6, 2008a, 464) and India (Harriss-White *et al.* 2009, 540–541).

<sup>7</sup>Wolf (1969, 26–27 and 280–281) notes the simultaneous pursuit of land seizure and denial by private *haciendas* encroaching upon the territory of Indian peasants in Mexico.

Significantly, the notion of land denial is logically predicated upon the prior possibility of gaining or being entitled to land. It thus draws attention to the need for analysing the mechanisms of *land gain* in order to better understand the causal factors underlying *land loss*, as indeed undertaken below. Furthermore, this distinction is relevant for distinguishing analytically between different kinds of resistance to land alienation, viz. struggles against (i) land seizure and (ii) land denial (Borras and Franco 2010, 29–30).

### ***Resistance to land alienation and primitive accumulation: forms and modalities***

Historical evidence indicates that land alienation can provoke resistance from the social groups and classes being dispossessed, which in turn can constrain primitive accumulation and the expansion of capitalism.<sup>8</sup> However, such struggles can also facilitate capitalist development by reducing the capability of powerful non-capitalist classes to acquire and control land. Resistance to land alienation can thus *cut either way* with regard to the prospects of primitive accumulation and capitalist development, depending upon the configuration and balance of forces at a given conjuncture.

The existing literature distinguishes between covert and overt, as well as violent and non-violent, forms of resistance among subordinate groups.<sup>9</sup> For present purposes, I have combined these two binaries to produce a fourfold typology of resistance, as shown in Table 1.

Instances of *covert* resistance against powerholders are provided by acts of sabotage, gossip, rumour, foot-dragging, dissimulation, etc. (Kula 1976, 186, Scott 1985, 1986). Also termed ‘avoidance protest’ by Adas (1986, 64–86), this kind of resistance consciously bypasses open dissent and direct confrontation with dominant groups and agencies. While covert resistance is typically non-violent, it can exceptionally take violent forms (Adas 1986, 78–80), e.g. *anonymous* acts of assassination, injury, arson, or burning down of forests (Kerkvliet 1986, 116–117, Peluso 1992, 101, Guha 2000, 107–125).

In contrast, forms of *overt* resistance by subordinate groups involve open dissent and direct confrontation with powerful groups and agencies, which can also take either violent or non-violent forms. Forms of legal–constitutional protest, such as public meetings and demonstrations, provide instances of open resistance that are usually non-violent. In contrast, armed struggle and insurgency, rebellion and

Table 1. Typology of forms of resistance

	Covert	Overt
Non-violent	Non-violent covert	Non-violent overt
Violent	Violent covert	Violent overt

<sup>8</sup>See Moore (1966, 13, 28), Brenner (1976, 70–71, 1977, 73–75), Perelman (1984, 46), De Angelis (2004, 79) and Adnan (1985, PE-62, fn 12).

<sup>9</sup>See Scott (1985, 1986), Adas (1986), Turton (1986), Kerkvliet (1986, 1990, 2009), Adnan (2007), and Walker (2008a).

revolution, constitute forms of violent overt resistance. Unlike covert struggles, participation in overt actions entails the risk of exposing the identity of those involved, making them potentially vulnerable to reprisals by the concerned powerholders (Adnan 2007, 210–211).

Empirical evidence indicates that resistance by subordinate groups can shift from *covert to overt* forms with changing circumstances.<sup>10</sup> Correspondingly, overt *non-violent* resistance may become transformed into *violent* protest under exceptional circumstances (Adas 1986, 82–83). Furthermore, the *modalities* of resistance can also change in terms of the *scale* and features of group organization and collective action (Tilly 1978, 7, 78). For instance, the evolution of resistance can involve formation of broad alliances and coalitions, as well as coordination of activities by a network of organizations operating at multiple levels, ranging from the local to the global. As discussed below, such shifts in the forms and modalities of resistance can critically affect the outcomes of land alienation and primitive accumulation.

### 3. Factors shaping land contentions in the study area

#### *Agro-ecological and socio-demographic features of the Noakhali chars*

The accretion of new *chars* in the Ganges–Brahmaputra–Meghna delta reflects *incremental* growth in the pre-existing stock of land. Correlatively, the erosion of existing *chars* by river and tidal activity amounts to marginal land losses. These processes can take place alternately or cyclically, e.g. through the ‘re-surfacing’ of old *chars* that had formerly existed but were subsequently eroded. These dynamic processes of land formation and erosion lead to continuing flux in the *char* landscape over time, with critical consequences for property rights and migratory processes.<sup>11</sup>

Communities living in the delta, including the Noakhali *chars*, face the constant threat of losing their lands due to erosion, resulting in recurrent population displacements and migratory movements. Historically, there has been a continuing trend of landless peasants migrating to new *chars* at the frontier of the active delta to clear forests for new settlements and cultivable lands (Eaton 1997, 211–212). Such processes of settlement by in-migrating peasant households have continued up to recent decades (Adnan and Mansoor 1977, de Wilde 2011, 173–176). As a result, the bulk of the current inhabitants of the Noakhali *chars* consist of migrant households seeking land, many of which have become squatters occupying subsistence plots, with *de facto* possession rather than formal titles or *de jure* rights. In view of these considerations, I have defined the term ‘poor peasantry’ in Noakhali to include not only those with legal ownership of small parcels but also ‘landless squatters’ who occupy small plots of land, even though they lack formal rights. However, the bulk of these *char* lands are owned or controlled by much smaller numbers of rich and middle peasants, as well as absentee land owners including commercial and professional groups living in urban areas.

At the time of emergence, the *chars* consist of vast tracts of accreted silt and sand without any physical boundary markers or human settlements. These are initially

<sup>10</sup>See studies of resistance in the Philippines (Kerkvliet 1990, 179–182), Bangladesh (Adnan 2007, 183–185), and China (Walker 2008a, 463).

<sup>11</sup>During 1973–2000, the Meghna estuary experienced gross accretion of 1372 sq. km. and gross erosion of 864 sq. km., resulting in net land formation of 508 sq. km. Maps and satellite images of changes in the deltaic landscape over this period are shown in de Wilde (2011, 21–35).

surveyed and demarcated and the relevant property rights are then determined and entered in formal land records by concerned agencies of the state (de Wilde 2011, 157–164). However, before the *char* lands can be utilized for agriculture and other productive purposes, their soils need to be stabilized and consolidated. In Noakhali, massive afforestation programmes were undertaken for this purpose by the Forest department from 1966 onwards (de Wilde 2011, 64–69, 155–156, Sajjaduzzaman *et al.* 2005, 732).

The *chars* consist of numerous islands in the estuary and sandbars linked to the mainland, criss-crossed by rivers, creeks and sea channels. In addition to their distance from the district headquarters in Noakhali town, the nature of the terrain, partly covered by forests, makes them extremely difficult to access by prevalent modes of road and water transport. As a result, the district administration, police and other government agencies do not generally have effective control over the outlying *char* areas.<sup>12</sup> These factors provide scope for the existence of predatory power relations among the various classes inhabiting these remote localities.

### *Changes in property rights and alternative policy options*

The laws and policies governing property rights in the *char* areas of present-day Bangladesh were amended several times after the end of colonial rule in 1947. The cumulative outcome of this series of legal amendments was that all accreted *chars* automatically came under state ownership (constituting *khas* lands) during the period 1972–1994 (de Wilde 2011, 153–154).<sup>13</sup> This applied irrespective of whether such *chars* were entirely new, or had re-surfaced in the same location as eroded ‘old *chars*’. Even after another amendment to the law in 1994, state ownership of new *chars* persisted unless any private claimants were able to establish their former ownership rights on eroded lands in the same location.

These rapid and sequential changes in property rights created scope for considerable confusion and uncertainty in the legal status of particular holdings, which was compounded by superimposition upon the flux in the physical location and boundaries of *char* lands due to erosion and accretion. This combination of legal and physical uncertainty often resulted in contentions about land arising from legal pluralism and ‘multiple titling’. Specifically, the ‘stacking of laws’ led to the simultaneous existence of two or more claims of *de jure* and/or *de facto* rights on the same lands, making conflicts about property rights endemic to the *char* areas (cf. Jansen and Roquas 1998, 83–85, 92–94, Assies 2007, 12). Such

<sup>12</sup>Ali (1981, 185), *Ajker Kagaj* (16 June 2004 and 22 June 2004), and de Wilde (2011, 181–182).

<sup>13</sup>During the British colonial period, the procedures for determining the ownership of *char* lands were governed by the Bengal Alluvion and Diluvion Regulation of 1825. After independence, the provisions of this law were incorporated into the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act (EBSATA) of 1950 (Siddiqui 1981a, 16, 1981b, 70). The latter allowed former owners to reclaim eroded lands that had re-surfaced in the same location within a period of 20 years after their re-emergence. However, this law was amended by the Awami League government in 1972 through Presidential Order No. 135, which decreed that all newly accreted *chars* would henceforth become *khas* or state-owned. This, in turn, was amended by the BNP (Bangladesh National Party) government on 13 July 1994 through PO Order No. 15/1994. The amended law allowed accreted lands to be reclaimed within 30 years of their emergence by any former owners of private property in the same location; otherwise, ownership of such *char* areas passed to the state by default.

'ambiguous'<sup>14</sup> lands were particularly susceptible to expropriation because the fuzziness in their legal status provided scope for manipulation by powerful agencies (de Wilde 2011, 157).

The successive changes in property rights noted above also shaped the policy options available to the government regarding the distribution and utilisation of *char* lands. State ownership of much of these areas from 1972 gave it the discretion to distribute them in particular ways. One option was to divide these extensive tracts into small plots and allot these to poor peasants for subsistence holdings. Significantly, the existence of such a reservoir of state lands offered a 'painless' way of undertaking *distributive* land reform that did not involve any of the social and political costs of forcibly acquiring 'surplus' holdings from large landowners, as would otherwise be required for *redistributive* land reform (Ali 1981, 179–180, Adnan 2006, Borras and Franco 2010).

Alternatively, these lands could be allotted to wealthy interest groups for large-scale commercial use. State-owned *chars* were particularly attractive to such groups because these were unencumbered with any *pre-existing private property* rights, i.e. there were no 'barriers to entry' in terms of resistance from incumbent landholders (Hussain and Tribe 1981a, 124–125, Adnan 1984, 28, 1985, PE-57). Furthermore, these tracts of *contiguous* and *undivided char* lands were free of the problems of fragmentation and spatial dispersion of plots, characteristic of peasant property. Consequently, the *chars* were particularly suitable for setting up large consolidated farms, as well as the *centralization* of capital during the process of capitalist accumulation in agriculture (Kautsky 1988, 145–146, Banaji 1976, 30–31, cf. Brenner 1977, 75).

At the beginning of the 1970s, therefore, the state was in a position in which it had the discretion to allot *char* lands to either the poor peasantry or wealthier classes. The options that were actually taken up in Noakhali during the succeeding decades were embodied in evolving laws and state policies pertaining to property rights and land reform, as well as programmes of agricultural development and export promotion.

#### 4. Multiple avenues of land gains by the poor peasantry

For the poor peasantry in the Noakhali *chars*, access to land has been institutionally mediated by not only the state and the market but also the prevalent social organization of production and power relations. These alternative avenues are specified below in terms of a stylized typology of the mechanisms of gaining *de jure* or *de facto* rights to land.

##### *Option 1: de facto land gains through clientelist relationships*

During the mid-twentieth century, *de facto* possession of remote *chars* in the deltaic frontier of Bangladesh was typically taken over by a class of enterprising rich

<sup>14</sup>The term 'ambiguous land' was initially used by Sato (2000, 156–161) to designate very specific kinds of anomalies between co-existent land rights in Thailand. Comparable situations have been noted in Indonesia (Peluso 1992), Honduras (Jansen and Roquas 1998, 83–85, 92–94) and Africa (Cotula and Vermeulen 2011, 41). I have redefined and broadened the notion of 'ambiguous land' to subsume *all* types of anomalies in the status of landed property resulting from co-existent contending claims of *de jure* and/or *de facto* rights on the same area.

peasants known as *jotedars*, who were the dominant powerholders in their respective localities.<sup>15</sup> They established new settlements by bringing in landless peasants from the surrounding delta, using gangs of *lathiyals* or armed retainers to keep them under control as a captive clientele (Adnan and Mansoor 1977, de Wilde 2011, 158–159). The *jotedars* provided the migrants with *de facto* ‘squattling rights’ on the *chars* and extracted (precapitalist ground) rent from them in the form of cropshare. These squatters were also required to serve as loyal foot soldiers of their patrons in conflicts with rival powerholders.

Leading elements among the *jotedars* manipulated the votes of their captive clientele to get ‘elected’ as Chairmen and Members of the Union Parishad (UP), the institution of local self-government at the grassroots (Adnan and Mansoor 1977). Holding of such office served to endow them with legal–constitutional authority and provide legitimation for the illegal force they used to enforce their local-level dominance. The *jotedars* usually sought to maintain good relations with the local state machinery, particularly the district administration and the police. Correlatively, to the extent that these agencies of the state operated in the remote *char* areas, they did so in collaboration with the *jotedars* of the concerned locality. Such linkages with state functionaries also served to reinforce the position of *jotedars* as the ruling class in the local-level power structure of the Noakhali *chars*.

Significantly, the *jotedars* were also perfectly capable of using violence and intimidation against government officials and the police, whenever necessary, to grab *char* areas and prevent poor peasants from getting formal land rights from the state (Hossain 2003, 458–459). They thus operated on the borderline between legitimate authority (e.g. as local self-government office-holders) and illegal power (use of force through armed retainers).

Furthermore, the *jotedars* themselves were clients of patrons higher up in the power structure, such as the Members of Parliament and local bosses of national political parties in Noakhali. The latter, in turn, were followers of their respective central party leaders based in Dhaka, the capital city. Some *jotedars* also served as the rural agents of urban-based commercial and industrial businessmen. This hierarchy of clientelist relationships, straddling the local and national levels as well as the rural and urban sectors, constituted the overarching power structure dominating the Noakhali *chars*. It also served as a ‘parallel land administration’ providing *de facto* access to state lands, co-existing with the civil administration awarding formal land rights (cf. de Wilde 2011, 159).

### **Option 2: de jure land rights through legal acts and land reform**

In 1972, the Awami League government promulgated a land reform law (Presidential Order 135) with the purported objective of distributing state lands ‘for settlement among the poorer classes of agriculturists’ (Siddiqui 1981b, 69–70). The rules of land allotment gave priority to near-landless households that held less than 1.5 acres. However, this populist programme for gaining support of the rural poor was undermined by subsequent modifications in property rights and allotment rules by

<sup>15</sup>The term *jotedar* refers broadly to the classes of small landlords and rich peasants which took control of landed property and the power structure in rural Bangladesh after the abolition of the large *zemindari* or landlord estates by the East Bengal State Acquisition Act of 1950 (Abdullah 1976, 68–89).

the same government. By 1974, households owning as much as 33.33 acres were made eligible for allotment of state lands (Siddiqui 1981b, 78–79). The raised ceiling of landholdings and enlarged list of eligible allottees provided ample discretion to corrupt officials in the civil administration to make allotments favouring the rich at the expense of the poor.

Furthermore, the law allowed the administration to settle consolidated blocks of 500 acres or more with farmers' cooperative associations, which were required to be formed with households that were individually eligible for allotment of state land (Siddiqui 1981b, 69–70). However, *jotedars* manipulated this legal provision to legitimate their *de facto* possession of vast *char* areas by forming fake 'cooperative associations' with their captive clientele as its 'members' (Adnan and Mansoor 1977, Ali 1981, 183–185, Hossain 2003, 446).

In 1984, a new land reform order was issued by a military regime under General Ershad, followed by policy guidelines in 1987 for distribution of state lands to landless households (Hossain 2003, 460). As a result, Land Reform Selection Committees were formed in each of the *upazilas* (sub-districts) of Noakhali during 1988–1989, which had the task of selecting eligible landless households for allotment of state lands on a priority basis (Foyej 2004). This process led to allotment of state lands to a small proportion of poor peasants in certain parts of Noakhali during 1987–1990 (Hossain 2003, 458).

However, in most cases, these land reform directives were not implemented as claimed, because the intended beneficiaries among the poor peasantry either did not receive the allotments, or could not get possession of their plots even if land had been allotted to them. Moreover, such populist proclamations about distributing state lands to the poor had the perverse consequence of forewarning *jotedars*, who made pre-emptive attacks to take over *char* areas from the incumbent squatters before they could obtain formal land rights.<sup>16</sup> Thus, despite several half-hearted attempts at distributive land reform during the 1970s and the 1980s, the poor peasantry of Noakhali did not benefit significantly in terms of gaining formal rights to state lands.

### **Option 3: de jure rights through land reclamation and development projects**

From the mid 1970s, Dutch development agencies offered aid and technical assistance to the government of Bangladesh for reclamation of land from the delta adjoining the Noakhali mainland (de Wilde 2011). By law, *chars* formed by artificial reclamation techniques automatically became state property. The allotment of *chars* reclaimed through such aid-funded development projects provided an alternative avenue of land gain to the poor peasantry.

The first of these ventures was the experimental Land Reclamation Project (LRP), which began in 1978 and allotted lands to peasant households that had lost their former holdings due to river erosion or distress sale (Matin 1986b, 14). The allotment was given on the basis of *joint* leases to cooperative associations of landless households, which were formed specifically for this project by the NGO, Nijera Kori

<sup>16</sup>Settlement of state lands by landless peasants took place in various *char* areas of Noakhali, including Ramgati, Sandwip, Hatiya, Companyganj and Sudharam. However, *jotedars* attempted to stop this process by force. For instance, they made a particularly violent attack on 4 November 1992 to take over lands held by squatter households in the *chars* of Nabagram (Hossain 2003, 460).

(Matin 1986a, 8).<sup>17</sup> The conditions of allotment stipulated that these state lands could not be sold to others, imposing restrictions on their fungibility. During 1984–1986, the project handed over lands to 30 landless' associations on 15-year leases (Matin 1986b, 15). Subsequently, these group leases were converted to individual titles on plots of two acres for each household.<sup>18</sup>

Ironically, such project-based allotment of state lands to poor peasants threatened to undermine the clientelist support-bases of *jotedars* dominating the local power structure. The process not only bypassed them, but also made them *redundant* to their potential clientele among the landless, since the latter no longer needed to depend on their patronage for access to land. Not surprisingly, local *jotedars* made repeated attempts to forcibly grab the lands allotted by the LRP to poor peasants.<sup>19</sup>

The LRP was followed by the Char Development and Settlement Project (CDSP) during the 1990s. One of its objectives was to allot state lands to 5000 landless peasant households with individual titles.<sup>20</sup> An elaborate plot-by-plot survey was undertaken by the project to ascertain the identity of those actually in possession of state lands and prepare a recommended list of people for the award of formal land rights.<sup>21</sup> However, poor peasants alleged that this list was biased towards those who had the requisite wealth and influence to gain *de facto* control over state lands and procure fraudulent 'documents of right'.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, even those who obtained allotments from these development projects faced the constant threat of forcible eviction or constrained sale to local powerholders such as *jotedars* (de Wilde 2011, 156–157). This could happen *despite* them holding formal land rights recorded by agencies of the state (Adnan 2006). In any case, however, development projects such as the LRP and CDSP operated on a relatively small scale and could give allotments to only a tiny fraction of the masses of poor peasants seeking land in Noakhali.

#### **Option 4: de facto land gains through illegal forest clearance under the banadasyus**

An alternative avenue of gaining *de facto* land rights became available when the afforestation projects initiated by the Noakhali forest department began to mature during the 1990s. By this stage, the new *char* soils had become consolidated and economically attractive. Such prospects encouraged a coterie of enterprising operators among the peasantry to illicitly cut down these state forests and take possession of the cleared lands.<sup>23</sup> They gained notoriety as *banadasyus* ('forest

<sup>17</sup>Vide settlement no. 91/85-86 by the Government of Bangladesh.

<sup>18</sup>Vide letter from Ministry of Land to Noakhali district administration dated 30 May 2000 (Ref: 91-71/98-1901/SA of 29 November 1998), regarding allotment of land to landless households in Char Baggardona of Sudharam Upazila of Noakhali.

<sup>19</sup>For instance, *jotedars* launched a violent attack on 29 June 1984 against landless peasants allotted plots by the LRP (Matin 1986b, Adnan 2006).

<sup>20</sup>Allotment of state lands was given on the basis of 99-year leases (*Ajker Kagaj* 16 June 2004).

<sup>21</sup>*Deshar Khabor* (23 January 1999) and de Wilde (2011, 164–168). Also, copies of official lists of the occupants of state lands with reference to the Noakhali Shrimp Zone.

<sup>22</sup>Fraudulent practices, including forgery of land rights documents, were rampant in Noakhali (Foyej 2004).

<sup>23</sup>*Jugantar* (4 June 2001) and *Ajker Kagaj* (16 June 2004 and 22 June 2004). The clearing of forests in the Ganges–Brahmaputra–Meghna delta for land reclamation can be traced back to the expansion of the Mughal Empire in the early seventeenth century (Eaton 1997, 210–226).

bandits’) by using violence to expel forest officials and the police from the areas under their control (Nabil 2003, 21, Sajjaduzzaman *et al.* 2005, 733, de Wilde 2011, 158–159).

The *banadasyu* gangs mobilized landless peasants from the surrounding delta to serve as the workforce for clearing forests. They gave these migrant households small plots to cultivate and build their homesteads, who thus became illegal squatters on state lands (Sajjaduzzaman *et al.* 2005, 733). The latter were required to make an initial ‘down payment’ for gaining access to land, and then pay ‘rent’ periodically to the bandit leader for cultivating their subsistence plots.<sup>24</sup> This kind of *de facto* ‘squattling right’ was quite effective for everyday use within the domain controlled by the concerned *banadasyus*. However, it not only lacked legal recognition but also was quite insecure, being contingent upon the squatters’ continuing to have good relations with the concerned bandit gangs.

Furthermore, these landless families were subject to the absolute social power of the concerned *banadasyu* leaders, who ‘promulgated local decrees’ within their respective domains to exploit and repress them with ruthless violence. At the same time, the squatter households faced constant threats from rival gangs attempting to grab their lands through violent means, inclusive of harassment, arson, assault, rape and killings. Given such predatory power relations, the landless squatters in the Noakhali *chars* desperately needed the protection of their ‘own’ *banadasyu* patrons.

However, unlike the *jotedars* based in peasant villages and operating in collaboration with the administration, the *banadasyus* were clear-cut outlaws who did not have any territorial base among the mainstream peasantry. Since they operated in open defiance of forest officials and the police, they also needed cover against possible punitive actions by the latter. Consequently, the *banadasyu* leaders sought the protection of patrons in the local power structure such as Members of Parliament (MP) and political party bosses, as well as influential businessmen and industrialists.<sup>25</sup> In return, the forest bandits gave their patrons a part of the rent and other forms of surplus extracted from their squatter clientele.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, they assisted their patrons in grabbing lands in the Noakhali *chars*, and also sold *de facto possession* of lands under their control to other wealthy interest groups.<sup>27</sup>

### **Option 5: de jure rights through routine land settlements**

Poor peasants squatting on state lands faced the constant threat of resumption by the administration, or forcible takeover by armed gangs deployed by powerful political and commercial interest groups. Consequently, they took every available opportunity to apply to the administration for formal land rights through routine settlement procedures. Such attempts were *not routed through the power structure* of rural Noakhali, since the poor peasants did not apply as clients of *jotedars* or *banadasyus*, but rather as citizens of the country. However, they were in no position

<sup>24</sup>*Jugantar* (4 June 2001), Nabil (2003) and Sajjaduzzaman *et al.* (2005, 732).

<sup>25</sup>Nabil (2003, 21), *Jugantar* (4 June 2001), *Janakantha* (11 December 2003 and 14 December 2003), *Prothom Alo* (11 December 2003 and 21 January 2004) and *Sangram* (2 January 2004).

<sup>26</sup>Nabil (2003, 20–21), and *Jugantar* (4 June 2001). Statement by an arrested *banadasyu* leader (*Sangram*, 2 January 2004).

<sup>27</sup>*Sangram* (2 January 2004) and Sajjaduzzaman *et al.* (2005, 733).

to compete with wealthier interest groups having far greater influence on the state machinery and the power structure controlled by the major political parties. Given the class biases and corruption of the civil administration, their attempts to gain formal land rights were usually not successful.

Significantly, in their applications to the civil administration for land settlement, poor peasants explicitly referred to any state lands that they already held under occupation (e.g. as squatters). This was because the law recognized *de facto possession* over a continuous period of time as a basis for the award of formal land rights (Foyej 2003). In fact, *all* classes, whether rich or poor, attempted to gain *possession* of state lands first, in order to cite such prior possession in support of their applications for *de jure* rights.

The primary basis of such *de facto* possession was actual control on the concerned holding, which depended upon the capability to fend off possible takeover by other private contenders or agencies of the state (Jansen and Roquas 1998, 91–94). The *effectiveness* of such possession was therefore crucially *dependent upon power relations* and could be modified through the use of force and intimidation. These considerations provided a systematic *rationale* for *pre-emptive* land grabs in the Noakhali *chars*, involving a *two-stage* strategy in which gaining *de facto* possession was the essential first step, followed by its legitimation through application for formal land rights (Nabil 2003, 19).

### 5. The Noakhali Shrimp Zone: land grabs by the state and wealthy interest groups *Advent of the shrimp zone rules in 1992*

As the forested tracts of the Noakhali *chars* were cleared and made arable, influential politicians and businessmen became interested in gaining control over them. However, existing government policies did not give priority to such groups in the allotment of state lands. The latter were also concerned to get allotment of much larger holdings than the small subsistence plots awarded to poor peasants. Consequently, they were keen to change government policy on these lines. However, considerations of political expediency required that any such policy change be *justified* on grounds that could be projected as being ‘in the national interest’ and, hence, ‘legitimate’.

Significantly, such a ‘justification’ became available at this juncture due to the impacts of neoliberal globalization on Bangladesh. From the 1980s, the country became subject to structural adjustment programmes and their derivative policy prescriptions (e.g. PRSPs), imposed by the IMF, the World Bank and other donor agencies (Sobhan 2007, 332–333, cf. Fortin 2005). These pressures from the global level induced the government to adopt neoliberal policies, which included the privatization of state lands for the promotion of export-oriented agriculture, notably shrimp farming (Guimaraes 2002, Bhattacharya *et al.* 2005). During the second half of the 1980s, major international banks and development agencies began financing projects for promoting commercial shrimp production in Bangladesh.<sup>28</sup> The output and export of shrimps were also boosted by rising demand in the world market and

<sup>28</sup>The World Bank and the UNDP funded the Shrimp Culture Project in 1986 and the Third Fisheries Project in 1991 (Guimaraes 2002, 298–299, 307–311), while the Asian Development Bank supported another shrimp project in Chittagong in southeastern Bangladesh.

facilitated by global supply chains linking producers in Bangladesh with consumers in the US, Japan and Europe (Guimaraes 2002, 209–214).

Setting up ‘shrimp farms for boosting export earnings’ provided precisely the kind of legitimate ground being sought by wealthy interest groups to get priority in the allotment of state lands. Pressure on the government from this domestic lobby served to reinforce the neoliberal policy prescriptions from international agencies (de Wilde 2011, 156). Their combined influence led to the announcement of the *Chingri Mahal* or shrimp zone rules in 1992 by the reigning BNP government.<sup>29</sup> This declaration marked a critical shift in government policy on the allotment of state lands in Bangladesh. While the erstwhile priority given to poor peasants continued to be nominally kept in the books, wealthy interest groups became entitled to claim priority in land allotment by invoking the official rules for promotion of shrimp farming (Guimaraes 2002, 298).

### *Enclosure Phase I: pre-emptive land grabs for shrimp farms, 1992–2003*

Even though announcement of these rules in 1992 did not immediately result in the establishment of a shrimp zone in Noakhali, the very fact that the government was promoting the idea encouraged powerful interest groups to stake pre-emptive claims on *char* lands under that pretext. During the subsequent decade (1992–2003), large chunks of the Noakhali *chars* were taken over by these powerful groups, marking the *first* of several phases of enclosure.

The Noakhali district administration contributed to this process by manipulating official rules to allot to wealthy and powerful interests more lands than permitted.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, plots held by the poor were fraudulently transferred to rich and influential parties by corrupt officials versed in manipulating the law and land records (Foyej 2004). In parallel, powerful interest groups made violent attacks on poor peasants aimed at seizing their lands.<sup>31</sup> In some cases, forgery of land records was combined with the use of force, indicating the use of multi-pronged strategies of land grabbing.<sup>32</sup>

Significantly, even though the national press explicitly reported such brazen acts of land grabbing in the Noakhali *chars*, virtually no action was taken by the police and civil administration against the illegal use of force and fraudulent manipulation of land records by powerful interest groups.<sup>33</sup> This was suggestive of the complicity of state functionaries in land grabs through acts of *omission* as well as *commission*.

The identities of the social groups and agencies involved in grabbing *char* areas in Noakhali provide significant clues about the social and political bases of land alienation (Nabil 2003, 17–24). Firstly, there were politicians operating at local and

<sup>29</sup>The *Chingri Mahal* (shrimp zone) rules, memo no. 217 of the Ministry of Land, dated 30 March 1992 (*Ittefaq*, 5 December 1999).

<sup>30</sup>*Ittefaq* (5 December 1999), *Noakhali* (27 October 1996) and *Abayab* (16 November 1996).

<sup>31</sup>*Banglabazar Patrika* (24 October 2000) and *Ittefaq* (25 October 2000). For instance, in 2000, armed gangs sent in by powerful interest groups attacked 75 landless households in Char Bagga, causing death and injury.

<sup>32</sup>Foyej (2004), *Prothom Alo* (2 August 2001), *Manabjamin* (2 August 2001), *Ittefaq* (2 August 2001 and 3 August 2001), *Jugantar* (3 August 2001), *Ajker Kagaj* (3 August 2001) and *Sangbad* (3 August 2001).

<sup>33</sup>*Ittefaq* (1 December 2001), *Jugantar* (1 December 2001), *Bhorer Kagaj* (3 August 2001 and 2 December 2001), *Ajker Kagaj* (2 December 2001 and 4 December 2001) and *Sangbad* (3 December 2001).

national levels, some of whose home bases were in Noakhali, inclusive of Ministers, Members of Parliament (MP), bosses of political parties, and Chairmen and Members of Union Parishads. In particular, certain top politicians at the national level are alleged to have used their influence on a 'commission basis' to facilitate legal allotment, or illegal occupation, of *char* lands benefiting these interest groups.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, large business houses, mostly agro-fisheries or 'agro-vet' enterprises, grabbed *de facto* possession of hundreds of acres, claiming to be setting up 'shrimp' farms.<sup>35</sup> Thirdly, *char* lands were also taken into possession by middle and upper-middle class professionals such as contractors, lawyers, college teachers and journalists, mostly based in urban areas. The constellation of social groups gaining lands in the Noakhali *chars* thus consisted of influential classes with political and commercial interests at local and national levels, most of whom were literate and urban-based.

Significantly, members of these land-grabbing interest groups were affiliated to not only the current ruling political party, but also the major opposition parties.<sup>36</sup> This is indicative of *collusion* and division of the spoils among all the major political fractions within these classes, rather than discriminatory patronage channelled to the followers of any particular political party or factional grouping. In effect, at work was an 'all-party coalition' of land-grabbing groups which shared this common interest despite differences in their political affiliation. Furthermore, this coalition of land-grabbing powerholders, businessmen and professional groups was arrayed along a *class-based* axis against the poor peasantry whose lands they were taking over.

During 1992–2003, poor peasants in Noakhali resisted violent attacks aimed at grabbing their lands as best as they could. For instance, in 2000, hundreds of poor peasants protested publicly against illegal seizure of their state-allotted lands, holding processions and a meeting in front of the district administration offices.<sup>37</sup> In 2003, poor peasants of Char Wapda and Char Clark protested against the local MP, belonging to the ruling party (BNP), and Union Parishad (UP) members who had set up an unauthorized shrimp farm that threatened to waterlog their homesteads and crops.<sup>38</sup> They brought out a procession and held a protest meeting under the banner of the Bhumihheen (Landless') Association and submitted a memorandum to the DC (Foyej 2004).

In certain instances, overt resistance by the poor peasantry against land grabbers resulted in further repression upon them, reflective of the *interactive dynamics* of domination and resistance (cf. Adnan 2007, 222). In 1999, poor peasants lodged a court case against a local powerholder who had blocked a river in Char Dhaner Shish to create a shrimp farm that had resulted in the waterlogging of their lands.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup>*Sangbad* (13 September 1999). These politicians were reported to have been offered commissions in the form of 'shares' of the thousands of acres that were expected to be grabbed.

<sup>35</sup>Nabil (2003, 22), Sajjaduzzaman *et al.* (2005, 733), *Jugantar* (7 March 2007) and *Amar Desh* (14 May 2007).

<sup>36</sup>Nabil (2003, 19), Foyej (2004), *Prothom Alo* (21 January 2004) and *Ajker Kagaj* (16 June 2004).

<sup>37</sup>*Ittefaq* (6 August 2000), *Banglar Bani* (31 July 2000) and *Prothom Alo* (7 August 2000).

<sup>38</sup>*Samakal Barta* (25 February 2003) and *Lok Sangbad* (1 March 2003).

<sup>39</sup>*Loka Sangbad* (30 May 1999 and 1 July 1999), *Ittefaq* (1 July 1999), *Banglabazar Patrika* (2 July 1999) and *Muktakantha* (4 July 1999 and 6 July 1999).

In reprisal, thugs deployed by the former assaulted these peasants and burnt down their homesteads. In Char Majid landless squatters were able to thwart armed gangs deployed by a big business house to seize their lands in 2000, but were confronted with further attacks the following year.<sup>40</sup>

### *Declaration of the Noakhali Shrimp Zone*

During the decade following the declaration of the Shrimp Zone Rules in 1992, the Noakhali district administration continued to forward applications for setting up private shrimp farms to concerned ministries and departments.<sup>41</sup> On 1 October 2002, the district ‘Shrimp Resources Development and Management’ (SRDM) committee decided to submit a proposal to the Ministry of Land for setting up a shrimp zone in Noakhali.<sup>42</sup> On 6 May 2003, the Ministry approved the establishment of the *Chingri Mahal* (shrimp zone) and the decision was announced locally in Noakhali on 21 May 2003 (de Wilde 2011, 156).<sup>43</sup>

Significantly, the economic and demographic arguments used by the district administration to justify the establishment of the Noakhali Shrimp Zone (NSZ) were deceptive and inaccurate. An inherent paradox lay in the fact that the agro-climatic and ecological conditions of the Noakhali *chars* were *not* suitable for the production of the major export-earning species of shrimps which required brackish water. Nonetheless, in the SRDM committee’s proposal, production of such brackish water shrimps was ‘made feasible’ by unwarrantedly interpolating the cost–returns data of a different species.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, the district administration claimed that the NSZ contained only state lands, implying that these had not been formally settled and hence were ‘empty’ and ‘available’ for shrimp farming.<sup>45</sup> This kind of labelling of the lands within the zone was also convenient for the administration, since it meant that there were no legitimate landholders who would have to be informed, consulted with, and compensated (cf. Cotula and Vermeulen 2011, 44–46). However, official documents

<sup>40</sup>*Prabhat* (1 March 2000, 3 March 2000 and 15 March 2000), *Ittefaq* (1 March 2000 and 14 February 2001) and *Muktakantha* (1 March 2000).

<sup>41</sup>*Sangbad* (13 September 1999) and *Ittefaq* (5 December 1999).

<sup>42</sup>Minutes of the meeting of 1 October 2002 of the SRDM committee, chaired by the DC of Noakhali, dated 18 November 2002, Memo no. JePra/Noa/Chingri/S, A/13-30/2002-1883(30). Endorsed by letter from the DC Office of Noakhali to the Secretary of the Ministry of Land, dated 21 November 2002, Memo no. JePro/Noa/Chingri/S, A/13-30/2002/1898.

<sup>43</sup>Letter from Ministry of Land to DC of Noakhali, dated 6 May 2003, Reference no. Bhum/Shah-8/600/2002/320, and Ministry of Land, Memo No. Land/Section/8/ Revenue/227/91/217. *Manabjamin* (26 May 2003), *Banglabazar Patrika* (27 May 2003) and *Loka Sangbad* (1 June 2003).

<sup>44</sup>*Loka Sangbad* (1 March 2004). The committee’s proposal was based on *large* farms suitable for *brackish water* shrimps (*penaeus monodon* or *bagda chingri*), even though their production was *not* feasible in Noakhali because of inadequate salinity. However the committee unwarrantedly interposed cost–returns data of *freshwater* prawns (*macrobrachium rosenbergii* or *galda chingri*), which could be grown in Noakhali, but needed much *smaller* units based on family labour to be profitable (i.e. by excluding the significant supervision costs of wage labour). See also Guimaraes (2002, 181–184, Table 7.1, and 205–213, Figure 8.1 and Table 8.1).

<sup>45</sup>Framing in terms of ‘empty’ lands has been used to justify the *eviction* of the incumbent peasantry (Guttal and Monsalve 2011, 75, Borrás and Franco 2010, 9–10, 19–20) and take over their lands (LRAN 2011, 8).

and press reports clearly indicated that sizeable areas within the NSZ had been previously settled with peasants and other private landholders, or transferred to state agencies such as the Ministry of Forests.<sup>46</sup>

Immediately after the shrimp zone was announced, massive protests were organized by the Noakhali Sadar Upazila Landless' Coordination Association (NSULCA).<sup>47</sup> On 25 May 2003, thousands of peasant men and women blockaded (*gherao*) the office of the Deputy Commissioner in Noakhali town under its banner and submitted a petition demanding cancellation of the shrimp zone.<sup>48</sup> This was copied to the Ministers of Land and Law, the local Member of Parliament and the district Police Superintendent, all of whom, ironically, had played key roles in the establishment of the NSZ. The Association also held a press conference and released a statement to the media demanding that the state-owned (*khas*) lands within the zone be re-allotted to landless peasants.<sup>49</sup> They also apprehended (perceptively) that the declaration would be manipulated by the administration to pre-emptively evict poor peasants from their lands within the zone *before* the latter could establish formal rights.<sup>50</sup>

### ***Enclosure Phase II: land grabs following declaration of the shrimp zone***

Eviction of poor peasants from state lands in their possession undoubtedly *accelerated* after the declaration of the NSZ. Powerful politicians and commercial interests were reported to be conniving to grab not only the area inside the zone but also all available state lands in Noakhali district.<sup>51</sup> This massive enclosure programme was undertaken through a twofold strategy combining land seizure and land denial.

Poor peasants already holding *de jure* or *de facto* land rights in Noakhali became the prime targets of systematic attacks by powerful land grabbers (de Wilde 2011, 156). From mid 2003, those holding state lands in Char Bagger Dona and Char Jabbar began to be violently evicted by *jotedars*, some of whom were UP Chairmen and Members. Poor peasant households occupying state lands in Char Majid were repeatedly attacked by armed gangs of a local political leader wanting to expand his agribusiness.<sup>52</sup> Significantly, they had been listed earlier by the CDSP as being

<sup>46</sup>Nearly 15,000 households had been living in the designated area of the NSZ for the *preceding* 12–15 years, of whom 8000 had obtained formal land rights of one kind or another. Nearly 6000 acres of agricultural land had been occupied illegally for shrimp farms, with 4000 acres of forest being destroyed in the process, *before* the declaration of the zone was made. Vide letter from the DC Office of Noakhali to the Secretary of the Ministry of Land, dated 21 November 2002, Memo no. JePro/Noa/Chingri/S, A/13-30/2002/1898. Also, *Star* (29 February 2004) and *Ajker Kagaj* (16 June 2004).

<sup>47</sup>*Banglabazar Patrika* (27 May 2003).

<sup>48</sup>Petition addressed to the DC of Noakhali by NSULCA on 25 May 2003.

<sup>49</sup>Press release by the NSULCA on 25 May 2003. *Manabjain* (26 May 2003), *Jugantar* (26 May 2003), *Banglabazar Patrika* (10 June 2003), *Prothom Alo* (26 May 2003), *Ajker Kagaj* (26 May 2003) and *Gonojagoron* (26 May 2003).

<sup>50</sup>*Loka Sangbad* (1 June 2003) and *Banglabazar Patrika* (10 June 2003).

<sup>51</sup>*Prothom Alo* (20 January 2004). There were more than 47,000 acres of state lands in Noakhali, of which only around a quarter was located within the shrimp zone.

<sup>52</sup>*Jugantar* (22 June 2003), *Banglabazar Patrika* (22 June 2003) and *Prothom Alo* (25 June 2003).

eligible for award of formal rights on the lands in their possession, which became the objects of such attacks.

In parallel to these acts of land *seizure*, allotment of shrimp farms to rich and powerful interest groups amounted to the *denial* of such state lands to the poor peasantry. The official rules were manipulated by the district administration to allot unduly large shrimp farms to influential politicians of the ruling and opposition parties, as well as industrialists and businessmen (Foyej 2004). Allotment of land was often made *covertly* to the relatives and followers of these powerful individuals (*benami*). The official rules requiring that allottees must have prior experience and technical expertise in shrimp farming were typically disregarded.<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, little attempt was made to avoid 'conflict of interest' situations involving government officials. The Deputy Commissioner and Superintendent of Police of Noakhali acknowledged that many of their departmental staff had applied for allotment of shrimp farms and were going to get them.<sup>54</sup> Members of the civil administration and security forces were thus not only complicit in the dispossession of the poor peasantry but also became private beneficiaries of the process.

Significantly, the opportunity to apply for new shrimp farms was also utilized by powerful interests to formalize rights on lands that they had seized earlier by illegal means.<sup>55</sup> Ironically, the neoliberal policy of privatizing state lands provided them with precisely the kind of legal cover that they needed to legitimate such illegal possessions.<sup>56</sup>

## 6. Contradictions within the power structure and the state apparatus

### *Conflict between forest bandits and their patrons*

Establishment of the NSZ not only accelerated pre-existing trends of land alienation but also sharpened incipient contradictions within the power structure of the region. In particular, the political and commercial patrons who had been providing protective cover to the *banadasyus* became interested in getting hold of the state lands occupied by the landless peasants under the latter's protection. They now demanded that the forest bandits evict these squatters and hand over the vacated lands to them.

This directive from their patrons placed the *banadasyus* in a dilemma. Evicting the squatters would mean dismantling the very clientelist relationships that constituted the source of their own strength and resources.<sup>57</sup> These landless households provided them with new recruits for their armed gangs and the labour force needed for forest clearance, as well as rent and other forms of surplus and personal services. Consequently, the forest bandits were unwilling to evict the squatters in their *own enlightened self-interest*, rather than any great concern for them.<sup>58</sup> However, this also made the latter the only group within the power structure that opposed the influential political and commercial interest groups bent upon grabbing the lands occupied by the squatters.

<sup>53</sup> Prothom Alo (20 October 2004).

<sup>54</sup> Prothom Alo (20 October 2004).

<sup>55</sup> Prothom Alo (20 October 2004) and *Ajker Kagaj* (16 June 2004).

<sup>56</sup> Nabil (2003, 22), *Khabarpatra* (23 September 2003), *Ajker Kagaj* (16 June 2004) and Prothom Alo (20 October 2004).

<sup>57</sup> *Bhorer Kagoj* (15 December 2003).

<sup>58</sup> *Sangbad* (20 September 2003).

Furthermore, apprehensions about the *banadasyus* were expressed by wealthy applicants for farms in the shrimp zone. They feared that it would not be possible to get *possession* of allotted plots if these were in areas under bandit control, where the administration and police lacked effective authority.<sup>59</sup> In parallel, a public call for the arrest of the *banadasyus* and destruction of their forest bases was made at a gathering of over 5000 poor peasants in Boyar Char, organized by the Landless' Association on 21 October 2003.<sup>60</sup>

These developments indicate that, by the second half of 2003, the *banadasyus* had not only become distanced from their patrons among powerful interest groups but also faced open defiance from organized sections of the poor peasantry, located respectively above and below them in the hierarchy of class and power relations. This polarization of forces had been triggered by the establishment of the shrimp zone a few months earlier. It led inexorably towards a violent confrontation between these groups with opposed interests, located at different levels of the class and power structures of the Noakhali *chars*.<sup>61</sup>

The critical conjuncture came at the end of 2003, when the erstwhile political and commercial patrons of the *banadasyus* decided to crush them altogether. At their behest, the media began to portray the forest bandits as criminal outlaws against whom punitive measures needed to be taken. With the active connivance of two powerful ministers, these influential interest groups were able to mobilize state power for a massive operation against the *banadasyus*. Contingents of several military and paramilitary forces were brought in from around the country to reinforce the police and district administration of Noakhali.<sup>62</sup> This pre-planned operation by security forces was launched on 7 December 2003 and continued during the succeeding weeks.<sup>63</sup> It was justified by the government as being necessary 'to free state lands occupied by the forest bandits and gain possession over them'.<sup>64</sup>

The presence of the security forces served to embolden the poor peasantry, triggering a massive outburst of violence against the bandit groups that had long exploited and repressed them. The vengeful anger of the poor was stoked by members of the local power structure such as MPs, UP chairmen and members, even though they had formerly utilized the *banadasyus* to serve their own interests.<sup>65</sup> Mobs of angry peasants chased and lynched the gang members with the tacit approval of the security forces and senior officials present (including the DC and the superintendent of police).<sup>66</sup> During a short span of two weeks in December 2003,

<sup>59</sup>*Sangbad* (20 September 2003) and *Star* (29 February 2004).

<sup>60</sup>*Prothom Alo* (22 October 2003), *Manabjamin* (22 October 2003) and *Banglabazar Patrika* (22 October 2003).

<sup>61</sup>Comments from Edward Lahiff on an earlier draft helped to clarify this point.

<sup>62</sup>These included the paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) commanded by army officers as well as the coastguard of the navy to block possible escape routes of the *banadasyus* by waterways. Kaiser (2003, 4), *Banglabazar Patrika* (10 December 2003 and 11 December 2003), *Janakantha* (10 December 2003) and *Bhorer Kagaj* (15 December 2003).

<sup>63</sup>*Janakantha* (10 December 2003) and *Bhorer Kagaj* (15 December 2003).

<sup>64</sup>*Bhorer Kagaj* (15 December 2003).

<sup>65</sup>*Bhorer Kagaj* (15 December 2003), *Janakantha* (19 December 2003), *Manabjamin* (21 December 2003) and *Banglabazar Patrika* (21 December 2003).

<sup>66</sup>Foyej (2003) and Kaiser (2004). Major national dailies provided detailed coverage of these violent events in the remote *chars* of Noakhali: *Prothom Alo* (8 December 2003, 9 December 2003 and 10 December 2003), *Banglabazar Patrika* (8 December 2003, 9 December 2003, 11 December 2003 and 21 December 2003), *The Independent* (11 December 2003), *Janakantha*

around 40 members of the bandit gangs were killed, many had their eyes gouged out, and hundreds were injured and arrested.<sup>67</sup> Thus, just seven months after the declaration of the shrimp zone, the *banadasyus* were ruthlessly crushed by a combination of state power and mob violence, manipulated by the powerful patrons whom they had dared to defy.<sup>68</sup>

### ***Enclosure Phase III: eviction of poor peasants following elimination of the banadasyus***

The political and commercial interests that had mobilized the security forces against the *banadasyus* went on to cynically manipulate the poor peasantry. The latter had participated vigorously in eliminating the bandit gangs in the hope that this would clear the way for gaining formal rights to state lands. However, as the bandits were hunted down, their erstwhile patrons turned swiftly against the poor peasantry, indiscriminately labelling them all as ‘followers’ of the *banadasyus*.<sup>69</sup> Armed thugs deployed by these groups attacked poor peasant families, burning down their homesteads and seizing their lands as they fled the area.<sup>70</sup> These violent attacks were lethal and systematic, taking place repeatedly to force these households to leave their lands for good.<sup>71</sup> In some instances, the victims were offered a small cash handout if they agreed to go ‘without any fuss’.<sup>72</sup>

This constituted the third phase of enclosure of poor peasant lands in the Noakhali *chars*, which was initiated almost immediately after the operation to crush the *banadasyus* in December 2003, and continued during the succeeding years.<sup>73</sup> Many of the locations of these attacks lay *within* the NSZ.<sup>74</sup> As in earlier phases, these were usually aimed at *pre-emptive* eviction of poor peasants in order to take over the state lands in their possession *before* they could obtain formal rights.<sup>75</sup> For instance, landless squatters in Char Uria were attacked in July 2004 by armed gangs bent on capturing over a thousand acre of state lands in their possession.<sup>76</sup> Significantly, the victims reported that the district administration had given them application forms earlier for award of rights on the lands that were subsequently grabbed.

Poor peasants in Noakhali continued to resist such attacks even after the *banadasyus* had been eliminated. In February 2004, squatter households in Char

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(9 December 2003, 10 December 2003 and 19 December 2003), and *Manabjamin* (14 December 2003 and 21 December 2003).

<sup>67</sup>Such retributive justice had precedents in the tradition of peasant movements in Bangladesh. In 1969, angry mobs had executed cattle thieves in the *char* areas of Tangail under the banner of the local peasant association (*Krishak Samity*) (Hossain 2003, 318–319).

<sup>68</sup>*Banglabazar Patrika* (8 February 2004) and *Janakantha* (21 April 2004 and 2 June 2004).

<sup>69</sup>*Manabjamin* (12 December 2003, 13 December 2003 and 16 December 2003) and Kaiser (2003, 5–6).

<sup>70</sup>*Jugantar* (14 December 2003), *Manabjamin* (17 December 2003, 28 March 2004 and 15 July 2004), *Prothom Alo* (17 December 2003 and 12 July 2004), *Ajker Kagaj* (16 June 2004), *Janakantha* (11 July 2004), and *Banglabazar Patrika* (13 July 2004 and 24 March 2004).

<sup>71</sup>*Banglabazar Patrika* (24 March 2004) and *Manabjamin* (28 March 2004).

<sup>72</sup>*Janakantha* (11 July 2004) and *Prothom Alo* (11 July 2004).

<sup>73</sup>*Ajker Kagaj* (16 June 2004), *Janakantha* (11 July 2004), *Prothom Alo* (12 July 2004), *Banglabazar Patrika* (13 July 2004) and *Manabjamin* (15 July 2004).

<sup>74</sup>*Banglabazar Patrika* (24 March 2004), *Manabjamin* (28 March 2004) and *Janakantha* (11 July 2004).

<sup>75</sup>*Banglabazar Patrika* (24 March 2004) and *Manabjamin* (28 March 2004).

<sup>76</sup>*Manabjamin* (15 July 2004).

Kalmi and Char Jatra were assaulted and their homesteads burnt down by armed gangs.<sup>77</sup> The latter were deployed by a powerful constellation of *jotedars*, UP officeholders and ruling party leaders under the banner of the Noakhali Shrimp Project Owners' Association (NSPOA), a class-based organization. The squatters were initially successful in repulsing the armed gangs and started rebuilding their homesteads. However, the attacks on Char Kalmi were resumed in March 2004.<sup>78</sup>

On 11 July 2004, groups of landless peasants in South Char Bagga held a peaceful protest meeting against forced eviction and associated police harassment.<sup>79</sup> However, on 21 July 2004, there was an extraordinary outburst of anger among poor peasants in Char Clark against the police who had extorted money and acted in the interest of a shrimp estate owner.<sup>80</sup> During the clash, several policemen were hurt and a police rifle and some uniforms were snatched away by the angry peasants. Feelings of moral indignation among the poor peasantry against unjust acts by the police *overrode their fear* of possible reprisals by powerholders and security forces (cf. Guha 1983, 167, Adnan 2007, 214–215, Walker 2008a, 469–471, Kerkvliet 2009, 234–235).

In some of these instances, poor peasants resorted to *counter-violence* against those attacking or oppressing them, reflecting a switch from *non-violent* to *violent* forms of overt resistance. However, the outcomes of such struggles varied from case to case and displayed reversals over time.

#### ***Underlying rationale and political significance of the elimination of the forest bandits***

The rationale underlying the elimination of the *banadasyus* has to be sought in the difference of interests between them and their patrons vis-à-vis their squatter clientele occupying state lands. Even though the forest bandits ruthlessly oppressed and exploited these landless households, they also *needed the presence of this captive population* on the lands under their control.<sup>81</sup> In contrast, the political and commercial groups that crushed the *banadasyus* were only concerned with grabbing the lands and had little interest in retaining the squatters holding them. Consequently, they adopted a *two-stage* strategy of political conflict and enclosure to attain this objective. In the first stage, they mobilized state power to eliminate the *banadasyus*, who posed the only significant source of opposition within the class and power structures to the eviction of the squatters.<sup>82</sup> Once these bandit gangs were on the run, they embarked on the second stage by evicting the squatter households, who could offer far less resistance without the protection of the *banadasyus* (Kaiser 2003). Significantly, this provided an instance of *multi-stage* land grabbing, involving a phase of '*in situ* displacement' (Feldman and Geisler 2012, 974–945, 980–981) during which the squatters were *kept in place*, while their protective cover was dismantled to clear the ground for subsequent eviction.

This sequence of moves by these political and commercial interest groups was guided by calculated manipulation of the state machinery and power structure in

<sup>77</sup> Prothom Alo (24 February 2004) and *Banglabazar Patrika* (2 March 2004).

<sup>78</sup> *Manabjamin* (19 March 2004 and 22 March 2004), *Jugantar* (19 March 2004) and *Ittefaq* (19 March 2004).

<sup>79</sup> Prothom Alo (12 July 2004).

<sup>80</sup> *Jugantar* (22 July 2004) and Prothom Alo (22 July 2004).

<sup>81</sup> Bhorer Kagoj (15 December 2003).

<sup>82</sup> Prothom Alo (11 July 2004).

order to bring about a deliberate shift in the class distribution of *char* lands. It climaxed with a decisive showdown that not only resolved the sharpening contradiction within the power structure but also provided a warning signal that further resistance to the grabbing of *char* lands would be ruthlessly crushed. This shift in the balance of forces in favour of land-grabbing classes had critical implications for the subsequent dynamics of land alienation, primitive accumulation and capitalist development in Noakhali.

### ***Roles of supporting coalitions and the higher judiciary***

The landless men and women of the Noakhali *chars* were actively involved at the forefront of the resistance against the powerful forces grabbing their lands. As a result, many of them became victims of litigation and imprisonment as well as harassment by corrupt police and court officials. Given this context, a number of activist NGOs and public interest agencies decided to become involved in providing assistance to the poor peasantry.<sup>83</sup> These ‘civil society’ organizations were subject to regulation by the state and typically mobilized their funds from foreign donor agencies, inclusive of Northern partner NGOs.<sup>84</sup>

These organizations played the role of a ‘supporting coalition’ for the poor peasantry, providing a variety of technical, financial and legal assistance that enabled them to mobilize resources and organize resistance against land grabbing. Such efforts contributed to the formation of the Landless’ (*Bhumiheen*) Coordination Association, noted above, which interlinked and united small groups of poor peasants scattered over the vast *char* areas. Branches of this federation at the sub-district (*upazila*) level played crucial roles in large-scale mobilization of poor peasants for organized resistance and collective action.

Members of this supporting coalition also provided free legal advice and services to poor peasants, inclusive of legal defence against (often false) cases lodged by the police and land grabbing interests. They filed public interest litigations on behalf of the poor peasantry, becoming involved in legal battles with the administration. In late 2003, a group of NGOs moved a writ petition in the High Court challenging the government’s decision to set up the NSZ as well as its attempts to evict landless peasants from lands inside the zone.<sup>85</sup> During legal proceedings on 24 January 2004, the administration agreed to halt eviction until the affected peasants could be adequately rehabilitated, but subsequently violated this commitment.<sup>86</sup> Consequently, another writ petition challenging this violation was lodged by a larger group

<sup>83</sup>Some left-wing political parties also attempted to organize the poor peasants of Noakhali. For instance, the Krishak Samity, a front organization of the Bangladesher Biplabi Communist Party (M-L), organized landless peasants in Char Dhalchar of Hatiya (Hossain 2003, 459).

<sup>84</sup>The NGO, Nijera Kori, played a leading role in supporting the poor peasantry all through, while involvement of the other organizations varied according to the issue concerned. The latter included BELA (Bangladesh Paribesh Ainbid Samity), BLAST (Bangladesh Legal Aid Services Trust), ASK (Ain o Shalish Kendra), ALRD (Association for Land Reform and Development), BSEHR (Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights), as well as a team of socially committed lawyers based in Noakhali.

<sup>85</sup>de Wilde (2011, 156). Writ petition no. 7248/2003 filed by Nijera Kori, in collaboration with BELA and BSEHR, and statement issued by BELA as advocate for the petitioner. *Manabjamin* (16 December 2003), *Ajker Kagaj* (16 December 2003), *The Independent* (16 December 2003), and *Banglabazar Patrika* (16 December 2003).

of NGOs on 1 September 2004.<sup>87</sup> In 2005, the court gave an order restraining the administration from evicting landless peasants until final judgement on the case was delivered.<sup>88</sup> The crucial consequence of this series of court orders was to provide poor peasants with *temporary reprieve against eviction* by agencies of the state.<sup>89</sup> However, such legal restraint did not apply to *private* interest groups, which continued to grab their lands undeterred.<sup>90</sup>

It is striking that the poor peasants of Noakhali faced a situation in which there was *no effective* mechanism within the executive machinery of the state or the political party structures for dealing with their grievances against land alienation. They had little choice but to appeal to the Prime Minister, the Minister for Land and Law, the DC, and other officeholders, even though almost all of them had displayed partisan attitudes in favour of the wealthier groups taking over their lands.<sup>91</sup> Not surprisingly, such appeals turned out to be futile, so that the formal judiciary remained the only institution to which they could turn for redress. But the lower echelons of the judiciary in Noakhali district were corrupt and, in any case, did not have the capability to stand up to pressure from powerful agencies. The role of the High Court at the national level assumes critical significance in this context because it was the only organ of state that was in a position to withstand pressure from the administrative executive, big business, and the power structure. Indeed, without the restraining orders of the High Court on the administration resulting from the public interest litigations lodged by their supporting coalition, it is unlikely that many of the poor peasants of Noakhali would have been able to hold on to their lands.

## 7. Conclusions and reflections

### *Avenues of gaining access to land*

The market, the state and power relations provided the broad avenues of gaining access to land in the Noakhali *chars*. Poor peasants typically lacked the means to purchase it in the property market. In many cases, they were also unable to obtain formal rights from the state through distributive land reform, reclamation projects, or routine settlement procedures. Given such limited prospects of gaining formal land rights, poor peasants typically sought *de facto* access to subsistence holdings through clientelist affiliation with powerholders.

Continuous land formation in this deltaic frontier provided *jotedars* and *banadasyus* with recurrent opportunities of grabbing possession of new *chars* and placing poor peasants on these state lands as squatters with *de facto* occupancy. This enabled them to extract (precapitalist ground) rent and personal services from the squatters, and also compel the latter to serve as their foot soldiers in local-level conflicts. Provision of this kind of 'squattling right' to landless peasants was therefore

<sup>86</sup>Rule of the High Court, dated 24 January 2004, on Writ Petition No. 7248 of 2003. *Dinkal* (25 January 2004) and *Prothom Alo* (25 January 2004).

<sup>87</sup>Writ Petition no. 5194/2004, filed by Nijera Kori in collaboration with BELA, BLAST, ASK, ALRD and BSEHR, and Rule on Writ Petition no. 5194 of 2004, dated 8 September 2004, by the High Court Division (Special Original Jurisdiction).

<sup>88</sup>Order on Writ Petition no. 5194 of 2004, dated 13 March 2005, in the Supreme Court of Bangladesh, High Court Division (Special Original Jurisdiction).

<sup>89</sup>*Prothom Alo* (25 January 2004).

<sup>90</sup>*Prothom Alo* (1 May 2006).

<sup>91</sup>*Banglabazar Patrika* (10 June 2003).

integral to the *functional* needs of the social organization of production as well as the clientelist power relations prevailing in the Noakhali *chars*. Consequently, this avenue of gaining *de facto* access to land continued to be viable as long as such functions were necessary. Correlatively, it began to be closed down as changes in production organization and power relations in Noakhali made landless peasants increasingly redundant as sharecroppers and clients.

In contrast to the poor peasantry, wealthier political and commercial interest groups did not initially have priority in government policies for distribution of state lands. However, they could gain direct access through market purchase of *de jure* and *de facto* land rights, as well as other kinds of market transactions such as usufructuary mortgage. In any case, these groups also had the capability to grab land through violent means, operating through armed gangs or local powerholders such as *jotedars* and *banadasyus* (Nabil 2003, 19). Furthermore, their prospects of gaining access to state lands were greatly boosted by the subsequent shrimp zoning interventions of the government under the influence of neoliberal policy regimes.

### *Alienation of the lands of the poor peasantry*

As with land gains, the state, the market, and power relations provided the three major avenues of alienating the lands of the poor peasantry. Private interest groups, government agencies and international organizations operated through these alternative mechanisms in particular ways, as follows.

Big business houses and powerholders used a wide variety of market and non-market, economic and extra-economic, as well as legal and illegal mechanisms to establish control over the lands held by the poor peasantry. These included eviction through violent means, falsification of land records through bribery and manipulation, harassment of incumbents through spurious litigation and false allegations to the police, use of fictitious mortgage contracts to circumvent restrictions on land sale,<sup>92</sup> as well as cash inducements to buy out the incumbents (cf. Khan 2004, 98, Adnan and Dastidar 2011). Displacement of poor peasants from their lands often took the form of 'distress sale' (Deiningner 2003, 96–97, Fortin 2005, 164), induced by violence, intimidation, legal harassment, deliberate waterlogging, etc. This kind of constrained *market* sale constituted the *terminal* link in a longer chain of causation driven by antecedent *extra-economic* pressures.

Although the normative role of the state is to protect the property rights of all citizens, in this instance its executive and law-making machineries acted in a partisan manner to transfer the *existing* holdings of poor peasants, as well as their *potential* land entitlements, to wealthier classes. Firstly, the state made critical changes to pre-existing property rights and land allotment procedures, which profoundly altered the ground rules governing access to land. During the 1970s, the government had subscribed to the rhetoric of allotting state lands to the poor through distributive land reform, routine settlements, and reclamation projects. However, declaration of the shrimp zone rules in 1992 and the NSZ in 2003 drastically altered the allotment priorities in favour of wealthy interest groups, effectively amounting to *denial* of entitlement to land to the poor peasantry.

<sup>92</sup>Comparable mechanisms for circumventing restrictions on sale of land have been noted in Nicaragua (Deiningner 2003, 122–123).

Secondly, the administration undertook direct *seizure* by declaring *all* areas within the NSZ as public property, including not only state lands but also those on which peasants already held formal settlements (or had applied for such rights). In the latter instances, the state used its prerogative of *eminent domain* to acquire these peasant holdings against their wishes, making such lands *available in the first place* to private interest groups. In effect, the state served as ‘land broker extraordinary’, transferring private and public lands to the rich for *private profit-making*.<sup>93</sup>

Thirdly, a massive exercise in state violence was undertaken against the forest bandits to remove the only significant source of opposition within the power structure to the eviction of squatters from their lands. This critical intervention by the state not only shifted the balance of forces in favour of land grabbing classes but also underscored the futility of further resistance to land alienation.

These multi-faceted roles of the state facilitated and legitimated the massive enclosure of public and private lands in Noakhali by powerful interest groups at the expense of the poor peasantry. In effect, its executive and legislative machineries served as the *primary instruments of land alienation*.<sup>94</sup> However, rulings by the higher judiciary served to partly balance the excesses of the administrative executive, indicating that these distinct organs of the state did not entirely function as a monolithic apparatus (Adnan 2006).

Factors at the global level, while operating at a distance, also played critical roles that contributed to the land grabs in the Noakhali *chars*. By imposing structural adjustment programmes, international financial and donor agencies promoted the neoliberal policies leading to the declaration of the shrimp zone rules and the NSZ. These, in turn, resulted in denial of land entitlements to the poor. The agribusiness enterprises emerging in Noakhali were linked to transnational corporations through global supply chains, all of which had a common interest in converting the subsistence lands of the peasantry into commercial holdings (cf. Fortin 2005, 153–155). Moreover, promotion of shrimp farming through projects funded by international banks and development agencies motivated powerful interest groups to *seize* lands under that pretext. These varied international policy influences and market linkages thus constituted distinct strands of neoliberal globalization that facilitated land alienation in Noakhali.

Viewed as a whole, land grabs in Noakhali were the outcomes of multiple factors operating in combination, indicative of a complex and extended chain of causation that stretched from the local to the national and international arenas. The convergent effects of factors at multiple levels is pre-eminently illustrated by the fact that the *state* enacted neoliberal shrimp zoning policies under the *combined* pressure of *domestic* interest groups and *international* banks and donor agencies. This also demonstrates that the lands of the poor were under threat from not only

<sup>93</sup>This was in sharp contrast to the more accepted and legitimate role of the state in acquiring private lands for *public purposes*. Comparable roles have been played by the state in the special economic zones of India (Walker 2008b, 580, citing Bhaduri 2008, Levien 2012, 941) and China (Walker 2006, 4, 2008a, 464–466).

<sup>94</sup>The roles of the executive and legislative machineries of the state in earlier instances of land enclosure and primitive accumulation have been noted by Marx (2010, 505–506, 528) and Harvey (2005, 145–150). The state has played comparable roles in other parts of Bangladesh (Adnan 2004, Adnan and Dastidar 2011).

the agencies *directly* seizing them but also those *indirectly* generating the incremental demand for their capture.

Significantly, overarching factor that played a decisive role in varied forms of land alienation was power relations. Despite using illegal violence and fraud, private interest groups were able to grab lands with impunity because they were powerful enough to influence the police and civil administration to remain inactive. Even plots formally allotted to poor peasants by government agencies and programmes (e.g. the LRP and CDSP) were vulnerable to forcible seizure by *jotedars* and other powerholders using illegal violence. Indeed, given the predatory power relations prevailing in the Noakhali *chars*, the mere fact of having titles or formal land rights did not necessarily provide tenurial security against forced eviction (Adnan 2006).<sup>95</sup> The critical determinant in these varied instances was not the lack of formal rights, or *ambiguity* in the legal status of holdings (Sato 2000, 272), but rather the *unequal power relations* between the poor peasantry and the agencies grabbing their lands.

Overall, the poor peasants of Noakhali were denied their entitlement to *de jure* right through deliberate changes in the laws and policies pertaining to allotment of state lands, particularly during the establishment of the shrimp zone. In parallel, their existing holdings became the targets of forcible takeover by the state and private agencies. The cumulative consequence of these multiple strands of land denial and seizure was the systematic *de-linking* of the poor peasantry from access to land, undermining their capability to survive through subsistence farming.

### ***Resistance to land alienation and primitive accumulation***

Despite the predatory power relations to which the poor peasants of Noakhali were subject, it is striking that they displayed the capability to undertake *overt* resistance to land alienation (Tilly 1978, 73, 126, cf. Wolf 1969). They used both violent and non-violent actions, inclusive of mobilization and collective action, reflecting a diverse *repertoire of resistance* (Tilly 1978, 151–158, Peluso 1992). Typically, non-violent forms of constitutional protest were undertaken, including street demonstrations, public meetings, mass assemblies, press conferences, as well as submission of petitions, appeals and memoranda to key political and administrative office-holders. Poor peasants were also able to challenge attempts by the administration to evict them from their lands through court cases lodged by their supporting coalition. Occasionally, more militant actions such as blockades (*gherao*) were coordinated on a regional scale by branches of the landless' association, embodying *class-based* collective action. At the limit, when faced with physical assaults by land grabbers and unjust actions by the police, poor peasants occasionally displayed the capability to switch to violent resistance.<sup>96</sup>

Furthermore, between the 1970s and the 2000s, there was a significant shift from isolated and fragmentary modes of resistance towards group-based collective action by the poor peasantry, often in coordination with its supporting coalition (Tilly 1978, 84). Such shifts in the *modalities* of resistance came about because the lands of

<sup>95</sup> *Ajker Kagaj* (16 June 2004).

<sup>96</sup> Such transformation in the form of resistance serves to dispel the belief that subordinate groups in non-revolutionary situations only adopt 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985, 1986), lacking the capability to confront those oppressing and exploiting them (Kerkvliet 1990, 179–182, Adnan 2007, 183–185, Walker 2008a, 463).

the poor were threatened by an *increasingly complex constellation* of forces. Initially, their lands had been seized by local powerholders such as *jotedars* and *banadasyus*. Subsequently, urban–industrial business houses and influential politicians became involved in grabbing their lands, particularly after the declaration of the shrimp zone rules in 1992. Indeed, the entire power structure from local to national levels, including the civil administration and security forces of the state, became actively involved in large-scale expropriation of poor peasant lands after the shrimp zone was established in 2003.

Given such a formidable constellation of forces, resistance organized solely on the basis of isolated peasant settlements and local-level communities would have been quite futile. The struggle against land alienation gained in effectiveness as it began to be organized on a wider scale, unifying the poor peasants scattered over the Noakhali *chars* and interlinking them with the organizations in their supporting coalition at the local, national and global levels (cf. Teubal 2009, 159–164, Borrás and Franco 2010). Such scaling up and broadening of resistance made it possible to mobilize the strength of the entire coalition and coordinate collective actions in multiple arenas. The rationale of forging such links between poor peasants in Noakhali and their supporting national and international organisations lay precisely in building the kind of collective capacity that could oppose the combined global and domestic forces driving land alienation. It is evident that national *and* international elements were involved on *both* sides of this conflict, and the interactions between them were crucial in determining the outcomes of resistance to land alienation (cf. Brenner 2006, 100).

However, the regulatory framework within which the poor peasant associations of Noakhali and the NGOs in their supporting coalition had to operate was strictly delimited by rules imposed by the state and international donor agencies. These restrictions confined their struggles within legal–constitutional avenues, pre-empting any explicitly *political* and *militant* challenge to the power structure involved in grabbing their lands.<sup>97</sup> Such structural constraints served to impose definite limits on *innovation* in terms of more radical forms of struggle (Tilly 1978, 155–158).<sup>98</sup>

Nonetheless, the effects of the growth of organized resistance among the poor peasantry of Noakhali have not been insignificant. On the one hand, their struggles have partially limited land grabs and extraction of precapitalist ground rent by *jotedars* and *banadasyus* by increasing the social and political costs of this kind of expropriation based on predatory power relations. On the other, their resistance has reduced the pace and extent of land alienation that could have otherwise fed into the expansionary dynamic of capitalism. This double-edged role of poor peasant resistance also underscores the significance of their *agency* in influencing the outcomes of social and political struggles pertaining to land alienation. Furthermore, such struggles have contributed to the persistence of a non-capitalist (peasant) sector in the Noakhali *chars*, inclusive of landless squatters holding state lands.

<sup>97</sup>In contrast, the indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh undertook armed insurgency under a political leadership in order to contest the forced takeover of their lands (Adnan 2004, Adnan and Dastidar 2011). In certain parts of India, land grabs by the state and private corporations have been challenged by Maoist revolutionary armed movements based on mobilization of the poor peasantry and indigenous peoples (Walker 2008b, 582–583, 596).

<sup>98</sup>Comments from Md. Anisur Rahman reinforced this point. Cf. Walker (2008a, 469) on comparable attempts by the state to confine peasant struggles in China within the NGO fold.

***Land alienation, primitive accumulation and capitalist development***

It is arguable that expropriation of the lands held by the poor peasantry in Noakhali corresponds to ongoing primitive accumulation feeding into capitalist production. However, whether land alienation in a particular social–historical instance can be regarded as such depends upon the expropriated holdings being subsequently used in capitalist production. Since this is an *empirical* question, it needs to be resolved through evaluation of pertinent evidence. Available data from the Noakhali *chars* up to 2007 show three broad patterns of deployment of the alienated lands, with divergent theoretical implications.<sup>99</sup>

First, sizeable sections of the expropriated lands in Noakhali continue to be under the control of *jotedars* or absentee landowners. Typically, they have placed landless peasants on these as sharecroppers, from whom they extract (precapitalist ground) rent. Since the sharecroppers have been concerned with subsistence production, these lands have not been incorporated into the circulation of productive capital. Hence their prior alienation does not correspond to the concept of primitive accumulation.

Second, small sections of the expropriated lands have been simply kept idle without being used for any kind of productive activity. The groups controlling these lands are usually interested in making speculative gains through the rising value of landed property and real estate booms. Typically, they seize such lands illegally and then attempt to sell *possession* through markets in *de facto* land rights.<sup>100</sup> While these areas are currently not being utilized productively, they are potentially available for deployment in capitalist enterprises, particularly in locations where future urban and industrial growth is likely to occur. The prior alienation of these lands cannot yet be categorized as primitive accumulation, but that possibility should not be ruled out in the longer term.

Third, significant tracts of the expropriated lands have been taken over by large agribusinesses and smaller commercial farms producing high-yielding varieties of paddy and high-value fruits and vegetables, as well as mixed species of fish in large tanks (Sajjaduzzaman *et al.* 2005, 733, de Wilde 2011, 88–97, 135–142).<sup>101</sup> In these instances, production of commodities has been undertaken with salaried employees in order to make profit through market sale. Consequently, the expropriated lands have become incorporated into the circulation of productive capital and their prior alienation corresponds to the concept of primitive accumulation.

Significantly, some of the operators running capitalist enterprises in the Noakhali *chars* were already involved in comparable commercial production in the wider urban–industrial sectors of the economy. For them, establishing these new units has been a matter of extending their existing capitalist enterprises rather than one of switching to an entirely new mode of production. Other operators, without such prior involvement, have emulated the older business houses because of the demonstration effect of viable capitalist production. Consequently, what has been taking place in the Noakhali *chars* is *not* capitalist transformation in the sense of the

<sup>99</sup> *Amar Desh* (14 May 2007) and *Jugantar* (7 March 2007).

<sup>100</sup> Comparable instances of land grabs for speculative gains have been noted in other parts of Bangladesh (Adnan and Dastidar 2011, 88–91, Feldman and Geisler 2012).

<sup>101</sup> Ironically, these commercial units, even if located within the Noakhali Shrimp Zone, cannot produce brackish water shrimps due to inadequate salinity.

‘origin of capitalism’, but rather the *expansion of an already existing capitalist sector* within the wider economy (Marx 1976, 1021, Brenner 1977, 33, Wood 2002, 36–37).

During the 1970s, there had been hardly any capitalist enterprises in the Noakhali *chars*, which were almost entirely ‘preoccupied’ by peasant production dominated by *jotedars* and absentee landowners extracting precapitalist ground rent. However, fieldwork observations in 2005 and the secondary data from 2007, cited above, indicate that capitalist production has presently become a significant sector of production from near-zero beginnings. This implies that capitalist enterprises have been taking over a growing share of the Noakhali *char* lands compared to *jotedars* and peasant producers during the intervening decades.<sup>102</sup> Such a trend suggests that the expansion of capitalist production has become the *antecedent driving force* in the chain of causation propelling land grabs in the Noakhali *chars*. Consequently, much of the land alienation taking place through the market, the state and power relations during the preceding decades can be regarded as distinct strands of ongoing primitive accumulation that have fed into the expansionary dynamic of capitalist production.

Viewed in a long-term perspective, rural Noakhali has experienced continuous transformation in property rights and land distribution during the second half of the twentieth century, accelerated by the declaration of shrimp zoning rules in 1992 and the establishment of the shrimp zone in 2003. Lands held by the poor peasantry have been increasingly expropriated and concentrated in the hands of political and commercial interest groups that are mostly urban-based and involved in commercial enterprises or professional activities. Such a trend also implies a corresponding decline in the area controlled by the *jotedars* and the *banadasyus*, given the fixed stock of land. Consequently, a critical fallout of such class redistribution of land has been the progressive closing down of the traditional avenue of accessing subsistence plots by landless peasants through clientelist ties with local-level powerholders. The net effect of these complex processes has been to transform the pre-existing class structure and distribution of property rights in ways that have induced significant changes in the social organization of production.

For the urban-based interest groups progressively gaining control over *char* lands, capitalist production has become an *increasingly feasible and preferred option*. They have set up capitalist enterprises with wage employees (including skilled technicians brought in from outside the area), rather than recruiting landless peasants as sharecroppers with squatting rights, in the manner of *jotedars* and *banadasyus*. Correlatively, the systematic de-linking of poor peasants from land and subsistence farming has boosted the growth of a propertyless stratum in rural Noakhali that can be potentially employed as wage workers. These landless men and women have been increasingly compelled to seek alternative avenues of survival through wage labour or petty self-employment – if necessary, by migrating to the rural non-farm and urban–industrial sectors of the wider national and international economies (cf. Adnan 1993, 301–307, 1998, 1341–1343, 2012). This sequence of changes corresponds to the interpretation of ‘real primitive accumulation’ as *transformation of social property relations* in ways that the resultant social and class

<sup>102</sup>This hypothesis is based on *qualitative* assessment of fieldwork observations and documentary sources. Representative *quantitative* data on inter-temporal trends in the land areas under the control of non-capitalist and capitalist enterprises in Noakhali are not available.

structure becomes increasingly conducive to the expansion of capitalist production (Wood 2002, 36–37, 2006, 19–20, 2009, 49–50, Brenner 2006, 98).

***Reflections on the concepts of primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession***

The *creation* of a propertyless working class is integral to Marx's specification of the role of primitive accumulation in the process of capitalist development. However, in the specific social–historical context of deltaic Bangladesh, landless peasants have existed from much earlier than the advent of capitalist production in this region. Consequently, the significance of contemporary primitive accumulation in the Noakhali *chars* lies not so much in *creating* a propertyless class for the first time, but rather in sustaining a *continuing supply* of landless peasants who can be employed as wage workers, as well as in *concentrating* landed property among actual and potential capitalist producers.

As compared to the pre-eminent role of deliberate dispossession in Marx's analysis of enclosure, the evidence on land grabs in Noakhali shows the operation of alternative forms of primitive accumulation, embodying *different degrees of intentionality*. On the one hand, there are clear instances of deliberate expropriation of poor peasant lands by private interest groups and agencies of the state. On the other, comparable outcomes have resulted *indirectly* from the working out of complex processes triggered by policy and development interventions that were primarily concerned with other objectives.

This is best illustrated by the consequences of setting up the Noakhali Shrimp Zone, with the avowed objective of promoting brackish water shrimp production for the export market. Ironically, establishment of the zone did *not* lead to the realisation of this intended objective. Instead, it triggered massive land grabs and violent conflicts within the power structure, leading to the mobilization of the state machinery in support of the dominant land-grabbing interests. The outcome of these complex interactions was large-scale eviction of the poor peasantry and the capture of their lands by private interest groups. In this instance, primitive accumulation took the form of a negative externality and unintended consequence of neoliberal policy interventions concerned with a different objective.

In addition to the above, the experience of Noakhali included the privatization and undervaluation of state lands for allotment to private interest groups, the operation of global supply chains linking local agribusinesses with the world market, as well as the growth of speculation in land aimed at making private gains from real estate booms. These features clearly display greater affinity with Harvey's specification of the features of ABD, postulated in the context of neoliberal globalization, as compared to Marx's primitive accumulation, conceptualised during an earlier historical phase of capitalism.

Nonetheless, the relevance of ABD to the experience of land alienation in Noakhali is somewhat limited because of the role of mechanisms of dispossession different from those characteristic of the neoliberal era. Among these were changes in systems of landed property, distributive land reforms and development interventions that resulted in the alienation and class redistribution of land. The concept of ABD becomes relevant for interpreting land grabs in Noakhali from the subsequent impacts of neoliberalism in the 1990s, manifested in the declaration of the shrimp zone rules and the impacts of the NSZ.

Furthermore, as pointed out by Brenner (2006, 100), the critical socioeconomic and political transformations associated with ABD in a given social–historical context cannot be explained ‘simply in terms of the needs of capital accumulation on a global scale . . . By their very nature, they need to be grasped not just in the global context . . . but also in their own terms, by reference to domestic economic developments and internal political conflicts’. Unlike Harvey’s somewhat schematic treatment of ABD, this calls for substantive empirical analysis of the political and social ‘struggles that are required to bring about the subjection of pre- and non-capitalist economies and sectors to the logic of capital’ (Brenner 2006, 100, Luxemburg 2003, 351–365).

In this exploratory study, I have attempted to provide such an analysis of the social and political struggles that led to the commoditization, privatization and alienation of lands in the concrete social–historical context of Noakhali, inclusive of the *interactions* between global and domestic factors driving these processes. The findings indicate that the mechanisms and outcomes of land alienation in Noakhali were *not determined solely* by neoliberal policies prescribed by international financial and donor agencies, or the imperatives of the world market. Rather, the impacts of such global factors were *refracted* by domestic institutions and relationships, inclusive of the agencies of the state, the social organization of production, systems of landed property, clientelist power relations, as well as the resistance of the poor peasantry.

The analysis also provides insights into the comparative roles and relevance of the concepts of primitive accumulation and ABD, with significant theoretical implications. Even though they are postulated with reference to different historical phases of capitalism, the *roles* of the two concepts are *functionally* similar. Both primitive accumulation and ABD pertain to the acquisition of resources from non-capitalist sectors for the purpose of incorporation into the expansion of capitalist production. Only the mediating institutions and mechanisms are partly different, because of changes taking place between the historical periods to which these concepts refer. It follows that ABD does *not constitute a necessary new concept*, but provides an *alternative term* that re-labels primitive accumulation in order to highlight the distinct institutional arrangements and mechanisms characterising the phase of neoliberal globalisation.<sup>103</sup>

Even though ABD attempts to ‘fill up the gaps’ in Marx’s original formulation of primitive accumulation due to more than a century of historical change, it ignores or underplays the role of mechanisms of dispossession such as purported land reforms and development interventions, as highlighted by the analysis of land alienation in Noakhali. Furthermore, it is arguable that new institutional mechanisms of dispossession will continue to emerge in the future, as the relationships between the capitalist and non-capitalist sectors involved in such accumulative processes continue to change. These considerations underscore the need for defining a *generic* concept of *capitalism-facilitating accumulation* which functions as long as the expansion of capitalist production continues to take place by extracting resources from co-existing non-capitalist sectors (Adnan 2012). This generic concept applies to the entire trajectory of capitalist development and subsumes primitive accumulation and ABD as particular instances applying to specific historical phases.

The dynamics of land alienation in Noakhali also bring out theoretical complexities in the interrelationships between primitive accumulation and the

<sup>103</sup>Critical comments from Barbara Harriss-White served to clarify this point.

expansion of capitalist production that need to be explicitly articulated. On the one hand, most of the lands being currently used by the capitalist sector were obtained from poor peasants, the state, and land-grabbing interest groups through a variety of mechanisms subsuming deliberate dispossession and indirect forms of primitive accumulation. On the other, expansion of the existing capitalist sector itself has become a critical force driving further primitive accumulation, manifested in direct interventions by capitalists to separate poor peasants from their remaining lands (Adnan 1984, 28, De Angelis 2004, 63–68). Viewed in this dynamic perspective, ongoing primitive accumulation is as much a *consequence* of expanding capitalist production as its *precondition*.

Explicit recognition of this *two-way* and *recursive* causal relationship between primitive accumulation and the expansion of capitalist production is indispensable for an adequate theoretical and empirical understanding of the dynamics of capitalist development involving expropriation of resources such as land from co-existing non-capitalist sectors. Empirically, it highlights the features of ‘actually existing capitalism’ in many parts of the world where substantial segments of non-capitalist production continue to persist, inclusive of those involving the peasantry. Theoretically, it implies the need for reformulating models positing only a one-way causal relationship in which primitive accumulation feeds into the expansionary dynamic of capitalist production, without taking account of the ‘reverse’ role of capitalist expansion in driving ongoing primitive accumulation.

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