

The Making of Land and the Making of India: By Nikita Sud *New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020, 253 pp., 1495 INR/£52.00 GBP (hardback), ISBN (print edition): 978-0-19-013020-6*

Vasudha Chhotray and David Singh

School of International Development, University of East Anglia
v.chhotray@uea.ac.uk
david.singh@uea.ac.uk

Nikita Sud describes her latest book as ‘a telling of the life of contemporary India, as if land mattered’ (p. xiii). In this book, set in the post-1991 era of economic liberalization, the multiple lives of land weave in and out of the workings of the Indian state, encompassing its operating technologies and idiosyncratic behaviours. The book draws upon long-term research in Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, three states that have promoted liberalisation vigorously. Since land is a state subject in India, this research design provides the basis for an examination of diverse contexts around land policies and politics. Although the book is not set up to be a subnational comparative study, the multiple locations examined help Sud to present different configurations of the processes of development and change: a private infrastructure and manufacturing zone in coastal Gujarat, an industrial belt alongside a highway in Tamil Nadu, and a real estate and service sector in peri-urban Kolkata in West Bengal.

The story of land, which the book casts as the story of India, is centred on a conceptual framework that presents five interrelated dimensions: enlivenment, territory, authority, property, and access and exclusion. Key to this framework is an understanding of land in relational terms, as never merely a ‘thing’. Sud situates her own approach to land within a larger tradition of ‘relational socio-nature’, where the materiality (in the sense of physical or manifest attributes) of nature, and our sociality (understood very broadly as social relations) are intertwined (Whatmore, 2002). Other scholars have also noted that ‘land never settles’ (Liboiron, 2021, p. 43), but Sud’s work documents the relentless efforts of a panoply of actors, both state and non-state, to settle land for the development projects of ‘New India’. It is here that the book makes its distinctive contribution. By revealing how the work around the settling of land, in its many material forms and associated meanings, is actually mediated through complicated social relations, this book offers a concise commentary on three important themes that any critique of development in India is interested in: the state, market and resistance.

The state occupies a central presence in this work, where Sud, in Chapters 1 and 2, brings into focus the intertwined lives of the state with the many lives of land. Sud argues that neither land nor the state are fixed entities, and the process of land-making in India is itself forged by the process of state-making. Land is being governmentalized, ordered and framed by state technologies as territory and property where control and authority can be exercised. Formal territorializing practices in the post-liberalization context have taken the form of new land policies and regulations regarding land conversion, new circulars and resolutions facilitating the private takeover of common lands and the increasing significance of non-state actors in

informal territorial control. But this is ‘only one version of land’s biography’ (p.54), as attempts by the state to order land are also met with its own formal and institutional boundaries being stretched and manipulated by activities of shadowing, intermediating and brokering on/in/around land. The middleman is a powerful agent of land (un/re) making as he (and sometimes, she) facilitates the movement of land on its turbulent journey towards property and value and is deeply engaged in (re)producing both the shadows and the afterlives of the state. Looking at India’s state-making process through the novel perspective of intermediaries operating around land multidimensionality offers an original contribution to the existing scholarship.

Second, taking land to the market requires more than the ‘business-friendly’ state, which is regularly idealised by international financial institutions. Taking land to the market requires state-friendly business where both the state and business groups cultivate intimacy and shared codes in their project of transitioning the many lives of land towards commodity and property status (or, as Sud presents, from ‘waste’ to ‘value’). What Sud suggests in Chapters 3 and 4 is more than a treatise on state-business relationship or, simply, corruption. Understanding the ‘shadowy life of land’ reveals the constant blurring of the state and market and vice versa, and fundamentally alters what both state and market mean for people. Equally, land itself ‘is not a readymade commodity for the market’ (p. 93) or a given disposable piece of material. The market constantly needs to accommodate and negotiate land’s multiple sociality and temporality, particularly when it is suffused with identity and religious attachment (‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ land). Paperwork, government artefacts and documentation are therefore critical in ordering land, creating and even manipulating its property status and making it ready for the market. Sud makes a much-needed contribution by linking identity documents with the multiple identities of land.

Third, as shown in Chapters 5 and 6, land transition or conversion is not a peaceful process for it triggers political reactions from those who lose access to land. In this book, the idea of the ‘political’ captures the disparate forces of resistance, which are shaped by the conceptual multidimensionality and mutability of land. Those resisting land appropriation draw upon very different attachments to land (history, sacrality, fecundity, environmental fragility), its multiple entwinements with livelihoods, and challenge the widely prevalent discourse of land as ‘waste’ or ‘barren’. But the forces of resistance are neither constant nor homogenous and work as a collage entangled by social hierarchies, much like the ever-changing Zone (shorthand for the institutional order that fixes land) they oppose. Both everyday politics and party politics deploy reverse processes of negotiation, coercion and consensus-building, acting to silence and incorporate elements of the political. The book brings an extremely valuable perspective on the ‘loud’ and public political (re)actions to land conversion. However, it could have better explored the silent and almost invisible forms of everyday contestation that constitute the more nuanced terrain of resistance.

Sud’s book is a sobering account of the India of the present, where the proponents of land alienation are not restricted to any one office or region. Attention to the role that socialised land itself plays in this process is highly instructive. This is also because it reveals the ugly

coalescing of ever new forms of othering onto older distinctions around religion and caste. The book is also timely in its renewed attention to land, which must take appropriate centre stage within all discussions on decolonisation, and reiterates the futility of assigning colonial-mode land alienation to any fixed historical epoch. The imperative of climate change has further complicated things with precarious land in coastal environments literally slipping away.

Finally, this book is written in a contrarian spirit to the modernising pathologies of development with its relentless desire for order, separation and enclosure. It is richly interdisciplinary, rejecting the toxic presumption of ‘untouched knowledge’ (itself redolent of *terra nullis*). It is gentle around the edges, ‘ground-making rather than ground-breaking’ (p. 212) and is packed with observation. Its value lies in demonstrating, how land itself, as much as the documents that testify to its possession or the project zone that promises transformation, all need to be ‘made’. In showing us how the Indian development story is an unequal patchwork of aspirations and resistance, Nikita Sud succeeds in bringing together a very grounded political economy into conversation with the rich socio-materialities of land.

Reference:

Liboiron, M. 2021. *Pollution is colonialism*. Duke University Press, Durham