We Demand Work! 'Dispossession', patronage and village labour in Bibiyana, Bangladesh

Corrected text highlighted in yellow.

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It is January, 2014, two weeks after a general election characterised by violence, blockades and civil disorder on an unprecedented scale. I am picking beans with two friends in a village about two hundred miles north of Dhaka. At first sight the picture is one of bucolic calm. A kingfisher flits across the water; above us, an eagle soars. On the land next to the pond men are planting paddy; ankle deep in mud, they work in lines, leaving patches of vibrant green in their wake. Glancing across the fields I notice a large group moving along the distant road. They are walking with intent and seem to be holding something above their heads: at least a hundred or so figures, their white prayer caps catching the winter sun. My friends peer across the fields. "*Procession*" they say, using the English word. "They're going to the gas field for work."

Shift the gaze and another reality is revealed: the hulking outline of a vast gas plant operated by the multinational energy corporation Chevron, the towering flare smudged into the horizon; a high road, cutting across the land to the north until it meets the arterial highway that a generation earlier was a rural track. Both shudder with heavy industrial traffic. On the other side of the fishery a huge pipeline is being constructed, connecting South 'pad' to a new site a few miles east. The thump of drills is audible a mile away. For a moment we can hear the chants of the men as they move along the road, then they are gone. They have marched from the nearby market town of Enatganj bearing banners and caps marked with the words *Chakri Pai!* ("We demand work!"). When they reach the junction they find it blocked with police vehicles.

This is not the first procession to the gas field; there have been many such marches. Some have resulted in meetings with the corporation but most have been met by police. In recent weeks local villages have set up *samity* (committees) to negotiate for work. Other encounters have been more chaotic and violent. During my stay a Chevron contractor is struck in the face. A few weeks later an American employee is beaten. Worse, a year earlier a fight between villages over labour contracts ended in murder.

The Enathganj procession takes place a week into my visit to Bibiyana, the location of my doctoral research in 1987-88 and more recently where three researchers from Jahangirnagar University and I researched the impact of the gas field in 2008-11[1]. During our research local people expressed fury and bewilderment at finding themselves living next door to an industrial enclave which offered neither employment nor access to gas whilst Chevron attempted to mollify them with various neo liberal schemes of income generation, credit and training, which I termed 'disconnected

[1] This research was funded by the ESRC-DFID joint fund for poverty focussed research, for which I am extremely grateful. My colleagues at Janhangirnagar were Fatema Bashir, Masud Rana and Zahir Ahmed.

development' (Gardner, 2012; Gardner, Ahmed, Bashar and Masud, 2014) [2]. In the four years since, the situation has radically changed. There is a third gas field a mile north, a new road and a new pipeline. Crucially, there are over a thousand jobs; many of the people who in 2009-10 were furious at being overlooked are now employed. *Chakri* – employment in the formal sector - is what everyone wants, for agriculture is seen as too expensive and insecure. Today, many of the most vociferous critics of Chevron are now enthusiastic supporters.

The journey back to Dhaka reveals a rapidly altered landscape from the Bangladesh of my previous research in the 1980s and 90s (Gardner, 1991; 1995). The vista of rice fields and rivers remains but vast tracts of land have been overtaken by brick-kilns and factories, highways and urban sprawl. Reports have it that nearly 1% of agricultural land is being lost a year to unplanned building causing irreversible environmental damage and threatening the country's hard won food security; other estimates suggest that over the next 25 years 50% of the country's arable will be lost . Indeed, Feldman and Geisler call the country 'an epi-centre of displacement' (2012: 973; see also Gardner and Gerharz, 2016). Kathy Le Mons Walker's observation that land is the main site of struggle in India (2008) applies equally to Bangladesh, even whilst in other quarters the country is being applauded for its advances in measures of human development (Dreze and Sen, 2013).

Back in Bibiyana significant and unpredictable about-turns had taken place in the fortunes and, indeed opinions, of many people. Whilst our research up to 2011 had covered the struggles surrounding the loss of land, the situation had changed. In what follows I recount how opposition which originally united people against the gas field during the initial stage of land dispossession has, nine years later, changed into escalating estrangement and conflict between groups, based around new forms of patronage. Indeed the shift from land to precarious labour seems not to have led not to a decrease in the moral economy of village based patronage and political allegiance, but instead has strengthened it, partly as a result of Chevron's 'community engagement measures'. Similar processes of 'elite capture', and the reinforcement of pre-existing, or altered forms of inequality as the result of 'development' or industrialisation have been documented across South Asia, (for example, Shah, 2010; Pattenden, 2011; Carswell and de Neve, 2013; Levien, 2012). What was more striking on our return to the area in 2014 was how some of the poorest rural families who were dispossessed of their land and livelihood in 2005 appeared to be doing well, at least for the time being. Clearly, the story had moved on.

Theorising the Future

[2] Julila Elyachar describes similar World Bank projects as 'Antidevelopment development' (2002); see also Karim, 2011 and Pattenden, 2010

Before describing these changes, let us consider the way in which the future is theorised and approached both in Bibiyana and in academic work on economic transformation. As we shall see, *anticipation* (a state in which one waits for, or looks forward to events in the future) runs through every part of my account and is reflected in both liberal and neo-Marxist theories of agrarian change. In terms of the latter, much of the emerging anthropology of industrialisation and neo liberalism in South Asia engages with the work of David Harvey and other Marxist theorists interested in capital accumulation and new forms of inequality (Kasmir and Carbonella, 2008; Le Mons Walker, 2008; Corbridge and Shah, 2013; Munster and Strumpell, 2014; Munster and Munster, 2012; Carswell and de Neve, 2014; Levien 2011; 2012; 2013). Harvey's work has particular resonance for anthropologists researching the repercussions of the spread of global capital into new territories (2003). Arguing that capitalism's chronic over-accumulation is solved by 'spatio-temporal fixes' which displace the problem over time and space into new territories, Harvey refers both to the ways in which capitalist infra-structure is physically fixed (the crisis) and how its global spread fixes the problems, opening up new markets and finding new resources to exploit. He terms this process 'accumulation by dispossession' (ABD) a contemporary version of Marx's primitive accumulation[3], though with important differences. Land and natural resources, often seized via alliances with states, remain important whilst new forms dispossession include debt, structural adjustment, copyright, and so on.

As Michael Levien has argued with reference to the development of Special Economic Zones in India, two features distinguish ABD from the processes of primitive accumulation that Marx observed in the Nineteenth Century English countryside (Levien, 2012). The first is that contemporary dispossession is characterised by extra-economic factors, usually the collusion of the state with capitalist interests. The second is that whilst in the case of industrialising England, primitive accumulation forced the peasantry from the land, transforming them into an industrial proletariat, in South Asia today landlessness does not usually precede industrial employment. As Levien writes: 'ABD has more to do with the multiple forces seeking to turn land and other resources into capital …than about what may or may not be its result: adding to the pool of wage-laborers.' (ibid: 938). In the case of the SEZ in Rajistan which Levien documents, the result of ABD was not industrial work for the dispossessed, but rampant land speculation, the development of a rentier class of wealthier farmers and even more precarious livelihoods for the rural poor. As this work shows, contemporary forms of dispossession do not lead to predictable futures for the poorest.

ABD has proven to be a compelling formulation for those researching predatory global capitalism in South Asia, with anthropologists adding important provisos involving cultural context, local and national politics and history (cf Munster and Munster, 2012;

[3] 'Accumulation by dispossession' draws attention to the ongoing processes of primitive accumulation, the process which Marx argued that in pre-capitalist contexts the means of production – usually land - was transferred from the producers to capitalist owners via violent and state sponsored methods such as the enclosures of the English countryside, slavery and colonial conquest.

Gardner and Gerharz, 2016). In contrast is the neo liberal narrative of 'development'. Here, the future is foregrounded and change naturalised in an evolutionary and lineal way: as inevitable, though with some bumps and obstacles (tradition, weak governance, lack of democracy and so on) to get over. Like Marxism, the future is brought to us care of The Economy, though in mainstream development theory this process is benign, for economic growth brings social goods and well being.

Whilst anthropologists of development have spent much time critiquing this paradigm, it's important to remember that in many parts of the world people believe in it passionately. As Craig Jeffery notes in his work on 'time pass' in India, the promise of 'development' – which will arrive in the future – has led people to readjust their temporal horizons, reconciling themselves to adjusting their short term goals in the hope of pay-offs in the longer term (Jeffery, 2010: 4). Waiting for the future, which can be strategic as well as unavoidable, is an important element. This sense of anticipation is the focus of Jamie Cross's work on Special Economic Zones in India, which he argues lead to 'economies of anticipation', involving 'dreamscapes' as well as nightmares of what neo liberalism will bring. Whilst in some contexts there is intense resistance in others the advent of SEZs involve fevered speculation as farmers rush to sell their land. Meanwhile large scale sites of industrial infra structure become " … arenas of imagination, hope, aspiration and desire in which people construct and assemble possible future worlds for themselves and others from existing ideas and images" (Cross, 2014: 10).

As we shall see, Bibiyana has also been animated by an 'economy of anticipation' in which peoples' actions are directed at an imagined though contradictory future involving both nightmarish scenarios of industrial apocalypse leading to emptied out landscapes depleted of fertility and hopes for economic security and modernity. As they try to predict uncertain futures, the strategies and alliances of different groups shift or involve sudden reversals. Charting these, and showing the complex processes involved reveals that we cannot assume what side people are on, or what they want. Indeed, by focussing on a particular crisis in time - that caused by accumulation by dispossession – we are in danger of over determining the future and forgetting about the past. In doing this we might also reflect upon how ethnography, both as a method and a form of writing, 'locks' unfolding events into lineal narratives that pull us towards 'end points' which are actually snap shots of a moment in time, over determining what in reality are ever changing, disordered and tangled realities. As Line Dalsgaard and Martin Frederikson put it: 'Every time we return to the field our conclusions or 'endings' so to speak, were put to shame by the course of events.' (Dalsgaard and Frederikson, 2013: 58)

Bibiyana : 'Global Villages' and Labour Reserves

The history of Bibiyana, an area of about ten square kilometres containing four villages close to the Bibiyana River in Habiganj, Bangladesh, is in many ways a history of global labour (Adams, 1987; Gardner, 1995; 2008; 2012). As documented throughout Bangladesh, the country's deltaic and constantly shifting geography has been matched by a similarly mobile population of Bengalis moving East in search of new lands (Amrith, 2013; van Schendel, 2005). In Talukpur, the village where I did my doctoral fieldwork, accounts of older people tell of the village being settled in the early to mid Twentieth Century. Men had been working as lascars in Calcutta's ships since colonial times (Adams, 1987; Chowdhury, 1993) many eventually settling in Britain. Most initially worked in heavy industry in Northern England before a typical 'crisis of over accumulation' (Harvey, 2004) occurred in the shape of the 1970s recession and mass redundancy. Rather than return to Bangladesh, the majority switched to an emerging niche: 'Indian' restaurants, reinforcing their foothold in Britain by obtaining citizenship and reuniting their families.

Since then the area has developed multiple links to foreign countries (*bidesh)*[4]. Those families that had connections to Britain, known as *Londonis,* invested first and foremost in improving their economic and social status at home, buying up land, building pucca houses and elevating their social standing via recourse to purist Islam, education and so on. By the 1980s local socio-economic hierarchies directly reflected access to the global labour market. Not surprisingly, the benefits of connection to *bidesh* were bunched in particular lineages, especially those which had previously owned land and held power: the Pathans and Syeds. By the early 2000s, land ownership, concentrated entirely with *Londoni* families, remained a key arbiter of economic and political power in the area. The land was used for subsistence agriculture, with a surplus sold on local markets; *Londoni* families supplemented their incomes with remittances from the U.K whilst those without British connections sought other migrant destinations, in particular the Gulf, where men worked as construction labourers. 'Time pass' therefore has a particular complexion, as the sons of families with *Londoni* connections wait for their chance to migrate, either through marriage, student visas or other ruses which families dedicate much energy, resources and time into planning. Some young men spend years unemployed and waiting for their own spatio-temporal fix: their imagined futures only possible by moving in the opposite direction of Harvey's capital, back to the crisis ravaged centres of over accumulation , the post-industrial towns of Northern Britain , to take their turns in the restaurant trade (Gardner, 2008).

Meanwhile households which did not have a member overseas had either always been land poor or landless, or had slipped down the hierarchy and lost land over time. Some of these were within the powerful migrant lineages (Gardner, 1995). Today, they continue to be very poor, but are supported by the charity of their transnational kin

[4] In 2014 remittances from overseas migration is a major earner for Bangladesh, with destinations including the Gulf, South East Asia and South Africa . Migration to the UK however, remains a monopoly of particular areas in Sylhet (Gardner, 2008)

(Gardner and Ahmed, 2009; Gardner, 2012). The poorest people in the area, however, were outside the dense networks of kinship and connection that had benefitted so greatly from overseas migration. These were people living in the adjacent village of Garibgram. Originally in-migrants from other parts of Sylhet attracted by the high wages offered by *Londoni* families for agricultural and domestic labour, in the 1960s and early 1970s, they lived on the outskirts of Talukpur or within family *baris* where they were employed as semi-permanent labourers, or *kamla*. According to local accounts, by the mid 1970s leaders in Talukpur had arranged for nearby *khas* (government owned) land to be settled by the in-migrants, since they were running out of space (perhaps the land rush caused by *Londoni* migration meant a shortage of available *khas* land in Talukpur).

The relationship between the two villages was strictly one of patron and client. Garibgram supplied labour for Talukpur. Men worked as seasonal agricultural labourers or permanent *kamla* living in farm buildings. Women were hired as *ghor beti* (housemaid) helping with domestic tasks and processing agricultural products. In general, relations were cordial, permanent labourers were addressed as *mama* (sister's brother) and support offered at times of crisis: hand down clothes, meals, occasional charity and loans, plus land for long term sharecropping arrangements were offered in return for political support and a constant supply of docile labour, the hallmarks of rural patron-clientage in South Asia (Wood, 2003; 2005; Jansen, 1987; van Schendel, 1981). There were however clear boundaries between the two villages. There was no inter-marriage, nor did anyone from Garibgram migrate abroad. Garibgram people were known as *chotomanoosh* (literally: little people) by the *bhalomanoosh* (good people) of Talukpur and were treated accordingly: squatting rather than being seated, eating off tin rather than china plates. During the national crises and food shortages of the mid 1970s a friend who had set up a school in the village recalls helping people from Garibgram raid the grain stores of their wealthy patrons in Talukpur; without this action, he told me, many would have starved.

By 1990 Garibgram still largely acted as a labour reserve for Talukpur, providing labour or sharecropping land left by absentee Londoni households. Over the next fifteen years, these agriculturally based livelihoods were to become increasingly precarious as a shift of investment from agriculture towards business and property took place. Subsistence agriculture was slowly being replaced by commodification. Soaring land prices and attendant speculation meant that whilst land ownership remained important to Londonis, agricultural output was increasingly irrelevant. Rather than asking for a share of the crop, some landlords were now demanding rent, making it harder to farm without capital inputs. As documented across South and South East Asia, as agriculture has become monetarised and mechanised, making a living as a small farmer is increasingly difficult. As elsewhere, in Bibiyana, farmers say that agriculture is 'too expensive' because of the capital required for seeds, fertiliser, labour, irrigation[5].

[5] See for example Welker, 2012

The Gas Field: Resistance and Compliance

By the early 2000s Garibgram and Talkpur were still linked by patronage, but the wealthier village's need for farm labour was diminishing. Meanwhile landless or land poor households without capital to invest in overseas migration, education or business opportunities were forced to take up alternative sources of income, such as rickshaw driving (Khan and Seely, 2005). In 2005 the District Commissioner arrived in Bibiyana to announce that large reserves of natural gas had been discovered. Land would be forcibly acquired by the government and leased to Unocal (which was merged with Chevron in 2007). There was already a smaller installation (the North Pad) at a village two or three kilometres away but this was a major find which would eventually supply over 50% of Bangladesh's gas, a vital resource for the by now rapidly industrialising country's energy security. At this stage the installation was to take up sixty acres of agricultural land plus much more for the high banked roads that were to connect the North and South pads.

Bibiyana's story should be contextualised within the broader picture of rapid industrialisation and economic growth in Bangladesh. Whilst governments since the 1990s have pursued neo liberal economic policies, encouraging foreign investment, nationally the role of multinationals in the extraction of natural resources was being fiercely debated over 2008-11 and has caused serious political unrest . In 2006 protests against a proposed open cast mine in Phulbari in north west Bangladesh, to be operated by Asia Energy led to the death of three and injury of around a hundred (Nuremowla, 2011; Faruque, 2012; Gain, 2006). Meanwhile national agitation centred around the content of Production Share Contracts with foreign companies, with activists arguing that these grossly exploit the country's natural resources, leading to large profits for the multinationals, generous backhanders for corrupt government officials and nothing for Bangladesh (Shawkat and Faruque, 2009). Few however would dispute the need for energy security (Islam et al, 2008; Wesley, 2006). Over 2008-11 this was increasingly pressing; power shortages were hampering the industry which has motored Bangladesh's growth rate of 6.6 % (in the first part of 2010). Such was the need for energy that the years leading up to our research power shortages caused riots at electricity stations [6].

Meanwhile in Bibiyana in 2005, feelings were running high. As Unocal was carrying out 'community consultations', people from the four villages close to the site had organised themselves into 'Demand Resistance Committees'. The most influential leader was

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[6] [6] http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Six-dead,-100-reportedly-wounded-in-Bangladesh-electricity-protest-5196.html (accessed October 14 2010)

[6] http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-18709714_ITM

[6] http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Six-dead,-100-reportedly-wounded-in-Bangladesh-electricity-protest-5196.html (accessed 15/10/10)

Joyful Haque[7], the chairman of the *union parishad,* a member of the BNP and part of the most powerful lineage in Talukpur. Other men had more informal leadership roles. Samsun Khan, for example, told us that his high social status, saintly ancestry and family honour had contributed to his role as a leader in a nearby village. Samsun Khan was soon to become one of the largest land losers: his property was directly opposite the plant and nearly all of his fields were taken. During our research he was one of the fiercest opponents of the plant.

In 2005 opposition against the gas field seemed united. For the landless, the loss of land to the gas field was seen as a serious threat to their livelihoods, involving employment as agricultural labourers or sharecroppers, as well as a pool of land for cattle grazing, gathering grain and straw post-harvest, and small fish and prawns during the wet season. Recounting this time, Samsun Khan tells of a meeting of over two thousand people at his *bari.* Describing the ensuring protest movement, he told us:

> *We stopped government officials and Chevron's people from entering the villages … building a barricade. We lay down on the roads and went on hunger strike.*[8]

Whilst Unocal held 'community consultations' and took advice from community relations consultants who urged them to drive more carefully, meet peoples' eyes and try not to be associated with forced land acquisitions (Reyes and Begum, 2005) the government threatened violence, stationing hundreds of police in barracks at the construction site. Strong pressure was placed on party members such as Joyful Haque to back down. Accompanying this was the news that after Unocal's intervention the rate of land compensation had been increased. It was at this stage that some of the leaders began to negotiate with the company who were now promising a range of community engagement gifts including an 'Alternative Livelihoods Programme' to be presided over by Village Development Organisations, headed by the same leaders. As these leaders withdrew their support, the organised protest movement came to a halt.

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The story of the villages surrounding the Bibiyana gas field is thus a case par excellence of 'accumulation by dispossession' . A multinational corporation with state assistance (the 'extra economic' forces noted by Levien[9]) dispossesses farmers in order to build a large gas extraction plant. The gas is piped far away, sold back to the government in order to profit the multinational and boost the country's energy security on which its growth rate, powered largely by privately owned garment factories, depends. Neither

[7] The names of villages and individuals have been anonymised.
[8] Interview notes, 2008
[9] Levien, 2012.

the gas nor the profits are distributed locally; the site of extraction is surrounded by high perimeter fences and security guards, an enclave of high modernity surrounded by a disenfranchised and resentful population[10] . Rumours abound nationally and locally about backhanders and bribes offered to government officials by corporations eager to win contracts in the rush to extract Bangladesh's natural resources, which are being represented within international mining finance as a new frontier (Gilbert, 2015).

It should be noted that many of the landowners were living in the U.K. In our meetings in Britain they expressed bewilderment, fury and grief at how land they had spent their lives amassing had been taken. One man decried the way that the rural charm of his ancestral village had been destroyed, turning it into 'an industrial zone'. Another was so upset that he sat mute and morose through a group discussion with his neighbours and relatives in Burnley. Meanwhile in his village home a few hundred metres from the perimeter fence of the South Pad, Samsun Khan told us he 'felt fire in my heart' when he thought of the land his family had once owned, now covered in concrete. Chevron had a 'case' out against him for his role in the protest, he explained. Oddly, an hour later he was smiling and posing for photos by the fence. As he departed for his other house in Sylhet Town he handed me a card that read 'Chevron Contractor'.

Yet whilst our interviews with landowners revealed anger about the forced acquisition what landless people from Garibgram and other villages were most concerned with were jobs. In 2005-07 around five hundred local men had been employed in the construction of the South Pad and its infra-structure. Once the building was completed they were laid off, tossed back onto the depleted land reserves to find whatever means they could to survive . In 2008-09, many households in Garibgram lacked basic food security. What they wanted was work, which they had hoped Chevron would provide, they told us. *We were given lots of hope*, one man said in 2009, *but we received nothing.*

Indeed, despite the initial resistance movement, the gas field had evoked intense hope for many people; as one man put it: *'*no more darkness'. As Gisa Weszkalyns points out in her work on prospecting for oil in Sao Tome, energy resources are laden with potential (2008; 2014). Like oil in Sao Tome, no-one knew exactly how much gas there was under the fields in Bibiyana; the extent of the resource was continually debated during our research, and used by national protesters to contest Chevron's presence, for example in arguing that they were extracting too much, too quickly. An invisible entity, piped away and only materialising in the shape of a towering flare, the potential of gas is even more elusive than the sticky, tangible material of oil. 'There is gold under our land,' people said but it was never seen, only guessed at: the source of continual rumours.

The anticipation of connection to the gas, and to modernity, is vividly materialised in the shape of a gas cookers, waiting in would-be kitchens of large Londoni houses that are

[10] This is similar to what James Ferguson describes in his much cited paper '*'Seeing it Like an Oil Company'* which argues that extractive industries in Africa create discontinuous development, enclaves of modernity which use up productive resources but leave 'un-useable' Africa untouched (Ferguson, 2005).

often empty. In my adoptive house, for example, I found a cooker and stainless steel sink in the section owned by cousins who were settled in northern England. Covered in dust, and the repository not of modern cooking utensils but sacks of betel nut and rice, the oven stood forgotten. It was never connected to the gas supply, for the gas was never supplied and never used, for the cousins had not returned. A mile up the road anticipation takes a different form: a newly constructed gas station, built by a local businessman. During our research this too remained unfinished, the pumps unused.

If people in Talukpur hoped for connection to the gas supply and speculated on the profits to come, in Garibgram, it was industrial employment that was eagerly awaited. In 2008-11 the disappointment was visceral. Landless men, who had been scraping a living as agricultural labourers had been given training, official papers and identity tags, which they waved in my face as material evidence of their brief inclusion in modernity, industrial employees of Chevron, but only ever *temporary.* Now, they were set aside once more. 'All they gave us were bullshit promises', one man told us. There was to be no employment, no connection to the gas and no inclusion. Indeed, all that Chevron were offering were various 'alternative livelihood' and self help projects: the disconnected development I mentioned earlier. Hopes for the future jostled with fear. The terror of blow-outs, based on recent accidents at other gas fields in Sylhet, was palpable during our fieldwork. Alongside their anger at Chevron, who people said had 'looted' local resources whilst 'giving nothing back', informants described how the gas extraction was emptying and draining the land. This was not only causing a reduction in the fertility of the fields, which had been dried out as a result of changes in the annual inundation of monsoon water due to the high banked roads, but would eventually lead to the land caving in once the gas reserves were emptied. Here, rather than jobs, security and modernity, the vision of the future was of a desecrated landscape, its riches pumped away to profit others, whilst 't*hey give us nothing'. 'We live in terror of the fire.'* People told us. When Chevron carried out a controlled flaring one night in 2010, many hundreds of people ran from their homes in panic, believing that the dreaded blow out had finally occurred.

These alternative futures, of secure employment, prosperity and modernity versus industrial apocalypse can be grafted onto the alternative theoretical paradigms which I discussed earlier: the stories of blow out and terror read as local critiques of predatory capitalism and its contemporary tendency to create escalating land speculation which only profits the land owning rural elite and the hopes of connection, employment and business opportunities as an approving nod to neo liberal tales of growth and good things. Both are ways of thinking about the future, and both are mobilised at different times by different people according to context. Let us now consider employment at the gas field in more detail.

Employment and Labour Contractors: Divisions deepen

Employment was one of the main complaints against Chevron in 2008-11, for the few local labourers taken on were hired entirely through contractors, a practice widely reported across neo-liberal India and where, as Carswell and de Neve (2014), Picherit (2009; 2012) Bremen (1996) and Guerin (2013) have shown, it is open to forms of bonded or exploitative labour practices banned in the formal sector. In Bibiyana as in many other cases contractors supply a reserve army of informally hired labour enabling the formal sector to utilise flexible labour power on their own terms. A related practice which caused huge resentment in Bibiyana was the use of labour drawn from distant regions, creating a 'docile' workforce, for outsiders are less likely to abscond or make trouble remaining dependent upon the contractor, a locally known patron, for their everyday necessities and protection. As the Community Liaison Officer, who tellingly had previously been a manager of a tea estate, explained, this led to an 'easy flow of labour.' (Gardner, Ahmed, Rana and Bashir, 2012). During 2008-11 the few local people who were employed as guards, and road workers were hired through the labour contractors who were largely the same 'local leaders' who presided over the Village Development Organisations set up by Chevron for its community development programme (Gardner, 2012). Meanwhile jeeps filled with foreign engineers sped to and fro from the gas field.

So far, so predictable: the limited resource of employment and the benefits of Chevron's community development programmes were controlled by the same landowning elite who had monopolised migration to the U.K. As Jonathan Pattenden has observed in Karnataka, the shift away from agrarian based livelihoods does not necessarily involve a loosening of the ties between the landowning elite and their landless clients. Rather, by being the conduits through which decentralised government funds are siphoned, the elite gain new forms of control, mediating between the state and the poor as powerful gatekeepers (Pattenden, 2011; see also Shah, 2010). In Bibiyana these leaders were not gatekeepers to government resources but a global energy corporation, which despite high expectations was offering very little. Once it became clear that Chevron was not going to provide jobs or much in the way of local services, the influence of the leaders who had built relationships with the company faltered, accused by local people of corruption. They received no benefits from Chevron because their leaders had sold them down the river, we were told by the landless. They had taken bribes and stuffed their own pockets, but provided *nothing*, an accusation strenuously denied by the men in question, who argued that they simply didn't have enough jobs to distribute. Meanwhile, when the Awami League gained power in 2008/09 leaders who had been allied to the BNP lost their foothold in the union *parishad* and *upazila* councils. This, plus their lack of success in bringing what their previous clients had hoped for – work and material benefits – led to the rapid fall from grace for Joyful Haque, the influential leader who by 2011 had withdrawn from political life.

The fate of Joyful Haque does not, however, indicate a shift away from village based political allegiance and patronage. Rather, as the next turn of the story shows, the growing importance of industrial work in the aspirations of local landless and land poor

people has led to a strengthening of village based loyalties and political organisation, this time based around access to industrial employment rather than agriculture and drawing upon the village based development organisations set up by Chevron as part of their Community Engagement programme. Indeed, village membership has never been so important, but in these new times rather than Garibgram being a supplier of rural labour for their patrons in Talukpur the two villages are pitted against each other.

We Demand Work! Village Committees and Employment 2013-14

It is now early 2014. More gas reserves have been discovered, leading to a third extraction site, a mile or so from Talukpur, a major pipeline connecting this new site to the South Pad and a new road. Crucially there are many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of new jobs, leading to intense pressure on Chevron to distribute employment locally. In the few weeks of my stay the situation is volatile. Men march from Entaganj, a market town a few miles away, and thus not, as Talukpur people say indignantly 'victims of the gas field'; this is the procession I see from over the fields. A few days later there is an assault close to the gas field: furious that he hasn't been given work, a Garibgram man has attacked a Chevron contractor. There is more agitation; urgent meetings are called between leaders and Chevron. Crucially, it is now village committees (*samity)* that negotiate deals with the company, some of which are the same VDOs which Chevron set up in order to dispense 'community development'. In response to pressure from these committees, the processions, blockades and sit-ins that characterise protest in South Asia, the company agrees in the early weeks of 2014 to give the contracts for supplying the labour to locals, to be distributed via the *samity,* rather than to private labour contractors. As the Secretary of the Garibgram *samity* explains, although originally the company filed cases against them, a meeting with the *samity* and the government's energy advisor (Towfiq Eliah Chowdhury) in 2009 had led to the change in policy.

Talukpur set up its *samity* in 2013. The objective was to provide employment for poorer people in the village and a connection to the gas supply. Like the Garibgram *samity* each member had to pay 200 taka (around £1.50) a month to cover expenses and act as a savings group. This is a stark contrast to the labour contractors, who demand tens of thousands of taka for supplying work. By March 2014 the Talukpur *samity* had 70 members and had distributed 16 jobs to men from the poorest households. Their leaders also told us that they had successfully bargained for higher wages, from 6-8000 taka a month up to 12 to 15 (depending on the work). Meanwhile the Garibgram *samity* had distributed 300 jobs and were expecting another hundred from Chevron. What seemed to be developing was a new geography of patronage, still headed by the rural elite but based around the Village Development Organisations that Chevron had instituted. Though the powerful lineages – the Syed and Pathans who were spread across all villages with the exception of Garibgram – had maintained their position, new alliances based

around business interests, access to Chevron's personnel and the VDOs were also developing.

By 2014 the material changes were visible in Garibgram. Take, for example, the nephews of Abdullah, who worked for my Talukpur family as a permanent farm hand in the 1980s. In 2008-9 the family of five brothers were surviving on an insecure and meagre agriculturally based livelihood. In 2005 one of the brothers had gained work, via a Dhaka based contracting company involved in the construction of the gas field. This came to an end once the South Pad was completed; during the 2008-10 research they were struggling to feed themselves and living in extreme poverty. Now, all five brothers have work at the gas field, earning around 10,000 taka a month (daily wage labour is around 300 taka a day, but is irregular). They were delighted at the turn in their fortunes. Regular employment, a degree of security, at least until the work runs out, this is what they wanted so badly. Clearly, we cannot assume that people want to be farmers, an important point to remember when considering processes of 'dispossession' (Hall, 2012). Mostly, they don't, for it is hard, gruelling life, and the rewards can be meagre. Better to work at the gas field! Abdullah's nephews told us happily[11].

The upturn in the fortunes of Abdullah's nephews and the employment of hundreds of local people reminds us of the importance to look beyond the struggles of dispossession and see what happens next. By 2014 in Bibiyana the poorest people, who in 2004 were struggling in the increasingly challenging agrarian economy appeared to have benefited, their protests against Chevron having yielded a tangible result. No longer the clients or 'little people' of their wealthy patrons over the fields in Talukpur, in Garibgram they have their own *samity* which has successfully negotiated many jobs. In the wealthy, landowning villages the basis for patronage had changed. Even Samsun Khan, the biggest land loser who in 2009/10 Chevron had a 'case' against, was now telling us how much he approved of the multinational, the case long forgotten[12]. The 'Chevron Contractor' card he had handed me in 2009 was a clue: desperate to maintain his earlier position as a landowning patron he had fought against ABD. Now that the battle was lost he was keen to find new sources of power, which in the newly formed landscape of the gas field meant forgetting his previous anger and forming an alliance with Chevron.

The Story Fractures: Violence and Conflict

It is at this point that, as is so common in Bangladesh, the story fractures with division and violence. By 2014 local resistance had fragmented and was not about obstructing global capitalism in the shape of the gas field, but wanting desperately to be included *in* it. Seeing the success of the Garibgram *samity* in negotiating jobs, by 2014, others wanted to get in on the act. As the President put it:

[11] Their only complaint was the uniforms that Chevron forced them to wear, which were too heavy and hot.
[12] His alliance with The Awami League may be a factor.

Chevron has a full sack. Through our samity we managed to open it … now everyone wants a share

In January, for example, the Enatjanj *samity* was formed. This time the leader is a labour contractor and members pay a thousand taka a month. Here, profit, rather than benefitting the poor, seems to be the principle objective. Group discussions in Garibgram revealed that just as before, access to work depends upon maintaining good relationships with the leaders. In this sense *samity* leaders are in a similar role to labour contractors, compiling lists of who should and shouldn't be given the work and negotiating with Chevron. In Talukpur the *samity* leaders are the same figures who led the 2005 protests and from the same families who have dominated *Londoni* migration and land ownership since the 1980s, the old patrons returned albeit with a different resource base Indeed, Joyful Haque has re-emerged from his temporary political exile, becoming one of the leaders.

Crucially what started as united resistance to Chevron and the state has turned into a new geography of conflict, with villages pitched against the other in the competition for jobs. In some cases the old landowning elite remains powerful because they have developed close links to Chevron which they use to create jobs for poor people in their villages. In others the change is radical. Garibgram, for example, is now in direct conflict with Talukpur, the village's previous patron, for the people of Garibgram are no longer dependent upon their old Talukpur patrons for agricultural work, seeking new patrons from outside the area who can offer industrial employment. The location of the village, immediately adjacent to the gas field has increased their bargaining power with Chevron as well as Talukpur, a mile away. This is vividly illustrated by a dispute which began when Chevron offered a contract to fill fields adjacent to Garibgram with sand in preparation for more building. Accounts differ, but it seems that a contracting company owned by businessmen in Talukpur and other nearby villages won the contract, but this was contested by the Garibgram *samity*. In some accounts the local upazila (council) member who also happened to be the president of the Garibgram *samity* was supporting a businessman from the next upazila, Baniachung (40 km away) in the expectation of a cut of the profits. The end result was a battle between the people of Garibgram and an alliance between Talukpur plus other villages who wanted the work to go to their own people and who were outraged at the previous clients of Garibgram striking out alone. Whilst in Talukpur my friends had told me that since the arrival of the gas field people of Garibgram had become violent and dishonest and the dispute had arisen because of their allegiance to the Baniachung contractor – an outsider who had no right getting contracts from Chevron - those in Garibgram described crowds of people coming in trucks to attack them with home made weapons. Whilst many escaped to the fields, a woman was struck by a stick and later died.

As this sad story shows, groups of workers are organised by village based *samity* in order to exert concerted pressure on Chevron to distribute work locally but also to fight other villages. Whether or not the *samity* are controlled by contractors or more

genuinely representative of local interests seems to vary. In early 2014 people were talking darkly of how the *samity* were being used to profit the leaders and of increasing violence and intimidation. Later that year an American working for Chevron was assaulted by a man from *Garibgram,* yet more evidence for those in Talukpur that say the village is filled with criminal thugs.

Conclusion

In observing events over time and resisting the temptation to foreclose accounts of agrarian transition we see how ABD in Bibiyana has been followed by complex shifts in power, with uncertain benefits for the poorest. In Bibiyana, as elsewhere in Bangladesh, land dispossession has a long history as has been highlighted by many commentators who describe the aggressive tactics of elites seizing land and other resources since the early 1970s (Hartman and Boyce, 1983; Adnan and Mansur, 1975; Jenkins, 1983; van Schendel, 1981)[13]. And if dispossession is nothing new, nor is the role of global capital in restructuring social and economic relations both within and between places. Many decades before Chevron's gas field, migration to the UK had led to the accumulation of property by individual men and their families, who gained land from the rapidly disenfranchised non-migrants (Gardner, 1995). It was these families, largely settled in the UK who were dispossessed in the most obvious sense of losing their property to the gas field. As we have seen, the discovery of greater than imagined natural gas reserves and the expansion of the gas field have meant that for now at least, those who were previously the 'little people' (*chotomanoosh*) seem to be benefitting, even if, for now they remain dependent upon *samity* leaders and labour contractors, who control the distribution of industrial employment. Eventually the current phase of construction will end, and many hundreds will be laid off.

Whilst the protests of 2005 involved united force between villages against the construction of the gas field, closer attention to the stories shows significant ambivalence and disagreement. Over time it became clear that different people wanted different things. The landowning elite were united for a while but then opportunities appeared, political pressure was exerted from above and they became divided. Today, those from the elite who were most opposed, such as Samsun Khan, are working enthusiastically with Chevron as contractors. Meanwhile the landless of Garibgram, who initially united behind their patrons in Talukpur but then showed their anger at local leaders and labour contractors / Chevron, were concerned not with the loss of land, but

[13] As documented in a Bangladeshi classic *A Quiet Violence* (Hartman and Boyce, 1983) the victims are usually the poorest, forced from their homes and land via the crude methods of arson, murder or violent intimidation. In other instances the poor are mobilised to support the claims of their patrons (see Adnan, 2013 and Feldman and Geisler, 2012). In Talukpur in the early 2000s, for example, a land dispute led to a fight between two groups in which a young man from a landless and marginal family was shot dead.

the availability of employment. This fury, articulated with focus groups and interviews in our research in 2009-11 and violently expressed by individual assaults more recently, was not about dispossession in the sense of struggles over land but *lack of inclusion* in an eagerly anticipated future of industrial employment.

Crucially, rather than becoming increasingly detached from their villages or uniting as a proto industrial class, what the ethnographic evidence shows is that over 2012-14 the opposite process was taking place for the rural poor, with village based patronage remaining important, but in different ways. Indeed, village level political organisation has been strengthened by Chevron's promotion of 'local leaders' and Village Development Organisations as part of their Community Engagement programme. Whilst the patronage of Talukpur over their rural labour reserve in Garibgram has been overtaken by violence and conflict between the villages, the village based *samity* which agitate for work reflect the structures of patronage encouraged by Chevron's granting of contracts to 'local community leaders' and their fashioning of 'Village Development Organisations' to dispense their development gifts. Patronage thus continues to thrive, but within rather than between villages and based around the ability of individuals to negotiate work contracts and wages with Chevron in their role as 'community leaders', rather than their ownership of land. Whilst agriculture may no longer be the basis of rural livelihoods, villages – as political units and conduits of patronage – remain vital to the survival of the poorest. What will happen in the future? As the twists and turns of my account show, whilst futurity has become ever more important to those concerned, whether local people attempting to for see risks and opportunities , corporate strategists calibrating future gas reserves or indeed anthropologists seeking coherent stories, the uneven registers and scales of neo liberal temporality (Bear, 2014) mean that only time will tell.

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