

Anticipation of Dispossession: Narratives from the Mallanasagar Reservoir Area

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This article attempts to give voice to the perspectives of people living in ‘anticipation of dispossession.’ While the rationale for development projects involving mass displacement, is that it is the responsibility of the state to expand and diversify economic activity and create opportunities, how tenable is this logic in terms of the lived experience of those facing imminent removal? Can compensation in fact compensate the layers of loss suffered by those who are displaced? The collectivity built around the collective ownership of the village (an ownership distinct from title), and a sense of rootedness and identity—a situated belonging—is jeopardised by dispossession. Is this shared notion of ownership quantifiable? This article explores these questions through conversations and interviews with people living in the villages in the Mallanasagar reservoir area in Telangana that has been marked for submergence in the very near future.

Keywords

Displacement, anticipation of dispossession, Mallanasagar reservoir project, social impact assessment

Introduction

It has never been like this before—we are all struggling to live peacefully; we are confused and do not know what we should do. We were a joint family. But recently,

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my husband's brother got married and decided to set up a separate home. This meant we had to construct a new house, and thought about asking for help from friends and relatives. Now we realise it is not possible for us to do this, as the government has already given some money for compensation. Most of this money was used to clear debts. And we still have debts to clear.

The one acre of land that we own is a family inheritance from my in-laws. When the government took our land, we tried to buy another piece of farm land of the same size. My husband went around neighbouring villages and enquired. He found that the rates were very high and we could not even buy half an acre with the compensation the government gave us for one acre. Now the rates have increased drastically. Where can we buy any land? It is not possible in the surrounding areas. The government should give us land.

I have never faced any serious problems in my life before—because my village gave me the strength to do anything I wanted to—farming, petty business. It was not a problem even when I failed for any reason— crop failure, expenditure on fertilisers or hiring tractors for preparing paddy field, or any other. My pressure from debts were eased by my neighbours and my relatives.

We are living here surrounded by our people. Although problems arise among us, they don't affect our relations. We have the support of elders of the community and village, and we follow their advice.

But now, our neighbours and relatives are also under pressure. Since the project was announced landlords who gave us credit are forcing us to repay immediately. They threaten us. This is not only my experience. It is everywhere in all the villages under the project area. This misery affects my whole family.

We will now disperse in different directions. Will we have this bond in another place? Is it possible? (B, marginal farmer, 23 January 2017)

B, 32 years of age, is a marginal farmer who farms her own land and labours in other farms.¹ She is from the Madiga caste (Scheduled Caste [SC]), has completed high school, Secondary School Certificate (SSC), and was married at the age of 15 to a marginal farmer. After her marriage, she lived in her husband's home with his parents and unmarried brother. She outlines for us the different layers of the 'anticipation of dispossession,' experienced by the collectivity—the village, or cluster of villages.

What does it mean to live in 'anticipation of dispossession'? How do human relations, cultural moorings and external threats—here embodied in state power—interlink to reconfigure the lifeworlds of villagers in the reservoir area, foregrounding the collective experience of 'anticipation of dispossession'? How tenable is governmental logic on the urgency of development projects in terms of the lived experience and lifeworlds of those facing imminent removal? Can compensation in fact compensate the layers of loss suffered by those who are displaced? The collectivity built around the collective ownership of the village (an ownership distinct from legal title) and a sense of rootedness and identity—a *situated belonging*—are jeopardised by dispossession. Is this shared notion of ownership quantifiable?

This article explores these questions through a close look at socio-demographic details (and diversities therein) of the affected villages, conversations, and interviews with people living in the villages in the Mallanasagar reservoir area in Telangana that has been marked for submergence in the very near future. Beyond

the physical and ecological impact associated with irrigation projects, questions have most often centred around the geographical distribution of livelihoods, politics of administrative decision-making processes, relocation and resettlement plans for ‘project affected people’, and the politics and rationale of projects of displacement.

Our interest in this article lies in unravelling the cultural ramifications of dispossession (Reyes-Gaskin 2005, p. 70). In trying to understand the governmental action that deliberately disregards the many-layered, complex articulations of a people’s refusal to comply, especially their refusal to leave their territory and homelands, we signpost debates on dispossession that foreground the intersecting axes—of the accumulation of dispossession (Harvey, 2005), regimes of dispossession (Levien, 2015) and cultures of dispossession (B. Bhandar & Bhandar, 2016) as particularly relevant to an understanding of various layers of the experience of dispossession. In this context, the refusal of people to move, or their assertion of the ‘right to stay put,’ can scarcely be interpreted as a resistance to ‘forward looking’ development strategies (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 24).

Drawing this out further, victims and survivors of displacement use quite different parameters by which to evaluate the worth of their land, home, homelands, social bonds and indeed, their lives. The palpability of dispossession is at once both immediate and intangible. What then is to be compensated, and how?

Ideas of home are determined by alternative discursive logics of wellbeing that resist masking by languages of ‘improvement’, ‘growth,’ ‘development’ or the delineation of rationale and ‘interests’ that determine state action and ‘compensation’. The home, for instance, is, importantly, a product of geographies and imaginations that shape the collectivity and underpin both the experience of dispossession and its anticipation.

In this article, we attempt to grasp the collective experience of impending displacement under the Mallanasagar reservoir project in Telangana, sidestepping the governmental thrust on rehabilitation and compensation based on official quantification of material assets and the assertion of eminent domain by the state. We draw on data relating to land acquisition in these villages and present narratives gathered from fieldwork in villages in the Mallanasagar area that are facing submergence, covering 375 households between January and March 2017. Detailed interviews, more in the nature of immersed conversations with 107 persons cutting across social groups and gender, provide a rich opportunity to understand displacement as dispossession—locating both an understanding and a way forward in the experience of people living in anticipation of dispossession.

We attempt to demonstrate that people’s situated expressions of identity, belonging and loss are expressed in terms that are simultaneously material, symbolic and emotional and therefore aggravated—social inequalities on the ground notwithstanding. While the literature on displacement importantly focusses on the experience of vulnerable communities—dalits, adivasis and minorities—we find continuities in the experience of dispossession between people across economic and social classes, possession itself defined in specific ways in relation to residence and belonging, not necessarily only in relation to property ownership or lack thereof. There is also a solidarity of belonging in the collectivity—the village, for instance—that intersects with caste hierarchies and everyday oppressions.

The first section presents detailed information on the villages and communities located in the area of proposed submergence, a close examination of which, in our view, is necessary to place the narratives that follow in the second section, which is the central focus of this study in perspective. The distribution of family households on the intersecting axes of caste and material assets in the first section importantly helps situate them in their village communities and ruptures for us the apparent continuities in narratives of dispossession in the second section; what appears repetitive on the surface is in fact exactly its opposite, given the widely varying social and material locations of the interviewees. To explore the meanings of the anticipation of dispossession and the lifeworlds of those we met and spoke to, we have paid specific attention to intersections, commonalities and divergences in location, experience and worldview; the relationship of the anticipation of loss in a continuing present to material assets/resources or the lack thereof. The diversity in social location is interlocked with deep commonalities in the experience of impending loss.

Villages Facing Submergence

The Government of Telangana proposed the construction of 22 reservoirs in the state with the objective of increasing the area under cultivation and agricultural productivity. The reservoir of Mallanasagar was planned on a canal branch of the Kaleswaram irrigation project. It was proposed to reserve about 50,000 million cubic feet (hereafter tmc) capacity of water to irrigate about 165,000 acres of land. It was intended to distribute water through established irrigation systems to the three former districts of Medak, Nizamabad and Karimnagar (prior to district re-organisation in 2016). In furtherance of its plans, the Telangana Government passed GO 123, dated 30 July 2015 which provides for ‘Procurement of land and other structures thereon from Willing Land Owners by the Procuring Agencies for public purposes’. Relevant to our present argument is clause (viii) which states with reference to compensation/consideration for land acquired by the government:

The consideration as agreed by the individual land owner/owners and Procuring Agency before the District Level Land Procurement Committee shall *inter-alia* include the value of land and property, perceived loss of livelihood, equivalent costs required for rehabilitation and resettlement of *willing land owners and others*. (emphasis added)

The implementation of this GO was stayed by the Hyderabad High Court in January 2017, which also ordered the maintenance of *status quo* in land acquisition under this project in October 2017 in response to writ petitions filed in the court.²

The total population of areas facing submergence (complete and partial) is about 16,125 consisting of 3,677 households (Census 2011; Offices of Gram Panchayats of Rampur and Laxmapur) spread over fourteen villages of nine Gram Panchayats of old Medak district (now Siddipet). Gram Panchayats—Etigadda Kistapur, Rampur, Laxmapur, Vemulaghat and Pallepahad from Thoguta mandal—are set to be completely submerged in this proposed reservoir; Erravalli and Singaram

villages from Kondapaka mandal and Thoguta GP and Thukkapur from Thoguta mandal are to be partially submerged (lands only) (Table 1).

These lands are known to be especially fertile, surrounded by tanks and canals and also irrigated by submersible pump sets. The profile of the villages facing submergence is provided in Table 2. What emerges from this profile co-constructed from official data and field information is the diversity of the people/communities in the villages, their distribution across villages, the nature of the functioning agricultural economy in the villages, and therefore the nature and far-reaching consequences of dispossession that are anticipated.

Homes, Neighbourhoods, Boundaries and Sociality

All castes in these villages (except Komati and Brahmin) have meeting places called a *kula sangham* (caste association), which deals with internal caste affairs and supports its own members in the affairs of the village and the office of the Gram Panchayat. Vemulaghat also has the Vemulaghat Raitu Karmika Sangham (Vemulaghat Agricultural Workers' Association).

Houses in the village are made of square bricks and have open verandahs and spacious open spaces before verandahs. Some houses have a large tree at the entrance. People gather either under the tree or on the open verandahs and open spaces during the daytime and evenings. A typical house, whether *pucca* (permanent) or *semi-pucca* (semi-permanent), has an open verandah and rooms for rest; recent constructions have living rooms and bedrooms, and some have storerooms. The houses have main gates and corridors. There are some huts with mud walls and tin roofs; some of them have cement (asbestos) roofs. This is the fairly standard housing layout in these villages. All castes (except *lambada thandas* and *Vadderas*) in this area have designated burial grounds. In general, all these villages have clearly demarcated housing patterns with SC and Scheduled Tribes (ST) homes on the eastern end, Other Backward Classes (OBC) homes (including Muslim) in the centre of the village and Other Classes (OC) homes in the western end of the village. Agricultural lands surround the village on all sides. Although roads demarcate social boundaries within the village, movement across the village for all castes appears to be fairly common.

Table 1. Extent of Land to be Submerged

Revenue Village	Extent of Land (in Acres)
Etigadda Kistapur and Laxmapur	2,526
Thoguta and Rampur	2,703
Vemulaghat	5,398
Pallepahad	1,199
Erravalli	2,180
Singaram	1,088
Total Area Facing Submergence	15,094

Source: Executive Engineer's Office, Siddipet.⁷

Table 2. Villages Facing Submergence

Village	Population to be Affected*				Crops	OC	Caste/Social Group		
	T	M	F	HH			OBC**	SC	ST
Vemulaghat	2,805	1,384	1,421	617	Thoguta Mandal Paddy, Maize, Millets, Cotton, Vegetables	Reddy, Kapu, Velama, Komati, Brahmin	MU, C, M, O, KU, K, P, G, KR, KA, V, VR, GO, MBC	Madiga Begari Mala	Lambada Erukala
Thukkapur	1,296	675	621	294	Paddy, Maize, Millets, Cotton, Vegetables	Reddy, Brahmin, Komati	MU, C, M, G, KR, KA, GO	Madiga Mala	Erukala
Rampur	335	158	177	73	Paddy, Maize, Millets, Cotton, Vegetables	—	MU, C, B, VR	—	Erukala
Thoguta GP (Brahmana Banjarapally, Vaddera Colony) Pallepahad	3,833***	1,869***	1,964***	919***	Paddy, Maize, Millets, Cotton, Vegetables	Reddy, Komati	MU, C, G, M, V, VR	Madiga Mala	—
Erigadda Kistapur	3,320	1,662	1,658	743	Paddy, Maize, Millets, Cotton, Vegetables	Komati	MU, C, M, O, KU, B GO, V, P, K, MBC	Madiga Mala	Lambada Erukala
Laxmapur	463	225	238	103	Paddy, Maize, Millets, Cotton, Vegetables	Reddy, Komati	MU, C, M, O, KU, GO, MBC	Madiga Mala	—
Singaram	561	288	273	111	Kondapaka Mandal Paddy, Maize, Millets, Cotton, Vegetables	Reddy, Komati	MU, C, M, KU, GO, V, MBC	Madiga Mala	—
Erravalli	1,745	884	861	401	Paddy, Maize, Millets, Cotton, Vegetables	Reddy, Velama, Kapu, Brahmin, Komati	MU, C, M, G, O, KU, M, GO, KR, V, P, K, KA, MBC	Madiga Mala	Lambada

Sources: *Census of India 2011. All other information from Field Survey.

Notes: T: Total, M: male, F: female, HH: households, OC: other castes, OBC: other backward classes, SC: Scheduled Castes, ST: Scheduled Tribes.

**Mudiraj (MU), Chakali/Rajaka (C), Mangali (M), Kummari (KU), Kammari (K), Ousali (O), Padmashali (P), Golla (G), Kuruma (KR), Katika (KA), Besta (B), Goud (GO), Vadda/Vadrangi (V), Vaddera (VR), Muslim (MBC).

***Population for Thoguta GP. Other details are for two villages that will be submerged. Separate population figures for Brahmana Banjarapally and Vaddera Colony not available.

All the villages are characterised by intra-caste kinship relationships—affinal, natal, social and economic bonds and interrelations. It is also not uncommon to find mutual economic support among friends who have lived in this area since childhood. Likewise, there are caste-based relations as well between villages.

These villages are not idyllic nor are they homogenous or devoid of intersecting hierarchies of caste, community, class and gender. Importantly, these hierarchies manifest themselves in spatial orderings in the village, property ownership and social relations (*Table 3*).

Socio-demographic Profile

The study used a structured questionnaire for a sample of 374 households covering all social groups: SC (30.5 per cent), ST (16.3 per cent), OBC (44.4 per cent) and OC (8.8 per cent). A majority of the households (98.7 per cent) reported being Hindu. Among SCs, Madiga are greater in number than Mala; the two ST communities found in the area are Lambada and Erukala; OBC communities are the most numerous—Besta, Mangali, Vaddera, Chakali/Rajaka, Mudiraj, Kummari, Kammari, Goud, Padmashali, Ousala, Kuruma, Vadla/Vadrangi, Yadava/Golla and Katika. Two castes from the OC category are Komati and Reddy. Although there are very few Muslim OBC families, a single family presently owns 45 acres of land in one village. In the entire affected area, this is the largest landowning family. For the purposes of analysis, this household has been treated as an outlier and has been omitted from the analysis on landownership.³ During interviews, we found that while SC and ST women spoke easily about the problems that beset them without being interrupted by men, with OBC women following close behind, OC women were often interrupted by men who spoke on their behalf. Not coincidentally perhaps, the OCs owned more land than the SCs and STs—the big farmers (that is, those who owned more than five acres of land) coming primarily from this group.

Land and Agriculture

Thirty-two per cent of households derive their main income from farming. This is followed by agricultural labour (24.8 per cent) and livestock (23.5 per cent). Together, agriculture and livestock account for about 80 per cent of the income of households surveyed. Non-farm rural labour, urban labour, artisanry, petty business and self-employment together account for main income for about 16.6 per cent of households. Across diverse livelihoods, 88.8 per cent participate in Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) works apart from their regular income-earning activity.

There are different sources of income apart from agriculture such as supply of seeds, fertilisers, private crop loans and private marketing of vegetables, milk and milk products.

Ascertaining land values in an area such as this where uncertainty prevails is far from easy. While land value in rural areas depends on various factors, a major reason for lack of uniformity in the prices of land in this area is classification of land into two types—*patta* lands and ‘assigned’ lands. *Patta* lands in turn might be officially recorded and unofficially recorded (or *saada bainama*).⁴ Unofficially recorded land holdings account for 26.5 per cent in the study villages.

Table 3. Landownership by Gender and Caste (N = 374)

Household Category	Caste					
	ST			SC		
1. Landless HH	14 (18.18%)			34 (44.16%)		
2. HH with Land (in Acres)	47 (15.83%)			80 (26.93%)		
3. Particulars	No	Area	Female No	Female Area	Male No	Male Area
(i) Assigned Land	9 (30.0)	15.00 (14.9)	8 (47.1)	18.25 (32.9)	15 (31.9)	27.50 (26.8)
(ii) Patta Land	7 (23.3)	17.50 (17.3)	2 (11.8)	5.00 (9.0)	18 (38.3)	31.75 (31.0)
(iii) Patta Land with Saada	8 (26.7)	38.00 (37.6)	5 (29.4)	25.00 (45.0)	4 (12.1)	15.00 (14.6)
Binaama	6 (20.0)	30.50 (30.2)	2 (11.8)	7.25 (13.1)	13 (39.4)	28.25 (27.6)
(iv) Patta and Assigned Land	30 (100)	101.00 (100)	17 (100)	55.50 (100)	47 (100)	102.50 (100)
Total HH with Land						
4. Average Size of Holding	3.37		3.26		2.18	
5. % Title Holder by Gender Within Social Group	63.82		36.17		58.75	
6. % Share of Land by Gender Within Social Group	64.54		35.46		58.22	
7. % Title Holder by Gender out of Total HH with Land	10.10		5.72		15.82	
8. % Share of Total Land by Gender out of Total HH with Land	11.00		6.04		11.16	

(Table 3 Continued)

(Table 3 Continued)

Household Category	Caste											
	OBC				OC				Total			
1. Landless HH	27 (35.06%)		2 (2.60%)		77 (100)		31 (10.44%)		297 (100)			
2. HH with Land (in Acres)	139 (46.80%)											
3. Particulars	Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
(i) Assigned Land	No	Area	No	Area	No	Area	No	Area	No	Area	No	Area
	11 (12.1)	14.25 (5.1)	8 (16.7)	14.00 (11.6)	-	-	-	-	35 (18.3)	56.75 (8.9)	24 (22.6)	47.25 (16.7)
(ii) Patta Land	47 (51.6)	142.75 (51.4)	25 (52.1)	59.25 (49.1)	21 (91.3)	144.25 (93.8)	8 (100)	33.50 (100)	93 (48.7)	336.25 (53.0)	43 (40.6)	108.55 (38.3)
(iii) Patta Land with Saada Binaama	16 (17.6)	42.50 (15.3)	12 (25.0)	31.50 (26.1)	1 (4.3)	4.00 (2.6)	-	-	30 (15.7)	99.50 (15.7)	21 (19.8)	64.50 (22.8)
(iv) Patta and Assigned Land	17 (18.7)	78.00 (28.1)	3 (6.3)	16.00 (13.3)	1 (4.3)	5.50 (3.6)	-	-	33 (17.3)	142.25 (22.4)	18 (17.0)	63.00 (22.2)
Total HH with Land	91 (100)	277.50 (100)	48 (100)	120.75 (100)	23 (100)	153.75 (100)	8 (100)	33.50 (100)	191 (100)	634.75 (100)	106 (100)	283.30 (100)
4. Average Size of Holding	3.05		2.51		6.68		4.19		3.32		2.67	
5. % Title Holder by Gender Within Social Group	65.47		34.53		74.19		25.81		64.31		35.69	
6. % Share of Land by Gender Within Social Group	69.68		30.32		82.11		17.89		69.14		30.86	
7. % Title Holder by Gender out of Total HH with Land	30.64		16.16		7.74		2.69		64.31		35.69	
8. % Share of Total Land by Gender out of Total HH with Land	30.23		13.15		16.75		3.65		69.14		30.86	

Source: Field survey.

Seventy-seven households out of 374, that is, 20.59 per cent are landless (Table 3). The 297 landowning households are distributed across social groups as follows: SC 26.93 per cent, ST 15.83 per cent, OBC 46.80 per cent and OC 10.44 per cent; gender distribution of land titles across social groups shows SC women holding land in the highest proportion (41.25 per cent and OC women the lowest (25.80 per cent). Overall, 35.69 per cent of women in households surveyed held land in their name. The total land owned by 297 households is 918 acres. The highest share of land holdings among different social groups was found to be the OBCs (398.25 acres) followed by OCs (187.25 acres), SCs (176.05 acres) and STs (156.50 acres). OC women have the lowest share of total land owned by sample households at 3.65 per cent, and OBC women the highest share at 13.15 per cent. In terms of overall distribution, men hold 69.14 per cent of land across caste while women hold 30.86 per cent (Table 3).

The average size of land holding among the SCs is low (2.20 acres) in comparison with other social groups. The average land size among OC is 6.04 acres, among OBC—2.87 acres and ST—3.32 acres. The smallest land holding is 0.25 acres (Mudiraj—OBC), whereas the largest is 29 acres (Reddy—OC). Similar to the average size of land among SC households, the standard deviation in extent of land owned is also low for SC at 1.16. Data also point to intersecting marginalities in land and social status among SC, ST and OBC as distinct from OC (Table 4).

To understand the interconnections between distribution of wealth and sense of disempowerment better, we classified families in the study villages according to size of landholding: big farmers with over five acres, small farmers with 2.5–5 acres, marginal farmers with less than 2.5 acres and landless households.

Table 4. Disparities in Landownership Across Social Groups

Caste	Descriptive Statistics	Status of Social Groups (Land Holdings in Acres)
SC	N = 80 M = 2.20 SD = 1.16	Lowest-(Madiga) = 0.40 Highest-(Madiga) = 6.00
ST	N = 47 M = 3.32 SD = 1.88	Lowest-(Lambada) = 0.50 Highest-(Lambada) = 8.00
OBC	N = 139 M = 2.87 SD = 1.93	Lowest-(Mudiraj) = 0.25 Highest-(Kuruma) = 10.00
OC	N = 31 M = 6.04 SD = 5.23	Lowest-(Reddy) = 2.00 Highest-(Reddy) = 29.00
Total	N = 297 M = 3.09 SD = 2.56	Lowest-(Mudiraj) = 0.25 Highest-(Reddy) = 29.00

Source: Field survey.

Note: N = No. of households covered; M = average size of holding (acres); SD = standard deviation (distance between individual holdings and mean size of holdings); Lowest = lowest land holdings among sample households; Highest = highest land holdings among sample households.

Table 5. Primary Occupation (N = 374)

Primary Occupation	SC	ST	OBC	Others	Total
Agriculture	38 (33.3)	12 (19.7)	96 (57.8)	28 (84.8)	174 (46.5)
Agricultural Labour	70 (61.4)	47 (77.1)	27 (16.3)	2 (6.1)	146 (39.0)
Non-Agricultural Labour	0	0	4 (2.4)	0	4 (1.1)
Skilled Labour	5 (4.4)	1 (1.6)	31 (18.7)	1 (3.0)	38 (10.2)
Animal Husbandry	0	0	7 (4.2)	0	7 (1.9)
Rural Industry	1 (0.9)	1 (1.6)	1 (0.6)	2 (6.06)	5 (1.3)
Total	114 (100.0)	61 (100.0)	166 (100.0)	33 (100.0)	374 (100.0)

Source: Field survey.

Note: Figures in parentheses show the percentage of total.

The proportion of agricultural labour is the highest among SCs, with a preponderance of ownership over assigned land of an average holding size of less than two acres; skilled labour and animal husbandry are the highest in the OBC category. In the category of rural industry,⁵ all social groups were found to be equally distributed (*Table 5*).

Housing

The residential land value was reported in all villages to be between ₹600 and ₹1,600 per sq. ft based on the location of the plot. A majority of houses were about 400 sq. ft, and some of them were 600 sq. ft. For nearly half of the surveyed households (49.5 per cent), dwellings were semi-*pucca*. Close to half (45.7 per cent) of total selected households were in the *pucca* houses. Four per cent of households lived in housing with asbestos roof, only two households lived in huts, and only one household was in the government-supported housing under the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY).

The highest average value of house is approximately ₹450,000 for *pucca* followed by semi-*pucca* at approximately ₹300,000, houses with asbestos roof at ₹240,000, and IAY at ₹200,000. The lowest is the hut at ₹90,000.⁶ Landless households are only entitled to compensation for house under this scheme—that is, if they own one.

The profile of nine Gram Panchayats in two *mandals* facing submergence under the Mallanasagar Reservoir project that have been covered by this study, sets the context for the next section, which presents the complex and intertwined narratives of the residents of the villages who speak from their location in these villages and as members of a shared collectivity. To anticipate our argument quite simply, the prospect of displacement to any unfamiliar location is experienced as dispossession—material and emotional—irrespective of social location within the village.

States of Mind

Going around villages in the project area and listening to people speak about the experience of the anticipation of dispossession adds yet another layer to our understanding of dispossession: the loss of a sense of self and internal peace.

‘They came at midnight... We fear that there is no hope for the future,’ said R, 35, a landless Madiga labourer. Y, a young Golla woman who owns one acre of *patta* land, was pregnant, when, ‘one day, the officials came at midnight, while we were in deep sleep. I am sure that it was summer. We were sleeping on the road... When we woke up, there were 6–8 people along with our local leaders.’ They had come to take signatures on land papers of *patta* land owners. ‘Was this the way to come here? Was that the right time?’ she asks. There were several who spoke of the impropriety of the timing of this visit—a time when they were caught unawares, literally ‘napping’, and were ill equipped to engage effectively and defend their interests. Being roused rudely from deep midnight slumber, the villagers were thrown into sleepless, anxious nights:

I have to cross the border of my village with my livestock, hens, children and my wife. I have to travel to an unknown place. I am not clear where I should go. I have been thinking only about this till I fall asleep. But I am sleepless. The only thing in my mind is I have to leave this place. Again I ask myself, will I have to leave? Why should I leave? I am still thinking. I don’t want to. If I think continuously like this for long, I will die.

(V, a 41-year-old, Besta man, a landless agricultural worker)

That death is preferable to eviction from their villages, or that it will lead to death is a recurrent theme in the narratives on anticipating dispossession:

If we leave this village, our future will be uncertain. I don’t want to see such an uncertain future. We have never before faced a situation like this in which we live in a state of fear, anxiety and a kind of mental torture. Unlike moving to a place that gives a feeling of happiness, displacement will cause a deep wound in our future life. That is what we don’t want to see. Instead of experiencing these terrible situations, I would rather welcome my death. I can’t say more than this.

(R, a 39-year-old educated, landless man of Padmashali caste, a tailor by profession).

The thought that he has to raise his children in a place where he has no ancestral roots, no kinship bonds, and the certainty that he must move to an unknown, unfamiliar place, makes 62-year-old K, a landless worker from Rajakka caste, lonely. (31 January 2017)

I am very worried. Forget about lands and other assets. Darkness has spread over life. The feeling of happiness is disappearing and hopes of life are melting day by day. We know the government is stronger. There could be a tremendous pressure on us to find a place to relocate. There might be no more villages, no more agriculture. So how would we eke out our lives? (R, a 65-year old, educated Reddy farmer, 17 February 2017)

For 29-year-old Y, a Mudiraj farmer, the village and its paths are thick with memories of his rides with his grandfather on the bullock cart through the village to the fields. How does one live in a place that has no memories? For T, a 45-year-old

Vaddera woman, leaving the village is like eloping—the loss of kinship and collectivity for couples who defy caste endogamy. Others reflected on the breakdown of trust, the lack of security against homelessness and landlessness and the emotional security of making ends meet in difficult circumstances in one's own village, the collectivity guaranteeing some measure of support.

Rural Hierarchies and Dispossession

Among the big farmers, the concern was that fertile land that produced food was being squandered away by the government, and people were being forced to vacate their villages even when villages were not in the core area; the older farmers, like K, the Golla farmer said he felt sad while signing the papers—at 65, he had perhaps another 5 years to live, but what troubled him was the suffering that lay in wait for his children and the young people of these villages, who will be thrown at risk with no land or social bonds of their own (18 February 2017); or others like the Reddy farmer L who lamented that dispossession was total because there was no possibility of acquiring lands with the monetary compensation—owing to the inadequacy of compensation, but also because money is used up immediately to clear old debts. The same question came up repeatedly. 'What will my sons do? Farming is the only livelihood they know'. (28 February 2017)

There are several women among the small farmers. G, a widowed Madiga farmer aged 56 asks, 'If I leave this village with only money and no land or house, will it be possible for me to survive?' (13 February 2017). Then of course the attachment to the place, the land, not an inheritance, but earned by her husband through his sweat and blood—and therefore her distress on being told to leave. N, a Golla woman with four acres of land says, 'The government must put itself in our place and think of what it should do to improve our lives, instead of only engaging in propaganda about itself'. (15 February 2017)

B, a marginal farmer, is also a traditional healer with a good clientele in this area. Moving to a new village will dispossess him of his vocation, which depends on trust and personal acquaintance. 'Merely distributing money is not justice' says R, a marginal farmer from Madiga caste. 'We need land for farming and neighbourhood' (22 February 2017). RJ, also a marginal farmer from Madiga caste, anticipates trouble if they attempt to settle elsewhere—those villages are home to other people: 'I do not want to face hostility in other villages for settling down there'. (28 February 2017)

Landless farmers—mostly SCs—felt a sense of fear and insecurity. In this village, livelihood was assured in other people's lands—people who knew them and would give them work and wages. In M's words,

Agricultural workers can survive here although we have no land...We only face problems when we need large sums of money—that too, for performing marriages of our children or constructing a new house...We have the strength of our community. When we are in urgent need of anything, our people take care of those things. We need not worry. But, if we disperse from here, we will lose our biggest asset—community strength. (28 January 2017)

The anticipation of dispossession cuts through spatial geographies and village hierarchies in very specific ways with the collectivity facing a common (uncertain) future intertwined with (diverse) social location.

Land, Agriculture, Livelihoods

Across these areas, irrigation has developed well over the past few decades. Villages like Vemulaghat, Etigadda Kistapur and Singaram located on the edges of major tanks have produced considerable amount of grain, and production has never recorded insufficiency since the late 1960s. There is a general consensus among people that these lands guarantee food grains and livelihoods especially for the landless.

We have our village tanks and canals, and many bore motors (submersible pumpsets). Bore motors have been working very well in this area since long. Even during dry season or hot summer, they do well in terms pumping water efficiently. We have large tanks surrounding our village. We also have link canals which connect to all fields. Do you get such lands in any other villages? (N, 40 year-old, marginal farmer, 28 January 2017)

There are 220 families in this village. A majority of them depend on farming, alongside wage work under the 100 days programme. The village has 1,170 acres of farm land, of which 330 acres are under irrigation and cultivable in both seasons – *mirugu* and *yesikki*. If you look around the village, you will see that no part of farm land lies uncultivated or untended. You will not find a single stone or weeds in this land. It is very fertile and productive. You cannot find this soil anywhere. The government has proposed construction of a project in these villages. Since this village does not fall within the core area, it is possible to avoid acquiring this land for the project.

We informed the officials that we would not part with our lands when they approached us. The rates are atrocious. They did not show us where we would be re-located to. We refused to vacate the lands and requested them not to wrench us apart from our village. (M, 71-years-old, and a part of a large landowning family, 2 February 2017)

Some people of this area put forth a proposal to take the project forward in a different direction and still increase the storage of water without submerging villages, to no avail.

G, a 56-year-old Madiga woman with five children, widowed, speaks of their struggles to build assets.

My husband acquired the land with his hard-earned money. Our lands are not his inherited – he earned it with his sweat and blood. Even if we do the same work as my husband did, we cannot find such land in any part of the neighbouring villages. You tell me, how far it is right to give my lands to them at such low rates? We need house for house and land for land, that's it.

N, a 60 year-old Madiga man, recounts his struggles:

Can I buy this land and house elsewhere? Do you know how we earned them? How much of our sweat and blood we poured into it? I worked as a bonded labourer for 40 years. From the time I was eight years-old. I have two sons and they have to share

this house and land. They can lead their lives confidently in this village as they have their own land and houses. What can we do with the money?

Although people are still living in their villages, they are preoccupied with thinking about how to leave and where to locate their lives. There is constant talk about different locations, confusions on settlements, land purchase and searching for plots. Through all this, says R, people are still hopeful about living on in their villages.

The fact that project plans have disrupted village relations and trust between communities is evident, even while there is a shared feeling of loss due to the anticipation of displacement.

The idea of the project has wrecked everything in our villages—our sentiments, feelings, regular cultural-social ethos, social and financial relations and neighbourhood. We have lost our relations with our surrounding villages. Everything is based on monetary calculations. Our people are disturbed. This is a different feeling which we have been encountering in everyday life. Is this what we desired? All we wanted is to settle the matter and live peacefully with our children and families. I don't know how long we must wait for that to happen. (K, Reddy farmer, 1 March 2017)

Some livelihood sources largely based on local resources—apart from agricultural land, like grazing lands, natural tanks and fodder—are facing total disruption. For people like L, a Golla marginal farmer, whose identity derives from her dependence on natural resources, her anxious concerns remain unaddressed:

I am a small farmer but I am dependent largely on farming and my flock of sheep. I'm sure I would lose my assets especially my flock. I have been worried as I would lose my strength—my flock and farm lands. Surrounding farms of my village give me a kind of courage. Now open fields will soon disappear. What will I do without grazing lands? How can I lead my life without them? (23 January 2017)

There is also, as we have seen, the widespread apprehension of hostility from inhabitants of villages to which they may relocate; their rejection of the proposal that they must relocate is driven both by their attachment to their village and an acknowledgement that they may not be welcome in the places they relocate to and will not have the strength of collectivity that would ensure a measure of security.

The Place Called Home

How can we leave this house now, this minute? How is it possible? Do you know how many years we have lived here? We have been protecting our lands and village for so many years. Is it so easy to just leave it all and go away? Do you know how painful it is to set up a fireplace? The pain is known only to those who have borne the pain of setting it up. It is not as simple as arranging bricks, mud and dung, and plastering it. It is like setting up the lifeline of generations—providing permanent home, land, livestock, building relationships with kin, neighbours, villagers, and connecting people around us. This is the meaning of setting up a fireplace. It also is a place where we cook, eat, dine with others, our relatives, share food with others, and give food to others. How can a new fireplace spring up out of nowhere? (V is a 39 year-old Golla woman, 24 January 2017)

Discussions around valuation of house/dwelling fail to grasp the value that the home has for the people it shelters. While speaking about the fireplace, V also speaks of the connections of the fireplace with the intricate bonds of communal living—land, home, livestock, kin and village drawing life from each other. Without rejecting change altogether. S, a Mudiraj marginal farmer observes

The connections between villages, people and lands are not simple. Social bonds are built from coexistence. Money from compensation cannot make our lives better. Events like marriages and funerals bring us together. Scattering us apart is not good. Let them re-locate us together, if they want us to move from here. Some changes in lives are essential, but these changes are fatal. We never imagined a situation like this. Change has to do with time, it must not be about place. Doesn't the government know that relocation involves not only financial resources but also lives of people, their habitations, children's futures, lands, livelihoods and bonds? Is it only related to financial resources? Can't they fathom our lives at all? (19 February 2017)

Ratnamala, noted activist, draws on the analogy of a tree, which cannot simply be plucked out of the ground and stuck in somewhere else. The roots go far below the earth, and just as the tree grows in relation to its environment, drawing sustenance from it, people build their lives in relation to their environment (Ratnamala, 2008). The intertwining of the moral, spiritual and material sets the home apart from the world. It is where the goddesses reside, where festivals return every year, and where festivities and mourning, joys and sorrows are shared.

M, a 52 year-old non-literate Golla agricultural worker, puts it poignantly:

Can we even imagine what we are going to lose in the future? We will lose our people, our relatives, our gods— Ooru Maisamma, Katta Maisamma, Hanumandla gudi. Hanuman *jatara* and Maisamma *jatara* are our most important festivals. They bring us all together once a year. Not just people from my village and the villages around ours; the *jatara* brings back people who have migrated out in search of livelihoods—for jobs, as labour, watchmen, cooks, cleaners, washerfolk, drivers—they all return so we can meet at the *jatara*. This is the only occasion for us to come together. Can they give us our *jatara*? It is not only our lands and houses and villages that we will lose. It is our rituals, our practices, our festivals inherited from our ancestors. Can you imagine yourself homeless, with no village to call your own, no culture? Tell us what we should do? (6 February 2017)

Can compensation for value of land and house compensate for loss of community? The place called home is situated in a community and embedded in communal life—attachments and identities are built on this mix of emotion and structure, as B, a Lambada agricultural worker observes:

If we move to different locations, we would need a lot to settle down in a new place. Moving everything from here is not possible. But they measured only land and houses. They told us that they would count our livestock later. But there are other things which need to be taken into account. The thought of moving out of our village is deeply saddening because our village is the place where I grew up... I have different experiences with different people. Can they measure our feelings? I don't think they have a sense of

our life. This is a wonderful place to live because everyone knows everyone else. If we leave, it would probably scatter our people in different directions...I know that if we move, it would not be the same because it wouldn't be our village....

This understanding of value is deeply rooted in emotion, attachment and belonging, with the prospect of removal being experienced as trauma in the present—the trauma of uncertain futures, the trauma of impending loss and the trauma of mistrust in an otherwise stable community. What is often forgotten is the sovereign privilege of state authorities who in the very act of formulating policy place themselves outside its sphere of effect (Agamben, 1998). It is possible therefore to be perfunctory, bureaucratic and distant in the infliction of the harms of dispossession.

The Question of Compensation and a Future

While there is an assertion that compensation is inadequate, unfair and unequal, there is simultaneously a strong and palpable sense that the problem is not with the quantum of compensation but with the very idea that money can compensate for the loss of self, dignity, worth, networks, sociality and assets.

Where do we go? Where do we live? How can we re-create this environment, this village? The government said to us 'We will give you our key and you will have to give us your key.' Without their key, how can we give them ours? They are trying to snatch our keys from us... They said they would give house for house and land for land. Now there is no plan of house or land. They are making us people-with-nothing—homeless, landless, nameless. How do we survive with nothing except compensation money? What do we have left to talk about and what do we have to tell you? (S, 45 year-old Mudiraj farmer, owns 4 acres of land works on his own land and seeks wage work, 12 February 2017)

In articulating this loss, people attempt to fit narratives into the frames of governmental measures to displace, the only operative frames for discourse, but keep returning to the impossibility of moving out, no matter what. Besides, as Ratnamala (2008) has argued, monetary compensation introduces anarchy into an already fraught situation. R, waiting to settle his daughter's wedding, believes they have been robbed of their future. He has seen the compensation money disappear in his village on liquor, bikes and tractors; he worries that his daughter might not find a suitable groom because they can no longer claim to belong to a village (9 February 2017). S, 34-year-old non-literate Vaddera landless agricultural worker, confesses:

I come regularly here and drink this Koatar [quarter of liquor] sitting on this pile of wood. Three months ago, I wanted to renovate my house as it was falling apart—its walls were totally cracked and broken and needed re-plastering before the rainy season. It will be difficult to live in it without repairs. But now I do not know what to do. I have already taken some compensation money. What should I do, except drink? I will drink as long as I suffer because I want to live and die here. I do not want to go anywhere else. I do not want to leave my village. (22 January 2017)

For R, a 25-year-old woman, non-literate, Vaddera stonecutter, it is not about money, but about the shared collectivity:

We don't want anything. We only need our village and our people. Money comes and goes, but once we have lost our people, they will never return to us. As long as we live here, we are secure. If we disperse from here, our lives will be shattered. Let the government first construct our houses together and then we will all move together from here. Otherwise, it will be very difficult for us to lead a life in the future. (13 February 2017)

There is anger. R, Madiga marginal farmer, 22-year-old, a school dropout who owns a little land and seeks wage-work is indignant:

They throw some money at me like I am a beggar...I have never begged for anything in my life but worked hard in the field and lived a peaceful life...We were never dependent on any person or any government... why do they treat us like this? (27 February 2017)

K, a 35-year-old Mudiraj small farmer was told that the compensation was more than the value of her hut in rupees. But for her, 'this hut is more valuable than anything... They destroyed my peace. They have robbed my sound sleep. How can I be compensated for my loss of peace?' (15 February 2017).

Conclusion

Studies on displacement and dispossession have often focussed on vulnerability post-displacement foregrounding the experience of 'oustees' in a post-displacement context, where the impact of displacement is aggravated and visible, and the collectivity is fragmented and dispersed. While social impact assessment (SIA) was intended to be a deliberative process where people likely to be affected by a project have a voice in deciding on its feasibility, this goal has been largely unrealised in India, and literature has focussed on calculations of impact, relief and rehabilitation, and remedial measures after displacement. Often in these instances, the most vulnerable communities are totally dispossessed, scattered and dangerously poised on the edge of precarity. Loss is expressed through memory, recall and grief—expressions that cannot be accommodated within SIA templates, and are therefore left out of the account. On another track, studies of caste focus both on the fissures of power, wealth, disentitlement, violence and resistance in village contexts as undergirding the social realities of rural India, and on unequal interdependencies that seem to hold the village together as a collective entity. Our account of villages in the Mallanasagar reservoir area speaks to both these bodies of work in specific, limited ways.

The distribution of inequality—in material wealth, power and social standing, among others—is evident in each of the villages facing submergence. There is no doubt that the 'caste line' is strong and nowhere near receding in everyday life—work, residence, sociality, kinship and oppressions. However, the 'anticipation of dispossession' (as distinct from an experience of dispossession that is

past continuous) provides a lens to examine the experience of the collectivity that is not yet fractured or dispersed, that springs from ‘situated belonging’ (to borrow from Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran, & Vieten, 2006) rooted in shared place and intertwined lives. The narratives suggest a different idea of ownership—the collective ownership of *the village*—in its material and immaterial aspects, not predicated on title to assets alone, inequalities and hierarchies notwithstanding. Put differently, ownership expressed in ‘my own village’ (*sonta ooru*) as distinct from ‘the land I own’ (*sonta bhoomulu*) is all-encompassing for all inhabitants in distinct ways, the loss of which cannot be comprehended within the narrow, reductionist frames of state appropriation and ‘remedial’ action that is routine state practice today.

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Notes

1. Names and village locations of interviewees have been withheld. All interviews were in Telugu, translated by the authors.
2. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/mallanasagar-high-court-stalls-land-acquisition-orders-status-quo/articleshow/60980147.cms>
3. Three Brahmin and three Velama families were present in the villages surveyed, but they declined to respond to queries, and were therefore not included in the sample.
4. Officially recorded land is land in the name of present landowner in land records with proper survey numbers. Unofficially recorded land is owned by present owner through formal transfer but recorded in another person’s name. The latter are vulnerable to denial of compensation.
5. The most common activities in this category are repair works, machinery spare parts, seeds and fertiliser supply, and other agricultural needs.
6. The average value reported here has been calculated on the basis of inputs by respondents in the study.
7. Response of Executive Engineer Office, Dr B.R. Ambedkar Pranahita Chevella Sujala Sravanthi, Siddipet, Medak, dated 14 June, 2016 to RTI application.

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