

Digital Empire in Urban India: Studying Postcolonial Property Technics in Agrarian Delhi

2023 Scott-Kloeck Jenson Pre-Dissertation Travel Fellowship Report

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Figure 1: Aftermath of state violence and demolitions in agrarian Delhi (Image Credits: Sahil Sasidharan, 2023)

My doctoral research project stems from an overarching goal to understand India's ongoing yet contested turn towards market fundamentalist modes of urbanization and its unevenly unfolding digital revolution under the same register of what I term as postcolonial property technics—a technoscientific enablement of global racial capitalism in the capital territory of Delhi's peripheries through a digitally mediated transformation of its peripheral rural land to urban property. For this Ph.D. project, I have been focusing on the evolution of a new land policy regime in Delhi which is techno-politically transforming the capital's planning and urbanization framework through a digitally enabled political-economic restructuring of its peri-urban land market that in turn further cements the marginalization of socio-economically vulnerable groups and their right to the city. Through an ethnographic study of the processes and practices of digitalized urban property-making and unmaking in the peripheries of Delhi, chiefly in areas that form part of *Dilli Dehaat* or agrarian Delhi (in the Hindi language), I aim to nuance ongoing conversations around the policy and planning-related failures of formal urbanization in the capital. This is particularly in relation to the existing incomplete narratives about the proliferation of informal settlements at the city's edge which do not account for either the imperialist logics and forces underpinning these failures of India's emerging technocapitalist urbanization or their multidimensional costs and burdens that are collectively borne by various residents of Delhi, including those who continue to live and carve lives on its socio-spatial margins.

Given India's colonial-agrarian past, the National Capital Territory of Delhi (hereafter Delhi) is comprised of 350+ villages with more than half already subsumed under the capital's urban core, while the rest are earmarked for future urban expansion into agrarian Delhi. In 2013, India's National Capital Territory of

Delhi (hereafter Delhi) adopted a new neoliberal land policy that marked a paradigm shift in the capital's urbanization trajectory as planned for these agrarian peripheries. This new policy replaced an age-old socialist practice of planned expansion through large-scale compulsory land acquisitions—via state powers of eminent domain instituted in the 1960s as legacy of Independent India's coloniality and its non-aligned stance during the Cold War era. A policy regime whose failures drove Delhi's informal urbanization into the twenty first century. In contrast, the recent shift in policy to a Public Private Partnership (PPP) model for assembling land for planned urban development coupled with Delhi's newfound zeal for real-estate-driven planning were part of broader market-oriented changes under neoliberal globalization that had gained momentum in the 1990s with the fall of the Soviet Bloc and India's enforced economic liberalization. Such imperialist economic and geopolitical drivers also accelerated technological transformations that were already underway, culminating in contemporary national programs like Prime Minister Modi's ambitious 100 Smart Cities Mission and Digital India initiatives in 2015. It is in this context that I have embarked on my second round of preliminary fieldwork in the Summer of 2023 with the support of this esteemed fellowship.

My aim with this round of preliminary fieldwork was to study the status and impacts of the capital's new land policy in light of its delayed implementation that had already taken almost a decade by 2023. I was also aware that since 2018, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), the capital territory's federally administered planning and development agency had modified the new Land Pooling Policy (LPP) to open up almost 50,000 acres of agricultural land in 105 peripheral villages for voluntary pooling and subsequent sectoral development. I was also cognizant of the speculative impact of this massive urbanization program on the city as it was backed by the administrative technique of land readjustment or pooling to enable public-private partnerships in land assembly for planned development, which itself was incentivized by the potential for real estate speculators to profit off of urbanizing land at the capital's frontier. My time on the field was also spent towards supporting my argument that DDA's vision of rolling out and implementing this policy at such an unprecedented scale was only made possible due to the advent of a host of digital technologies. This digitalization of planning and property-making processes in Delhi's peripheries involved the use of new geospatial databases and GIS, online portals and websites, digitization of land and property records, use of surveying technologies (including drones for mapping and GPS technologies for ground truthing processes) as well as the use of social and other forms of digital media for knowledge dissemination about the policy and its implementation. I was resolute in my belief that the use of these digital interfaces and technological mediums was also crucial to re-inscribing Delhi's informally urbanized peripheries as vacant land or terra nullius that was thus made ripe for imperialist and globalizing real estate speculation in these postcolonial geographies of the urban South.

I am extremely grateful to IRIS-NRC and the family of Scott-Kloeck Jenson for the generous support provided to my research under this pre-dissertation travel fellowship. Under its tenure, I was able to continue my preliminary fieldwork in Delhi as informed by my prior experience as researcher-cum-practitioner in India's urban milieu, my previous round of summer fieldwork in 2022 and my coursework and studies here at UW-Madison. In this regard, I am also equally thankful to those who were kind enough to spare their valuable time and resources in support of my research as part of this fieldwork visit. As part of it, I was able to study updated urbanization plans and ongoing planning and real estate development processes in the capital's urban extensions with a focus on recently urbanized villages designated for urban development under the Delhi Master Plan's Land Pooling Policy (LPP). Following preliminary fieldwork

in the summer of 2022, I had identified key sites where impacts of this new policy regime were studied closely during this visit. I was also able to meet with government bureaucrats in MoHUA and the DDA as well as city planners involved in this policy process along with getting updates to Delhi's 2041 masterplan process as this new land policy has now been incorporated under the same.

I was also able to continue my ethnography of the different actors and implementation processes involved in the realization of this policy. For the same, I was able to establish contact with different offices and functionaries within the government, private sector as well as non-governmental organizations that have been associated with different components of this policy including its policymaking process and implementation. I was also able to initiate contact with two sets of research participants who are crucial to my project: functionaries of the Land Pooling Cell in Pitampura, Delhi who have been involved with the day-to-day work of managing the LPP portal, applications and GIS-based ground-truthing and verification processes for land that has been pooled in various sectors of the different land pooling zones in Delhi. Here I was able to obtain details of field camps, field visits or surveying exercises that were undertaken in relation to implementing this policy. For this phase of my project, I was also in touch with DDA's Planning department functionaries who were able to guide me through these processes from their planning and developmental standpoint. Secondly, I was able to initiate my next round of participant observations and interviews with representatives of the villages and other affected communities that are being impacted by these policy changes to understand their aspirations and hold meetings with their representatives and other significant actors who are involved in this ongoing process. Furthermore, I was able to meet with additional University faculty in Delhi and the larger National Capital Region who will be able to support my subsequent dissertation research fieldwork along with offering avenues for presenting my research findings in relevant communities in and around the city. Lastly, I have also been able to collect relevant text materials such as international financial organization reports, global consulting firm reports, government documents, performance reports of real estate securities and funds, maps and media articles pertaining to these proposed developments in agrarian Delhi. While some of these documents were already available in the public domain, I was able to request access for others from my research participants during in-person meetings.

This additional round of fieldwork over the summer term also allowed me access to a host of opportunities to network and connect with professionals, research scholars and academics who have been engaged in work focused on similar issues and concerns in and around Delhi. This has also enabled my scholarship and activism around these matters to gain traction in relevant communities and I was also able to meet with myriad representatives of state and non-state organizations whose inputs have been crucial in terms of further nuancing the direction of my doctoral research project and any future plans. I really appreciate the generous support that was provided under this fellowship as it was essential towards supplementing travel, lodging and per diem costs that have allowed me to continue advancing my scholarship on this topic over the summer. In gratitude, I will continue keeping the driving ethos of this fellowship alive through my present and future work by foregrounding matters of social justice and maintaining a focus on the inequities wrought by analytics of social difference such as race, caste, religion, gender and sexuality in the world.