

The stark social dislocations that accompany the ongoing commodification of land and agriculture in contemporary rural India receive ample coverage in both academic and popular accounts. There is a tendency, however, in much critical debate on rural India, to focus predominantly on the swift, violent and disruptive forms of primitive accumulation or ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey 2003) involved in the expansion of neoliberal capitalism (Banerjee-Guha 2013, Chatterjee 2008, Sanyal 2007). In this article, we suggest that such a marked focus on violent and coercive forms can hinder us from exploring the manifold ways by which coercion and consent intertwine in the making and grounding of neoliberalisation as a hegemonic process in rural India. In destabilizing the consent/coercion dichotomy, we join recent interventions in critical agrarian studies that argue for the need for thinking beyond enclosure and displacement when analyzing the insidious advance of neoliberal capitalism (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011, Li 2014, Castellanos-Navarrete and Jansen 2015). Closely related to this, we argue that the critical debate on India’s rural transformations has tended to sideline the role of popular aspirations to capitalist expansion. Bringing aspirations up front, we argue for seeing these as constitutive elements to such a process, and as crucial to grounding it in lived experience.

We thus start from the argument that, when seen from below, ongoing rural transformations in India involving the expansion of neoliberal capitalism may appear to be as much, if not more, about popular aspirations as they are about actuating the aspirations of capital ‘from above’. While we do not posit the local and the global as distinct realms, we seek to show, through an interrogation of how aspirations ‘from above’ and aspirations ‘from below’ intersect in particular circumstances, that the commodification of the rural Indian frontier proceeds in a messier, more complex and contradictory manner than is often assumed. To do so, we develop a conjunctural approach in the Gramscian tradition to explore ‘how multiple forces come together in practice to produce particular dynamics or trajectories’ (Hart 2004, 97). This goes

beyond seeing accumulation by dispossession as an (in the worst case simplistic) ‘impact model’ (Hart 2002), but also takes us further than merely asserting that local people, through their aspirations, can be agents in processes of dispossession (Hall 2011). Rather, we perceive aspirations from below as constitutive elements to a broader hegemonic process, thus opening up an avenue for exploring ‘the way in which power is lived and inequality is normalized at the nexus of force, consent, and the production of desires for particular ways of living’ (Li 2014, 17).

Within this broader landscape of ‘aspirations from below’ in the context of capitalist expansion, we are particularly interested in understanding what we propose to call *compounding aspirations*. To clarify what we mean by this, we invoke a twofold definition of the verb ‘to compound’ as we conjoin it to ‘aspirations’, namely: (1) to make up (a composite whole) as in to mix or combine; and (2) to make something worse or intensify the negative aspects of. By ‘compounding aspirations’ we thus refer to aspirations that, like Gramsci’s (1971) contradictory ‘common sense’ to which we shall return later, absorb and accumulate ideas from a variety of sources (Simon 2015, 23; Crehan 2002, 51) as it guides social praxis. Through their embodied realizations in social praxis, these aspirations are additionally compounding in the second meaning of the term insofar as they ground hegemonic processes of neoliberalisation in everyday life to accelerate capitalist trajectories that intensify social dislocation in the countryside.

When we talk of compounding aspirations, then, we refer to a potentially broad spectrum of social *praxis* derived from the active, seeking roles that rural populations play in the uneven expansion of neoliberal capitalism. By foregrounding social praxis, we thus align with Lyall and Colloredo-Mansfeld who elsewhere in this special issue distinguish between aspirations and desires. Desires, they argue, are essentially cognitive and propositional collections of imagined possibilities. They remain latent, only inspiring action in specific moments of

opportunity, in which they merge with *intent*. Desires that merge with intent constitute a distinct function in social praxis, and it is this they call aspirations. We build upon such an approach as we seek to adapt it to tackle head-on hegemonic processes: In short, aspirations while rooted in popular lifeways are always conditioned by political economic forces.¹ While we thus take the question of intentionality seriously, our interest in this article, therefore, tends to gravitate in a somewhat different direction, towards the ways in which aspirations as social praxis may ground hegemonic processes of neoliberalisation in lived experience. This implies taking a step back to take stock of how specific aspirational projects may have complex and contradictory ramifications that compound existing forms of social dislocation.

Our ambition in what follows is, first, to provide conceptual foundations for our notion of compounding aspirations, and second, to illustrate its analytical utility in practice. We pursue the first ambition by drawing on a number of ethnographic studies on land and dispossession in India, while we turn to the second ambition via a study of the expansion of industrial agriculture in a remote corner of south Karnataka. The Karnataka case draws on fieldwork carried out by the first author between 2017 and 2018, utilizing village-based ethnographic methods including semi-structured interviews, life story interviews, focus group discussions and casual conversations with villagers. Through this study, we argue that the compounding aspirations that are intrinsic to the establishment of neoliberalisation as a hegemonic process engulfing rural India revolve crucially around post-agrarian futures. We further argue that the notion of compounding aspirations is useful, also, for studying rural transformations that take the form of ‘adverse incorporation’ (Hall et al. 2015; Borras Jr and Franco 2013). ‘Some have questioned the term “land grab”,’ write Hall et al. (2015, 474), ‘in cases where farmers have been incorporated into corporate agribusiness, not only because accumulation proceeds

¹ We concur with the assessments that in India, ‘neoliberal capitalism has been felt quite unevenly across time, regions, sectors, castes and classes’ (Münster and Strümpell 2014, 4). Nonetheless, we argue that the notion of compounding aspirations can assist us in tackling head-on hegemonic processes.

without dispossession but also because peasants actively seek incorporation into new corporate value chains.’ Adverse incorporation, the authors proceed to argue, points to:

The manner in which people may be incorporated into corporate agribusiness and even global value chains while simultaneously being excluded from processes of capital accumulation. The term ‘adverse incorporation’ itself draws attention to the exploitative character of such relations even where people seek inclusion in them, and so redirects attention to the structural transformations underway and their relationships to reactions and responses from below (Hall et al. 2015, 474).

Involving ‘active’ and ‘seeking’ roles for local populations while they integrate in new circuits of capital, adverse incorporation thus appears a fertile ‘ground’ for compounding aspirations, and reveals that the effects involved can be far from overt, manifesting instead in trajectories of change where local populations end up integrated into new exploitative relationships. Through a spectrum of cases ranging from overt dispossession to adverse incorporation, we thus offer our concept of compounding aspirations as a prism that is flexible enough to capture a substantial diversity of conjuncturally specific effects.

We proceed by first elaborating on the scholarship on neoliberalisation and dispossession in India. We then develop our notion of compounding aspirations in conversation with select recent monographs on land conflicts, capitalist development, and agrarian change before we deploy this notion to the Karnataka case. In the conclusion, we engage with the recent phenomenon of escalating farmers’ protests across much of India to discuss the implications

and limitations of analysing rural transformations in contemporary India through the prism of compounding aspirations.

NEOLIBERALISATION AND DISPOSSESSION IN INDIA

Dispossession and coercion appear omnipresent in the advance of neoliberal capitalism in rural India. Indeed, there has been a spate of recent books that testify to a commonly held scholarly interest. We frequently find land and agriculture emphasized as key axes of contention in India's rural transformations, underpinned by primitive accumulation or accumulation by dispossession, depending on the orientation of the author (D'Costa and Chakraborty 2017a, Mohanty 2016b, Nielsen 2018, Oskarsson and Nielsen 2017, Levien 2018).

Two recent edited books featuring contributions from several leading scholars testify to the marked focus on coercive, violent dispossession: *The Land Question in India: State, Dispossession, and Capitalist Transition*, edited by D'Costa and Chakraborty (2017a), and *Critical Perspectives on Agrarian Transition: India in the Global Debate*, edited by Mohanty (2016b). Intrinsic to the interest in 'capitalist transition' in both books is a perspective that brings dispossession into focus. In the agrarian transition volume we find discussion of primitive accumulation, not the least in order to place ongoing 'transitions' in India in relation to classic literature about 'peasant dispossession' (Mohanty 2016a). The land question book, on its part, features more of a sustained engagement with recent work on accumulation by dispossession and emphasizes conflicts over commodification: 'The consequences of converting land to a commodity are many as dispossession and displacement are integral to this process', as the editors state (D'Costa and Chakraborty 2017b, 30). Coercive, conflictual and disruptive processes are thus perceived as central. In such regard, both books make reference to the influential work of Chatterjee (2008) and Sanyal (2007) where the advance of

neoliberal capitalism in rural India stands out as driven, largely, by externally imposed processes of primitive accumulation (and their attempted reversals through state welfare).

However, recent advances in critical agrarian studies includes significant rethinking of the top-down dynamics implied in much work along these lines (see Hall 2013). Critics have charged Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession for operating with a model that sees contestations over the specific forms of accumulation by dispossession as mere 'reactions', and not as constitutive to capitalist processes. Harvey, according to these critics, assigns local agency and political struggles secondary importance, and foregrounds the logic of capital (de Angelis 2007; Kenney-Lazar 2018). Gillian Hart, in contrast, argues for incorporating localised agency as constitutive so that struggles over accumulation by dispossession 'must be understood together in terms of multiple historical/geographical determinations, connections, and articulations' (Hart 2006, 984). In the India-specific debate, Michael Levien has similarly criticised Harvey for overemphasising the role of (circuits of) capital in determining dispossession. Levien instead calls for recognising the inherently political nature of dispossession, that is, the specific ways by which processes of dispossession are 'determined by class struggle and not the circuits of capital' (Levien 2013, 382). In Levien's work on 'regimes of dispossession', we nevertheless find that coercion is the regime-defining feature, even if the coercive function is ascribed to the state, or specific arms thereof (Levien 2018).

BEYOND COERCION

Other scholars contributing to the 'Indian land grab debate' have highlighted determinants that soften the rigid distinction between 'coercive' and 'voluntary' processes of dispossession. These include, for example, the systematic dissemination of disinformation and manipulation

(Oskarsson 2013), the state's wilful neglect of the agrarian economy (Vijayabaskar and Menon 2018), and the amorphous mass of 'men in the middle' who lubricate transactionalist relations across domains and scales (Sud 2014). At the same time, the role of *aspirations* has largely been overlooked in these writings.

To bring aspirations into our conjunctural approach we find inspiration in an often-overlooked passage in Harvey's writings (a passage that also invites scrutiny of some of his critics cited above). In discussing the 'grounding' of capitalist processes in everyday life, Harvey (2006, 81) distances himself from theorists who, by positing forms of autonomy for 'the lifeworld', by implication end up endorsing the concomitant existence of 'some mystical external force – "capital"'. From this, Harvey goes on to explore Gramsci's notion of 'common sense' as a key site of such grounding whereby 'the activities of capital circulation and accumulation are refracted through actual discursive practices, understandings and behaviours' (Harvey 2006, 84). From Gramsci (1971, 419) we know common sense as diverse and context-specific as it takes shapes that are 'fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential' in that they do not challenge the formation of social orders. Taking form through lived experience, the contradictory, inconsistent and fractured landscapes of common sense are shaped by both deep structural forces and more contingent history (Crehan 2002, 57, Simon 2015, 22-23). Common sense is thus intrinsic to the deployment and consolidation of hegemonic social orders and is, as Kate Crehan argues, for subordinated groups, 'in part a product of their subordinate and dominated position' (Crehan 2002, 116). This is not to say, however, that common sense is totalising. Common sense is continuously and dialectically imbued with what Gramsci (1971, 328) calls 'good sense' which exists as a 'healthy nucleus' in common sense and 'deserves to be made more unitary and coherent.' Through political praxis, this nucleus of good sense can generate coherent visions that, Gramsci (1971, 333) emphasises, are *critical* and oppositional. While we focus squarely on common sense and its articulation in

compounding aspirations in the following, the underlying destabilization of common sense – and thus the potential for disruption of hegemony – through good sense is explored in the conclusion.

We take these analytical steps as promising invitations for grounding capitalist processes at the intersection of capital's aspirations 'from above' and popular aspirations 'from below'. Tania Li's (2014) recent work, which relies on Gramscian analytics and a conjunctural approach to explore how capitalist relations can emerge through everyday practices embedded in local desires and aspirations, is exemplary in this regard. The role of aspirations thus appears constitutive to a Gramscian approach that:

Employs the idea of a hegemonic process to comprehend social domination in terms of the interconnection between the determining characteristics of capitalist social relations through history on the one hand and the willed practice of agents seeking control over history on the other' (Smith 1999, 238 emphasis removed).²

Focusing on rural India we also seek to address an imbalance in the existing scholarship on 'aspirations' in India more generally, a scholarship that has generally neglected the rural and instead fixated on the country's urban middle classes. One line of inquiry has foregrounded the reconfiguration and rearticulation of middle-class aspirations for particular ways of living

² Applied in the Indian context it illustrates how the country's neoliberalisation proceeds as a contradictory, uneven and incomplete hegemonic process (Nielsen and Nilsen 2015, Jakobsen 2018b). This enables us to avoid reifying 'neoliberal capitalism' as an externally imposed, unitary phenomenon, while simultaneously recognising that capital does indeed exert its 'logic' on rural India.

centred on conspicuous consumption in the context of economic liberalisation (Fernandes and Heller 2006, Donner 2012, Säävälä 2010). Another line has analysed how middle-class aspirations undergird the broader hegemonic process of restructuring Indian society and economy in accordance with the logic of neoliberalisation that has, in the Indian context, been wedded to political illiberalism (Fernandes and Heller 2006), while also shaping popular common sense about the good life (Nielsen and Wilhite 2015, Kaur 2016, Kaur and Blom Hansen 2016). We see the working of this hegemonic aspirational project in the commonsensical (in the Gramscian sense) casting of the urban and high-tech as the site of aspirations, symbolically condensed in the prosperous IT-entrepreneur; and the rural and agrarian as the site of distress, symbolically condensed in the indebted peasant prone to suicide.

A more limited number of recent critical ethnographic explorations have, however, sought to bring popular aspirations into conversation with debates about agrarian change and/or land dispossession by interrogating the work that aspirations do or fail to do outside the charmed circle of the urban middle classes. An important, if sometimes only implicit, reference point for several of these studies is Appadurai's (2004) work on slum-dwellers in Mumbai in which he develops his argument about aspirations as a navigational capacity. While Appadurai's intervention is explicated more fully in the introduction to this special issue, it is worthwhile recalling his argument that aspirations allow people to form conjectures about the future. Hence, the inability to form such conjectures – the inability to aspire, in other words – becomes a hallmark of poverty. One recent monograph that has taken a cue from Appadurai's arguments is Sirpa Tenhunen's (2018) book *A Village Goes Mobile* on the appropriation of mobile phones in rural West Bengal. Tenhunen follows Appadurai in arguing that phones can empower poor villagers to the extent that the new flows of images and information they enable will enhance their capacity to aspire. Her ethnography clearly brings out this enhanced

aspirational capacity and its strong engagement with post-agrarian economic domains. From a farmer's point of view, a mobile phone may well be useful for checking whether a particular store has particular agricultural inputs available; to monitor the market price of agricultural commodities; or to hire harvester machines from afar. But the single-most important role that a mobile phone plays in the economic lives of small farmers (and in West Bengal pretty much all farmers are small farmers) is that it enables them to call villagers who have *already* moved outside the village and found non-agricultural work, in order to gather information about job opportunities (Tenhunen 2018, 78). The material affordances of new technologies thus segue into rural contexts in ways that both kindle and nurture post-agrarian aspirations. While the aspirations described by Tenhunen appear largely benign in their effects, there is enough of a literature on labour migration in India to alert us to their potentially compounding effects on social life and wellbeing.

COMPOUNDING ASPIRATIONS

In order to flesh out more substantially how compounding aspirations as a concept aids us in making sense of dispossession and the expansion of neoliberal capitalism and in India's rural transformations, we proceed to offer an in-depth reading of a selection of recent monographs. Through this reading, we lay out the contours of the broad landscape of social praxis where compounding aspirations do their work under various patterns of exploitation, oppression and dispossession. Like common sense, this landscape is, as argued, contradictory, inconsistent and fractured, shaped by both deep structural forces and more contingent history (Crehan 2002, 57; Simon 2015, 22-23). Presenting cases that speak to the conjuncturally specific effects of what we refer to as compounding aspirations, we want to highlight how these come into play in ways that are clearly at odds with any neatly demarcated consent/coercion

dichotomy. While our first monograph, *Dream Zones* by Jamie Cross, comes closest to revealing how popular aspirations generate consent to exploitative conditions, Michael Levien's *Dispossession without Development* delves, rather, into forms of resigned compliance when aspirations are betrayed. Our last two monographs – Kenneth Bo Nielsen's *Land Dispossession and Everyday Politics in Rural Eastern India* and Sarasij Majumder's *People's Car* – similarly deal with dispossession. They show how what appears, in 'top-down' analytics, as an unambiguous case of anti-dispossession mobilisation working against both coercion and consent, in fact reveals itself as working in and through deeply ambiguous and contradictory aspirations that compound influences across such an imagined dichotomy. Indeed, we are dealing with a modality of aspirations that comes close to shattering such a dichotomy altogether.

Located squarely within the debate on land dispossession and capitalism, Cross's *Dream Zones* (2014) analyses the work that economies of anticipation do. Economies of anticipation are simultaneously embodied and iconised in India's special economic zones (SEZ) in which neoliberal forms of economic organisation have been unleashed in small, concentrated and confined doses. Economies of anticipation, Cross argues, do not impose themselves on hapless impoverished workers. Rather, they incorporate rural people into diverse projects for social and material transformation. SEZs are thus arenas of imagination, hope, desire, and aspirations in which people construct and assemble possible future worlds for themselves and others, albeit from existing ideas and images (2014, 9). These dreamed-of futures (2014, 8) can take many forms. Young men working in factories may, for example, use their earnings to fashion themselves in the latest style, acquire new consumer goods, and land a good marriage; and poor and displaced Dalits may see the SEZ as a space of promise and hope where slightly better futures can be forged (2014, 70). They might even see their dispossession as socially liberating insofar as the new spatial configurations of their resettlement sites work to flatten

pre-existing caste hierarchies (2014, 91). Elsewhere, Cross (2015) goes further to suggest that, from such a vantage point, ‘accumulation by dispossession appears less as an external project driven by the interests of corporations and capitalists than a bottom-up process’ in which the willingness of people to accept the loss of land and livelihoods is rooted at the intersection of social histories of agrarian change and the specific ways in which people imagine possible futures.

By foregrounding the ways in which capitalism as it manifests in the SEZ incites people to dream and aspire in ways that engender their continued commitment to the relationships of its reproduction and the dispossession, exploitation and dislocation that co-constitute them, Cross’s work broadens our understanding of the work that aspirations do outside the urban middle classes, in rural lives and subjectivities. But because he largely brackets out the question of whether people can actually realise their hopes and aspirations, his analysis tends to gloss over significant anxieties, ambiguities and contradictions that are, as our Gramscian approach would have it, constitutive elements in aspirations as we conceive of them. For example, Cross does not in any detail examine the implications of the ways in which the young factory workers – who incorporate their industrial working lives into their own aspirational projects for social advancement – consent to conditions of work that are by all objective standards deeply exploitative; nor does he address the wider ramifications of his observation that even the lucky few who have a foothold in the industrial workforce have earnings that are ‘palpably insufficient to meet their long-term aspirations to be householders, husbands and fathers’ (2014, 153). The contradictions that lie at the heart of individual and collective aspirational projects are evident enough and even subjectively acknowledged, but the analytical implications thereof remain underdeveloped, barring passing assertions of how dreams and desires are *also* sources of uncertainty, ambiguity and ambivalence that

materialise in the contradictory ways in which people may simultaneously contest and consent to the terms and conditions of labour.

In his monograph aptly titled *Dispossession without Development* that deals with land dispossession for a SEZ in Rajasthan, Levien (2018) pursues a comparable line of critique and insists that any bonafide analysis of popular aspirations must take stock of outcomes: Sooner or later the rural poor and/or the working classes will submit their aspirations to a long and hard reality check, and for most the result will be hugely disappointing.³ In other words, while the poor may well harbour aspirations that closely resonate with those of the upwardly mobile middle classes under India's neoliberal growth model, Levien dismisses these as 'clearly utopian' in light of the evident absence of any 'objective possibilities for their realisation'. As a result, the poor are eventually likely to abandon (rather than simply recalibrate) their utopian aspirations, weighed down by very real structural impossibilities (Levien 2018, 181). This is what is likely to have the dominant function in shaping social praxis, and not 'aspirations' in and of themselves. In his monograph, Levien brings out the compounding effects of post-agrarian aspirations among sections of the rural poor who had hoped to benefit from the arrival of the SEZ: Dispossessed and fully proletarianised, but unable to find work in the SEZ (and incapable of tapping into the booming rural land market) most end up worse than before. In this context, the *semi-proletarian condition* acquires a new salience. Unlike fully proletarianised and fully excluded villagers who do not even have the benefit of being exploited, those in the semi-proletarian condition at least retain a modest land base that offers some leeway and autonomy in the pursuit of complementary non-agrarian livelihood strategies. The salience of the semi-proletarian condition, however, is not the outcome of aspirations realised, but of aspirations betrayed.

³ Levien's argument is articulated in other publications such as Agarwal and Levien (2019).

If Cross's aspiring young men and Dalits thus at times resemble utopian daydreamers unbudged by structural limitations, Levien's disillusioned villagers appear as hardnosed realists who (sooner or later) recognise the world for what it is. At the risk of simplifying complex arguments, we might say that the everyday life-worlds analysed by Cross are marked by aspirational *consent* in the context of adverse incorporation and ongoing exploitation, whereas those analysed by Levien are marked by resigned *compliance* or 'getting by' in a context of dispossession and exclusion. While one can explain much of this divergence by drawing attention to differences in ethnographic context and analytical orientation, our intention in juxtaposing these two scenarios has rather been to see them as manifesting the contours of a larger landscape of conjuncturally specific social praxis. Within this landscape, we can fruitfully locate further examples of coercive dispossession as well as their accompanying anti-dispossession movements. Such movements have been the subject of two recent monographs, namely Nielsen's *Land Dispossession and Everyday Politics in Rural Eastern India* (2018), and Majumder's *People's Car* (2018). Both deal with one of the most prominent instances of anti-dispossession mobilisation in India in recent years, namely that against building a Tata Motors car factory on land acquired through eminent domain from villagers in Singur in West Bengal.

A central theme in both monographs is how farmers and peasants who mobilise to hang onto their land in the face of dispossession have deeply ambivalent and ambiguous views of their own land, and of the hyper-modern car factory that would be built on it if the state government and private investors had their way. In other words, what from the outside appears as a staunch anti-dispossession mobilisation is shown to house a multitude of contradictory and often conflicting orientations among activists, many of whom are smallholders. Among smallholders, land is valued for the sustenance it provides as well as for the complex forms of identity formation and social distinction it underpins, structured along

the intersecting axes of class, caste and gender. It also forms an important part of a pluri-active mix of livelihoods among most impacted villagers; and, especially in Majumder's book (2018, 6-11), it is seen to provide the leverage required to realise aspirations for post-agrarian futures. Here we sense echoes, however faint, of the salience attached to the semi-proletarian condition in Levien's analysis. However, to the extent that land enables land-owning villagers to imagine themselves as subjects of mobility and aspiration, it equally burdens them with uncertainty and anxiety: Changes to the political economy of agriculture, dwindling land sizes, rising costs of input, low profit margins, and the increasingly declining social status of farmers (a stand-alone article by Majumder (2012) is tellingly titled 'Who wants to marry a farmer?') mean that land alone can often no longer serve as the foundation from which to work towards desired futures. Industrial development of the kind for which Singur's farmers and peasants were dispossessed is thus attractive as it offers a shortcut to post-agrarian futures; but it is accompanied by an equal measure of ambivalence and ambiguity since the arrival of new off-farm jobs would annihilate the socio-material preconditions of local aspirational projects among landed farmers, that is, agricultural land and its attendant patterns of identity and distinction.

These ambiguities and contradictions run deep. They divide villages, neighbourhoods, families, and subjectivities. They lead some affected smallholders into more or less reluctantly signing off their land; others more or less ambivalently find their way into anti-dispossession politics (Das 2016); others refuse the dichotomy altogether and opt for a contradictory game of hedging bets – publicly mobilising to stop the land dispossession from being carried out, while privately positioning themselves to benefit from the anticipated arrival of industrial jobs (see also Majumder and Nielsen 2017; Nielsen 2015). To yet others the felt contradictions simply lead to confusion and paralysis. As one informant asked Nielsen: 'I want my land but I also want the factory. What should I do?' These are not cases

of double standards that await exposure or a logical resolution; they are, rather, testimony to the contradictory and ambivalent qualities of aspirations as a distinct social praxis. As both monographs tellingly show, not even the eventual departure of the automobile company from the area and the restoration of the land to its erstwhile owners would resolve this contradiction.

Our reading of these monographs illustrates how the concept of compounding aspirations can aid in shedding new light on ongoing rural transformations in India by destabilizing the consent/coercion dichotomy. Our reading has, in effect, explored the double nature of compounding aspirations as they inform social praxis: Simultaneously compounding the contradictory and fractured influences that flow into aspirational projects and their realizations in and through social praxis, as well as generating a spectrum of conjuncturally specific effects that compound social dislocation as they ground hegemonic processes of neoliberalisation.

While the analysis in this section has focused on contexts marked by processes of dispossession, we proceed to show the empirical utility of our concept of compounding aspirations through the case of adverse incorporation in corporate agriculture in Karnataka. We first lay out the politico-economic context wherein dryland farmers have rapidly taken up the cultivation of hybrid maize. Then, we analyse some of the diverse influences that compound villagers' aspirations as these give rise to social praxis, leading to the second dimension of compounding aspirations: their constitutive role in grounding hegemonic neoliberalisation as an oppressive and exploitative process among marginalised villagers.

ADVERSE INCORPORATION: CORPORATE AGRICULTURE IN SOUTHERN KARNATAKA

In the remote, dry and increasingly drought-prone tracts of Kollegal taluk in Chamarajanagar district, southern Karnataka, corporate agriculture has made its appearance in instructively insidious ways. This trajectory centres on hybrid maize, which in the 2000s rose to dominance in the region's largely rainfed agricultural system (Jakobsen 2018a). Yet, if we glance at the trajectory of hybrid maize expansion in Karnataka – or even India – with a focus on the aspirations of capital 'from above', there appear little insidious to things. Indeed, hybrid maize has expanded rapidly, outpacing other major food crops: From 1990 to 2016, the area harvested for maize in the country increased by 72.7 percent and the total production of maize by 193 percent (FAOSTAT 2019). Meanwhile, in Chamarajanagar the *kharif* acreage for maize expanded by an astounding 359 percent between 1998 and 2014, making it *the* most grown crop in the district. The rise of maize in India has clearly been a *corporate* trajectory, with agribusiness control stretching from seeds to distribution as maize comes in to use as a 'flex crop' (Borras et al. 2016) feeding primarily the country's booming poultry industry. Having expanded by 839.4 percent from 1990 to 2016 (FAOSTAT 2019), the poultry sector is indeed a key site for accumulation in India's changing rural-urban landscapes. Meanwhile, Indian governments have for the last years actively promoted maize, pushing for the tripling of production by 2025 in close collaboration with private sector capital (see The Indian Institute of Maize Research 2015). Yet, unlike the frequently invoked image of integrated value chains as a distinctive trait for corporate run rural transformations – in India most commonly in the contested form of 'contract farming' (Vicol 2019) – the rapid expansion of maize cultivation in Chamarajanagar has involved farmers in 'active' and 'seeking' roles as they have decided to grow the crop on their land.

From the point of view of corporate-governmental actors pushing the maize boom, this may seem a no-brainer: 'It's a win-win situation!' as one high-ranking agricultural department officer in Bangalore underlined. Farmers will only gain from growing maize, he held, and the

same will corporate-governmental agencies. We know, of course, ‘win-win’ discourses as fraudulent masquerades for the aspirations of capital from innumerable instances in political ecology and critical agrarian studies. Presenting this case as one of adverse incorporation leaves little doubt about the salience of such characterization. However, we want to go further to ask how compounding aspirations come to be articulated in specific circumstances – how, that is, hegemonic processes are grounded among ‘active’ and ‘seeking’ farmers.

The village of Mekkenur⁴ with 326 households is located five kilometres from Hanur, the main, *mofussil* town in the vicinity, in Kollegal taluk. Predominantly a region of rainfed agriculture where some 87 percent of the landholdings are marginal and small, few outsiders have shown much interest in its scattered villages, as has often been the case in similar places aptly termed ‘India’s rainfed agricultural dystopia’ (Harriss-White 2008). Such rural areas tend, across India, to house villagers relying on mixed, often precarious livelihoods, where agriculture intertwines with complex portfolios of wage labour and circular migration (Pattenden 2016). Calling them ‘farmers’ can therefore be something of a misnomer, although competing terms such as ‘agriculturalists’ (Vasavi 2012) are not much better in conveying the sense of flux, informality and experimentation carried out by people among India’s ‘classes of labour’ (Bernstein 2006, Lerche 2010). Likewise, in Mekkenur, we find the lower class/caste sections of the population engaged in broadly labour-oriented livelihoods intermixed with cultivation on a majority of rainfed plots. We sense echoes, again, of Levien’s semi-proletarian condition.

Over the last two decades, agriculture in Mekkenur and the nearby region has become dominated by maize. This entails evident corporate capital accumulation: varieties of hybrid maize are present to a degree unlike other crops in agro-shop inventories, which is the case

⁴ A pseudonym.

also in advertisement including seed companies' excursions into villages ahead of the planting season. Likewise, there is strong corporate dominance over end-use: the region's harvested maize feeds into poultry industry across the border in Tamil Nadu. Yet, apart from the sheer dominance of hybrid maize in the corporate-dominated landscape, we find few signs that agribusiness has been pursuing aggressive strategies to make farmers join their ranks. To the contrary, villagers profess their own volition in deciding which crops to grow.

Simultaneously, as fraudulent masquerades for adverse incorporation go, it is unsurprising to find that villagers strongly deny any real benefit from maize. Little profit is made from growing the crop, villagers explained, but at least it is a slightly better option than other available crops, which frequently entail losses. Key here is that maize integrates well in the labour oriented mixed livelihoods engaged in by the majority of the population: Maize is less labour demanding, and faster maturing, than most other crops, freeing up precious time for engaging in wage labour. For rainfed farmers, this may mean up to nine months a year of wage labour. Maize is also adaptable to dryland conditions; it intercroops well with little additional costs, giving 'added' value to the agricultural season; and it feeds livestock – cows in particular – providing milk that is sold to the village milk cooperative society.

Nevertheless, for marginal and small farmers, growing maize entails the exclusion, as Hall et al. argue for adverse incorporation, from processes of capital accumulation restricted to agribusiness and their intermediaries.

In the following, we examine some of the broader structural forces and local contingent histories that have brought into being the kinds of compounding aspirations that sustain ongoing processes of adverse incorporation in the present. To do this, we look at Mekkenur's trajectory over time. While the broad, simplified picture presented of Mekkenur so far is that of a village located in a remote rural region where wage labour and corporate agriculture coexist, we found villagers narrating remoteness in relative terms. The narrow road

connecting Mekkenur to Hanur is now tarred, but villagers in their fifties and above readily explained how they grew up in a village weak in connectivity. One would not necessarily hear about it immediately when relatives in nearby villages passed away. If one happened to have any errand in Hanur (more of a village at the time) – which in itself was rare, lives commonly lived without ever visiting it – one would walk barefoot. Bicycles made their first appearance in these senior villagers' childhoods. People would largely remain in the village, only seldom departing from it to take up other work or higher education. While cash was in use, villagers would emphasize that most of daily life was carried out without the need for it. Agriculture was for own consumption, relying primarily on *ragi* (finger millet) and sorghum. One Dalit man in his eighties summarised: 'In my childhood we had ragi. Growing, harvesting, eating. No saving of money.'

With the gradual penetration of state and capital into the area, things began changing. State-led infrastructure development enhanced connectivity; new government schools and colleges made education widely available; and the commercialisation of agriculture – first in the form of mulberry cultivation in the 1970s – introduced a cash economy and agricultural market. With this, villagers perceived major changes in life-styles, and a new sense of being subjects of mobility and aspiration – a process not wholly unlike that described in Nielsen's and Majumder's books – emerged. Following these changes, post-agrarian aspirations of the kind we have described earlier became increasingly salient, especially among the younger generation. Predictably, middle-aged and older villagers frequently saw this as a slide towards cultural decadence: the passing of a 'traditional' life style and the coming of a new era characterised by consumerism, greed and insatiable appetites for material betterment. As post-agrarian aspirations consolidated more widely, the new 'era' witnessed the gradual decline in participation among younger inhabitants in agriculture. Again, there was a sense of grief in

the loss of a way of life among older residents. For example, another elderly Dalit man exclaimed that:

If only these youngsters are here, they will sell this land. They can't do any agriculture. They can't work in agricultural land. They have education. If I send them to the agricultural land, they won't do any work there. And finally they will be selling this land. This agricultural land is only for old people.

Middle-aged and older villagers conceived of this as testimony of decadence, youth now being too 'lazy' for physical labour in the fields, only interested in living 'good lives' more attuned to post-agrarian aspirations and synchronised with those of the urban middle class. Young people themselves held a different view, however, considering toiling on the land a sort of 'last resort' if other opportunities in life fail.

Ideas flowing from new state projects, new inflows of capital, and older histories of relative isolation and slow agrarian change were thus compounded into new forms of common sense about desired ways of life that, in turn, shaped people's aspirational projects. The contradictory nature of these aspirations are most profoundly illustrated in the ways in which the very same parents and grandparents who complained about lazy youth neglecting the land would *also* emphasise that they themselves had spent whatever limited income they had managed to save on schooling and opportunities beyond the village for the next generation. For example, an upper caste middle-aged man who runs a restaurant in Hanur with his children professed that he would like to see his children working in agriculture (which they are not), while simultaneously explaining how his own experience of betterment in life would never have happened if he had remained in agriculture. Among the lower castes/classes, the

hope was rather that one's children would not need to go through similar lives of continuous agrarian hardships.

Agricultural fields in Mekkenur are frequently poorly manned these days, as can be expected in such a scenario. In many cases, elderly parents tend their lands while their children, now adults, work elsewhere either part of the year or full-time. While upper class/caste sections have been able to secure grey collar employment and petty businesses – maintaining the ability to hire agricultural labourers for physical work on the farm – the majority has not fared so well. Rather, the compounding effects of their new aspirational projects have been deeply felt. The typical pattern is one of shifting employment in informal, often poorly paid sectors in Hanur and beyond – frequently in megacity Bangalore. Enabling at least a certain degree of savings, labouring class houses are maintained and upgraded and school fees are paid. And, in a manner comparable to Cross's SEZ workers, motorbikes have become very common, fashionable clothing is sported, and increasingly expensive weddings are celebrated. But sustaining these expenses is demanding, compounding the negative effects of ever-rising debts that are partly managed through virtual ubiquitous participation in women's self-help groups in the village. Whatever income is drawn from the land, including importantly from the selling of milk fed by maize straw, goes largely into repaying such loans.

By virtue of its specific qualities, maize comes in handy for labouring class households immersed in mixed livelihoods of such sorts. The steady demand for maize offered by the corporate poultry sector allows unfailing market access, unlike other crops where government-run markets frequently go bust. All of this allows villagers to reap whatever little benefits they can from their maize, while simultaneously engaging most of their time in what they aspire for, namely access to post-agrarian futures. No doubt spurred by hopes for more security than what the informal economy offers lower caste/class rural migrants, these

aspirations nevertheless contribute to the willingness to comply with oppressive work conditions, thus compounding existing forms of social domination.

Consolidating corporate agriculture as a form of adverse incorporation, the maize boom plays a role in transforming the agrarian scene in Mekkenur into one that allows greater ease in participating in the hegemonic process of neoliberalisation with its (imagined) post-agrarian futures. With few signs that such ‘participation’ – ‘active’ and ‘seeking’ as it may be – leads to any real chances for the labouring classes to gain access to the hegemonic image of post-agrarian life that they aspire for, walking Mekkenur’s streets are young people harbouring deep frustrations. They do not aspire for agrarian change that is more enabling and generative of accumulation than what the adverse incorporation through maize has to offer, nor are they anywhere near content with the experienced trajectory of precarious wage labour. As neoliberalisation continues apace, these experiences of frustration that are simultaneously symptomatic and generative of compounding aspirations may become a defining feature of life in Mekkenur.

CONCLUSION: LOCATING COMPOUNDING ASPIRATIONS IN INDIA’S RURAL TRANSFORMATIONS

In this article, we have foregrounded popular aspirations as a promising avenue towards destabilizing the consent/coercion dichotomy that has underpinned much of the recent critical debate on rural India and its transformations. Examining aspirations, we argue, allows us to take stock of and appreciate the active, seeking roles and willed practices of agents. This approach seems particularly useful to us when wedded to Gramscian considerations of hegemony and common sense, understood as a contradictory, inconsistent and fractured landscape shaped simultaneously by deep structural forces and contingent history. Both

common sense and the aspirational projects it harbours are thus inescapably linked to the subordinate and dominated position occupied by large sections of the rural Indian populace in a context of neoliberal restructuring. When cast in this way, aspirations appear as simultaneously rooted in local subjectivities and intentionalities *and* conditioned by political economic forces. Aspirations thus work as a site where hegemonic processes of neoliberalisation are grounded in lived experience, albeit always in contradictory and inconsistent ways. We have thus offered our notion of ‘compounding aspirations’ as a key organizing device that helps us sift through and sort a broad spectrum of aspirational projects across different social and geographical locations. While we have explored this spectrum in the particular contexts of land dispossession in contemporary India, and adverse incorporation in corporate agriculture in Karnataka, we take note of how several of the other contributions to this special issue in a comparable manner conceive of the articulation and subjectivisation of aspirations as a contradictory process that dissolves neat distinctions (see the introduction to this issue), generate contradictory social projects, and produce unanticipated outcomes. We thus hope that our notion of compounding aspirations can aid analyses of rural transformations cutting across seemingly disparate contexts elsewhere.

Compounding aspirations, however, are never totalising, nor do they ground hegemonic processes of neoliberalisation in such a way as to render hegemony a permanently achieved state of affairs. As with Gramsci’s notion of common sense, they always and dialectically carry with them a healthy nucleus (good sense) that can generate oppositional social change. Recently, we have seen signs of the formation of such critical oppositional forces in India in the shape of a new form of farmers’ protests over the last few years, after a lull of several decades (Suthar 2018, 17). Some of these recent mobilisations appear as shaped by forms of compounding aspirations as we have analysed them above: they articulate the interests of dominant propertied classes in the countryside who demand special ‘quotas’ in educational

institutions, government jobs, or other forms of state intervention to get a foothold in the post-agrarian economy, thus seemingly reinforcing pre-existing hegemonic constellations of power (Jakobsen 2018c). Other recent protests, however, appear more diverse and incorporate a broad segment labouring classes in the countryside: men and women, young and old, educated and uneducated. A mix of alienation, exclusion, and insecurity among those who – like the dispossessed Dalits in Levien’s study – have seen their aspirations go unfulfilled drive these protests (Suthar 2018, 20). While they thus articulate ‘agrarian anger’ (Nilsen 2018) at the present state of affairs where rural people are deeply disappointed with life and dwindling opportunities in the countryside, they also seem to embody an alternative aspirational project, one in which the rural-agrarian is imagined in new ways and recast as ‘the way of the future’ (Suthar 2018, 17). Integral to this aspirational project is also the forging of new rural-agrarian identities, the nature of which – according to Suthar (2018, 20) – cannot yet be articulated. Whether this ‘as-yet inarticulable’ may constitute the healthy nucleus of common sense from which the making of counter-hegemonic projects ‘cannot but start in the first place’ (Gramsci 1971, 347) remains to be seen. More importantly, sustained socio-political struggle will determine whether such a potential nucleus of opposition can be made into something ‘more unitary and coherent’ (Gramsci 1971, 328) that may eventually unsettle the everyday grounding of hegemonic processes of neoliberalisation through compounding aspirations.

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