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Contesting the Unethical City: Land Dispossession and Corruption Narratives in Urban India

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In this age of global inequality, how people talk of corruption matters. This article examines the role of corruption narratives in struggles against land enclosures (“land grabs”) in two Indian cities. Drawing on ethnographic research on land grabs in Mumbai and Bangalore and critical corruption and geography literatures, we argue that corruption talk by slum-based and lower middle-class residents and activists advances an ethical critique of contemporary capitalism. In our cases, corruption discourse upends mainstream development agendas that narrowly equate corruption with individual acts of bribery and the long-standing notion in India that corruption manifests mainly among the poor and lower rungs of the state. Instead, we find that “corruption” serves as a cultural, semantic, and moral rubric that expresses and shapes a sense of structural injustice in this moment of sharpening urban inequality. Specifically, corruption talk is leveraged to identify and challenge the mechanisms underlying elite land grabs and the hypocritical policing of the poor. Corruption discourse also provides a meaningful framework to voice discontent over the betrayal of the “public interest”—defined here as housing and economic dispossession. Taking care not to unequivocally celebrate its progressive potential, we find that corruption discourse can be and has been repurposed in disruptive ways. We therefore posit the need to examine how corruption politics are expanding—rather than disappearing—from geographies of advanced capitalism. *Key Words:* accumulation by dispossession, corruption discourse, informality, land struggles, postcolonial urbanism.

在全球不均的当前时代中，人们如何讨论贪腐将具有影响力。本文检视在印度两个城市中，贪腐论述在对抗圈地（“土地掠夺”）中所扮演的角色。我们运用在孟买及孟加拉对土地掠夺进行的民族志研究，主张居住在贫民窟以及中下阶层的居民和行动者们有关贪腐的话语，推进了对于当代资本主义的道德批判。在我们的案例中，贪腐论述倒置将贪腐限缩并等同于个人贪污行为的主流发展议程，以及贪腐主要盛行于国家内部穷困和较为低阶社会此一长期存在于印度之概念。反之，我们发现，“贪腐”在城市不均更为尖锐化的当下，提供作为表达和形塑结构不平等的感觉之文化、语意及道德成规。贪腐论述尤其在指认并挑战支撑精英土地掠夺以及对穷人进行虚伪的警备之机制中发挥关键作用。贪腐论述同时提供了具有意义的架构，对背叛“公共利益”的不满进行发声—于此定义为住居和经济的夺取。为了避免毫不迟疑地颂扬该论述的激进潜能，我们同时发现贪腐论述可能、且已经以破坏的方式进行再目的化。我们因此提出检视贪腐政治如何在发达资本主义的地理中扩张—而非从中消失的方式。 *关键词：* 夺取式积累，贪腐论述，非正式性，土地争夺，后殖民城市主义。

En esta edad de desigualdad global, es importante la manera como la gente habla de la corrupción. Este artículo examina el papel de las narrativas sobre corrupción en las luchas contra los encierros de tierra (“segregación de terrenos”) en dos ciudades de la India. Basándonos en investigación etnográfica sobre terrenos segregados de Mumbai y Bangalore, lo mismo que en literaturas de la crítica de la corrupción y la geografía, sostenemos que las charlas de residentes sobre corrupción, tanto en zonas de tugurios como de clase media baja y con activistas, fomentan una crítica ética del capitalismo contemporáneo. En nuestros casos, el discurso sobre la corrupción transforma drásticamente las agendas de la corriente principal del desarrollo, que estrechamente iguala la corrupción con actos individuales de soborno, y la noción de vieja data en la India que asume que la corrupción se manifiesta principalmente entre los pobres y en los niveles más bajos del Estado. En vez de eso, hallamos que la “corrupción” sirve como una rúbrica cultural, semántica y moral que expresa y configura un sentido de injusticia estructural en este momento de aguda desigualdad urbana. Específicamente, la charla sobre la corrupción se utiliza para identificar y retar los mecanismos que están detrás de las segregaciones de terrenos de la élite y el hipócrita control policíaco de los pobres. El discurso sobre la corrupción también provee un marco significativo para propalar el descontento sobre la traición del “interés público”—que aquí se define como el desposeimiento habitacional y económico. Teniendo el cuidado de no celebrar demasiado inequívocamente su potencial progresivo, encontramos que el discurso sobre corrupción puede ser y ha sido replanteado de maneras perturbadoras. Por eso nosotros destacamos la necesidad de examinar el modo como las políticas corruptas están extendiéndose—en vez de retroceder—desde las geografías del capitalismo avanzado. *Palabras clave:* acumulación por desposeimiento, discurso sobre la corrupción, informalidad, luchas por la tierra, urbanismo poscolonial.

Sitting in a shaded nook between the broken walls of his demolished neighborhood, activist-resident Devasadhan Nair shuffles through binders and piles of documents strewn across a concrete slab. His fingers scroll down a long list of forged signatures in a document prepared by developers as proof of slum residents' consent for a project to clear the area for commercial high rises. He stops at one name. "This lady Sulochna B. Pawar died in 2005. How did they get her signature [at a 2009 meeting]?" The scene is from a campaign video exposé of a fraudulent, state-enforced land acquisition for a slum redevelopment project in Golibar, a settlement located in the bullish real estate market of central Mumbai. Nair and his neighbors have been contesting corrupt land grabs and forced evictions since 2010.

Such conflicts in Mumbai are part of a transnational current. From everyday frustrations to mass protests, "corruption" is the name given to what many around the world see as an increasingly inequitable and unethical political-economic order. Going beyond bribery, recent anticorruption mobilizations express discontent over extreme inequality, authoritarianism, and a host of wealth-usurping collusions between states and elites. In Cairo, for instance, "No to corruption, no to this regime!" was the rallying slogan that inspired thousands to descend on Tahrir Square to topple Egypt's dictatorship (Gumbiner, Abouali, and Colla 2012). In India, high-level scandals implicating officials and corporate heads helped galvanize a national anticorruption movement, dramatically shifting electoral results and fueling the formation of an influential new political party. Meanwhile, public sector kickbacks in postbailout Greece (Smith 2014), money laundering through property transactions in New York (Story and Saul 2015), and the nefarious tax evasions exposed by the Panama Papers have captivated public imaginaries across the Global North as well.

This article explores the relationship between corruption talk and the lived geographies of advanced capitalism. Rather than a priori defining acts of corruption—which vary in meaning across cultural contexts and historical eras—we follow a number of critical scholars who study shifting and situated discourses of corruption as a lens into contemporary political life (e.g., Gupta 1995; Haller and Shore 2005; Jeffrey and Young 2014). We insist that "corruption" is best understood as a malleable and morally charged discursive field that does different kinds of political work at distinct conjunctural moments. In contemporary India, the interconnected processes of informal urbanization and rapid land-based development and

dispossession play a critical role in the articulation of recent anticorruption struggles.

Drawing on ethnographies of land struggles in Mumbai and Bangalore and critical literatures on corruption and postcolonial urban geography, we argue that corruption talk by lower class residents advances an ethical critique of accumulation and dispossession. Specifically, we find that contemporary anticorruption narratives provide a cultural, semantic, and moral rubric to challenge the legally nebulous processes through which land is appropriated by elites and the poor are concomitantly dispossessed. Furthermore, corruption provides a meaningful framework to voice discontent over the betrayal of the "public interest." As one anticorruption activist summarized it, "The basic point is that corruption is this: Land which has to be used for public purposes and for poor people has been grabbed by powerful people. This is wrong. This is corruption." Such narratives reveal much about how polarizing sociospatial transformations are advanced, narrated, and contested.

Bangalore and Mumbai are paradigmatic sites to study the interface of corruption talk with land struggles because of a flurry of conflicts over state-facilitated land acquisitions for "world city" development projects. Whereas Mumbai, slated as India's finance capital, exemplifies inner-city redevelopment in slums¹ and former industrial areas and exemplifies diverse slum-based mobilizations, Bangalore, with its more recent technology-driven growth, concentrates development for real estate and high-technology projects on the urban fringe and exemplifies lower middle-class mobilizations. We find that corruption is now being mobilized across class positionalities in both cities as an ethical critique of land-based accumulation and dispossession, processes that lie at the heart of urbanized capitalist development in India today.

Our approach stems from ongoing ethnographic research on various aspects of urban transformation, informality, and social mobilization in Mumbai and Bangalore over the last decade. Whereas the first author has focused on slum redevelopment and resettlement in Mumbai, the second author has studied the politics of informal development and infrastructure at Bangalore's periphery. Recently we launched a joint research project investigating how changing tropes of "corruption" narrate land enclosures and dispossession. We used qualitative and ethnographic methods including participant observation at social movement events; unstructured interviews with residents, activists, and politicians; and analysis of newspaper articles, official reports, and activist publications and blogs.

Methodologically and theoretically, our objective is to think about corruption with our informants (for whom we use pseudonyms here unless they are public figures)—to rely on the insights of spoken and written language. What does it mean, as Rekha, one Bangalore-based activist defined it, when corruption is reframed as a “collusion, or a nexus, an established network that works at a permanent level” and not a “one-time deal” wherein “someone is giving the money and someone is receiving the money”? Why is it that activists are contending at this moment that corruption is ill-defined and that many acts not formally codified as such are, in fact, corruption? Discourse and meaning making are crucial to our analysis because urban residents affected by land grabs vocalize corruption in sometimes counterintuitive ways to challenge land-related collusions as immoral or “criminal,” yet not always “illegal.” Their stories upend mainstream approaches to corruption focused narrowly on the illegality of individual behaviors and reflect a widespread distrust of big money. They also reveal the salience of informality, not just as a legal status but as a power-laden, deregulated, and flexible modality of urban land use and governance (Roy 2009). One of our key contributions is thus to demonstrate that the politics of urban land informality play a critical role in dispossession and anticorruption mobilizations.

The following section of the article aims to rethink corruption by engaging with geographic and postcolonial scholarship on dispossession and informality. We then draw on our qualitative data to demonstrate how corruption takes on semantic force in the context of rapid high-end development. One section delves into how public discontent constitutes “a structure of feeling” (Williams 1977) surrounding the practices and biases of land enclosure, and the next focuses on how dispossession and the betrayal of the public interest are contested through moral idioms deployed by both slum dwellers and middle-class residents and activists. We conclude by reviewing our main findings, discussing the limits and potentialities of corruption talk for social justice in India, and illuminating the insights of this research for bolstering critical geographies of corruption beyond our case cities.

Rethinking Corruption Through Critical Theories of Dispossession and Informality

Since the end of the Cold War, political scientists and economists have been at the helm of defining,

measuring, and rooting out corruption. In the 1990s, anticorruption became a centerpiece of the World Bank’s structural reforms and was eventually defined as “the abuse of public office for private gain” (World Bank 1997, 8). This definition represented a mainstream “consensus” on corruption (Johnston 2005), one that effectively foreclosed reflection on other types of corruption (e.g., private-sector corruption, transnational corruption, legal corruption, etc.). Deploying rational choice models, this view reduced corruption to the principal-agent problem or what anthropologists Haller and Shore (2005) dubbed the “rotten apple” interpretation. If state actors are corrupt, it is the result of internal dysfunction and individual venality—conditions considered endemic to third world states and the “traditional” societies in which they are embedded—rather than systemic extractive relationships. Corruption, so the logic went, could only be remedied through liberalization, deregulation, and an overall minimization of the state’s role in the economy. This consensus not only uncritically pathologized non-Western governments but also problematically mirrored and reinforced neoliberal doctrines that assume markets to be the antidote to undisciplined states (see also Brown and Cloke 2004; Hindess 2005; Wedel 2012).

As Jenkins (2014) documented, talk of corruption in India has a long career, and its varied uses in political rhetoric are marked by key political-economic turning points. For instance, by the mid-1970s when the shortcomings of the Nehruvian state-led development model (in which the state often accommodated the interests of industrial capital) had become apparent, politicians began to leverage the discourse of corruption to call attention to corruption in “high places” (Jenkins 2014, 44). These older Gandhian understandings viewed wealth accumulation as inherently exploitative and “the capitalist system *itself* as corrupt” (Jenkins 2014, 43, italics added). This view of corruption, however, eventually gave way to market rhetoric. In the late 1980s, when proliberalization politicians sought to free the business class from the shackles of bureaucratic red tape, a dominant understanding of massive corruption at the bottom took hold in India. This was a view that no doubt gained traction because of a long-standing cultural tendency in the country for upper classes and castes to frame lower classes and castes as inherently “corrupt” and “criminal” (Witsoe 2011). Bjorkman (2014), for instance, found that middle-class discourses in

contemporary India increasingly decry “the decline of democracy, the corruption and criminalization of politics, and the sorry state of government propped up by the shortsighted whims of the slum-dwelling masses” (617). It is not surprising, then, that elite anticorruption campaigns over the last decade have targeted lower level politicians and officials in line with the consensus view (Jenkins 2014).

In contrast, critical ethnographic literature has shown corruption to be situated and shifting, shaped indelibly by the positionality of the onlooker. Although careful not to resort to cultural relativism,² scholars in this tradition have argued that corruption is embedded in governing processes of the postcolony that blur the boundaries between state and society (Gupta 1995). Colonial and postcolonial spaces have always been ruled and lived through mixes of legal and extralegal authorities—activities that fall under a “corruption complex” (de Sardan 1999)—and the negotiation of different layers of indigenous, colonial, and postcolonial rule (Mamdani 1996). Ethnographers of corruption have thus highlighted how corruption practice and talk are anchored in everyday life. In critical geographic accounts, corruption is framed in institutional terms with uneven impacts across gender, class, and caste (Robbins 2000). Jeffrey’s (2002, 2010) research in northern India reveals how anticorruption idioms serve to entrench the power of richer farmers who continue to perpetuate illicit acts to maintain market advantages over the poor. Negotiations between layers of the state and across multiple social “fields” (arenas in which differently situated classes struggle in pursuit of particular gains; Jeffrey 2010) have long enabled postcolonial subjects to simultaneously celebrate, condemn, and banalize corruption, reinforcing the fact that corruption is a situated construct that can serve multiple functions.

Although we concur that ethnography moves us beyond the problems of fixing corruption a priori, we also find it necessary to bridge with critical geographic concerns over resource usurpations—that is, to situate ethnographic approaches in contemporary political-economic processes, particularly land dispossession. Although less visible in the critical corruption literature, we find that notions of primitive accumulation—the process of enclosing and appropriating land and resources that inaugurates exploitative capitalist markets—are indispensable to theorizing corruption. In the Marxist view, corruption operates not as an aberration but is foundational to modern capitalism. Most famously, Harvey’s theory of accumulation by

dispossession reworks primitive accumulation to speak to Luxemburg’s thesis that capitalism is reproduced through ongoing *extraeconomic* (nonmarket) wealth, land, and resource transfers—often through the use of “force, fraud, oppression, looting” (cited in Harvey 2003, 137).³

The linkage between corruption and dispossession is especially pertinent in Indian cities today where the institutionalization of secure private property (a key driver of urban wealth) relies on informal, hybrid logics of rule. Much like in rural areas, urban areas in India have long been governed via a dialectic of rational planning and disorderly, informal urbanism. This dialectic originated in racialized colonial planning, a general feature of colonial cities (King 1990). For example, despite founding differences—Bombay (Mumbai) was a major port city and Bangalore a military cantonment—both cities were racially and socio-spatially segregated under British rule. Serviced administrative and residential areas, known as “white towns,” constituted the exclusive space of the white elite who were set apart from native “black towns.” Entire cities were carved up and enclosed as property for Europeans and a few native elites.

Postindependence, these inequalities were deepened by agrarian modernization efforts and market-oriented restructuring. Migrants flocked to cities in search of livelihoods. In Mumbai, this meant that successive waves of informal settlements—known by the catch-all term *slum*—emerged to cater to the working class, rural migrants, and refugees. In Bangalore, population growth was slow until the advent of technology-driven liberalization at the end of the 1980s, which significantly ushered in unauthorized settlement at the peripheries. City plans for low-income housing and services in Indian cities since independence have remained at the level of technomanagerial discourse. Informality has thus become the *de facto* modality through which affordable housing, services, and livelihoods are met despite India’s postindependence socialist development regime (Chatterjee 2004; Gidwani 2015). Thus the everyday survival of the lower classes is marked by informal practices that are denounced by upper classes as “corrupt” or illegal.

At the same time, critical interventions demonstrate that informality is not simply practiced by the poor, nor does it sit outside of legal-rational domains of government and market exchange (AlSayyad and Roy 2004). Government authorities might directly participate in informality (Roy 2009). If private property regimes were established through formal legal

processes under colonialism, it is the dynamics of informality that facilitate today's legally questionable urban enclosures—begging conceptual linkages among corruption, dispossession, and informality. Real estate has become the frontier of wealth accumulation in India (Chakravorty 2013; Searle 2016). Since the 1990s, malls, luxury residences, and office complexes have been informally developed through spaces of participation and influence and aesthetic justifications, and slums have been criminalized and removed (Ghertner 2015). In both Mumbai (Weinstein 2008) and Bangalore (Goldman 2011), it is an open secret that developers and officials work hand in hand with organized crime syndicates for speculative high-end real estate projects. Flexible planning, as Gururani (2013) put it, “is not a random act but has a cultural logic that offers access to material and discursive maneuvers of state power, legal and extralegal networks, and relations of influence” (121). In short, attention to informality reveals how states engage in spatial practices to the benefit of some in ways that traverse boundaries of legality and illegality.

Although the relationship between informality and corruption is complex and slippery, there are compelling reasons to bring these constructs into conversation. Informality captures a range of processes surrounding the governance, transfer, and (re)use of land across class, and corruption serves as an ethical discourse invoked at punctuated moments to assess the legitimacy and stakes of informal practices. Corruption is a cultural field saturated with particular vernacular vocabularies and affective sensibilities that allow ordinary people to understand the contradictions shrouding (in)formal rule at particular moments.

We thus find it useful to think of corruption talk in terms of what Williams (1977) called a “structure of feeling” (35) or a system of word associations, meanings, and values that emerge at a particular junctures. Structures of feeling are “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” (132). We demonstrate how in a moment of acute wealth concentration and an urban real estate bonanza, new linguistic associations have been forged that connect corruption with land grab, reflecting a shared sense of distrust and moral reprobation across class groups. In our cases a range of (in)formal modalities of governing and enclosing land have come under attack for privileging outrageous profits for the few at the expense of the broader public. As we show later, such processes have contributed to new terrains of struggle that have given “corruption” new meaning and political force in the present.

Narrating Land Grab “Scandals” Through Corruption Talk

In the following sections, we draw on ethnographic and archival data to analyze how meanings of corruption are made in the context of land grabs in Mumbai and Bangalore. Bundles of associated terms like *scandal*, *mafia*, *goonda* (gangster), *land sharks*, and *nexus*—in addition to the specific word *corruption* (both the English word *corruption* and vernacular equivalent *brashtachar*, common to both Hindi and Kannada) came up repeatedly to refer to the various mechanisms underlying land grabs. The range of modalities from the legal to the extra-legal suggests that we need to focus not only on “the inner workings of states in shaping new understandings and articulations of territory, sovereignty, authority and subjects” (Wolford et al. 2013, 195) but also how these contradictory “inner workings” are perceived and narrated by ordinary people. We focus on two key arenas of corruption meaning making: mechanisms of land grab and the hypocrisy of land grabs.

Corruption Meaning Making 1: (In)formal Mechanisms of Land Grab

Simpreet Singh, a key Mumbai-based activist of an antidisplacement coalition, the National Alliance of Peoples' Movements (NAPM), began filing Right to Information (RTI)⁴ petitions on projects around the city in 2005. In a 2013 interview with the first author, he described the motivations and strategies of antidisplacement struggles: “Scandals are happening everyday and no one sees, no one cares. They just see shining buildings. So the movement has to show the *scandal* of Mumbai's development . . . to create suspense and shock. . . . It's the only way.”

Scandal or scam deeply inflects the discursive strategies used by activists and the media alike to narrate mechanisms underlying land grabs. A prominent NAPM (2013) publication titled “The Real Encroachers of Mumbai” draws on RTIs and other sources to expose ten of Mumbai's most lucrative real estate projects—framed in the report and movement events as outright “scams.” The exposé took special aim at the extralegal mechanisms surrounding the redevelopment of large swathes of centrally located land occupied by now-defunct textile mills. With the decline of industry from the 1980s, mill lands were turned over to the state government, ostensibly for projects in the public interest. Since 1998, however, mill lands have been transformed into luxury

shopping malls, corporate centers, and tower residences. Journalists and activists relay how Maharashtra politicians scammed the public by releasing dozens of acres of prime mill land to developers at “throwaway prices” established through manipulative calculations (Gandhi 2005). Open space and affordable housing zoning reservations were also overridden, either fraudulently or due to last-minute changes in development control rules (D’Monte 2006). Other mechanisms detailed include nepotistic exchanges, the infraction of environmental or public use zoning, the use of strong-arm force, kickbacks to politicians and bureaucrats, and an array of legal practices.

Notions of scam and scandal similarly infuse land grab narratives in Bangalore. In an interview with the second author in 2014, Nikhil, a middle-class activist, denounced a recent luxury special economic zone (SEZ) funded by Dubai-based and domestic capital on one of the largest wetland chains, the Bellandur-Agara lakes, decrying the development as “through and through a thing for getting land allotted at cheap rates. It shouts scam!” RTIs sought by Nikhil and his fellow activists reveal not only that the wetland was allotted by a state agency to private developers at below-market rates but that the project also violated several environmental protections. To take stock of this and other land scams, a progressive elected state official, A. T. Ramaswamy, formed the Anti-Land Grabbing Committee of Karnataka in 2013. In a memo addressed to the Indian prime minister, the Committee insisted that “land grabbing is by far the biggest scam in the country, more serious than the ‘Coalgate’ or ‘2G scam’ [multibillion rupee corruption scandals involving the coal and telecommunications sectors, respectively]” (Anti-Land Grabbing Committee 2016).

The aura of scam is made all the more potent by the recognition that laws are not only broken but also bent to the will of the land grabber. Anticorruption activists in Mumbai and Bangalore thus spotlight a mixture of activities that blur the divide between legal and illegal. Observers contend that corruption is “ill-defined” and in reality refers to a host of legal activities not codified as corruption. For instance, RTI reports obtained by local activists and citizen journalists revealed that the Bangalore Development Authority, the master planning entity for the city, had reclassified the wetland allocated for the SEZ project mentioned earlier from an ecological zone on which development was “prohibited” to an industrial zone on which development was “permitted.” In Mumbai, legal tactics

narrated as “corruption” similarly include aggressive new land acquisition protocols and exemptions to planning rules granted to priority projects.

At the other end of the spectrum of legality, extralegal force is also deployed—through what Hansen and Step-putat (2006, 305) called “informal sovereigns” or the illiberal underside of the state. In Mumbai, not only do government-dispatched bulldozers and *lathi charges* (baton-wielding police) violently descend on recalcitrant slum dwellers but so do gangsters employed by legitimate builders. In Bangalore, one activist elaborated on strong-arming: “What builders usually do is first they try to throw their money around. If they don’t succeed with money, then they start invoking their other kinds of muscle, *goonda* [gangster] muscle.” Thus an official Government of Karnataka report penned by Ramaswamy while he was in office framed Bangalore as a “haven for land mafias and real estate sharks” (Karnataka Legislature 2007).

What we mean to show by these word associations is that corruption talk constitutes a structure of feeling that is not simply concocted by left activists but rather forms a more general discursive–affective terrain that traverses multiple social positionalities and fields. Conversations with residents of Mandala, a slum in Mumbai, for instance, reveal a looming sense of suspicion vis-à-vis a swampy area adjacent to a recently cleared slum settlement denoted as “illegal” and protected by no-development zoning: “This is just marshland now, but the *public* is saying that Godrej [a major industrial firm] is planning to build something here.” Sentiments of speculation, distrust, and rumor thus abound in everyday discussions over the fate of land throughout the city.

If scam invokes one set of discursive terms associated with land grabs, another set conjures up nexus, nepotism, and more generally “top-down” corruption. The perception that corruption is an entrenched phenomenon emanating from the top came up repeatedly across the two cities. Reflecting on the meaning of corruption in India more generally, Rekha, a middle-class anti-land-grabbing activist in Bangalore said in an interview:

In the corruption tree, they are just cutting off the leaves and branches; they are not cutting the roots. In spite of all the mechanisms and laws, why is corruption going on unabated? Shouldn’t you be asking this question? That’s why we’ve said attack it top to bottom not bottom to top. This is the heart of what we advocate for. Once you punish the last fellow in the chain, the poorest guy, nothing will happen because the chain is still there. In fact the chain will be replaced and made more refined and people at the top will keep profiting! So you have to start removing corruption from the first *top* link of the chain.

Although many actors are involved in the “corruption tree,” it is the fact of profits at “the top” that makes such collusions so damning. Archana, a lower middle-class resident fighting the usurpation of Bangalore’s wetlands, further elaborated to the second author in 2015 why “the roots” of corruption held fast in the city: “You need to understand that what makes the city run is just money politics.” Pressed further on what she meant by “money politics,” Archana explained that not only do corporate developers often bankroll the electoral campaigns and operations of Karnataka’s politicians but that the politicians themselves moonlight as real estate brokers or enter politics in the first place only because of the clout of their rural landed families. This structural coproduction of real estate capital and governance pervades both cities.

In Mumbai, such top-to-bottom land grabbing complicities also include formerly trusted friends and inner enemies. For instance, one relocated slum resident described the sense of betrayal she felt from a local ward politician who “was ruined by money.” In the Mandala slum referenced earlier, evictees consistently referenced *dalals* [brokers] working in cahoots with more powerful interests to provide information about the area and facilitate eviction processes. Residents claimed that *lalach* [greed] led a few local leaders to sell out their fellow residents organizing around eviction and fair relocation. Several slum residents also indicted nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) facilitating “participatory” resettlement as bought-out agents of the state, thus challenging gendered stereotypes in which the participation of “honest” slum women is purported to prevent corruption.

“Scam” and “top-down” understandings of corruption are not separate but rather work to reinforce each other. An English-language newspaper surmises in Mumbai: “Land scams become possible in Maharashtra because the bureaucracy is hand in glove with politicians. Virtually everybody from top to bottom is on the gravy train and works overtime to provide illegal gains to realtors, rather than acting as custodians of public interest” (Khetan 2011). One media report further highlighted the prevalence of nepotism: The developer of the Kohinoor luxury high-rise on one of the mill land plots was the son of a former chief minister of Maharashtra and a key leader of Mumbai’s Shiv Sena party (Johari 2014). The prevalence of a builder–politician nexus and nepotistic power structures mean that in both cities, government is much more willing to demolish poorer settlements than high-end developments. This is what we refer to here as the hypocrisy of land grabs.

Corruption Meaning Making 2: The Hypocrisy of Land Grabs

Ashok, a lower middle-class shop owner in his mid-forties, lives in a resettlement area on the eastern fringes of Mumbai where he was forced to move after two years of wrangling with state agencies and NGOs over the site and process of relocation for a World Bank–funded road project. In 2007, he took the first author on a tour of the areas near Gazi Nagar, a now demolished slum in central Mumbai where he once lived. “Are you seeing all these buildings?” he exhorted. “This whole *posh* area is *illegal*. Our slum area is truly *legal*⁵ but this is the *illegal* area that harmed all of Mumbai in 2005.” Ashok was referring to the sprawling Bandra-Kurla Complex, a 370-acre commercial park housing Citibank, Dow, and the stock exchange built despite flood warnings on the marshy wetlands of Mumbai in the early 1990s.

Similar narratives critiquing the hypocrisy of land governance are at play in Bangalore. One monsoon afternoon in July 2014, the second author met with Archana, the aforementioned middle-class activist fighting the SEZ on the Bellandur-Agara wetlands. Leading the way through a small entrance onto the banks of Agara, Archana stopped and gazed out over the horizon, her eyes scanning the large construction site and other developments ringing the water body: “This is not about the small huts that are coming here and there. What is disgusting is when the lake is made into a big apartment complex. It’s so much easier to clear a slum encroachment than it is to move a big encroachment.” Archana and members of Bangalore’s Anti-Land Grabbing Committee take issue with a definitional slippage strategically deployed by the government to collapse two very different types of unlawful activities: land encroachment (“small huts coming up here and there”) and land grabbing (“when the lake is made into a big apartment complex”). As Rekha explained further:

Encroachment is when you take a small piece of adjacent land. You don’t have title to that land. You cannot sell that land. But you just cultivate it; you use it for your own survival needs or you build something small on it. But land grabbing is when you take possession of land for which you are never entitled to it. And if you take possession of it, then you can sell it. . . . You can make a huge profit on it. So this is how land grabbing makes a total killing!

Shehnaz, a Muslim resident of a Mumbai slum designated as an illegal encroachment, echoed aspects of

Rekha's narrative from her own situated experience. Her settlement has been evicted three times with no entitlement to compensation because it was ostensibly settled after a state-stipulated "cutoff date" (i.e., the date of settlement after which residents are not eligible for resettlement). Such dire forms of eviction have hit discriminated Muslims and other "outsiders" especially hard. She passionately denounced:

The whole of Hiranandani complex was built after 1995. . . . They were able to settle afterwards because they could afford to pay 20 million rupees of *black* money, because they are literate, because they wear neckties, because they drive cars—that's why they are considered to be citizens.

The ultraluxury complex to which she is referring became the center of controversy and investigation after activists' exposed how the 300-acre plot was released to developers at a subsidized rate to build affordable housing units. Along with her neighbors, Shenaz has been struggling to reclaim her land with the support of NAPM activists who argue that such evictions of the poor are outrageous in a city where the elite engage in far worse actions.

The language of activists and residents like Simpreet, Ashok, and Shehnaz in Mumbai and Ramaswamy, Rekha, and Archana in Bangalore is in keeping with a general dissatisfaction among Mumbai's and Bangalore's poor and lower middle classes that efforts to "regularize" urban informality (i.e., transform land tenure from unauthorized to authorized through eviction or the levying of hefty penalties) unjustly target lower income residents while those at the top of the corruption chain are allowed to go free. Disciplining the poor occupies a spectrum of punishing and accommodating strategies. For instance, on one end are the violent and uncompensated evictions of illegal settlements that often target groups that are multiply discriminated by class, ethnicity, caste, and religion. In the narrative of an activist report in Mumbai:

Illegal and inhuman treatment is meted out under the pretext that . . . [slum and pavement dwellers, street vendors, fishermen] are encroachers. From bureaucrats to politicians, who at the first place thrive on the bribes and votes of these very populations, curse them and order their eviction. The city actually has been encroached upon—its resources from land to water are being usurped. But the question is by whom, who are these encroachers: slum dwellers or someone else? (Ghar Bachao Ghar Banao Andolan 2013, 2)

On the other end, the Slum Rehabilitation Scheme (SRS), specific to Mumbai, seeks to offer a "kinder, gentler" approach through developer-provided formal resettlement flats, while also freeing land for commercial development. The highly controversial 2013 *Akrama Sakrama* [turn "wrong/illegal" into "right/legal"] regularization scheme in Bangalore similarly does not evict but rather slaps steep penalties on lower and middle-income informal residents for violations of bylaws, ownership, and titling norms. As we discuss next, "corrective" and punishing interventions alike have since become subject to corruption charges in both cities for laying bear blatant dispossessions and the erosion of the public interest.

Betraying the Public's Interest: Anticorruption Discourse and the Immorality of Dispossession

[M]oney [is] being pilfered from even the poorest citizen, including the pavement dweller. . . . Our governments are giving away our commons; our money is being used to support the lifestyles of a few. Government officials argue that they are doing it by various rules and resolutions, and in "public interest." (Gandhi 2005)

The soon-to-be famous RTI activist Shailesh Gandhi (quoted earlier) calculated millions of rupees in losses due to the irregularities in public land leases to elites who enjoyed ludicrously discounted rates for prime properties in Mumbai. After filing dozens of RTI petitions, Gandhi, a relatively affluent owner of a plastics company, became a public figure who went on to make a career as the head of the Information Commission overseeing such cases across India. Activists and lower class residents in Mumbai and Bangalore have since echoed Gandhi. While the corruption discourses discussed earlier tapped into a collective sense of distrust and moral reprobation of the informal modalities and hypocritical biases of urban land governance, an emerging idiom centered on the public interest more directly calls attention to corruption's dispossessing effects.

Slum-Based Mobilizations

In Mumbai, slum clearances and redevelopment have become a center of controversy and activism in which various harms suffered by the lower classes have entered into the discursive field of corruption. The first

author accompanied a few resident-driven mobilizations in the aforementioned Gazi Nagar settlement in 2006. Poor and lower middle-class residents and shop owners were contesting displacement by a World Bank-funded road project on grounds of corruption in two arenas. One charge challenged the proposed path of the road through housing structures when it could have easily run through an adjacent area fraudulently usurped by a local politician. A second charge took aim at a world-renowned NGO that was commissioned to facilitate community resettlement. Resident leaders argued that they were given “no account” of a per person 20-rupee charge leveled by the NGO. Because these corruption charges seemed rather minimal or indirect, the first author pushed resident leaders Ashok and Manoj to explain further. Ashok replied, “See it isn’t right that we must move from our central location to Lallubhai colony [a notoriously crowded and underserved resettlement colony on the eastern fringe of the city].” Manoj added, “How can we make a living there? We are losing everything we spent our lives building. It’s like we are being sent back twenty-five years.” Residents were able to temporarily halt the project and secure a better deal through a variety of publicized agitations and support from the NAPM and Medha Patkar, a veteran antidisplacement activist with a long and famed history of agitating against the World Bank. By yoking charges of procedural irregularities with the loss of livelihood and a lifetime of investment, Gazi Nagar residents stretched corruption discourse to spotlight material dispossession.

Critiques of the erosion of the broader public interest via profit-driven corruption and its associated damaging effects mounted from 2007 to 2015, especially surrounding Mumbai’s SRS. The SRS was inaugurated in the mid-1990s as a quintessential public-private partnership that sought to eliminate slums and ostensibly include the lower classes in less punishing ways than evictions. The implementing agency, the Slum Redevelopment Authority (SRA), facilitates slum clearance, delivering lucrative commercial rights to developers on newly available land. In exchange, developers must provide onsite resettlement flats in formal buildings to eligible displaced residents pending the consent of at least 70 percent. Despite its inclusive premise, SRS excludes tens of thousands of noneligible residents of so-called illegal slums and informal renters, among others, especially marginalizing poorer and discriminated ethno-religious groups. These exclusions reflect the fact that slums are a heterogeneous category encompassing a wide range of socioeconomic and legal

statuses and that the market-based model reinforces inequalities among slum dwellers through restricting resettlement to remain profitable (Doshi 2013).

The much-hailed model soon became mired in scandal and critiques of “builders [and] their corrupt nexus with politicians-police-bureaucrats” (NAPM 2007). RTI and other investigations revealed millions of rupees in kickbacks paid to the officials of the SRA (the implementing agency), hundreds of dummy names added and eligible residents omitted from beneficiary lists,⁶ forged signatures on consent documentation, and false or trumped-up charges leveled against recalcitrant slum dwellers (Khetan 2011).

To harness a wide range of testimonials of slum residents’ experiences of dispossession as legitimate evidence for corruption (in addition to the infringements just mentioned), activists began to deploy *jan sunvais* or “people’s hearings” from 2007 to 2014. *Jan sunvais* are performative public events initiated in rural areas during the 1990s to expose experiences of corruption in front of invited officials. At one event attended by the first author in 2007, for instance, hundreds of evictees of a designated illegal slum gathered around a makeshift tent on the muddy grounds of their cleared settlement and painstakingly recounted the disrespectful runaround they faced in attempting to secure vital documents from authorities (see Figure 1). Although not without limitation, Baviskar (2007) noted, “To enable the poor to literally speak truth to power is the *jan sunvais*’ great achievement” (8).

From 2007 to 2014, *jan sunvais* organized by the NAPM became a space to voice myriad grievances in eviction and resettlement. Such efforts are especially salient in urban India where slum dwellers, vilified as freeloading encroachers, rarely benefit from the public sympathies afforded to the exploited rural poor who are seen as the moral core of the nation. The *jan sunvai* eventually morphed into the formation of the Peoples Commission on Irregularities and Illegalities in SRA projects (henceforth the Commission) in 2013. The Commission established a collaborative and participatory process including slum leaders and residents, researchers from a social science institute, NAPM activists, and eminent progressive public figures. Over seven months, public inquires and hearings were conducted in six different SRS sites in which residents provided testimonials of the hardships they incurred.

The first author attended an event in July 2013 that launched a report of findings from this process. In attendance were the Commission members and nearly 300 slum residents from a broad range of socioeconomic



Figure 1. Slum residents in Mumbai gathered for a *jan sunvai*. (Color figure available online.)

backgrounds gathered in a musty press event hall in Mumbai's southern business district (see Figure 2). The event began with Commission members recounting key findings of "fraud" to the audience and members of the press, followed by speeches and testimonials by slum representatives. They relayed how developer manipulations—including faulty lists, delays, and noncompliant architectural plans—worked to marginalize community rights. They recounted intimidation tactics including the demolition of critical amenities (a toilet block in one case) and threats of denying flats to agitators. One of the Commission members, Dr. Amita Bhide, a professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, explained the structural aspects of the plan that allow builders to manipulate the process and maximize profits causing severe suffering and loss for slum residents.

In the middle of Bhide's explanation, one journalist got impatient. He interrupted her, demanding concrete names of "rotten apple" officials involved to shore up a sensationalist story. "This is fine," he said, clearly frustrated. "But can you tell me exactly which officials are involved—some names of key players?" Bhide deliberately avoided the journalist's individualizing discourse in favor of emphasizing patterns of dispossession imbricating officials, developers, and local promoters. She and others reiterated the point that rather than serving as a slum rehabilitation scheme

[*punarvasan yojana*], rather than serving the "public interest" as proffered by government officials, SRS is effectively a scheme of "displacement" [*vistapan*] and "land grab" [*zameen hadap*] that is inherently fraudulent for privileging builders' profit at the expense of the housing rights of the poor.

One hardship highlighted was the suffering and losses incurred after slum clearance and before resettlement. During this period—lasting two to ten years⁷—"beneficiaries" are dispersed into distant, crowded, overheated, and mosquito-infested transit camps with contaminated water and no working sanitation—conditions far worse than those in most slums. They conveyed that relocation to offsite transit camps entailed loss of wages and the cost of renting in other more habitable settlements. Finally, those who had managed to acquire resettlement lamented being condemned to life in shoddily constructed and underserviced buildings—what many called "vertical slums." Commission members juxtaposed these hardships with the millions of rupees in profits accrued to developers from the commercial properties enabled by SRS—with reference to calculations provided in a section of the report titled "Magnitude of Corruption."

Another more fundamental critique highlighting the immorality of evictions denounced resettlement



Figure 2. Event to expose developer fraud featuring prominent slum and other social activists in Mumbai. (Color figure available online.)

eligibility restrictions for “illegal” slums as “fundamentally wrong” and “discriminatory,” alluding to the fact that many are poorer and marginalized ethno-religious groups and that exclusions keep SRA profitable while rendering thousands homeless. Aijaz, a fifty-year-old Muslim evictee of an “illegal” slum demolished in a sweep that destroyed 90,000 homes, presented the final testimonial speech of the event. Aijaz passionately condemned SRA as “completely corrupt” because of how few houses it was providing to the poor. He demanded the scrapping of the builder-centered SRS in favor of *swe-vikas* [self-development]. The Commission report echoed the call for a noncommercial model⁸ “guided by public interest”—and not profit—including the construction of affordable rental housing, the elimination of eligibility exclusions, and the establishment of a federal program to support community-led rehabilitation. What we found was that such narratives broaden the moral critique in which corruption becomes defined not only by dubiously legal or irregular procedures but also by its undermining of the public interest, defined here as the housing and economic dispossession of the poor. Struggles to replace SRS continue today as newly elected Prime Minister Modi seeks to replicate the controversial “Mumbai model” across India.

Informal Middle-Class Mobilizations

In Bangalore, similar anticorruption narratives centered on the immorality of housing and land dispossession have erupted especially around land grabs endangering the city’s peripheral lands. A few words about the sociospatial differences between the two cities are in order to better understand convergent and divergent narratives. Unlike Mumbai, Bangalore does not concentrate vast inner-city slum settlements and thus does not exhibit the same magnitude of corruption-embattled eviction and resettlement scandals, nor the same kind of grassroots energies contesting their dispossessing effects. On the other hand, Bangalore does exhibit a highly heterogeneous property-owning (if not always securely so) middle class. As Kamath and Vijayabaskar (2014) put it, in Bangalore “the middle classes’ project of gentrification is far from complete or neat” (149); many of these groups engage in struggles for housing and land via the sphere of electoral politics and connections forged with informal sovereigns; that is, tactics typically associated with slums. Yet, at the lower end of the spectrum, middle-class groups in Bangalore do not live in officially designated slums but rather inhabit a range of “unauthorized,” legally tenuous residential developments (visually defined by concrete blocks, dusty

roads, trash dumps, and minimal infrastructure), especially at the once-agricultural periphery.

The legally tenuous nature of peripheral middle-class settlements has placed land and property at the center of their civic struggles (Ranganathan 2014). Similar to Mumbai, anticorruption has taken on a powerful moral valence in light of the erosion of the “public interest” posed by land grabs. The dispossessing effects of, on the one hand, absolving land grabs by the wealthy and, on the other, slapping hefty penalties on—or worse yet, evicting—lower middle-class settlements have catalyzed anticorruption discourse. In 2012, the second author accompanied city engineers to the site of a recent demolition drive in a Muslim-majority outlying flood-prone neighborhood, Madina Nagar. Officially, the neighborhood was targeted for demolition because it was obstructing a storm channel; half the houses were removed and the remaining ones were slated for demolition the following month. Conversations with residents, however, also exposed concerns revolving around minority discrimination, layered on top of the *benami* [fraudulent] land deals by authorities and developers that had allowed settlement on the flood plain in the first place.

One resident, Fateema, lamented as she picked her way through her neighbor’s rubble:

It’s not enough that our possessions were damaged with rains—our *saris*, TV, chairs—now we are losing our house, too. But why don’t they remove *those* encroachments, those big buildings where big big people [*dodd dodd janaru*] live? And what about the temples? Nobody touches them. They gave permission to all of us; now we are the ones who have to suffer.

Mary, a resident of a nearby settlement, who had observed the demolition of Madina Nagar, commented that the process was “totally corrupt, corruption at every level—why did they allow that layout to come up in the first place? Why [do] they choose some to demolish, not others?”

Under the pretext of environmental protection and “maintaining law and order,” a much larger demolition drive targeting “encroachments” on several lakes in peripheral Bangalore ensued in 2014 and 2015, further bringing to light the selective politics of dispossession. Predictably, lower income settlements were targeted. Rekha, one of the members of the Anti-Land Grabbing Committee, framed such dispossession in light of the “corruption” that propels it:

Take the example of [what the government did to] Chikkalasangra Lake—here, all poor people’s houses on it are almost totally demolished. There were pregnant women, small school going children who had nowhere to go. . . . Suddenly school was affected. It was [a] huge chaos. You cannot do [things] like this. You yourself [the government] have given under your stamp and seal that these are genuine documents. These poor people have bought these lands based on them. You first create an alternative place for them. Allow them to comfortably move to that place. Children changing schools is difficult. Let them settle [in a new place]. Finally demolish. [You can’t just] first bring bulldozer and start demolishing. They always start with small buildings and immediately with the bulldozer. Why? This is how corruption works—the authorities tell the apartment people to go get a stay order. But they never tell the poor people.

Following the demolition drive, the Anti-Land Grabbing Committee wrote to the Chief Minister of Karnataka, admonishing the government for dispossessing “innocent citizens who have not only lost all their life earnings, but also have been mercilessly thrown on streets” (Anti-Land Grabbing Committee 2015b, 1). Leading with a 1948 quote from Mahatma Gandhi about how dealing with corruption requires “a high code of morals,” another memo addressed to Karnataka’s governor states: “Encroachment by the poor for livelihood has to be dealt with in a more humane approach as *there is no criminality involved*” (Anti-Land Grabbing Committee 2015a, 2, italics added). As in Mumbai, these narratives are focused not simply on the mechanisms or hypocrisy of land grabs, but they also morally condemn the dispossession—in this case a loss in schooldays, loss in housing, and loss in earnings—entailed.

Such narratives are not simply restricted to insecurely propertied groups directly affected by demolition drives but have also filtered into popular opinion. Media reports in 2015 explicitly expose the politics of dispossession with article titles like “Demolition Drive in Bengaluru Brings down Homes of the Poor, Religious Structures Untouched” (Nayantara 2015). The fact that Hindu temples, in addition to larger apartment buildings and colleges, built illicitly on lake land were spared from the bulldozer, whereas poorer homes bore the brunt of destruction, was called out in the media as a clear case of “[wanting] to protect the big fish, i.e. “corrupt officials and politicians” (“Major Demolition Drive On” 2015). It is noteworthy that in a Hindu majority country, illicitly built temples

have not been immune from public scrutiny, suggesting that this moment holds a particular political and moral urgency that corruption talk has been able to leverage. At the same time, we should be cautious about unequivocally celebrating the progressive potential of corruption talk given the election of a conservative Hindu prime minister, Narendra Modi, in 2014. Here, then, is a discursive terrain that is slippery and malleable to the political, economic, and cultural forces of the moment.

Convergent and Divergent Framings of Anticorruption

We reflect here on the similarities and dissimilarities between our two cases, as well as some potential dangers and limitations of corruption talk. First, as discussed, Mumbai and Bangalore exhibit important sociospatial differences rooted in different historical legacies. What does this mean for anticorruption meaning making? Although there are certainly symbolic alliances between slum and lower middle-class groups (as many so-called slum dwellers are lower middle class in expensive urban land markets and much lower middle-class housing is informal), it would be a stretch to say that the poor and middle class have united over a sense of corruption as injustice. As Jeffrey and Young (2014) showed, corruption discourses can be mobilized for socially regressive purposes that too conveniently align with neoliberal ideologies. In Bangalore, elite middle-class mobilizations around land encroachments are not necessarily progressive. High-rise apartment-dwelling groups look on slums and lower income encroachments on lakes with disdain, seeing these as tarnishing the lakescwildlife, aesthetic, and recreational value. Many of Bangalore's more elite English-speaking middle classes harbor distrust of those they see as "criminal" and "corrupt," including Kannada-speaking politicians and the "uneducated" constituencies they attract. They echo familiar, classist, and casteist notions of corruption, revealing rifts between the politics of marginal and elite groups. Similar complaints abound among Mumbai's upper classes and even among slum owners against informal renters who are usually the most vulnerable to displacement. Alliances have also often lost steam once the demands of relatively privileged groups (Hindus as opposed to Muslims, upper middle class as opposed to poorer middle class, authorized as opposed to illegal slum dwellers, etc.) are met. Ultimately,

aspirations for property owning and consumption lifestyles—from heterogeneous slum dwellers to the middle classes—might not easily lend themselves to broad cross-class alliances and radical agendas.

We should also be clear that anticorruption does not always result in progressive outcomes. To the contrary, the "politics of stealth" (Benjamin 2008, 726)—informal negotiations with lower bureaucrats and surreptitious encroachment—might still be a more effective way to meet housing needs for the poor than sanitized, corruption-free options. This is corroborated by the experience of Mumbai's Mandala slum dwellers who have languished for more than eleven years trying to reclaim their slum through a federal (non-market-based) rehabilitation scheme that was promised but never delivered. Although not applicable to our cases, elsewhere urban middle-class transparency activists seeking to "empower the poor" have counterproductively denigrated the informal practices and relations with the state on which the poor crucially depend (Webb 2012).

In sum, we do not wish to generalize anticorruption discourse as uniformly progressive, structural, or justice oriented. Nor do we wish to gloss movements against land enclosures uniformly as "resistance." Not only is there an "extraordinary array of struggles unleashed by accumulation by dispossession" (Hart 2006, 983), but political responses "from below" take a variety of forms, from resistance to acquiescence to active support of land grabbers (Borras et al. 2011). Still, there is strong evidence that allegations of corruption in urban India's land grabs are aimed at exposing tangled relations of power and structural inequality. By presenting a vehement and effective critique of real estate capital, the complex terrain of corruption politics cannot be dismissed as yet another instantiation of neoliberal subjectification (see also Walton 2016).

Conclusion

In this article, we took seriously the situated meanings attached to corruption. In a moment marked by growing inequality in India's cities, we showed that corruption talk among lower class informal residents, activists, and others serves to critically narrate land enclosures, a central driver of capitalist accumulation in India today. Through ethnographic and archival data from Mumbai and Bangalore, we demonstrated how anticorruption discourses and mobilizations eschewed individualizing, legalistic, and apolitical framings so common in mainstream

accounts. Although no magic bullet, these mobilizations have had real material effects. For instance, some of Mumbai's slum redevelopment schemes have been stalled due to combined anticorruption and antidisplacement activism, whereas in others residents have been able to negotiate better resettlement deals. In Bangalore, the Anti-Land Grabbing Committee has succeeded in stemming further demolitions, also gaining wide press coverage for their insistence on differentiating "criminal" land grabs from "noncriminal" encroachments. Although the ultimate fate of the SEZ coming up on the wetlands is yet to be determined, corporate developers have thus far been fined and publicly exposed.

In both cities, an associated set of discourses linked to scam and scandal reflected a "structure of feeling" of moral reprobation and distrust that came to define land grabs as corrupt. This affective and discursive turn cannot be understood without attention to informality as a historically specific, flexible regime of rule. Strategically traversing a spectrum of informal and formal governing logics, land grabs have come under fire for their elite biases and antipoor hypocrisies. Understandings of land grabs as a betrayal of the public's interest further extend the meaning of corruption to denounce housing and economic dispossessions as immoral even if not always illegal. Crucially, our informants' admonition of the betrayal of the public interest is a politically salient inversion in India where displacement stemming from state- and private sector-led development is typically couched in elite, litigation-backed notions of public interest (Bhan 2016).

In both of our cases, anticorruption struggles also allowed for the formation of symbolic and actually existing coalitions across lower and lower middle-class subjects. In Mumbai, anticorruption politics enrolled an economically and ethnically heterogeneous group of slum dwellers with differentiated legal status. Aligning with each other and public figures, such a diverse group was able to contest real estate-dominated slum redevelopment. Meanwhile, in Bangalore, we found that the interests of the informal middle class were very much centered on questions of land tenure, much as in slums. Although lower middle-class groups do not face the same degree of exploitation as slums, they nevertheless voice similar critiques over the hypocrisy of penalizing "encroachments" by the poor while absolving the "land grabs" of the rich. Such a convergence and sense of class coalition does not necessarily hold true for the upper middle classes, however. As we highlighted earlier, there are potential conflicts vis-à-vis corruption framings across India's heterogeneous urban classes.

Theoretically, we have sought to contribute to critical ethnographic and geographic treatments of corruption by discursively analyzing corruption in the urban sphere—a topic pertinent to struggles in many parts of the world and one that academics have yet to explore sufficiently. We have also sought to bridge "thick" descriptions of corruption discourse with political-economic and conjunctural analysis. Following Jeffrey (2010), we find that corruption talk indeed represents a diverse political field shaped by sometimes contradictory experiences of—and perpetuations of—fraud, looting, and dispossession. Like other critical scholars, we found corruption to be a multivalent field in the sense that it allows for a yoking of diverse critiques (e.g., the simultaneous critique of legal and extralegal land transactions). Indeed, corruption is a powerful semantic and affective rubric precisely because it enables normative assessment of actions regardless of their purported "legality."

At the same time, we also note the salience of a specific historical and geographic moment of crisis and political legitimacy in India (and many other parts of the world), one marked by an unparalleled concentration of wealth. Here, consideration of what Gramsci (1971, 400) called the "terrain of the conjunctural"—the coming together of social and political forces to establish hegemonic regimes and new opportunities for contestation—is crucial; after all, political fields (of corruption or otherwise) are not fixed but constantly shift and are subject to molding by myriad political, social, and economic pressures. Bringing conjunctural analysis together with the recognition of corruption as a cultural field, we believe, provides a useful way to ascertain how, why, and when certain political formations of corruption emerge as they do.

We suggest that this very set of questions might form the basis of a promising "critical corruption research" agenda beyond Mumbai and Bangalore. Geographic scholarship focusing on how corruption meanings shift across space and time can enrich a long-standing anthropological focus on situated discourses. Critical geographic research can also examine how corruption is integral to—and not eliminated by—the workings of advanced capitalism. How legal, extralegal, and extraeconomic strategies are deployed in myriad forms of dispossession across the north and south, for instance, and how such dispossession is narrated should form a key component of critical corruption studies.

Critical corruption studies can also explore how anticorruption mobilizations jump scale. For instance,

anticorruption mobilizations in Mumbai and Bangalore were influenced by more progressive strains of the national Right to Information movement (Baviskar 2007). They were further invigorated by the national anticorruption fervor in 2011 led by Gandhian crusader Anna Hazare. Despite Hazare's more middle-class message, a number of slum activists in Mumbai, such as Medha Patkar, joined the anticorruption-focused national Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), led by RTI leader and right-hand advisor to Hazare, Arvind Kejriwal. Participation in electoral politics was new and unknown territory for such activists and entailed campaigning alongside moderate elites. Indeed, cross-class alliances are necessary even as they are slippery and sometimes dangerous terrain for social justice mobilizations (Elwood, Lawson, and Nowak 2015).

Critical corruption studies would thus have to take a hard look at the progressive potential of anticorruption instantiations. For instance, in suggesting that lower class coalitions have united around the injustice of corruption, we must be careful not to assume that this progressive trend will always hold true. In the 2014 national elections, the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Narendra Modi came to power. Modi's campaign, too, capitalized on frustrations over corruption by offering an authoritarian, Hindu nationalist, and neoliberal antidote to the "mess" of the country. The BJP proved to be victorious, even though the AAP gained unexpected victories in Delhi and Punjab that year. As a result, we have seen a number of regressive ramifications, including a potentially problematic Hindu nationalist discourse around "cleaning up" India (of dirt, corruption, and minorities) and a move by AAP toward more centrist, accommodative, and technocratic politics. It is telling that in the lead-up to national elections in the United States in 2016, notions that "the system is rigged" and that corruption had reached unprecedented levels found appeal among both the left and right, once again revealing the term's slipperiness and opportunistic usage.

In the final analysis, it would be naïve to unequivocally romanticize anticorruption discourse. Yet, it would also be premature to dismiss anticorruption struggles as yet another neoliberal ruse. The terrain of the political does not always offer a pristine ideological stance through which to mobilize diverse constituents. Corruption talk is contradictory and multivalent; this is, after all, what gives it semantic force. In high-stakes moments, however, it can marshal moral indictments directed toward progressive causes. It is therefore

imperative for critical scholars to ascertain how corruption politics are expanding—rather than disappearing—from geographies of advanced capitalism.

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Notes

1. Slums are diverse in terms of their socioeconomic makeup and legal status (see also Note 5). The 2011 Indian Census defines a slum as "residential areas where dwellings are unfit for human habitation by reasons of dilapidation, overcrowding, faulty arrangements and design of such buildings, narrowness or faulty arrangement of street, lack of ventilation, light, or sanitation facilities or any combination of these factors which are detrimental to . . . safety and health" (Government of India 2011).
2. Note that cultural relativism is common in mainstream corruption approaches. For instance, the 2015 *World Development Report* rehashes simplistic corruption paradigms through a behavioral economics approach that continues to pathologize "cultures" of corruption in non-Western societies (World Bank 2015).
3. Luxemburg saw these as prevalent especially in colonial expansion projects, whereas Harvey focuses on a range of neoliberal predations from slum evictions to the subprime mortgage crisis.
4. RTI legislation, finally passed after ten years of mobilizations, aims to provide citizens quick and easy access to government documents to "promote transparency and accountability . . . and contain corruption and make our democracy work for the people in a real sense." Although the efficacy of RTI legislation has been far from consistent—and, indeed, there have been several instances of misuse or incompetence—several activists still see it as one of the few means of accessing information.

5. Slums referred to as “legal” are those that have undergone processes of official regularization (“recognition” or “notification”). In Mumbai, such status requires various documentations including proof of settlement before a stipulated cutoff date (1 January 1995 but more recently moved to 2000). Regularization of slums does not guarantee tenure security, but it does entitle residents to access government services and compensation. Slum structures and settlements that do not have these documents are designated as “illegal,” and inhabitants are denied rights to resettlement compensation. These categorizations are subject to myriad manipulations by authorities.
6. The SRS has built-in incentives to simultaneously inflate beneficiary lists and also exclude based on eligibility to maximize profits through the commercial sale component of redevelopment.
7. Delays in developer construction projects were purportedly linked to economic slowdown.
8. Although such a program exists in smaller towns in India through the federal Rajiv Awas Yojana, the State of Maharashtra has resisted replacing SRS because of the strong developer interest in retaining the scheme.

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