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**Kenneth Bo Nielsen. *Land Dispossession and Everyday Politics in Rural Eastern India***

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Kenneth Bo Nielsen. *Land  
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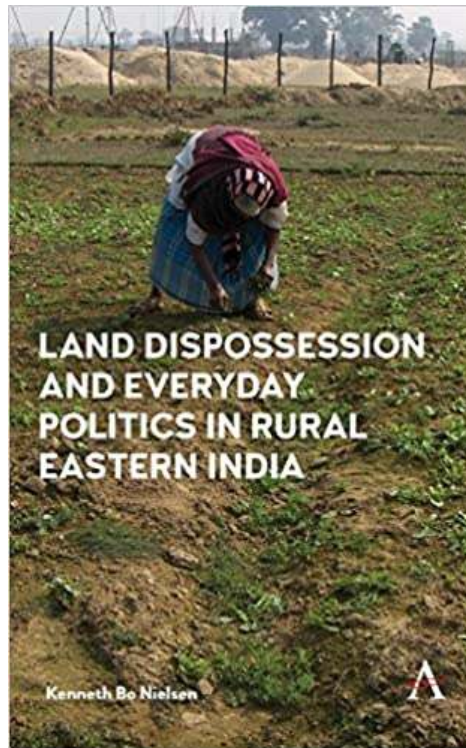
Delphine Thivet

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Nielsen, Kenneth Bo. 2018. *Land Dispossession and Everyday Politics in Rural Eastern India*. London; New York: Anthem Press.

- 1 In *Land Dispossession and Everyday Politics in Rural Eastern India*, anthropologist Kenneth Bo Nielsen explores the phenomenon of state-led land expropriation for the benefit of private investors following the adoption of the 2005 Special Economic Zone (SEZ) Act<sup>1</sup> (Jenkins, Kennedy and Mukhopadhyay 2014), and the associated struggles over land dispossession, popularly termed as India's "new land wars" (Levien 2013). The originality of this study is however its focus on the case of the Singur movement, a social mobilization unrelated per se to the SEZ policy. The study thus provides evidence of the multifarious purposes of current large-scale expropriations of land and natural resources in India in the name of "development" (industrialization, infrastructure, mining, real estate, urbanization...). Anti-land acquisition



- protests took place in Singur block, Chandannagore Sub-Division, Hooghly District of the Indian state of West Bengal situated approximately 45 kilometers from the state capital Kolkata. They began in May 2006 when the Left-Front state government led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]<sup>2</sup> announced that 997 acres of fertile farmland would be expropriated<sup>3</sup> and handed over to the Tata Motors, a major Indian car manufacturer.<sup>4</sup>
- 2 The Tata Motors project in Singur promised to generate more than 10,000 jobs in a state which was "once India's industrial powerhouse" (p. 23). This project was thus seen by the Left-Front government as a new step in the "reindustrialization" of West Bengal after decades of gradual but steady industrial decline. However, continued protests and agitation against land acquisition culminated in preventing the construction of the automobile factory. More than ten years later, in 2016, the Supreme Court of India ordered the West Bengal government to return the 997 acres of agricultural lands acquired by them to their original owners.
- 3 Drawing from his doctoral thesis in anthropology from the University of Oslo (2014), Kenneth Bo Nielsen offers a detailed account and thoughtful analysis of the "everyday politics" of this anti-dispossession movement. The strength, depth and richness of this study lie in the author's "prolonged ethnographic scrutiny" of this land struggle<sup>5</sup> which enabled him to steer away from intellectual shortcuts about land wars, whether they be "central explanatory tropes of a political economy nature, such as 'neoliberalism' or 'accumulation by dispossession'" (p. 4), or any other "straightforward, reductionist readings of [land wars] meaning, making and message" (p. 192). On the contrary, the author explores the inherent social and political complexity of the land struggle in Singur, that is, the "composite multitude of agendas and meanings at work within the movement," often contradictory and ambiguous, which the author terms as "semiotic

excess” (p. 192; 14). The author indeed re-embeds this struggle into the “local” and “evolving histories of doing politics and constituting the political in particular settings” (p. 192). Nielsen dwells repeatedly in this book on the importance of taking into account the “temporal, processual and circular rather than linear” relationship between land dispossession and everyday politics. He writes:

Just as everyday socio-political relations shaped the organisation and politics of the Singur movement, the politics and practices of the movement as it unfolded over days, weeks, months and even years fed back into everyday social life to influence social relations and practices in a multitude of ways that had little to do with fending off dispossession (p. 24).

The subtlety of his analysis consists precisely in recognizing the dynamic and entangled aspects of the movement. While the pre-existing everyday politics of caste, class and gender shaped Singur’s dispossession politics, they were also in turn, albeit often to a limited extent, subject to “contestation, renegotiation and partial transformation as the movement unfolded” (p. 193).

- 4 The book consists of seven chapters. The opening chapter (“Situating Singur”) sets out the key events, issues and social groups implicated in the land struggle in Singur from May 2006 onwards. It outlines the broader context of industrial decline in West Bengal, the conversion of the land of a “distinctive, highly diversified and commercial agricultural region” (p. 31) from agricultural to industrial use (under the West Bengal Land Reforms Act of 1955) and the Left Front government’s problematic compensation policy offered to land losers. It also retraces the setting up of the Singur Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee (SKJRC; Committee to save the farmland of Singur) initially a collective set up along non-political lines—bringing together NGOs, other civil society associations, and political parties (Trinamool Congress, Socialist Unity Centre of India, Majur Kranti Parishad, Naxalites, etc.)—united against their common enemy, the Left-Front government’s land acquisition policy, and for a common cause of saving the farmland.
- 5 The second chapter (“Land, Identity and the Politics of Representation”) details the various narratives, representational tropes, and activist translations conveyed to journalists or other outside visitors about the land struggle in Singur. The representations of the subaltern village community challenging “neoliberalism,” “capitalism” and “development” or the nostalgic, nationalist idealized village rich in agricultural farmlands of *Sonar Bangla* (Golden Bengal) helped to generate sympathetic responses to the movement from regional, national and global audiences. The author shows how this politics of representation was balanced with the plurality of meanings, often ambivalent and contradictory, that project-affected farmers ascribed to their land in a context of livelihood diversification and where ownership of land is seen as a strong symbolic marker of social hierarchies in rural India (especially for the *Mahishya* cultivators<sup>6</sup>). Far from being “uniform” and opposed to industrialization per se, the counter-narrative to the Left-Front government’s official policy was thus actually woven with the “desire to sustain access to land while increasing the scope for economic pluriactivity, and at the same time reproducing social identity and forms of everyday distinction” (p. 52).
- 6 In Chapter 3 (“Law, Judicialization and the Politics of Waiting”), Nielsen examines the transformation of the land struggle into a “law struggle” (Sundar 2011), or as McCann (1994) labeled it a “legal mobilization.” This chapter highlights how

judicialization is context-dependent (“a general sense of fatigue or impasse” of the Singur movement, [p. 64]), can be pursued by the activists “in tandem” with several other “avenues of protest” (p. 65) and “contain[s] within it the potential for its own undoing, that is, for dejudicialization” (p. 86). It explores the consequences of this strategic shift “from the streets to the court” (p. 64) to contest land acquisition, notably in terms of opportunities and risks for a popular movement. On the one hand, judicialization, through building counter-expertise and petitioning, enabled activists to challenge the official report of the Left-Front government (December 2006) stating that the majority of the landowners in Singur had “willingly” surrendered their land. It helped to make more visible that the “unwilling farmers” of Singur were not “simply a minuscule minority” (p. 73). On the other hand, judicializing the protest required “a complex, ambiguous and discontinuous series of mediations, transactions and negotiations unfolding over time, and involv[ed] a multitude of actors operating in a field of uneven and shifting power relations” (p. 67–8). As Nielsen emphasizes, the ability to appropriate the law’s language and the capacity to “endure the wait” of the different hearings and court verdicts (p. 74), or the “politics of waiting” (Jeffrey 2010), were not equally distributed among the farmers. In addition to the above, disagreements about this “bourgeois style of resistance” (p. 74) expressed by Socialist Unity Center of India (SUCI) and Naxalites activists within the Singur Krishi Jami Raksha Committee (SKJRC) led the movement to dejudicialize and shift to the political terrain during the *panchayat* elections in May 2008 and the *Lok Sabha* elections of April–May 2009.

- 7 Chapters 4 and 5 (“Class, Caste and Community”; “Gendered Mobilization: Women as Activists and Symbols”) are the heart of the book as they offer the reader textured understanding of the everyday politics of class, caste, patronage and gender relations within the movement. Unveiling the hierarchical class and caste relations existing locally in Singur between Dalit *khet majur* (landless agricultural laborers) or *bargadar* (sharecroppers) such as the *Bauri* and the *chasi* (owner cultivators) belonging to the intermediary *Mahishya* caste, the author rightly questions and deconstructs the category of “unwilling farmers” used by the Indian media to refer to the local landowners of Singur who did not want to comply with the land acquisition. Under the SKJRC’s common platform to save the farmland, the dominant (male) *chasi* were able, as he demonstrates, to concentrate the local leadership in their own hands and therefore to shape the discourse, agenda, strategies and symbolism of the movement. Other voices of the movement, such as the landless agricultural laborers and the non-landowning classes were marginalized, which thus led to the reproduction rather than the challenging of the everyday logic of local class- and caste-based hierarchies. However, Nielsen interestingly underlines the “catalytic work” (Nielsen 2012:265) achieved by external and non-local—mainly urban middle-class—activists to facilitate the emergence of a distinct *khet majur* (agricultural laborers) voice (along class lines)<sup>7</sup> within the Singur movement and destabilize these local everyday social hierarchies. Similarly, Nielsen looks at the connections between local gender identities and “the everyday politics of class and caste” (p. 134). Even if women in general were absent from the leadership and from important SKJRC fora, the Singur movement facilitated the limited participation of some women as public symbols (in accordance with *Mahishya* caste norms of respectable female domesticity), in particular, *chasi* women who could carve out free time for activism and play the role of “ideal woman” as housewife and mother. Other women, having both to work as *khet majur* in the fields

and to manage their households, were pushed even more to the periphery of the movement. Women's participation in the Singur movement, in spite of some "enchanted moments," such as the transgression of the boundaries of domesticity and a new political awareness for the *chasi* women activists (p. 131), did not lead to any "overt politicization of women's rights" nor generate reflections "on the gendered nature of landownership and the right to property and inheritance" (p. 137).

- 8 The following chapter ("Activist Leadership") focuses on what Nielsen calls the "activist model of leadership" (p. 149) and its limited autonomy, if any, vis-à-vis the "party society" of rural West Bengal (Bhattacharyya 2011). Through the portraits of different local leaders—some working solely at the village level and others lobbying in Kolkata, in the state legislative assembly and in Delhi—he expands upon the considerable amount of everyday work they did, though often invisible, to sustain the movement over time. Acting as "broker[s] translating between different idioms, arenas and forms of contestation," the local SKJRC leaders demonstrated skills of mediation, accommodation and negotiation, forming a bridge between "multiple movement constituents with not readily reconcilable interests, ideologies and values" (p. 163). Here again the author gives us a glimpse of the division of political labor existing among local leaders according to "patterns of social distinction and hierarchy" (p. 162). Lastly, the different sets of leadership qualities were closely intertwined with the "political capital" and extra-local resources these individuals had acquired, thanks to their affiliation to political parties, especially to the Trinamool Congress.
- 9 The final chapter ("*Ma, Mati, Manush—Mamata*") deals with the involvement of Mamata Banerjee, leader of the Trinamool Congress and Chief minister of West Bengal since 2011, in the Singur movement. Nielsen brings out the crucial role of "*didi*" (elder sister) as she is commonly called in Bengal, in "propelling the movement onto the regional and national political scene" (p. 168), and in supporting the movement through emotional, moral, financial, logistical, and legal means. He shows how Mamata Banerjee embodied the "activist style of leadership," embarking on a *dharna* (fast unto death) for more than 25 days in December 2006, and successfully turned the Singur movement and the land dispossession issue into an electoral vehicle for uniting all anti-government forces in the state. Her first act after taking oath as Chief Minister in 2011 was the promulgation of the Singur Land Rehabilitation and Development Act, an exceptionalist legal framework meant to facilitate the return of the acquired land to the Singur landowners.<sup>8</sup> However, Mamata Banerjee's entry into the Singur movement also brought disappointment and disillusionment among different constituents of the movement, especially as it led to the dominance of the Trinamool Congress and the relegation of smaller political parties to the margins. The author highlights also the deep internal "fissures" and factional conflicts between SKJRC local leaders that resulted from Banerjee's strong engagement with the movement and especially her politics of rewards, i.e., granting nominations to contest elections on a Trinamool Congress ticket (p. 182–3).
- 10 To conclude, through this book Nielsen contributes to rethinking the subaltern studies project in India in the contemporary context, emphasizing notably the "entanglement of elite and subaltern politics" rather than their "compartmentalization" (p. 12). By bringing to light the multiple mediations, transactions, negotiations, aspirations of the Singur movement embedded in everyday life all along, he invites us to transcend "strong binaries" (p. 191) or dichotomous theoretical categorizations between

movement politics and party politics and to recognize the “thin line” (p. 192) and “blurred boundaries” between them (Gupta 1995). One may regret that the author does not elaborate further on the major differences between the Singur movement and other movements struggling over “land conflicts” across East India (p. 20), especially the one in Nandigram, which sought to resist the acquisition of more than 10,000 acres for a petrochemical SEZ (Indonesia’s Salim Group). The Nandigram protests are scarcely mentioned (p. 9) in the book. Despite this minor drawback, this book undeniably offers a stimulating and valuable contribution to social movement scholarship, going beyond the Bengali and Indian context. *Land Dispossession and Everyday Politics in Rural Eastern India* will be of relevance to anyone interested in West Bengal politics, but also, more widely, to anyone seeking to learn more about land wars, anti-dispossession struggles, and farmers’ movements.

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## NOTES

1. Following the enactment of Special Economic Zone (SEZ) Act 2005, a number of state governments transferred land acquired for public purpose under the Land Acquisition Act to private companies, although this was later condemned by the central government.

2. The CPI(M) was the dominant force in the Left Front alliance which ruled the state of West Bengal from 1977 to 2011.
  3. The state government of West Bengal cited the 1894 Land Acquisition Act to use its power of “eminent domain.”
  4. Tata Motors planned to set up a factory in Singur to manufacture a “Nano car”; also named the “people’s car” because of its initial price of 1 lakh rupees (Rs. 100,000) which made it accessible to (lower) middle class consumers.
  5. The author conducted ethnographic field research from 2007 to 2009 in the villages of Shantipara and Nadipara.
  6. Caste group of intermediary status, traditionally agriculturalists.
  7. Through the formation of the Singur Akranta Bargadar Khet Majur Samiti (Association of the oppressed/affected sharecroppers and landless labourers of Singur/ SABKMS) and the political party Majur Kranti Parishad (Workers’ Revolutionary Council/MKP). In spite of their decline, the author shows that some of the demands raised by the *khet* majur were incorporated into the SKJRC platform so as to “appease” them (p. 113–14, 116).
  8. This act was challenged by Tata Motors and finally ruled as “unconstitutional” by the Calcutta High court in 2012.
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