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**The value of peasant life**  
**Nayā Ambhora, a village of displaced persons in central India**  
**Joël Cabalion, EHESS-CEIAS<sup>1</sup>**

“How can the countless interdependent aspects of this drama of existence and the art of existence torn to bits be explained and especially felt in the space of a few lines?”

(Bourdieu 1961, 36; taken up in Bourdieu, Poupeau, and Discepolo 2002, 21)

**Abstract**

The displacement and resettlement of four villages are the focus of this article. They are located in the Nagpur district in Vidarbha, a region in the state of Maharashtra in central India. Twenty-five years ago, the construction of the Gosikhurd dam was undertaken in order to revitalize the agrarian economy of a region deemed to be “backwards” by the Indian authorities. If the peasant populations downstream from the structure would from that time onward have the benefit of permanent source of irrigation, the fact remains that its production involved the flooding of 93 villages and the displacement of over 83,000 people. What are these lives worth compared to the “public good”, “national interest” and the irrigation of 718 villages? When there is a plan to wipe a village off the map, what does the annihilation of the resources of the peasant world and the scattering of its former units involve? How is the feeling of injustice of these displaced peasants expressed? Supported by research that followed the state management of these forcibly-displaced persons over ten years, this article concentrates on the trajectory of the inhabitants of four former villages, which today are depopulated, to their current place of residence, the new village of Nayā Ambhora.

**Key words:** India – Maharashtra – forced displacements – new villages – peasantry

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Vinod Chahande and Simon Borja without whom my field research and sociological analyses would not have had the same tenor.

Although the Maharashtra state government authorized the Gosikhurd dam back in 1983, and federal authorization dates back to 1986 with the Central Water Commission (CWC), it was not until 1988 that the peasant populations affected actually learned of the existence to come, when Rajiv Gandhi, then-Prime Minister of India, inaugurated the start of works on the banks of the Wainganga River. Dating from the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980-85) – the period during which the first economic liberalization reforms were begun under Indira Gandhi – the Gosikhurd dam was supposed to promote the modernization of irrigation systems as part of the Tribal Sub-Plan, the area benefitting being located in the Chandrapur district where many groups defined as “tribal” live, the majority of which are ethnic Gonds, making up approximately 20% of the population. In 1997, in order to speed up implementation of the projects in progress in the State and to improve their management, the Maharashtra government created five regional irrigation agencies to which full financial authority has been assigned. The Vidarbha Irrigation Development Corporation (hereinafter VIDC) is the agency in charge of the Gosikhurd dam and the entirety of the irrigation projects located in this eastern region of the state. Although one of the four villages studied is still inhabited at the time of writing this document, three of them (including the main one) have now been relocated to a new village, Nayā Ambhora. The displacements and resettlements were spread over a roughly five-year period, from 2008 to 2013, and thus are still topical for a handful of occasionally resistant families that are more often than not unable to leave and rebuild in a timely manner due to lack of resources.

By concentrating on the restructuring of the living sites, this article presents “[translation] a fragment of broader studies” (a doctorate in sociology) on the post-displacement consequences and stresses that it is not simply “[translation] establishing the observation of the ruins and the inventory of the rubble” (Bourdieu 2008, 149). For the displaced to be able to come to terms with their own destiny, the political foundations of forced displacement philosophy must be understood and turned upside down in order to ask the question about the political conditions of a new destiny. Can the aggregation of disoriented, tossed about atoms, that above all

are unequal in their positioning and trajectories, generate a new type of social unit? What is the meaning of the right to the village in the case of these displaced people? After presenting the magnitude of the losses affecting the villages of Ambhora Khurd, Maloda, Gadpayly and Ambhora Devasthan, I will turn my attention specifically to the litigation suits of the displaced persons, then to the rights and reasoning leading to the emergence of the new village. To address these various matters, I will present quantitative analyses and qualitative interviews<sup>2</sup>. The quantitative analyses are based on a file consisting of 241 households (of a total of 372). The variables are both quantitative (ongoing) and qualitative, matching up with written official data such as verbal statements. They make it possible to take stock of the current social structure of the four villages (14 castes<sup>3</sup>) and how the repercussions of displacement differ.

### **Depeasantization**

As an historic and social process which marks all economic development, depeasantization reflects the crisis of social reproduction of the peasantry and the evolution of the social identities of its "heirs" (Champagne 2002, Bourdieu 2002). For its part, forced displacement accelerates a decapitalization process of the peasants. But what's more, it causes a total disruption of the "traditional" forms of socialization and interdependencies of village life and its organization. This region's agriculture (mainly rice and grains, also having some variety: legumes, peanuts, truck farming and orange groves), while not being sufficiently well-paying for most of the peasants, retained many advantages. Food security was necessarily based on a strong symbolic redistribution economy for the exchange of grains and various services in family networks. With the remnants of the traditional forms of the peasant moral economy, a significant amount of reciprocal exchange was still organized. Grains (or chillies) moreover made a significant volume of non-monetary exchanges possible for the payment of farm workers' wages. Assessing the magnitude of the dual phenomenon

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<sup>2</sup> This research was a conducted independently in Hindi and Marathi.

<sup>3</sup> In order of descending demographic importance: Teli, Kunbi, Sonar, Lodhi, Sutar, Mali, Gurao, Mahar, Dhiwar, Navhi, Lohar, Gond, Dhobi and Gowari.

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represented by the destruction of a village flooded out with its land is critical. In the villages investigated, while previously 31% of the population had no land, 72% of the population is now “depeasantized” (41% being the “new landless”). This proletarianization of the land structure does not just pose the question of employment and the peasant lifestyle, but in a more global manner results in the disarticulation of a practical system. Although there is some farmland available in the region, it is generally much too expensive for the displaced peasants. While the Maharashtra government is officially obligated to find some, this is a challenge for any so-called “development” project whatsoever in India today.

The total farmland of the villages studied corresponds to approximately 680 hectares, of which 484 ha (i.e. 71%) are destined for flooding, not counting built up land. Land assessments and compensation to the villagers were spread out from 1995 to today, which has posed immense problems for the displaced due to the rise in the market price of land – often making any attempt to save one’s farming experience useless – but also due to the gradual dispersal of family cells into new household units. In daily living space, the peasant’s condition already appeared, from various perspectives, like a forced choice, or a poor choice, for many young heirs who were moreover aware of “non-employment”<sup>4</sup>. Inspired by an awareness of the disparities honed by their contacts with urban society, a significant proportion of educated young people today value new trades and plans.

Only a few large peasant families can claim to farm commercially, due to strong family units and a significant amount of land<sup>5</sup>. Thanks to adequate reserves of capital, they can also support a market economy when others, without security, barely selling or selling with great difficulty, were increasingly dependent on the State and its

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<sup>4</sup> I am basing myself here on the distinction between unemployment and non-employment used by Castel 2009, 114, note 1. The village youth do not expect the re-establishment of a “[translation] balance between the supply and demand of employment”.

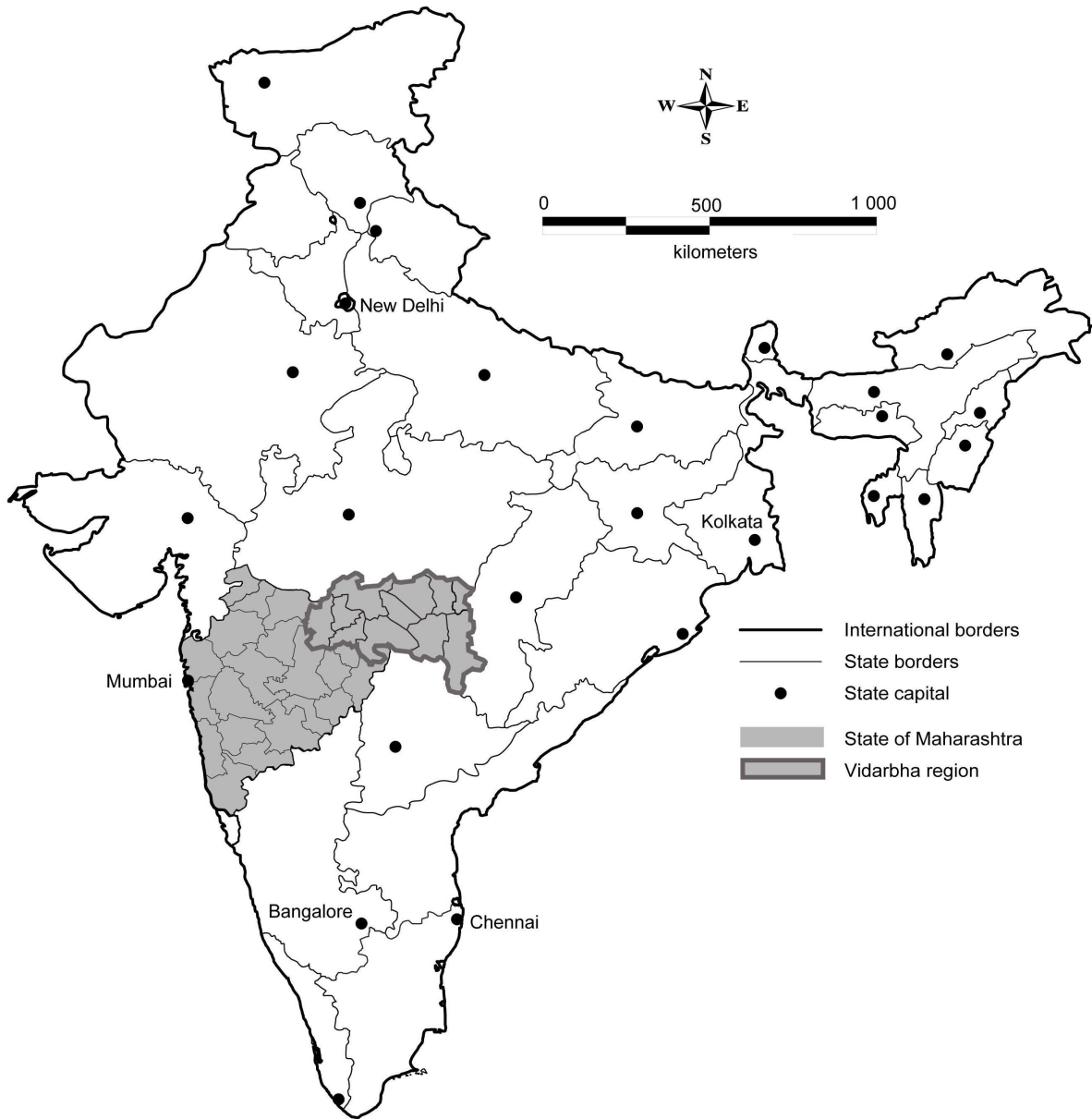
<sup>5</sup> I refer the reader to the thesis from which this work arose for more in-depth explanations regarding the land size of the social inequalities and the “[translation] inequalities of replacement chances”. Cf. Cabalion 2013a.

regulations to get by (administrative procedures to get a “Below Poverty Line”<sup>6</sup> card, subsidies that are as necessary as they are uncertain at the Fair Price Shop, etc.).

### **Map 1: Maharashtra and the Gosikhurd dam**

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<sup>6</sup> India’s poverty threshold is an economic indicator based on the per capita income long adjusted to daily caloric requirements. Getting a “poor person’s card” is supposed to provide access to various types economic assistance (mainly food but can also involve kerosene).



**Districts (Vidarbha)**

**Amravati division**

- 1. Buldhana
- 2. Akola
- 3. Washim
- 4. Amravati
- 5. Yavatmal
- 6. Wardha

**Nagpur division**

- 7. Nagpur
- 8. Bhandara
- 9. Chandrapur
- 10. Gondia
- 11. Gadchiroli



Marginal peasants and farm workers (permanent and seasonal) thus felt, at best, hope of seeing the State improve their condition, which they perceived in normal times as destined for stagnation, if not near to indebtedness. But with this normal time now being a thing of the past, the worst has to be thought and the despair lived with of not being able to survive in the face of the risk of impoverishment created by displacement (Cernea 2000). Dispossessed, impoverished and therefore quite often demoralized, displaced villagers have seen their symbolic and economic foundations destroyed and their living conditions completely transformed<sup>7</sup>. Hundreds of villages across India every year thus form a community destined to poverty and weariness, doomed to feeling abandoned by the institutions. And yet, the villagers attempt to get free of the engulfing rubble and this “pain of existing” (Poitevin and Rairkar 1985), by reconstructing their lives in these new spaces. How do they do it, and how has the State thought out and organized this problem of rehabilitating social groups?

## **Decapitalization of the peasants**

### **Land acquisition and displacement: What do the villagers think?**

A number of difficulties are come up against when asking villagers for their opinions, perceptions and arguments about government procedures for buying and appraising land. This is a process that generally occurs in open or informal discussion. Probing this perception of the problem by means of a semi-structured questionnaire systematically leads to the same type of answers. Even for the best “connected”, close to the government, local politicians or even village civil servants, the acquisition of land is perceived as an iniquitous, opaque process with catastrophic effects. The feeling of unfairness dominates. I even noticed that well-off peasants were at times more likely than those mainly affected to discuss the injustice and distress created by

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<sup>7</sup> The processes of this modification of the social order and the gamut of adaptation of the displaced in the face of the chronic uncertainty of their new existence cannot be grasped except by means of the longitudinal study just begun here. The work of Thayer Scudder and Elizabeth Colson on the Gwembe of Zambia provides a noteworthy example of the advances made in research in this field. Cf. Cliggett, Colson, Hay, Scudder and Unruh 2007.



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the displacement, who often had neither the time nor the energy to talk to me about displacement or were content to repeat that they had no opinion or did not know what to think about it, if not asking me what indeed they might think about it. Dispossession is clearly so catastrophic that one does not know what to say about it. Even if they had actually told me what they thought about it, would this even have been audible? I was confronted with a very limited range of narratives in the discussion situations and the villagers in fact always alternated between criticizing the State, demanding a re-examination of the appraisals of their land, and the demand for new social policies. At worst, they expressed to me a sense that necessity had already enclosed them in the unknown: *"That's the way it is."*

Yet, the procedure for purchasing and appraising the land of the four villages, if not participatory, was "by the book", the inhabitants have no control over state regulations. Land and properties were systematically numbered, measured, marked out and entered in registers prior to preparing the acquisition decrees which were posted in the village centre, on the walls of the village council, in order to inform the population – and prior to sending the documents to each household. Maniram N., a Lodhi peasant in his seventies, does not remember when things were planned by the State:

*"I'm illiterate so I can't tell you when the works for the dam began; a number of government employees came to do their investigations. How big is your house, how many family groups, how many doors, how many windows, how many metres, etc., all that was measured. But I don't remember the date when they started measuring. We aren't people who keep papers..."*  
(Maniram N., Maloda, April 2011)

The administrative procedures for land acquisition create a feeling of estrangement among many of the villagers. There is a gap separating ordinary language and administrative/legal language. When notice was sent about the land acquisition, many did not immediately understand what these documents implied for their future – even if they were able to read them. It took a number of years during which a social movement, some elite landowners and a few regional politicians carried out information work jointly, so that villagers would understand the conditions of their displacement and be aware that in reality, they were already dispossessed. This fact

only dawned on some when they received their compensations. This aspect came up constantly in village discussions. "*We hadn't understood*", "*What were we supposed to do?*", "*What did that mean?*". In response, the government officials' arguments at times seemed unreal. "*All they had to do was read..., why didn't they inform themselves?*" (Discussion with Mr. T., a civil engineer, Rehabilitation Division, Bhandara, October 2009), etc. This type of criticism of the inhabitants' inertia on their own fate, sounds like provocation. Certain government officials feign surprise at the problems encountered by these people who can barely read, and cast the blame on them, arguing that they are irresponsible. While they often make fun of the villagers for their ignorance and illiteracy, they suddenly remember that the villagers are not so stupid and should have figured it out themselves. "*They manipulated us*", says Maniram. "*They preferred to drink and eat chicken*" some of the officials hurl back. In general, the villagers' estimates of the value of their land and properties are about two to three times higher than their compensations. Yet, it is not unusual to hear that the compensations would have been correct if they had been paid out *upon resettlement*, which is the proof of a practical sense that is at odds with the present situation. Immediate resettlement would have been necessary, or else re-appraisal of the properties at the time of departure. How, in fact, could the increase in the cost of living, cost of building materials and land in the entire region be offset? "*The government does one thing and says another*" Says Rangalal R. a Mahar peasant (Nayā Ambhora, April 2011). The appraisals were based on 1998 registry office values, but the villagers did not receive their cheques until 2004. The government denies having been unfair, as it compensated the inhabitants by giving them an additional 30% as a "consolation prize" in addition to 12% interest for the delay in payment<sup>8</sup>. This would be evidence that the inhabitants are to blame if they are unable to make ends meet. As it happens, "*some profited while others lost*" as summed up by Sharad L. (Nayā Ambhora, April 2011), a Gurao caste youth and son of "Maharaj", a priest and religious businessman from the area. Moreover, the Rehabilitation Division officials are fully aware of these cases, and raise them as examples to say that it is quite

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<sup>8</sup> Inflation over the period ranged from 3 to 7%.

possible to get by provided one properly plans his or her resettlement and the family budget. The State somewhat divides the displaced into two groups: the responsible and the irresponsible. According to the villagers, it would instead be a heterogeneous group of survivors masking a large group of losers (Cabalion 2013b). So, how much did they lose?

### **So little for an entire life. Residential compensations, agricultural compensations**

What is a peasant's life – an agrarian lifestyle – worth? On the basis of the compensation made by the government, the answer seems to be €7,610, on average, per household. It is difficult not to be stunned by this figure. First, apart perhaps from the social movement of the displaced, no one would dare to present the problem in these terms. Yet, farming resources have a price that the Indian government is trying to set. Even with compensation, their disappearance will have long-term consequences on peasant existence. The decapitalization of peasants falls under a triple phenomenon consisting of the expropriation of resources, depreciation of their value and under-estimating the effects poverty will lead to among the poorest.

To understand this figure, it is necessary to refer back to Table 1, which summarizes the total compensation the government has paid out to the four villages. It totals the amounts concerning the agricultural space resources and the amounts for the village space. The total is €2,831,051, to be divided among the 372 households counted in 2001 in the four villages. €7,610 corresponds to 328,395 rupees. In 2004, this amount was the upper average of the local market price of one hectare of unirrigated land. This is if you could find land – and buy it at a reasonable price<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> The amount of €7,610 corresponds to 71% of the land, rather than to all the houses. A quick calculation, by weighting the portion of agricultural space with village space, assuming that Gadpayly and Ambhora Khurd saw all their land disappear, would lead to a figure of about €10,000. Quite a figure for the peasant life.

**Table 1: The compensation of village resources (in rupees\*)**

	Ambhora Khurd	Maloda	Gadpayly	Ambhora Devasthan	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b><i>Agricultural space</i></b>					
Agricultural land	29 394 340	13 268 597	7 598 509	1 716 596	51 978 042
Fruit trees	2 261 733	416 194	444 457	8 380	3 130 764
Wells/agr. buildings	3 430 419	512 906	381 263	61 641	4 386 229
« Consolation » award ( <i>dilāsā rakkam</i> ) of 30%	8 933 131	3 797 657	2 558 182	281 255	15 570 225
12% Interests (delay of payment)	8 285 321	3 164 726	1 704 625	131 252	13 285 924
<b><i>Village space</i></b>					
Buildings (houses) and area	13 087 315	1 605 501	610 977	3 027 839	18 331 632
Electrical installations	520 740	43 430	12 821	160 152	737 143
Fruit trees	8 182	6 540	22 637	0	37 359
Wells/agr. buildings	4 622	0	0	0	4 622
« Consolation » award ( <i>dilāsā rakkam</i> ) of 30%	5 530 353	756 116	419 042	1 358 989	8 064 500
12% Interests (delay of payment)	5 566 212	327 663	167 616	543 599	6 605 090

<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>in</b>	77 022 368	23 899	13 920 129	7 289 703	122 131
<b>rupees</b>		IR	330			530
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>in</b>	1 785 404	553 995 €	322 673 €	168 978 €	2 831 051 €
<b>euros*</b>		€				
<b>% in row</b>		<b>63,1%</b>	<b>19,6%</b>	<b>11,4%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Source:** Fieldwork, *Land Awards' Lists, Houses Awards Lists*, VIDC, *Prapatr E*, Nagpur district, 2004-2012.

**\*Note:** On the 15<sup>th</sup> of April 1998, 1 € = 43.14 INR [Indian rupee]

The equivalent of 1€ on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April 1998 is of 1.28€ on the 20<sup>th</sup> March 2013.

Inflation over the period: 27.68 %, used index: FRCPI1998, Initial index: 100.1, Final index: 127.81

Before the 31<sup>st</sup> December 1998, euro exchange rates are theoretical

**Source** (exchange rate): <http://fxtop.com/fr>

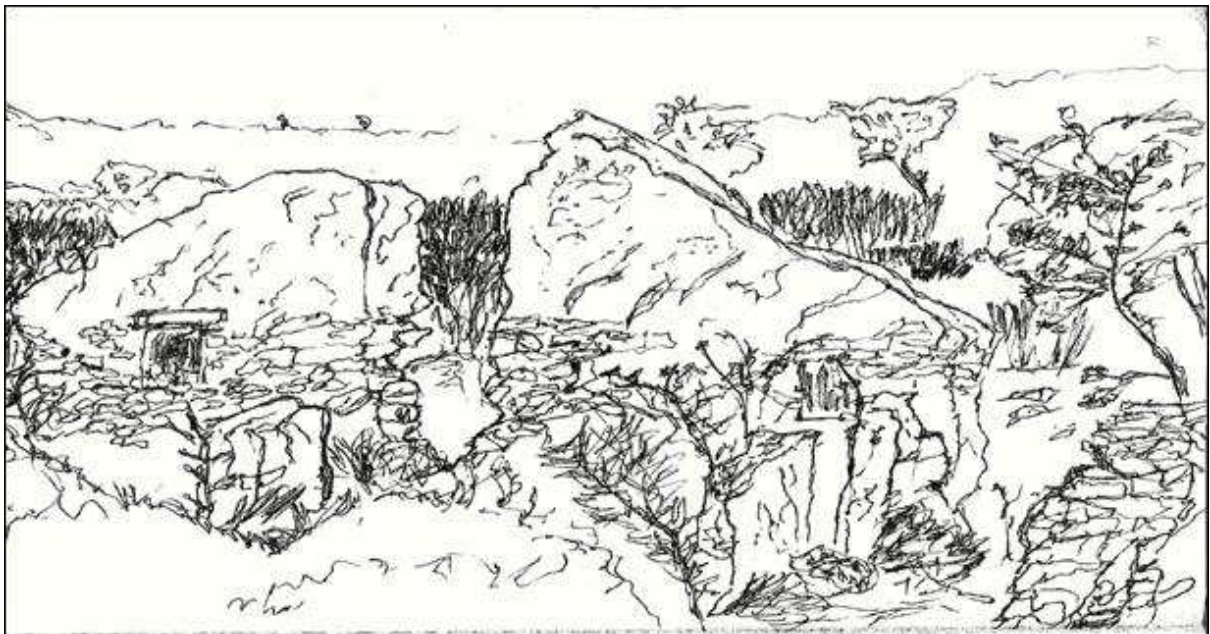
Land acquisition involves compensation at a number of levels. I am firstly concentrating on the material resources of peasant existence. Agricultural space is designated as base land, that is, "natural capital" (Cernea and Mathur 2008) developed by the farmers, but also all the infrastructure: wells, farm buildings (barns, stables) and other natural resources such as orchards and irrigation ponds. Village space refers to living space (yards, streets, threshing areas), structures (houses, wells, barns, stables, ancestors' temples, electric facilities) and finally, similarly, to the natural resources there (fruit trees only). From an accounting perspective, it can be stated that the Indian government does not miss much. There is no doubt that a genuine, accurate material calculation of the displaced inhabitants' property was done, framed by the law and explained in the expropriation manuals. A "correct method of dispossession" does not, however, prevent either controversy or protests. Nor does it prevent counting errors, even if compensation classifications give the illusion that nothing has been neglected.



**Fig.1:** The village of Ghat Umri at the foot of the dam, displaced in November 2009.



**Fig.2:** The ruins of the village houses in Gadeghat (Simon Borja, December 2012).



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**Source** (exchange rate): <http://fxtop.com/fr>

### **Recourse against the State: the legal protection of land interests**

The peasants affected by the acquisition are not totally without protection before the land administration. 50% of households protested one or more aspects of the compensation paid to them. Occasionally, the legal action undertaken is specifically for compensation because the government failed to count a house, or deliberately left it off the lists due to illegal encroachment on government forest or community land. The village of Gadpayly counts, for example, a total of 23 houses, 5 of which were deemed ineligible for compensation.

*"Yes. With the binoculars (tachemeter). They told me "we don't see your house in our binoculars", does that mean it is in the forest area?...You can see my house from far away. You can even see the bus that goes to Nagpur from my house." (op.cit.)*

The technicians that travelled through the affected areas to do a topographic survey had no decision-making power themselves over what they were measuring. The cadastral maps already existed, so their boundaries did, too. All that had to be recorded was the measurements of the future reservoir. The problem was located higher up, in the VIDC departments where it was assumed that lifeless territory was being measured. Village records held by the region's various councils are partially to



blame for this situation. The expansion and segmentation of households spilling over from village space was not recorded even though the inhabitants were paying their (residential) land tax. Accordingly, when the VIDC arrived and dusted off these documents, slightly more than a thousand families in the region suddenly became illegal occupants of their land. These types of situation were subject to individual lawsuits among the affected households. Moreover, the displaced people's social movement quickly appropriated the question of illegal encroachment as a major issue (see Wade 2011; Cabalion 2014). Since 1999 in fact, the process used in the Gosikhurd dam displacement has been vigorously protested by the committee of the displaced people's struggle *Gosikhurd Prakaalpgrast Sangharsh Samiti* (GPSS), whose leader is a *dalit* (the politically correct term for the former untouchables). If these mobilizations clearly arise from a regional socio-political dynamic that is part of a long tradition of socialist and anti-caste struggles led under the auspices of the historic figures Bhimrao Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule and Rammanohar Lohia, it is also clear that they come under a broader progressive context which resulted in the conceptualization of a "social question of dispossession" at both national (particularly following the struggles of the "Save the Narmada" movement) and international levels. Although most of the encroachment cases were resolved during a massive settlement, there are still families here and there who have not yet received anything. Ultimately, in the best cases, the massive settlement only pertained to the value of the buildings, and not the land.

In the four villages, 185 households, i.e. half, have filed suits at the Nagpur bench of the Mumbai High Court. Although some households have grouped their cases to minimize lawyer's costs, most of the complaints are individual and appear in the name of the head of the family. This figure leads to the assumption that the court system will be colossally clogged in the affected region. However, the suits do not systematically result in a hearing before a judge. In theory, the acquisition procedure involves examination of the petitions and an attempt at mediation at an intermediate level of government.

What are the village lawsuits about? 42% of those filed concern the calculation of the compensation for resources attached to the land or village space, in general fruit

trees (31% of the actions) and wells (11%) that were not entered in the accounts. The villagers' response to the land acquisition is philosophically just as arithmetic and accountable as the one that is imposed on them, and thus, they do not hesitate to pad the appraisals they deem both unfair and false. In most of the cases, they manage to obtain compensation, despite the very discounted (in their opinion) values (500 rupees for a mango tree, for example). Examination of the lists of suits shows that the petitions pertaining to trees and wells were dealt with. The same is true for 14% of the petitions for transfers of the name of an heir following the owner's death. These processes, whether or not they were successful, took time and cost money<sup>10</sup>, not to mention that they demanded assistance be found for putting together the file. Finally, 44% of the cases that were not successful at the VIDC level went to court. These are petitions for reappraisal of land, demands for higher compensations, if not demands for jobs.

Do all social groups necessarily have recourse to the legal system? Table 2 presents the inequalities it is appropriate to qualify as symbolic<sup>11</sup>, illustrating the breakdown of predisposition to protect one's interests by official means. There is a correlation between caste and whether or not one seeks help from the courts. If a count is made of the breakdown by caste on the official lists, we note that the Mahar (*Dalits*) filed the most lawsuits together with the Kunbi (55), then the Teli (48), the Dhiwar (18) and the Brahmans (5). As Brahmans no longer live in the village today, they are subsequently absent from my personal sample presented in the various tables. Although the high proportion of actions on the part of the Mahar can be interpreted as protection of their land interests, a historic effect of their social mobility and a firmly rooted legalism that is tied to Ambedkar's struggles (Jaffrelot 2000) can also be detected<sup>12</sup>. They are often perceived as "vindictive" by the low castes just above them

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<sup>10</sup> An individual lawsuit costs several thousand rupees.

<sup>11</sup> By *symbolic*, I mean a particular manifestation of the social (and material) conditioning the various provisions with regard to structural violence bestowed by the State. See Dubois, Durand, and Winkin 2005.

<sup>12</sup> According to Mishra and Pathak (2011), the Mahar are not a group that is either "behind" or particularly dominated. From the academic perspective, for example, they are at least equal to, if not better than many of the low castes. The choices of stream differ, however. The lack of money explains

in the social hierarchy. Indeed, if they are threatened or scorned (insulted by having their caste's name thrown back at them: "*hey mahāriyā!*"), they can quickly file a discrimination complaint under the law for protecting the so-called Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (*SC-ST Prevention of Atrocities Act*). Just because they have the option, does not mean they use it, and it is even a caste prejudice to believe that they abuse it. On the other hand, these figures certainly show a greater propensity to defend oneself through the legal system. Their case is however particular because, if other variables are cross-referenced, an otherwise revealing consistency is noted. The more land one owns, or the more compensation one has received, the greater the chances of appealing to the justice system to protest the purchase, appraisal, and compensation for one's resources by the State, which is illustrated in Table 3. The Mahar protest thus appears as the exception to the rule of symbolic domination. The low farming castes (considered as dominant in India's countryside), protest more, all things being equal, than the castes that can be seen as being dominated from an economic perspective (fishermen or the low trade and service castes).

**Table 2: Caste groups and recourse to the legal system \*\***

			Juridical litigation		Total
			Yes	No	
CASTES	Teli	Count	19	62	81
		% row	23,5%	76,5%	100%
CASTES	Kunbi	Count	27	36	63
	Sonar				
	Lodhi				
	Sutar Mali	% row	42,9%	57,1%	100%
	Gurao				
	Mahar	Count	16	28	44

for many Mahar the inability to complete technical studies, as the primarily private institutions do not enable them to take advantage of the positive discrimination policies they benefit from in the public sector (reduced tuition, etc.).

	% row	36,4%	63,6%	100%
Dhiwar	Count	10	43	53
Navhi				
Gond				
Dhobi	% row	18,9%	81,1%	100%
Lohar				
Gowari				
<b>Total</b>	Count	72	169	241
	% row	29,9%	70,1%	100%

**Source:** Fieldwork, *Lists of Application*, VIDC, Nagpur district, 2004-2012

**Note:** One asterisk indicates statistical significance at the level of 10 % (\*), two asterisks at the level of 5 % (\*\*) and three asterisks (\*\*\*) at the level of 1 % (chi square test)

**Table 3: Juridical litigations and compensation awards \*\*\***

Juridical litigation	N	% of N total	Sum (INR)	% of total sum	Mean (INR)
Yes	70	32,9%	33 808 218	48,1%	482 975
No	143	67,1%	36 536 655	51,9%	255 501
<b>Total</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>70 344 873</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>330 258</b>

**Source:** Fieldwork, *Land awards Lists*, VIDC, Nagpur district, 2004-2012

The average compensation for the households that have taken legal action is nearly 500,000 rupees, compared to 250,000 rupees for those who have taken no action. The more weight one carries in relationships of production, the greater one's chances of deeming oneself injured by the State and protesting one's expropriation. Means are necessary to fight and feel qualified to file a suit, which is in contrast to the idea of fighting because one is oppressed. In general, the individuals most distressed by the ongoing action are those who are the least mobilized. This phenomenon of social differentiation in the use of the justice system reveals a self-censoring effect on the

part of the poorest, in part accentuated by caste and economic domination relationships.

### **The new village: rights and logics of a new spatial organization**

New villages are not entirely built by government authorities but they are spatially marked out and then equipped with facilities in accordance with town planning thought out higher up in the ministries (*town planning department*). Displaced villagers thus receive residential sites on which they must rebuild using their own means, the compensation received. For those who unable to manage, there is emergency housing they can live in until the money to build is found.

According to the engineers-officials of the Rehabilitation Division, the former villages “spread based on circumstances and were not well planned<sup>13</sup>” (Varhade, Raje and Chafle 2013, p.510). Since then, for lack of effort to rebuild the local economic fabric in the new villages – a task that is as great a priority as it is complex and demanding for officials with little training in this regard – the engineer-developers’ attention and self-satisfaction are primarily turned toward everything that could appropriately be called “space metrics<sup>14</sup>” stemming from the consequences of the 1986 rehabilitation law. Maharashtra may in fact boast of being the first state to have legislated the matter. This law forces the creation of shared infrastructure, including 17 types of facility<sup>15</sup>. When they are obeyed, these legal provisions help create an ideal village

<sup>13</sup> It would be easy to criticize this remark to the extent that it reflects ignorance and a disdain of social logics governing the spatial organization of traditional villages (notoriously based on caste neighbourhoods and around agnatic relationship structures). This citation reveals the “modernisation mission” which the authorities deem promising. Even if the officials themselves mention the “dangers of social disintegration” which the displaced face, unfailingly referring to the Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction model of Michael Cernea (2000), it must be observed that they do not grasp the analytical implications in their diagnosis.

<sup>14</sup> Increase in building lots (from 185 m<sup>2</sup> to 740 m<sup>2</sup>), increase in the width of streets, approach routes (from 6 m to 15 m), and drains available, proximity of former villages compared to the new (from 2 to 50 km), distances currently reduced with the premises of government authority, etc.: these elements pertain to the celebration of a new spatial organization:

<sup>15</sup> 1. Drilled wells, driven wells or fountain points for drinking water. 2. A school (primary at least). 3. A cultural centre (party hall). 4. Asphalt streets and approach routes. 5. Three-phase electric power and streetlights. 6. A place for cremation and/or cemeteries. 7. A main sewer system (open). 8. Public toilets. 9. A pen for lost livestock. 10. A Maharashtra State Transport Corporation bus stop. 11. Areas for threshing and seed shedding. 12. Grazing spaces. 13. Space for a local market. 14. “Open space” for

perceived as viable, rationally planned and pleasant to live in. The new village would inevitably be modern, as it would have the characteristics of cities.

In addition to the previously mentioned obligations, three more socio-spatial facts appear influential:

- Demographic growth: a number of villages have resettled together due to the lack of "free" land;
- Growth of interior distances: the new villages witnessed a form of "de-intensification" of the physical space, i.e. a reduction in population density. This is actually an increase in the spatial distances between neighbourhoods, between former neighbours and between the living places in new villages;
- The contagiousness of "modern" residential requirements: new forms of structure are almost uniformly imposed (concrete houses; broader and occasionally surfaced, streets; flat roofs; verandas; the addition of toilets and bathrooms; tiled floors in the most comfortable houses; installation of ceiling fans; wider windows compared to the old houses, etc.).

Although these various elements are likely common reference points of the new villages as a whole, the "formal types of dwelling", like the "ways of living" (Ramadier and Depeau 2011, p. 10) can vary greatly.

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future expansion. 15. Open space for a secondary school, a dispensary, a cooperative bank, a post office or nursery school, depending on the size of the village. 16. Spaces reserved for community use (generally for temples). 17. Playing spaces.

**Fig. 3:** Emergency housing in Nayā Ambhora (Joël Cabalion, February 2014).



For the inhabitants, if the relationship with the new village is primarily structured on the basis of their economic projections and their hopes for reclassification, the morphology it presents creates a representational shock in relation to the spatialization of the old village. Many, from many perspectives, feel honoured by the space, the large size of the sites and the layout of the common infrastructure that was previously missing. In Nayā Ambhora, a sort of generalized enchantment is even perceptible because the villagers feel "*as if they're in the city*". Many times during interviews in the old villages, particularly with women, when the question of the new living location is arrived at, their eyes open wide, their gestures increase and its structure is presented to me with a good many superlatives. The former village was suddenly doomed to public ridicule. This type of narrative was strongest among young Mahar women, as if their new village had brought them the city and the open-



mindedness necessary for their emancipation – yet, this enthusiasm is not shared by everyone.

In short, the new village was a spatial promotion: the city brought to the village. This new configuration reflects a contradictory representation principle. In the villagers' narratives, the new village embodies a form of modernity. Although everyone aspires to this semi-city-like modernity and architecture, few villagers are unaware of the meaning of this large piece of fallow land where it will be necessary to "*struggle in order to eat*." "*There will be mice in the houses and mice in our bellies*" is said without beating around the bush. If housing and farming are two separate topics in the analysis, it must be observed that the dam muddles them in the fear of food insecurity, which motivates most the narratives:

*"Even if we lose a hectare or 2, that's alright. If we get a village and a house, there's no problem. It can be done. But if there is no land, we're basically dead"<sup>16</sup>.*

It's not only the perception of the new village per se that is at stake, but the perception of the future which is split by an unbearable anticipation and the fear of scarcity: a scarcity of food but also a possible scarcity of relationships and proximity. Rurality symbolizes the proximity of the fields and the possibility of non-monetary exchange; or at the worst, meanness consisting of stealing tomatoes from a neighbour's plot. "*We don't always need to have five rupees in our pocket*," says Maniram. The feeling of novelty has not yet given way to routine in Nayā Ambhora, as nobody has seen his flooded fields yet, and the last arrivals are still to come. The anxiety of an uncertain future is, however, perceptible.

Four common traits currently make the houses similar in form and style to urban structures. (This applies to the inhabitants with the means to build in accordance with the "new" criteria in effect, but is not the case for everyone. The less better off were forced to rebuild houses in essentially the old style, i.e. out of brick and tile, although avoiding the earth structures of the past and their undesirable association with rural poverty.) Thus, new houses are built with flat roofs, the point being immediately visible among peasant families, who can use them to dry, sort or hull grain. The

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Sachin V., Ambhora Kurd, October 2009; Ishwar B., Nayā Ambhora, April 2011, Maniram N., *op.cit.*



second stylistic feature concerns the porch or veranda. This type of large, covered entry, often adorned with a swing, was formerly only found on the houses (*vādā*) of the Brahmans or the customary chiefs, the *pāṭils*. Inside the houses, a third change relates to the floor, which is made of concrete as a minimum, if not decorative flooring tiles. Finally, the fourth major feature is the addition of toilets. A few important peasant families have western-style toilets indoors. This is not a nod to fashion but something provided for the comfort deemed necessary for the elderly, especially when they have spent their whole lives bent over working in the fields. Otherwise, toilets and showers are located outside the houses, as an extension of a central corridor linking the various rooms.

If the perception of the physical space of the new village is generally positive, the same does not hold true for the feeling one gets living there. As a matter of fact, the positive perception the villagers have of the *living space* has to be disassociated from the feeling they express about the *space they used to live in* with regard to the social relationships that are part of the space. The living space is so big, in fact, that they have to walk great distances in the sun to meet up with anyone, go to the market, get together to have tea, or talk about work. Although today growing numbers of men have motorcycles or bikes for getting around, the same is not true for women, who suffer from the greater distances as they get around on foot only. Even bicycles are still taboo for them, not to mention the fact that it simply is not practical to ride a bicycle in a sari.

A number of aspects intermingle here. The most important has to do with the disappearance of caste neighbourhoods. The combined action of the social movement GPSS and the government, which was onside very early on this point, saw to it that caste was no longer a grouping criterion in the new village. Why? For the GPSS and its political philosophy (based on Gandhi's and Ambedkar's), it was quite simply unthinkable to accept an ancestral grouping system that would involve legitimizing and extending the dominant social order. From the government's point of view, keeping castes would have posed legal and constitutional problems. Social grouping, however, is the top criterion that comes to the villagers' minds. "*We wanted to resettle in caste-based neighbourhoods.*" Nearly everyone apparently

wanted this. Although the caste system embodies symbolic domination relationships, economic power and at times, the violent oppression of the *dalits* or *ādivāsīs* (“tribals”) by the dominant farming castes, the fact remains that it provides a protective, or at least reassuring, mental space, a safe, social neighbourhood space set off by symbolic boundaries. What is lost with the deconstruction of neighbourhood social relations, which at times are not so much based on caste as on family solidarity first and foremost? The question of solitude and loss of contact with the social body comes through more explicitly in what the elderly and the women say. In the case of young boys, if there are repercussions on their social circles, they are much less perceptible or spoken about less (at least at this time). Can neighbourhood life still exist in the new village, where the only truly community gathering place will be the weekly market, or on the central fallow fields (the so-called “empty” space) overrun by young cricket players near the emergency housing? A second aspect concerns the types of family. What the new village is witnessing, apart from the comparison to a big “*khicharī*” (a rice and lentil dish here symbolizing social mixing) of castes now sprinkled in the space, is an increase in nuclear families. The government in fact had not taken into account at all the complex family structures often described as extended or joint. At this time, if a woman has to help a female friend or relative on the other end of the village to sort her rice, make plates out of banana leaves, or decides to attend to other tasks, she is also in danger of not being there when her husband calls and demands that she do something when he comes home. The women can no longer stay near their homes, particularly if they continue to foster the same circles of relationships that are now spread out. Previously, one’s neighbour or sister-in-law was just a few steps away. Backyards were connected. A man would go see his brother. In the winter, people lit soy waste fires and chatted within a limited range, while in the summer it could almost have been said that the residents of a neighbourhood all slept together as the crushing heat would push them to fill the neighbourhood streets with their hammocks. “*The environment has changed*”.

Now, everything is individualized and distant. Not everyone can thwart the effects of social disarticulation, particularly those in solitary households of elderly couples.

Strong emotion is perceived in the comments of the elderly who no longer have the strength or the desire to cross the village to listen to and smile at the discussions that previously enlivened their lives through proximity. Vinayak P., a young Kunbi peasant pushed to the city to work, thus recalls the minimum that the villagers demanded:

*"We wanted to at least be resettled together, with our family. We were all scattered, one brother here, one there. That can happen in the city but not here in the village, the village culture is different from urban culture."* (October 2008)

The former village, as stifling as it may have been according to certain mainly outside views, thrived in this culture of proximity relations, this "communalization" of social life. The new village, to use Weber's terms, makes communalization difficult and fails to achieve "societalization"<sup>17</sup>; it is a sort of intermediate space that jumbles the village and the city.

**Fig. 4:** A peasant from the goldsmiths' caste (Sonar) in the garden of his new house in Nayā Ambhora (Joël Cabalion, February 2014).



<sup>17</sup> Max Weber distinguished communalization and societalization (see Lachaussee 2008). Communalization designates a feeling of belonging to a community, one of its characteristics being its small size and within which social relations are part of everyday life: village, neighbourhood, kinship, work and cultural (often synonymous with religion) relations. Societalization refers to the dehumanization of social relationships specific to modernity. This is a descriptive continuum and not a value judgement – where the former is indispensable to the latter in order for there to be "society".

**Fig. 5:** Transfer of the last *pāṇḥelā* (tea stall) from the centre of Ambhora Khurd to Nayā Ambhora (Joël Cabalion, December 2012).





Nayā Ambhora has two collective “temporary shelters” spaces, described as transit camps. These are two corrugated sheet metal buildings covering some 100 metres which form a set of “living rooms” for families being resettled and wishing to migrate to the new village to supervise the construction of their home. Since 2011, several dozen households have come to occupy this structure, which is not intended as permanent shelter but instead as emergency housing space. Since 2009, the Rehabilitation Division has enquired across the region about the progress of the works in the new villages in the first phase of the project. All the households officially considered as poor and those that have not yet begun construction of their home, were assigned a spot in these collective buildings. Although they were not forced to move there, they were duly informed of their spot. Everyone knows that when the flooding occurs these buildings will, if necessary, be used for the final evacuation of villagers who are resistant or too poor. It is difficult to imagine how quickly the water will rise when the last gates of the Gosikhurd dam are closed. It will however be sufficiently fast to necessitate the forced evacuation in the space of a few hours, so 60 rooms of this type were thus built in Nayā Ambhora. Some new villages have double, if not triple, the number on a single resettlement site. Due to the material, the temperature is for the most part, intolerable, being very cold in the winter and stifling in the summer. In fact, the people live outdoors a great deal of the time and have since adorned the area with climbing plants providing a bit of shade. A few families are long-term residents, having neither the means nor plans to leave.

The pauperized spaces and blatant spatial inequalities in the new villages rouse the anger of Vilas Bhongade, leader of the displaced persons’ social movement. According to him, the entire region has been blighted. This can be seen – and moreover is clearly visible on *Google Earth* – from the concentration of many new villages on the land bordering the road from Nagpur, from the town of Veltur to the village of Panchkhedi. In his opinion, they announce a sort of deformed urbanism, being born in turmoil:

*"It's becoming a new Nagpur, packed with the most neglected [the unemployed] from Ambhora to Panchkhedi, bringing what they know about urban culture, bars and all the rest, who knows, even dancebars...[places where prostitution is found]."*

In the rural region of Kuhi canton, small bars have already been springing up more quickly for some time. The rural residents did not expect "urban culture" to appear. The ravages of alcohol are clear in this region, as elsewhere in India, where stills are legion (a few large cauldrons near the Am river, in the forest) distilling *dēsī dānī* from *mohā* – a flower from a tree. Legion, too, are the women's movements seeking to ban the stills. Alcoholism is a major problem in Ambhora Khurd and the surrounding area, encouraging a number of Hindu households to join new sects in order to get out of it<sup>18</sup>.

## Conclusion

Since Independence, 60 million people have been pushed into a spiral of displacement – whether or not they have voluntarily agreed to this sacrifice. The new villages in India are not French Algeria's regroupment camps studied by Pierre Bourdieu and Abdelmalek Sayad (Bourdieu and Sayad 1964); nor are they the refugee camps on the "edges of the world" studied by Michel Agier (Agier 2002) or Liisa Malkki in Africa (Malkki 1995) and frequently rediscovered by the media during repeated political and humanitarian crises. Because they emerge from the break of populations' frameworks of existence that until then were submerged in community social ties, because they suddenly materialize as a *sui generis* reality announcing a new order through the disintegration of the rhythms and signs of a past familiar universe, the new villages in India also, like war or a revolution, symbolize a "policy of naked life" (Agamben 1998) and a major "point of inflection" (Jeanpierre 2011), breaking with the routines of peasant existences. In the impossible continuity of life that jolts along in spaces that are an after-thought, pauperization becomes the common denominator of most of the displaced and the symbol of a "geography of

<sup>18</sup> Over the last two decades, most of the Dhiwar fishermen in the area have converted to a movement within Hinduism called *paramātmā* ("the eternal"; also described as *mānav dharm*, "the religion of man"). A few Teli, Kunbi and Sutar households have also adopted this religion devoted to the god Hanuman.

domination" (Harvey 2008) of urban space on rural space, little able to stop despite the periodic arrival of new social policies to renegotiate the value of peasant existence.

A majority of displaced persons now apparently hope to develop dairy farms and rescue their own peasant experience through animal husbandry, as if having been deprived of the Green Revolution they had no other choice, aware of their sacrifice, shifting their hopes to the White Revolution. All the difficulties posed by this type of projection are well known, the training necessary for it to be made possible, and the supervision it would involve, not to mention the public investment. Yet, these projections are neither impatient, nor utopian, nor unachievable per se. The same holds true for the desires to develop large-scale fish farming, horticulture, sericulture and floriculture, which is spoken of by politicians and developers – surely because they have vested interests – due to the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) planned for the Nagpur airport (MIHAN). The hope to develop livestock husbandry has the merit of emphasizing, in the case of these areas in Vidarbha, that a farmer, even one locked in his contradictions – wavering between buying an expensive new patch of land in order to stay a farmer, and the uncertain investment in a tertiary activity in the village – in general rejects sudden depeasantization. Intervention from the outside, in as much as it continues to be imposed, even in a participatory manner, cannot therefore be reduced to the economic question of subsistence because economic choices are also, ultimately, cultural choices. The right to the village, because it holds in store an unexpected sense of spatial justice, therefore arises here in four different ways that are all interdependent with the perpetuation of a peasant lifestyle. This is an almost geographic and local right, i.e. a right to use living spaces over which one has control and to which one has personally contributed to the definition of the lifestyle. It is then question of a right to be protected from the effects of dispossession by an economic reconstruction policy that is attentive to unequal mechanisms for the redistribution of compensation. Finally, it is especially a matter of a right that is both cultural and political, to determine the conditions of the possibility of one's existence outside the omniscient field of a State that is often authoritarian and always paternalistic. If the water of the Wainganga River is one of the major supports of



peasant lives, used for irrigation and funeral practices, it is now the thread that separates or rips these peasant lives from the ordinary course of life, that is, passing from life as usual to the sovereign yoke of a powerful external constraint.

Whether it is defined by turns as radical, new, utopian or pragmatic, the right to the village is ideally a worksite perpetually in the process of redefinition and not social engineering imposed from outside, fixed once and for all. However, the new villages in India seem to bear the marks of a great spatial injustice and present a major challenge to the laws of spatio-temporal insertion of the peasant classes.

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