

# STATE, SCALE AND NETWORKS IN THE LIBERALISATION OF INDIA'S LAND

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## Abstract

As states concentrate their developmental capacities in space, the sub-national scale has emerged as a focal point of policy-making in India. The rescaled spatiality of the state is being inscribed on land. Land is the primary resource available to sub-national states to attract private investment in post-reform contexts. Yet, the promulgation of innovative policies is only the start of the space-state relationship. This paper follows rescaled state policy through to its reception and appropriation by business, community and family networks that operate in the real estate industry, which is a major land user. Dynamic multi-dimensional spatial relations involving scales and networks do not engage with a staid, centralised, formal state. Instead, real estate firms work with a state that is itself networked, and that straddles formality and informality, as well as shadows. India's land economy is animated in this teeming space of state, scale and networks.

## **1. Studying state, scale and networks through land**

### **1.1 State spatial rescaling**

Contra classic neoliberal<sup>1</sup> texts (e.g. Berg, 1981), the contemporary state is not in retreat. States today can be market-friendly or business-friendly (Rodrik and Subramanian, 2004), competition states (Cerny, 2007), post-Keynesian, post-national, workfare regimes (Jessop, 1999), or states that are undergoing political and policy reinvention in keeping with market economies (Brown, 2006; Sud, 2012). Mapping market logic, states now speak the language of efficiency, downsizing, sub-contracting services, Public Private Partnerships, and New Public Management (Hood, 1991).

One of the contemporary geographic rationalities of the state is a process of spatial rescaling. Here, space is being defined as the socially created geographical container of life, and scales as dynamic, nested and interacting geographic hierarchies, ranging from the global to the body. Scales produce space, and vice versa (Castree, Kitchin and Roberts, 2013). Rescaling involves a focus on scales beyond the

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<sup>1</sup> Neoliberalism is the current avatar of nineteenth and twentieth century ideas concerned with the conditions for the facilitation of free private enterprise. Neoliberalisation, as a set of policies to usher neoliberalism, has taken rather different forms in different contexts (Castree, 2006). It could involve trade liberalisation, privatisation of manufacturing and services including those traditionally provided by the state, disinvestment from public sector enterprises, currency convertibility and the opening up of financial markets, encouragement of foreign direct investment, etc.

national, be it in the form of upscaling or downscaling. For Brenner (1999), following Swyngedouw (1992), the state is going ‘glocal’, or actively seeking to adapt the local to better interface with global markets.

In an era of increased economic competition and integration, states consciously concentrate their developmental capacities. In the case of India, the state’s spatial focus is increasingly on select urban spaces and economically productive regions. This includes the current NDA government’s<sup>2</sup> pet 100 Smart Cities project, and the previous UPA government’s National Urban Renewal Mission that set out to invest \$20 billion in 67 cities over 10 years (2005-14). Much energy has also been trained on spaces of enterprise such as Special Economic Zones, Special Investment Regions, National Investment and Manufacturing Zones, and Industrial Corridors such as the Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor. The aim of these targeted state interventions is to partner with, and respond to, the needs of the market. Targeted (not universal) infrastructure development, and even welfare, are corollaries of this.

Rescaling is not a particularly new analytical lens for interrogating spatial change. Scholars have applied it to processes of governance, economic zoning and urban transformation in the global North (Leitner, 2004; Paul, 2005; Gualini, 2006; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009). Yet as the papers in this Special Issue demonstrate, spatial rescaling can be effectively applied to emerging economies like China and India. These contexts do not mimic the Northern experience in, say, the progression from Fordism to post-Fordism, which forms the backdrop of the extant

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<sup>2</sup> I use the word government when referring to the bureaucratic, institutional core of the state. However in much of the argument below, a broader view of the state is adopted, and suitable terminology used.

literature. Recent scholarship on India informed by scalar frameworks includes Kennedy (2014) on spatial and institutional restructuring; Jenkins, Kennedy and Mukhopadhyay (2014) on the country's contentious Special Economic Zones; and Banerjee-Guha (2013) on multi-scalar resistance to uneven development.

## 1.2 Land as elemental to state spatial rescaling

The contemporary spatiality of the Indian state is being inscribed on land. Here, after Lefebvre (1991) I view land not as soil, but as territory. The state has tended to be defined through its relationship with territory. This 'territory results from a historically specific, mutually transformative articulation between the state, the continually contested processes within it, and the land or soil that it inhabits, owns, controls and exploits' (Brenner and Elden, 2009: 362). The state may confer legal or customary rights to the ownership or usage of land as property. At the same time access, or the ability to derive benefit from things (as opposed to the right to do so) can go beyond state control (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). For being constitutive of the state, but also allowing insights into incursions on official 'state space' (Brenner et al, 2003), land offers an apt base for this study.

Land economy and geography may be studied through varied spatial lenses, besides scale. Across disciplines and ideological divides, the basic postulate of land is that it is fixed (Marx, 1981; Harvey, 2001), or that it needs fixing or stabilisation through tenure security (de Soto, 2000). In this reading, it is logical to study land in place. This for instance is the fruitful approach adopted by a burgeoning literature on urban political economy in India (Weinstein, 2014; Srivastava, 2015). Here, land is the base on which more dynamic geographies of international finance, governance and slum redevelopment can play out. Conceptually, these approaches speak to the

situated complexity of the site (Marston, Jones and Woodward, 2005), and the relationships engendered by globally connected local place (Massey, 1994). While the study of land in place is critical, I consciously adopt an alternative approach. Land is governed across scales. Thus Part 2 of the paper discusses post-liberalisation state spatial rescaling in India, as evidenced by crucial changes in sub-national land policy and practice.

Sub-national federal units of the Union of India are termed ‘States’, and are differentiated from the state apparatus by the use of the capital ‘S’. I show sub-national States going beyond national land policy frameworks. They formulate creative initiatives in land, as they compete with each other to attract private investment. Or as an interviewee, a retired civil servant who headed the Department of Industries in a southern Indian State put it, ‘If [Companies] are bringing an iconic brand into the State, they come with a huge list of demands, the primary one being land’<sup>3</sup>. Through their responses to such demands, States tend to be identified as pro- or anti-business, and by extrapolation, pro- or anti-development. Thus in a pivotal relationship, sub-national States are not just acting on land via policy, they are being defined in turn. Even as this paper moves beyond place-based approaches to a scalar perspective on land, it does not stop there. Space is multi-dimensional and ought to be studied as such.

### 1.3 Multi-dimensionality in space: Networks and the rescaled state

The focus on a single dimension of sociospatial relations can only be ‘a *simple entry point* into a more *complex inquiry*’ (Jessop, Brenner and Jones, 2008: 392). Acknowledging that socio-spatial relations are multi-dimensional (Jessop, Brenner

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<sup>3</sup> Chennai, 16/8/12

and Jones, 2008: 392), in Part 3 of the paper I explore spatialities in which rescaled policies in land are actualised. In other words, I am interested in exploring what becomes of sub-national policies once they are officially sanctioned. In data generated by inductive fieldwork, I find the role of networks in the animation of rescaled land-based schemes to be particularly significant. Networks comprise individuals, collectives or roles, linked by relations of sociality, production, experience, power or culture. Information, communication and transport technologies under globalisation may allow ever-more complex, even ‘rhizomatic’ networks to transcend space (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Castells, 2010). Root ginger is the botanical inspiration for Deleuze and Guattari’s influential metaphor of the rhizome, implying that networks are asymmetric, acentered, interconnected and heterogeneous.

Multiple networks crisscross rescaled state space in land. Recent research on Indian cities has pointed to ‘the appearance of elite networks around the pursuit of particular projects or shared agendas of spatial change and urban political reform’ (Shatkin and Vidyarthi, 2014: 27; Sami 2013). My focus will be on networks associated with real estate development. In 2013-14, real estate comprised 7.8 per cent of India’s GDP (Ministry of Finance, Government of India, in IndiaStat, 2015). Housing has contributed the maximum to GDP, while real estate in the retail, hospitality and commercial sub-sectors has also grown (EY and FICCI, 2013). Land is the base of this sector. Or as a real estate baron put it in an interview with this author, ‘land is my core business; it is where I make money or lose money.’<sup>4</sup>

The burgeoning of private developers, who finance and coordinate building projects, has accompanied the boom (see Weinstein, Sami and Shatkin, 2014; Sami, 2014; Rouanet and Halbert 2015; Searle 2014 for India; and Thrift 1986; Haila 1997;

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<sup>4</sup> Developer, 20/8/2012, Kolkata

Fainstein, 2001 for further afield). Furthering this body of work, I shall show socially embedded (Granovetter, 1985; Harriss-White, 2003) and networked real estate developers' associations, business communities and well-connected families accessing and appropriating the opportunities afforded by the rescaled state's initiatives in land. At the same time, I question the idea that 'private sector actors and ad hoc networks are taking the place of a more coherent agenda, which would otherwise be implemented by a strong government' (Sami, 2014: 122); or indeed that new forms of space such as edge cities, SEZs and new town development are being 'conceived outside the state' (Shatkin and Vidyarthi, 2014: 15)<sup>5</sup>. My contention is that contemporary networks are not arising in lieu of a strong state. Instead, the state itself is networked (Castells, 2005) and implicated at every level in rendering laws and plans open-ended, and subject to multiple interpretations and interests (Roy, 2009).

#### 1.4 A multi-dimensional state in interaction with multi-dimensional space

Governance today is being 'operated in a network of political institutions that share sovereignty in various degrees and reconfigure themselves in a variable geopolitical geometry' (Castells, 2005: 15). The networked state can operate across scales, say in collaborations between international capital and sub-national governments. At the same time, networks between the state, and social and economic

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<sup>5</sup> In his writing on state rescaling, Brenner also alludes to a 'centralized administrative apparatus', with the 'essential feature of the modern state' being 'its territorially centralized organizational form' (1998: 12-14). Further, statehood implies the ensemble of social relations embodied in, and expressed through, state institutions (Brenner, 2004: 24).

entities are also horizontal and intra-scale. The pluralised (Chandhoke, 2003) institutions of the networked state straddle formal, official roles and spaces, along with more informal (Roy, 2009) and shadow (Harriss-White, 1997) dimensions. Informality flourishes in the shadows of the state, and the following pages show informal actors in land deriving their legitimacy from their knowledge of, or association with, the formal state.

In the shadows of the state, patronage and tribute are accepted, moonlighting officials eke out an extra living beyond or during formal office hours, and touts of various kinds are proximate to the state and act as gatekeepers, but don't have an official role. The constant intermingling of the official and shadow state, institutionalises even the shadows as routine. Shadows are not unique to the contemporary networked state. However, with the outsourcing of the state's traditional functions such as the provision of security in arenas as varied as large sporting events (The Telegraph, 2013), and war (The Guardian, 2009), or indeed housing as we see below, the surface area for the state's shadows has increased.

In short, the state is porous to social forces, and is hardly institutionally coherent. To believe in a strong state in theory, which may be failing only in practice, is to fall for this entity's 'triumph of concealment' (Abrams, 1988: 77). Its 'mask of legitimating illusion' disguises conflicts and connections that are incompatible with its claimed autonomy and integration (Abrams, 1988: 77). Rescaled and networked socio-spatial relations are built in, with and around a multi-dimensional state. Rescaled land policy and practice is only the start of the state-space engagement, thus justifying the layered analytical approach adopted in this paper.

### 1.5 Methodology



I end this framing discussion with the methodology deployed to study the complexities of multi-dimensional space, in interaction with the multi-dimensional state. This paper is part of a larger project that seeks to understand the governance and political economy of land in post-liberalisation India (Author 2007, 2009, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). Eight rounds of qualitative fieldwork have been conducted between 2004 and 2015. The research presented here purposively covers two sub-national States, with rather different trajectories of policy making and practice. Gujarat is reputed to welcome private investment in land, while West Bengal's land liberalisation or market-facing policies have witnessed political challenges. I investigate these directions through juxtaposition, or placing side by side, rather than systematically comparative research which would involve matching like for like (Jacob, 2015).

My sources include government documents, policy papers, legislative debates, media resources, judicial documents, NGO literature, locational maps, and property title and sale documentation. Using purposive and snowball sampling, I have interviewed a range of politicians, bureaucrats, users of land including industrial manufacturers and private infrastructure developers, farmers, fishworkers, pastoralists, and associations representing these users, NGO activists, real estate developers and their contractors, land brokers and various other middlemen in land including government touts, as also professionals such as chartered accountants, lawyers, journalists and academics. Varied sources have been used to generate open ended data, or build the argument from the bottom up (Guest et al, 2013).

Finally, my understanding of informal practices of governance, negotiations between different stakeholders in land, and the operation of real estate networks has been greatly boosted by repeat visits to the field. In the relatively closed worlds of

land deals, government policy and real estate, I have not been able to immerse myself in field sites as would be demanded by ethnographic methods. However, I have conducted repeat interviews when possible in order to generate trust and rich data. I have hung out with key informants over many hours and endless cups of tea, and have also been in e-mail contact with some of them in between visits. Owing to the sensitive nature of the data, the names of interviewees have been anonymised, though their location and the date of the interview is revealed.

## **2. State spatial rescaling**

### **2.1 Sub-national land initiatives**

Under intense global competition for investment, land and other natural resources are tools for attracting the mobile factors of capitalist production. India's land economy is in flux. As Table 1 shows, since 1990-91, over 5 million hectares have been transferred to non-agricultural uses such as industry and infrastructure. Agricultural land, wasteland, pastures and groves have seen an attendant decline in area. More than ever before, sub-national states are at the frontline of demands for land per se, and demands for the opening up of land markets, or land liberalisation, more broadly (see Sud, 2014). In the words of a retired official of the premier Indian Administrative Service (IAS), '[Companies] have played off States against each other. Take for example [a multinational]. We were trying to get them to [our State]. [They were to invest] two billion dollars... [But] the company wanted 100 million dollars from us [in the form of land, tax breaks and subsidies].'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Retired officer, 15/8/12, Chennai

Table 1

**Land use in India (in million hectares)**

|   | 1950-51 | 1980-81 | 1990-91 | 2000-01 | 2010-11 |
|---|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Total<br>geographic<br>area               | 328.73  | 328.73  | 328.73  | 328.73  | 328.73  |
| Non-<br>agricultural<br>uses              | 9.36    | 19.60   | 21.09   | 23.75   | 26.51   |
| Barren and<br>uncultivable<br>land        | 38.16   | 19.96   | 19.39   | 17.48   | 17.05   |
| Permanent<br>pastures and<br>grazing land | 6.68    | 11.99   | 11.40   | 10.66   | 10.30   |
| Miscellaneous<br>tree crops and<br>groves | 19.83   | 3.58    | 3.82    | 3.44    | 3.21    |
| Culturable<br>waste land                  | 22.94   | 16.74   | 15.00   | 13.63   | 12.66   |
| Net sown area                             | 118.75  | 140.29  | 143.00  | 141.34  | 141.58  |

Source: Agricultural statistics at a glance, 2013, Directorate of Economics and  
Statistics, Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India

With sub-national sites in focus, I turn to the land policies of Gujarat and West Bengal. This is not a mere exercise in reporting. In terms of scholarship, disproportionate attention has been paid to national policy instruments such as the colonial Land Acquisition Act of 1894, and its more recent avatars (Ghatak and Mookherjee 2014; Chakravorty 2013; Ghatak and Ghosh 2011; Narain 2009; Sarkar 2007). This Act authorises the state to appropriate private land for private industry or infrastructure development, provided the project's public utility can be established. But as Shatkin and Vidyarthi rightly point out, 'more creative and less blunt efforts' are being made to access land in India (2014: 23). The policy manoeuvrings of sub-national state actors point to some such creative efforts.

In 1995, **Gujarat** altered Section 65 of the Bombay Land Revenue Act to lift restrictions on the conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural status for industrial development. In 2005, the government decided that all government-controlled 'wasteland', could potentially be privatised<sup>7</sup>. A Government Resolution announced the intention to allot plots from among 4.6 million hectares of 'wasteland' to the corporate sector for establishing industries and to large farmers for technology-intensive and corporate farming (Government of Gujarat, 2005).

In addition to these broad policy announcements, Gujarat's government has used the national Land Acquisition Act to channel land to private companies when needed. It has also offered its own land to corporate entities. For instance in 2008, it leased 1000 acres of land controlled by the Gujarat Agricultural University to Tata

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<sup>7</sup> Wasteland is a colonial construct, covering land that does not reap revenue for the state. Common property pastures are at times included in wasteland.

Motors for a car factory. Going well below market price, the land is supposed to have cost the Tatas INR 1000 (\$16) per square metre.

At times, the government has bridged general policy pronouncements and the needs of specific companies by resorting to the misinterpretation of the spatial features of land. For instance, in 2008 it granted 268 hectares of ‘wasteland’ to Nirma Ltd. for the construction of a cement plant in Mahuva. This is in keeping with its wasteland privatisation policy discussed above. However, based on a petition from the Shri Mahuva Bandhara Khetiwadi Pariyavaran Bachav Samiti (Society for Saving Mahuva’s Weir, Agriculture and Environment), the High Court of Gujarat ordered a stay on construction. By 2011, the national Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) had withdrawn its environmental clearance to the project, citing ‘gross misprision’ on the part of the State government and the company (Ministry of Environment and Forests, 2011, Annexure 2). An expert committee had convinced the MoEF that the land in question ‘possesses all the characteristic features of [a] wetland ecosystem (fresh water body)’ (MoEF, 2011, in Bhagat-Ganguly, 2014).

Mahuva is not a typical case. Between 2008 and 2011, approximately 78,838 hectares of common property pasture, ‘waste’ and fallow land have been privatised in Gujarat (Sud, 2012; Bhagat-Ganguly, 2014). Even if there has been some local protest, there is an elite consensus over land liberalisation and the privatisation of the commons (Sud, 2012). The pro-liberalisation Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been in power almost continuously from 1995, and has spearheaded Gujarat’s land policies. The BJP stormed to power nationally in 2014, led by its prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi. Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014. By January 2015, the National Green Tribunal had overturned the 2011 decision of the MoEF regarding the Mahuva plant, again recognising the land in question as ‘waste’.

**West Bengal** is more politically constrained than Gujarat, in that till 2011, it had the world's longest serving Communist government. This government was committed to the slogan 'land to the tiller' (Mallick, 1992) and was generally averse to carrying out any sort of land liberalisation. According to a civil servant who served in the Department of Land and Land Reforms, 'to start with, the government was reluctant. But pressure [was] building up because all other States: Punjab, Gujarat, Maharashtra, even Uttarakhand, attracted crores of investment. So West Bengal had to wake up.'<sup>8</sup>

The government of Chief Minister Jyoti Basu could 'attract private capital into the State', but only in 'feeble ways.'<sup>9</sup> In the mid-1990s, it attempted to modify Section 14Q of the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955, which decrees even a private company as a *raiyat* or cultivator of land, and imposes a land ceiling limit of 7 hectares on it (Government of West Bengal, 1999). However, the central Politburo of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) obstructed any such initiatives. It was averse to 'changing land reform law[s] and being seen as anti-farmer.'<sup>10</sup> In 2012, the successor of the Communist government, the Trinamool Congress, passed the Bengal Land Reforms (Amendment) Bill. It relaxed ceiling on land ownership. Henceforth, private bio-tech parks, food parks, ports, airports, shipyards and information and communication technology projects, and mining and allied activities could build on areas over 7 hectares, but only after seeking approval from the government.

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<sup>8</sup> Interviewed 26/12/11, Kolkata

<sup>9</sup> Interviewed 26/12/11, Kolkata

<sup>10</sup> Interviewed 26/12/11, Kolkata

Governmental arbitration has made a generally market-oriented practice of universal ceiling reform, targeted towards specific private entities.

While it has been unable to liberalise the land economy in general, successive governments of West Bengal have resorted to legislation and policy pronouncements to channel land to certain categories of private capital. The West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation (WBIDC) has used the Land Acquisition Act to acquire land, develop it, and lease plots to manufacturers. For instance, 1150 acres were acquired near Kharagpur between 1991 and 1997. Out of this, 250 acres (101.2 hectares) were leased to Tata Hitachi Construction Machinery Company Ltd. (WBIDC, 2013). Leasing public land has allowed companies such as Tata Hitachi to subvert the 7 hectare ceiling limit.

Further, the Communist government's inability to reform the land regime had a significant exception in the form of townships. A real estate development of over 25 acres, comprising housing, retail and leisure space, is referred to as a township in the Indian context. Townships can include facilities such as schools, hospitals, and office blocks. From the late 1990s, West Bengal's government entered into Joint Ventures (JVs) with real estate developers such as Bengal Shracchi Housing Development Ltd. and Ambuja Neotia Realty. The *raison d'être* of townships in the JV model is the provision of social housing at subsidised rates. Developers are expected to devote 50 per cent of the land for residences for lower income groups (Sengupta 2006, 2007). In the next section, I will explore how these townships fare, as they move from paper to practice.

State spatial rescaling through land enables us to make several analytical points. One, rescaling evinces continuities with earlier periods, even as it is a site for significant change. West Bengal's legacy of 'land to the tiller' promises is a case in

point here. Two, the institutional transformation evinced by sub-national state spatial rescaling is significant across time, but also space. There is great divergence in the mechanisms being adopted by India's States such as Gujarat and West Bengal in land policies and practices today. Three, scales are contested. Even as rescaling is in evidence in the case of land, the national state asserts itself time and again. In the material above, we notice its presence in States' continued but selective use of the national Land Acquisition Act, as also the national state's powers of adjudication via central tribunals and the like. Rescaling is very much a reality in India today, but it is a 'tendential' one (Brenner, 2009).

The next section demonstrates arrangements beyond formal state scalarity in the working of India's contemporary land economy. Evidence for this section draws on field sites in West Bengal. The high-definition detail demanded by the study does not allow a discussion of multiple research locations in this word-limited format.

### **3. Multidimensionality in space and state: Real estate in West Bengal**

How is the rescaled policy of states materialised? The assertion of this section is that state rescaling of policy needs to be followed through, to the spaces in which it is received, contested, refracted and realised. I shall study this contention through the workings of the real estate sector around Kolkata, West Bengal. First, the logic of focusing on sub-national or regional real estate firms is discussed, justified by the argument that it is not just state policy that is being rescaled in India; capital has a scalar dimension too. Next, I shall show the engagement between rescaled policy and regional real estate firms taking networked spatial forms. Here, a networked state abets networks engendered by real estate firms. This rhizomatic networking encompassing formal and official, but also informal and shadow spaces, takes a



tangible form in built space. It is hardly surprising that the latter often ends up having only a tangential relationship to what was initially intended on paper.

### 3.1 Scale in West Bengal's real estate sector

Glocal real estate development has been the subject of recent scholarship on India. Halbert and Rouanet (2014) have explored the anchoring of global capital in the urban built environment of Bangalore, while Searle (2014) discusses the fraught collaborations between foreign investors and Indian real estate developers in Gurgaon. Similarly Varrel (2012) comments on the different channels through which non-resident Indians invest in real estate. While such inter-scalar, transnational collaborations are important for our understanding, so are the ones steered by domestic developers with no declared international investors.

Statistically, the contribution of real estate to India's GDP in 2009-10 was INR 552927 crores (\$83.2 billion) (IndiaStat, 2012). Compared to this, FDI in real estate that year was 13586.42 crores (\$2 billion) (Lok Sabha, 2010). While these are not exact comparators, and real estate investment figures are never fully stated or taxed (Kumar 2002), the numbers do provide a sense of proportion. Having established the importance of understanding real estate with an apparently domestic base, I shall turn to the specifically regional or sub-national character of this sector. This is certainly the case in my field sites in West Bengal.

In West Bengal, real estate developers are key beneficiaries of post-liberalisation state policies in land. Prominent among these is the waiver of ceiling for township development, and the state's provision of land for the building of townships. While data on beneficiaries of the township development scheme is not readily available, those within the business suggest that the government 'handpicked'

companies in a ‘non transparent’ manner and bestowed as much as 160 to 130 acres on some of them, in the vicinity of the capital city of Kolkata<sup>11</sup>. Township JVs with the government are perceived as ‘a cartel formed to capture land’, and a ‘magic wand’ for bypassing ceiling limits and other government regulations that restrict land use change between agriculture, industry and residential purposes<sup>12</sup>.

Interestingly, when developers name the beneficiaries of the township scheme, West Bengal-based developers dominate. Initial township tenders did attract some national and international players. However, DLF headquartered in Delhi, Puravankara based in Bangalore, and the Singapore-based Keppel Group soon exited township ventures in Kolkata and Dankuni, West Bengal. The JV between Puravankara and Keppel was then sold to a Kolkata-based consortium (Times of India, 2014). According to those within the sector, real estate is ‘a very localised business. You cannot sit in Delhi and work here... The biggest developers are local to one State, e.g. Lodha to Mumbai and Maharashtra, Unitech mostly to the National Capital Region, Uppal to South Delhi...’<sup>13</sup>. It is important to note, that my informants move between scalar categories, referring to cities, parts of cities, the region combining urban and rural areas around Delhi, and entire States like Maharashtra. However, all the references are to scales below the national. I continue with this usage, with the general classification of sub-national. I consciously do not focus on the city scale alone, as my informants in West Bengal operate in and around the capital city of Kolkata, but also in neighbouring towns and rural districts, and further afield in the towns and districts of north Bengal. Certainly, the laws that apply to

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<sup>11</sup> Developer, 22/8/12, Kolkata

<sup>12</sup> Developer, 31/8/13, Kolkata

<sup>13</sup> Developer, 20/8/2012, Kolkata

them, and the state that they engage with goes beyond urban governance, to encompass rural panchayats or village councils, and urban as well as rural land revenue offices.

Even when firms based in one State venture into another, they tend to partner with a local developer, who ‘does the government work’<sup>14</sup>. Further, the home State remains the ‘asset base’<sup>15</sup>. Or as another developer put it, ‘95 per cent of our business is real estate, 80 per cent is around Kolkata, the remaining is in Chennai, Patna and Coimbatore, but we will do away with those projects’<sup>16</sup>. There is a temporal dimension to investment decisions. According to the latter developer, in the boom years around 2006, ‘everyone wanted to go pan-India... People wanted that [their] brochure had [the] name[s] of 3-4 cities. But everyone who wanted to move pan-India has failed. Everyone wants to regain [their] regional profile. Even DLF [the country’s largest developer] are selling their all-India assets. This is happening because every government in every State is so different that [it is] better to be regional players. Now [we will] consolidate. [In places like] Coimbatore, we will have strategic alliances, keep [a] small part of [the] project, [but we will] let someone else develop [it].’<sup>17</sup>

In short, based on field research in West Bengal, I am indicating that it is not just the state, but also business capital that is being rescaled. It is possible that there are divergences from this pattern in other parts of India. Yet, scholars ought to be interrogating this trend, paying attention to scale in space, but also in politics and economics. Already, we know that in many parts of the country, dominant regional

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<sup>14</sup> Developer, 19/8/2015, Kolkata

<sup>15</sup> Developer, 31/8/2013, Kolkata

<sup>16</sup> Developer, 22/8/2012, Kolkata

<sup>17</sup> Developer, 22/8/2012, Kolkata

parties have emerged, leading to what Michelutti (2008) calls a ‘vernacularisation’ of the polity. The regional satraps of these vernacularised formations tend to collaborate most closely with sub-national business houses rather than pan-India ones.

Sub-national capital has been critical to the financing of State politicians and parties that dominate West Bengal, but also other Indian States such as Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh (Baru, 2000; Damodaran, 2008). It is no coincidence that the career graph of current Prime Minister Narendra Modi has soared along with the fortunes of Gujarati business houses such as the Adani Group (Outlook, 2014). The latter may have a national and even international presence now, much like Modi, but the core base of each is sub-national. Having argued for scalar dimensions of capital and the state, I now turn to some of the spaces of engagement of these entities.

### 3.2 Networking the sub-national state and sub-national capital

The interaction of the state and sub-national capital can be understood along vertical dynamics of scale, but also, importantly, along horizontal, networked dimensions. Here, a networked state collaborates with sub-national capital through JVs in real estate, seamlessly traversing between official and shadow spaces. The flow of information in these networked arenas exemplifies such sociospatial relations.

As indicated above, real estate insiders point to the lack of transparency in the Government of West Bengal’s township development scheme. Yet, interview data provides a peek into information sharing and collaboration between the networked JV partners. Contra the focus on technology (Castells, 2010; Easley and Kleinberg, 2010), sociality rather than ‘virtuality’ is the vanguard in such alliances. The internet and mobile telephones become props for relationships forged offline.

The sharing of information on JVs has a long social life. Real estate developers emphasise the long-term cultivation of the right government officials. This may ultimately lead to speculation-inducing tip-offs on areas being brought under township schemes, and initiate direct benefits in the form of land transfers from the state under the JV model. To illustrate, 'XYZ is currently a Secretary in the government... you need to meet the right people... he is scheduled to go to the top... I try to meet them [bureaucrats] in non-work circumstances, so that they are there when I do need them for work.'<sup>18</sup>

Another well-known developer and beneficiary of the JV scheme introduced this author to a retired government official who he referred to as 'the boss' and 'sir'. This person apparently 'conceived' the flagship JV township scheme of West Bengal, and 'knows the ins and outs of all these deals... he personally gave land in [name of township] to JV companies.'<sup>19</sup> Relationships between developers and government officials carry on well past the life of a real estate project, through the so-called 'revolving door' phenomenon (Blanes i Vidal, Draca and Fons-Rosen, 2012). The latter developer's firm employed 'the boss' as a consultant after he retired.

The reliance on government officials for ease of access to the state, resources controlled by it, and for the deciphering of bureaucratic rules, goes beyond senior officialdom. Developers who have bought land in the vicinity of JV townships in order to take advantage of escalating prices, tend to do so with the counsel of section officers, junior clerks and others familiar with the state's land machinery. A developer I interviewed accesses such officers in two ways. First, he has employed a retired clerk who had worked with the Department of Land and Land Reforms for forty

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<sup>18</sup> Developer, 20/8/2012, Kolkata

<sup>19</sup> Developer, 22/8/2012, Kolkata

years. The developer attaches the suffix of Da or elder brother to the name of the retired official. In my presence, after discussing payment for a land parcel with the ex-official, the developer also enquired about his wife who was unwell. He reassured the man that all would be taken care of, which presumably, is a reference to hospital bills. When the retired official thanked his boss and left, the developer explained ‘it is common to employ former government officials. It makes sense.’<sup>20</sup>

Second, the latter developer, like others in the field, accesses government-held data on land through touts or ‘mahuris’. He describes them as ‘our agents’ who sit in the proximity of land records offices and ‘carry out works for us’. ‘Before buying land, we can do searching for [title] records through [the] mahuri, who gets five to ten thousand rupees.’<sup>21</sup>

Networks of information and sociality between the official state, shadow state and its partners in real estate development point to intricate, long-standing relationships that weave in and out of the state and real estate firms. It is in this horizontally networked space that re-scaled land schemes between the sub-national state and regional capital begin to take shape.

### 3.3. Networked real estate capital

Just as the state and capital are networked in processes of real estate development in West Bengal, capital itself operates in networked formations. Among these are networks of family and community through which Kolkata’s real estate firms access land from the state, access information about land, and acquire land

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<sup>20</sup> Developer, 29/8/2013, Kolkata

<sup>21</sup> Developer, 29/8/2013, Kolkata

privately<sup>22</sup>. Here, family implies ties of blood and marriage, and community refers to a self-perceiving population with shared ancestors, history, memory, culture, a common geography of origin and some element of social solidarity (Smith, 1996).

Of the 125 West Bengal-based businesses registered by the Confederation of Real Estate Developers' Associations of India (CREDAI), 72 are owned by Marwaris, i.e. 57 per cent. The latter are a migrant business community, originally from Marwar in western India, long settled in various parts of the country but with a strong regional presence in West Bengal. Marwari entrepreneurs with a base in West Bengal have spawned some of the most prominent business empires in the country, including the House of Birla (see Hardgrove, 2001).

Earlier generations of my interviewees' families have pursued business in logistics, paper manufacture, automobile dealerships, heavy goods transportation, agricultural tools, engineering parts, fertiliser trade, jute packaging, etc. Moving away from the pre-liberalisation economy which privileged basic industry and agriculture, the younger generations have turned to services including healthcare, hospitality, education, and particularly real estate because it is 'the most lucrative sector in West Bengal'<sup>23</sup>, with 'low barriers of entry and experience.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Halbert and Rouanet (2014) also point to the locally embedded nature of land procurement in Indian real estate. However for them, territorial networks filter the risks that foreign investors associate with the complexity of local-regional property markets. Networks thus assist in the anchoring of global finance capital into India's urban built environment. The case I make is for networked real estate that is not instrumentally connected to international finance.

<sup>23</sup> Developer, 20/8/2012, Kolkata

<sup>24</sup> Developer, 22/12/11, Kolkata

Within CREDAI Bengal's Management Committee, 16 out of 21 members are Marwari developers, i.e. 76 per cent. Since 2011, I have made five field trips to West Bengal and interviewed scores of actors in real estate, randomly and through purposive sampling. The developers I have met have all been Marwari and have invariably referred to uncles, cousins, in-laws and family friends who are also in the business. After repeat interviews, they have been open to picking up the phone and contacting *mausa-ji* (mother's sister's husband), *jija-ji* (sister's husband), *bhaiyya* (elder brother), etc. on my behalf.

In highlighting Marwari real estate networks, my intention is not to suggest a deterministic propensity for business. Instead, following Aldrich and Zimmer I am saying that Marwaris in real estate show continuing social relations. 'Within complex networks of relationships, entrepreneurship is facilitated or constrained by linkages between aspiring entrepreneurs, resources, and opportunities' (1986: 8-9).

Like all intimate ties, there is affection, cooperation, but also jealousy and competition in the real estate families. Networked flows of information-- who is doing what, how close they are to the present government, what is their latest land deal, etc.—traverse these undulating social landscapes. Thus, while referring to his more successful and high-profile cousin, a developer said 'he is a load of shit, but has just been very lucky with government connections, for example in securing [township] JVs.'<sup>25</sup> Or, '[Marwari] developers X, Y, Z, and also my cousin, they all operate on the JV model. My cousin has gone through a bad patch, he was very tied in with the Left Front government and is now in trouble with the new government.'<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Developer, 23/8/2013, Kolkata

<sup>26</sup> Developer, 20/8/2012, Kolkata



Marwari real estate developers' social ties form the base for more productive links. Ask developers how they ventured into the business, and they are likely to talk about a family connection that provided seed capital, an apprenticeship opportunity, or access to contacts in the government or amongst building contractors, materials suppliers and the like. Networks of family and community generate trust, and facilitate risk-sharing (Dercon and Krishnan, 2000) in a high-stakes business environment. To quote,

I am a Marwari, 100 per cent. Marwaris take more risk. Networks help. Like my initial opportunities came from Marwari friends; once you are in circle of friends, you get opportunities. Initially, my friends needed someone to share risks, chip in with capital, share in [the] load of work. Their condition to include me was that I had to give maximum time to activities of [the] group. I had to contribute equal capital, and take equal amount of risk. When I come to a stage where I can offer people opportunities, I will. Like my cousin has approached me saying I want to enter this line. I have said ok, you put in money, use my contacts, we develop business. [My] cousin [is] setting up his own company, but we are collaborating on a project together. This is how I began too.<sup>27</sup>

Marwari networks in West Bengal's real estate industry traverse beyond developers, connecting the latter to top-end middlemen in land. For instance, a developer introduced me to his 'jack of all trades', a man much older than himself who he refers to as *chacha* (father's younger brother). According to the developer, his *chacha* 'deals with land aggregators [who put together viable parcels of land by aggregating smaller units involving multiple sellers], vets papers, acts as my legal guy

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<sup>27</sup> Developer, 29/8/2013, Kolkata

as well... he has been a builder in the past... but don't call him a broker, he will eat me alive.'<sup>28</sup> Clearly, there are hierarchies of status in these networks, as would be expected in any community. But that horizontally networked community acts as a 'social structure of accumulation' (Harriss-White, 2003) in the case of Bengal's real estate industry is quite apparent.

The regional, scalar sphere of real estate is crisscrossed by horizontal networks, ethnicity-based and otherwise, which may or may not intersect with each other at all times. As indicated in Part 1, networks tend to be rhizomatic. The development of townships in areas like New Town, Rajarhat and Dankuni in West Bengal has triggered a private land-buying spree. Developers who did not benefit from the JVs on government-owned land are still purchasing land in the vicinity privately, and building on it. Top-end middlemen such as the one mentioned above, tend to work with a host of other brokers to procure land around townships. These land brokers need not be Marwari, and they in turn may form further productive and social relationships with the porous state.

One such land broker, a Bengali from a backward caste tells me 'I cannot work alone, I have to work with about 10 people... if we do equal work and suppose the commission [from the main middleman linked to the land buyer] is Rupees 1 lakh, then I have to share Rupees 10,000 each with them...'. Further, on the side of the state, which brokers need for accessing data on land ownership and disputed titles, there are further networked relationships. In the words of the same land broker, 'I have relations with government *mahuri* and local politicians from the panchayat [village council] to whom we give *chanda* [donations]... The more work I give to

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<sup>28</sup> Developer, 19/12/2012, Kolkata

these people, the more *jaan pehchan* [relations] I get. Then [I] can work more regularly through them<sup>29</sup>.

The multiple social and productive networks that underpin West Bengal's real estate weave in and out of a porous state. This is the formally, institutionally rescaled state with its land liberalisation policies such as those of township development, but this is also a state that is generating further business from those township policies and the land markets they have triggered—formally, and through shadow practices. State spatial rescaling tells us a lot about land markets and governance in West Bengal. However, reading scale with more networked interpretations greatly heightens our understanding of how land deals are actualised.

## Conclusion

With land as an analytical lens, this paper has discussed state spatial rescaling in India. It has shown the land liberalisation strategies of India's sub-national states. Largely bypassing New Delhi, Gujarat and West Bengal are engaged in intense competition to attract private capital, albeit within the constraints of politics, history and institutional capacity. The lifting of restrictions on size of holdings, or sale and purchase of land, as also the more targeted handing over of land to favoured businesses illuminates the States' rescaled policies and practices.

The state scalar perspective is an important, but partial window into sociospatial relations. It tells us little, for instance, about what becomes of land deals once they are sanctioned, nor does it say why some private businesses entities are better at colluding with the state than others. Incorporating a multi-dimensional socio-spatial lens helps us answer this question. The latter part of the paper focused on the

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<sup>29</sup> Broker, 29/8/2013, Kolkata

networks that interact with state scalarity, as also the scalarity of regional capital. My case was regionally dominant real estate firms that operate around Kolkata, West Bengal, and have been impacted by land liberalisation. Networks of family and community link many of Kolkata's real estate firms to each other, and to further networks of middlemen. The networks that crisscross real estate become conduits for the transfer of information, access to the state, capital, business experience and more. These horizontal, even rhizomatic formations engage with the formal, institutionally coherent state, as also the porous state that is itself networked and pluralised. It is in this teeming space of state, scale and networks that India's land economy is animated.

It would be a truism to suggest that rescaled land policy, when received and refracted by networked real estate capital, exposes and heightens the porosity of the state. That the state is 'corrupt' (Das, 2001; Witsoe, 2012), evinces a wide gap between ideas and practices of governance (Mooij, 1999), and cannot keep to its plans (Roy, 2009), is well known. The point of this paper was not to provide yet more evidence of the social and political embeddedness of the Indian state (Evans, 1995), or of the power relations that shape it (Bardhan, 1998). Instead, the intention was to emphasise the dynamic, multi-dimensional spatial *processes* that constitute the state, and in our specific case study, its territoriality.

Overall, this paper has made several contributions to the literature on state spatial rescaling, as also land deals in India. It has provided rich empirical evidence to support scalar theorisations. It has furthered ideas of the multidimensionality of spatial relations, and added the critical aspect of multidimensionality not just in space, but also the state that cannot be ignored in a complex inquiry. The paper has brought together disciplinary and thematic literatures that are not usually juxtaposed. Apposition has allowed us to move beyond classic binaries such as, say, top-down

state or market intervention in land, and popular resistance to this from below. While the latter is no doubt a reality of the land economy in India and beyond, it is far from the only one. Diverse sociospatial relations that engender cooperation, collusion and reciprocity link a porous state to society in land, making possible the efflorescence of land deals and construction that are the edifice of contemporary India.

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