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The Political Economy of Urban Space: Land and Real Estate in Dhaka City

Kazi Nurmohammad Hossainul Haque[♦]

1. Introduction

Lefebvre (1974) argued that “space is becoming a central object of political struggle in the contemporary world – it is no longer the ‘medium’ or ‘theatre’ of socio-spatial conflicts but one of their constitutive dimensions.” So much so, he even predicted that space is turning into “the principle stake in *goal directed actions and struggles* (emphasis added) (Brenner 2000: 373).” Urban space is produced through contentious processes whether instrumented by or in combination of local, national, transnational and global actors. The production of urban space is therefore a political economy process that is necessarily linked with capitalist accumulation through spatio-temporal articulation leading to both winners and losers.

Debates about space and spatiality are not new in human geography. They have further reinforced with renewed emphasis on urban space that is at the forefront of overall space debate particularly from 1990 onwards. This conceptual trend is more than urbanist assertion due to its full pace with empirical changes. Urbanization has reached unforeseen peak throughout the world. Twenty first century is the urban century. For the first time in human history, the world has become predominantly urban. Half of world population is now living in cities and towns. The ratio is projected to reach 70 percent by 2050. While Europe, North America and Latin America became urbanized within the 1970s, Asia and Africa are now fast catching up (UN-HABITAT 2008, 2010).

From the 1990s, urban growth in developing countries is far outpacing that of developed countries. Between 2005 and 2050, urban population of the developing world is expected to be more than double from 2.3 billion to 5.3 billion. But urban population of the developed world during the same period is likely to stabilize with moderate increase from 900 million to 1.1 billion. That is why 14 out of the 19 megacities in 2007 were in the global south and all the 7 new megacities will be from that part of the world (UN-HABITAT 2008: 15, 11, 6).

Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh is world’s fastest growing megacity with an annual growth rate of 4.4 percent (UN-HABITAT 2008: 26). Dhaka’s population of 10 million (according to the 2001 census) constitutes 40 percent of the country’s total urban population (World Bank 2011: 24). Currently, one tenth of the country’s total population live in Dhaka and this ratio will increase up to 13 percent by 2015 (Jahan and Rouf 2011: 14). Dhaka is also economic, commercial, political and cultural centre of the country. Greater Dhaka metropolitan area is the chief concentration of ready made garment (RMG) sector, the main manufacturing industry and the main source of non farm employment in the country. The city is also the service sector hub with bulk of business firms, corporate offices, banks and shopping districts established here. Since

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Dhaka is the seat of government of a centralized country, as almost all government agencies are headquartered in this city. It is also at the top end for both availability and quality of health and education services in the whole country.

As a fast growing megacity with accompanying dominance of the country's urban system, Dhaka is a mega site for capitalist accumulation and resulting dispossession of the marginalized and less powerful. While this is true for many spheres of the city's political economy, land and real estate (LRE) sector stand out as the most vivid manifestation of this phenomenon. Especially when it comes to the political economic contestations that underlies (re)production of urban space. LRE is that segment of Dhaka's spatial political economy where its constituting processes of accumulation and dispossession converge most.

From 1951 Dhaka's size and population have increased 17.88 and 25.09 times respectively (Islam et al. 2009: 51). Consequently, population density of Greater Dhaka is over 7000 according to the 2001 census. So, the city as well as its fringe areas are going through perennial contestations over land use and often unscrupulous real estate development. One should not forget that LRE is also making considerable economic contribution. Both construction and real estate sectors had average 8 percent share of GDP for the period FY 2000-2009. Their collective contribution to GDP of about 16 percent was third largest after agriculture and manufacturing. During the same period, the two sectors maintained average annual growth rates of 7.6 percent and 3.6 percent respectively. The annual growth rate of construction sector was much higher than that of overall GDP that was 5.81 (BBS 2009: 443, 449). According to the Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2002-03, construction and real estate sectors collectively employed 4% of total labor force that was 1.73 million workers. In the LFS 2005-06, the ratio was 3.7% of the labor force or 1.76 million workers (BBS 2009: 80).

The current paper analyzes political economy processes of accumulation and dispossession underlying production and reproduction of urban space. Dhaka city's LRE has been selected as the case study for this research. The fieldwork was conducted in Dhaka city and some of its fringe areas during October 2011-March 2012. The data collection methods were literature review, qualitative interviews, ethnographic observations and newspaper scanning. Twenty in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders of Dhaka's urban space. They include planners, geographers, public officials, lawyers, environmental activists, real estate executives, land agents, land owners, property owners and persons affected by land acquisition/grabbing.

2. The Political Economy of Urban Space

The political economy premise in conceptualizing urban spatiality was introduced by Castells (1977), a development that is identified by Walton (1993: 302) as the emergence of political economy paradigm in urban sociology. Then Harvey (1973, 1978 and 1985) further articulated this into a political economy approach to urban socio-spatial relations.

Urban as a connotation of labor power

Castells (1977: 115) initially considers city as the projection of society on space in his conceptualization of urban space. Then he continues, "space is a material product, in relation to other material elements – among others, men, who themselves enter into particular social relations, which give to space (and to the other elements of the combination) a form, a function, a social signification." In natural progression from such conceptualization of space as a component of broader social theory, Castells (1977: 237, 236) defines urban system as "specific articulation of the instances of a social structure within a (spatial) unit of the reproduction of labour power." He sums up 'urban' and 'urban space' respectively as a connotation of labor power reproduction process and a manifestation of its unit of articulation.

Accumulation by dispossession

Harvey (2003a) introduced the concept of 'accumulation by dispossession' that re-conceptualized Karl Marx's concept of primitive accumulation. Karl Marx in his classic *Capital* (volume 1) describes primitive accumulation as a set of processes that take place at the formative stage of capitalism. The long list includes, as summarized by Harvey (2003: 145), commodification and privatization of land and resulting forceful expulsion of peasant populations, conversion of common and collective property rights exclusively into private property rights, commodification of labor power, suppression of indigenous forms of production and consumption, colonial and imperial appropriation of assets and natural resources, monetization of exchange, taxation and land, slave trade, national debt and credit system.

But Harvey (2003: 145) argued that all the above features of primitive accumulation mentioned by Karl Marx "have remained powerfully present within capitalism's historical geography up until now." In other words, accumulation may begin with emergence of capitalism but doesn't end there. Rather predation, fraud and violence that are characteristic of primitive or original accumulation persist as means of capitalist development. To capture this reality of capitalism, Harvey (2003a) contextualized primitive accumulation in current practice of capitalism as accumulation by dispossession.

Harvey (2003b) then showed accumulation by dispossession in urbanization process that is obstructing common peoples' right to the city. Under capitalist urbanization through accumulation by dispossession, the city embodies individual command of resources at the expense of collective rights of common city dwellers. Urbanization is thus instrumental of capital accumulation and surplus absorption by capitalist elite while "the exercise of a collective power over the process of urbanization" is reversed.

Use value and exchange value

But the adoption of the political economy paradigm goes beyond Marxian urban thinking espoused by Harvey and others. This happened effectively with Logan and Molotch

(1987) who analyzed social context in which urban space is 'used' and 'exchanged' as a commodity underpinned by interest coalitions of individuals and groups. Deriving the distinction between use and exchange values from Marx's original formulation as clarified in Harvey (1973), Logan and Molotch (1987: 2) explored conflicts between these values in cities, their forms and their management. These values also have separate constituencies in urban space. For example, city residents in general prefer the 'use value' of space as residence or production site while businesses prefer the 'exchange value' accrued from buying, selling or renting of commoditized space. Simultaneous push for the two goals (use value and exchange value) is "inherently contradictory and a continuing source of tension, conflict and irrational settlements." This conflict is also at the heart of shaping the city, its population distribution and even the political dynamics, they further argue.

3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual foundation of this paper mainly builds on Harvey (1978, 1985, 2003a and 2003b) and to a lesser extent on Logan and Molotch (1987). The paper analyzes accumulation by dispossession as constituent of capitalist urbanization process. It tries to map the mutually constitutive processes of accumulation and dispossession. Each process is identified with one stakeholder of urban space as its main protagonist: accumulation with capitalist political economic elite and dispossession with working class and socio-spatially marginalized peoples. The research argues that accumulation and dispossession are mutually constitutive as a hierarchical chain where accumulation results dispossession. The research looked into urban land and real estate sector as proxy of urban space. But in doing so, it examined accumulation and dispossession processes in relation to urban land and real estate. Although the political economy of urban land and real estate is the paper's central problematique instead of broader capitalist spatialisation, the former is considered very much linked with the latter.

2. The Process of Accumulation

The concept of capital accumulation as introduced by Marx (1967 in Harvey 1978: 104) stipulates capture of surplus value by capitalists "from the organisation of cooperation and division of labour within the work process or by the application of fixed capital." Harvey (1978: 106) classifies Marx's fixed capital into two types: one type is enclosed within the production process and another type functions as physical framework or built environment of production. While LRE is a kind of fixed capital, it is also a commodity that generates surplus value. In one hand, it shares 'peculiarities' of fixed capital and on the other hand, it is unlike most other commodities.

As fixed capital, "(LRE) is immobile in the sense that the value incorporated in it cannot be moved without being destroyed. (This) can be produced in the normal course of capitalist commodity production but used as aids to the production process rather than as direct raw material inputs (Harvey 1978: 106)." As commodity, LRE holds exchange values in the form of rent that can be source of surpluses for capitalists. Land is a natural endowment not produced as most other commodities. Exchange value of natural land may increase with location variation or through value addition in the forms of

further servicing (i.e. plotting, road network and drainage facility) and construction of real estate.

As observed by Logan and Molotch (1987: 23), "land markets are inherently monopolistic, providing owners, as a class, complete control over the total commodity supply. They also find the LRE market "essentially secondhand" in nature where "buildings and land parcels are sold and resold, rented and re-rented...neither utility nor market price need decrease through continuous use." They further observed partnering between government establishment and LRE entrepreneurs over generation and distribution of rent. They argued that "rents are made possible in the first place through government stipulations regarding rights and privileges among market participants (for example, deeds, leases and sales contracts) and (w)ithout such government "regulation" there could be no exchange of place at all."

LRE has become crucial for capitalist accumulation in Dhaka city. It is instrumental in capital accumulation through multiple channels both directly and indirectly. Rents as exchange values are accrued directly from selling of land parcels, residential flats and office/shop spaces; renting out houses, offices and shops; and, sub-sectoral service provision like architectural design, planning, structural engineering, electrical wiring, gas and water engineering, litigation and legal counseling, land documentation etc.

One channel of indirect rent is facilitating LRE ventures in regular and irregular ways i.e. working as intermediaries in land purchase, throwing political and social clout behind parties of disputed land claims, preparing forged land documents particularly in cases of land grabbing, so on and so forth. Another channel of indirect rent is 'rent-seeking' from governance arrangements pertaining to land acquisition, leasing or allotting of public or *khas* land, construction authorization, development control, execution of land use, building and environmental laws, planning restrictions and permissions for utility connections. But rent from LRE whether direct or indirect is not exchange value alone. It is sometimes also the land itself as fixed capital that might be converted to commodity later on with or without value addition. A land or property can also provide indirect rent as bank collateral.

The capital accumulation channels in Dhaka's LRE sector as described above is featured in a complex interlinked processes driven by a network of stakeholders. The network of stakeholders is a hierarchical complex that is representative of neo patrimonial and class based power structure of the country's political economy. The principal stakeholder is the political economic elite who are the main protagonist of LRE accumulation. The remaining stakeholders are subordinate to them in one way or another. The latter's accumulation is residue of or dependent on the political economic elite's accumulation.

The political economic elite is constitutive of LRE entrepreneurs, real estate firms, land developers, Read Estate and Housing Association of Bangladesh (REHAB), Bangladesh Land Developers Association (BLDA), members of parliament (MPs), RAJUK, government high officials, local political leaders, big land owners, big property owners, socially and culturally eminent persons, business people, otherwise well connected persons and DCC. But this exhaustive list should be subject to two qualifiers. First, there is wider power asymmetry even among different segments of the political economic elite. The power

balance disproportionately tilts towards a group of 'oligarchs' who are heading some of the largest business conglomerates with big stakes in LRE specially land development.¹ They are well connected with and hold influence over Housing and Public Works Minister, Chairman of RAJUK and other key segments of the political economic elite. The current number of REHAB members is 320 but 95% of total market share is held by only 15 companies (Islam 2008: III). Secondly, there is considerable overlapping among many of the segments. Majority of our MPs are business people and there are many LRE entrepreneurs among them. Influential local political leaders are sometimes big land and property owners of respective parts of the city. Ward councilors of DCC are generally the top local leaders of political parties.

The accumulation strategies of the political economic elite and their subordinates are broadly two fold: either to maximize rent from an existing channel by improving work process and/or by manipulations and speculations or to open up a new channel of accumulation that present better rent prospects. Both sets of strategies are executed through penetration and incorporation of governance arrangements in favour of capital accumulation by the political economic elite and their subordinates.

With limited supply of land and housing units in Dhaka city and abundance of cheap labor, scope of rent maximization is already high. According to one industry insider, "profit is huge." When asked how he gives example of a small project of one real estate developer. It constructed an apartment on a 5 *katha* land on the basis of 50-50 partnership with the land owner. A 6 storied building with 3 flats in each floor, 18 flats in total. Even after only 9 flats or 50% of the project for sale by the developer (after giving the other 9 to the land owner), there was sufficient rent for him. The total expense was not more than 60% of the cost of the 9 flats or half of the total project. So there was straight 40% profit. This is withstanding the rising cost of raw materials. A market survey in 2003 by one leading real estate firm gave average selling price of apartment from lowest 1200 taka per square feet in Mirpur area to highest 2500 taka per square feet in Dhanmondi area. The same survey also gave land value (location wise) that started from 1667 taka per square feet and reached up to 3472 taka per square feet (Seraj and Afrin 2003: 103). Now after about a decade even mere inflation adjustment of the above figures would give shocking price tags. Anecdotal evidence suggests that land value in Gulshan Avenue that is evolving into the new central business district (CBD) of the city has reached 10-12 *crore* taka per *katha* that is even higher than New York City.

Scope of accumulation widens significantly due to manipulations. LRE is a sector where relevant governance arrangements are often violated and randomly not complied with. This is true for new low profile firms and high profile established firms alike. Although exceptions are always there but they just reinforce the norm.

¹ Two of the largest business conglomerates in the country have big stakes in LRE. Both of the business groups have numerous housing and land development projects in and around Dhaka city. There have been allegations against many of these projects for land grabbing, contract violation and other forms of manipulations. They are said to be among major donors of political parties and to have strong influence over concerned ministries of GOB.

Let us look at the well researched case of Japan Garden City (JGC), a high rise apartment complex in the city's Mohammadpur area. The total land size of JGC is 9.78 acres that houses 27 16-storied apartment buildings, a hospital and a shopping complex. The real estate developer of JGC claims in its brochure that only 43 percent of the total land is used for residential and commercial purposes while the remaining 57 percent are used for beautification. An utter misinformation since the flats and other facilities of JGC together can accommodate 10,000 people leading to a gross density of 1,020 persons per acre that is over three times the UN-HABITAT standard of 300 persons per acre. While the project's layout in the brochure shows playground, lake, garden and fountain at the centre of project area, none of them actually exist. All these are gross violations of RAJUK planning standards laid out in Land Development Rules for Private Housing 2004 (Mahmud 2007: 49-50). A recent newspaper report accused some of the tallest new buildings of the city of lacking approval, going 2-3 times beyond approved height and violating building code. These buildings are: 18-storey Premier Square, 22-storey Jabbar Tower, 25-storey Doreen Tower, 15-storey Bulu's Tower and 15-storey Natore Tower (Ali 2011).

But accumulation through contract violation with real estate clients is even more rampant and less noticed. Here's an apartment buyer's experience with an well established and respected LRE industry leader. He booked a flat with the company that was delivered about 4 years after the scheduled date. The flat was not even fully furnished and various fittings used there were of exceptionally bad quality. After all that the buyer was fined 5,000 taka for delaying only 3 days in making payments for the flat.

While above examples generally manifest rent maximizing through existing accumulation channels, new accumulation channels are also opening up. Land grabbing is dominant manifestation of the latter. While this is happening all over Dhaka city, intensity is highest in urban fringes, river banks, other water bodies, low lying areas, wet lands and flood flow zones.

Both print and electronic media are full of reports about wanton land grabbing by LRE stakeholders. A few years back a RAJUK official was quoted in media that implementation of the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) for the city will require reclamation of 3,000 acres of land illegally occupied by real estate companies. He pointed out that several real estate companies have already built high-rise apartments and sold several hundred plots on the occupied land (Rahman 2010). Recently, parliamentary standing committee on land ministry accused a leading LRE firm of grabbing 40 acres of government land. Dhaka city was once crisscrossed by 54 canals (locally known as *khals*) that acted as natural drainage channels by interconnecting the four surrounding rivers. It recently came out from a government investigation that 43 of these canals were occupied and filled up through registering them as properties of different individuals and GOs through different land surveys, particularly the Dhaka City Survey 1995-2009. While 13 canals can still be reclaimed, the rest have been developed beyond scope of reclamation (Ahsan 2011).

The rivers surrounding Dhaka are also shrinking due to land grabbing. A survey of Dhaka's riverbanks by Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) discovered that bank of the Buriganga River stretching up to 100 kilometres were illegally occupied

by 500 land grabbers. It also identified 4,021 illegal structures over 70 kilometres of land along the rivers Buriganga, Turag and Balu (Khan 2010). Fresh land grabbing is reducing Turag River into a canal observed one recent newspaper report (The Daily Star 2011). Around the same time, there was heated public criticism about a LRE's project for filling up of Balu River and illegally occupying neighbouring lands. There was newspaper report of LRE's continuous river filling and land grabbing even after a government order for the project's closure following a 50 *lakh* taka fine and seizing of five cranes and eight dump trucks of the firm in a Department of Environment (DOE) drive. The firm was even expelled by RAJUK from REHAB fair while caught selling plots of the closed down project (Bangla News 2011). In June 2011, the High Court declared a total of 77 private housing projects illegal for violations of master plan, wetland and environment conservation laws and private housing development rules (Ali 2011).

Such accumulation through manipulation can hardly take place without incorporation of governance arrangements. A case study of RAJUK will be most illustrative since it is responsible for many of the governance arrangements concerning LRE. RAJUK is the lead government organization (GO) in charge of Dhaka's planning, development and development control. Therefore, the political economic elite were always keen on subordinating RAJUK for their accumulation purposes.

RAJUK is instrumental in capital accumulation from LRE both in terms of rent maximizing from existing accumulation channels and opening up of newer channels. There is collusive (voluntary, induced by bribe) or enforced (involuntary, under political pressure) subordination RAJUK officials (not all though) by powerful LRE stakeholders that constrain proper regulatory oversight of the sector. So, manipulations through non compliance with or violation of laws and policies like building code, housing development rules, construction rules, real estate act and metropolitan development plan continue unabated. While RAJUK officials (not all but many) are facilitating LRE stakeholders' accumulation in one hand, they themselves are also accumulating from their development control and land development responsibilities. There is widespread allegation of 'rent-seeking' by RAJUK officials from building plan approval, land use clearance and land allocation.

RAJUK enjoys almost monopoly in opening up new accumulation channel in LRE sector in the form of making new land available for development. Land development is one of the three core functions of RAJUK and the most important one with respect to opening up new accumulation channel for the political economic elite. Ever since RAJUK (as DIT) was established in 1956 it has been main actor of Dhaka city's urbanization. Moreover, prior to the emergence of private LRE enterprises in 1990s, RAJUK was the sole land developer in the city. But even after private sector took lead in LRE, RAJUK continues to be prominent in land development. Let us see why and how.

RAJUK is simultaneously planning authority, regulatory body and LRE firm. Such an organizational design that is creating 'conflict of interest' is also doing 'market distortion' in LRE sector. Institutionally, RAJUK thus emerge as the most powerful LRE firm that can set market rules (to its advantage), a privilege that none of its competitors enjoy. LRE firms in general have to purchase (or grab) land for development at significant monetary and/or other cost. But RAJUK can have land for free or at minimal price

through land acquisition. Government can apply such laws as Land Acquisition and Compensation Act 1978 and The Acquisition and Requisition of Immovable Property Ordinance 1982 to acquire lands which RAJUK can develop and distribute. Although this privileged position of RAJUK may not be accepted by most of LRE firms and common people yet for this very reason it is precious to the political economic elite. This has made their accumulation easier since control over RAJUK alone can now lead to privileged (hence very cheap) availability of land. That is why, we can assume, RAJUK was converted into an 'authority' from a 'trust' in 1987 by the then authoritarian President Ershad that brought more executive control over it and fundamentally restructured its board by removal of civil society representatives and their replacement with bureaucrats. These purposive reforms were not revoked by the latter democratic regimes.

The conflict of interest and market distortion allegations withstanding many observers are not necessarily against RAJUK's existence as an LRE firm. They rightly argue that market rates of housing and land are often beyond purchasing powers of middle class and working class city dweller. Hence, RAJUK as a not for profit public concern can build public housing and develop land at such rates affordable to those groups of people. But that is not what RAJUK is generally doing although solving housing shortages of middle and working class peoples is a frequent excuse of its LRE projects.

While stating objectives of *Jhilmil* Residential Area, *Purbachal* Model Town and *Uttara* Residential Area (3rd Phase) projects, RAJUK stress on reducing acute problem of housing by creating opportunity of residence for city dwellers. These projects can be interpreted as for middle and working class city dwellers since their housing problem is most acute. However, no specific mention of these groups is found in project descriptions except in case of *Jhilmil*. Background description of the project claims that "(t)here will be about 1800 residential plots and 9,500 apartments for lower and middle income groups with all necessary infrastructure and urban services."

But review of plot allotment results of *Purbachal* and *Uttara* (3rd phase) projects would rather reaffirm that housing solutions for middle and working classes are not in RAJUK priorities. The following table gives a list of categories in plot allotment along with respective plot sizes and numbers of plots allotted in the above two projects.

	Purbachal New Town		Uttara Residential Area (3rd Phase)	
Sl. No.	Category (and plot sizes)	Total nos. of allotment (and as per plot size)	Category (and plot sizes)	Total nos. of allotment (and as per plot size)
1	<i>Adibashi</i> (3 <i>Katha</i>)	1034	-	-
2	Affected (unknown)	700	-	-
3	Armed Forces (3, 5, 7.5 and 10 <i>Katha</i>)	114 (44, 50, 14 and 6)	Armed Forces (3 and 5 <i>Katha</i>)	(8 and 4)

4	Artist ² (3, 5, 7.5 and 10 <i>Katha</i>)	151 (41, 80, 21 and 9)	Artist ³ (3 and 5 <i>Katha</i>)	16 (11 and 5)
5	Autonomous (3, 5 and 7.5)	654 (261, 308 and 85)	Autonomous (3 and 5 <i>Katha</i>)	69 (47 and 22)
6	Businessman & Industrialist (3, 5, 7.5 and 10 <i>Katha</i>)	472 (176, 213, 57 and 26)	Businessman & Industrialist (3 and 5 <i>Katha</i>)	45 (31 and 14)
7	Expatriate (3, 5, 7.5 and 10 <i>Katha</i>)	591 (220, 267, 72 and 32)	Expatriate (3 and 5 <i>Katha</i>)	57 (39 and 18)
8	Freedom Fighter (3, 5, 7.5 and 10 <i>Katha</i>)	296 (110, 134, 36 and 16)	Freedom Fighter (3 and 5 <i>Katha</i>)	28 (19 and 9)
9	Government (3, 5, 7.5 and 10 <i>Katha</i>)	1632 (610, 733, 200 and 89)	Government (3 and 5)	162 (111 and 51)
10	Journalist (3, 5, 7.5 and 10 <i>Katha</i>)	55 (20, 25, 7 and 3)	Journalist (3 and 5 <i>Katha</i>)	5 (3 and 2)
11	Justice (7.5 and 10 <i>Katha</i>)	14 (13 and 1)	Justice (5 <i>Katha</i>)	10
12	Lawyer (3, 5, 7.5 and 10 <i>Katha</i>)	110 (40, 50, 14 and 6)	Lawyer (3 and 5 <i>Katha</i>)	10 (7 and 3)
13	MP ⁴ (5, 7.5 and 10 <i>Katha</i>)	57 (1, 2 and 54)	MP ⁵ (5 <i>Katha</i>)	83
14	Others (3, 5, 7.5 and 10 <i>Katha</i>)	181 (92, 64, 17 and 8)		
15	Private Service (3, 5, 7.5 and 10 <i>Katha</i>)	591 (220, 267, 72 and 32)	Private Service (3 and 5 <i>Katha</i>)	57 (39 and 18)
16	Remaining (3, 5, 7.5 and 10 <i>Katha</i>)	207 (85, 85, 25 and 12)	Remaining (3 and 5 <i>Katha</i>)	26 (17 and 9)
17	Retired (3, 5, 7.5 and 10 <i>Katha</i>)	57 (21, 26, 7 and 3)	Retired (3 and 5 <i>Katha</i>)	4 (3 and 1)

Source: Own accounting from Plot Allotment Results 2009 available at RAJUK website

² This category also includes litterateurs and sportspersons.

³ Ibid.

⁴ This category also includes minister, minister of state, deputy minister and other equivalent positions.

⁵ Ibid.

Even a cursory look at this comparative table will reveal a number of things. The plot allotment categories are mainly on the basis of professional groups. Most of these professionals (i.e. Armed Forces, Businessman, Industrialist, Government, Justice and MP) belong to the political economic elite. Some of them like Expatriate and Lawyer are generally affluent sections of society with higher social status. Many other professional groups like Artist, Freedom Fighter, Journalist and Private Service may or may not be affluent but still enjoy high social status. In case of *Purbachal*, there are two categories named *Adibashi* (original inhabitants) and Affected. The first one includes people who were living in these lands before their acquisition by RAJUK and other one includes people who were somehow affected by the project. The highest 24% of *Purbachal* plots are allotted to Government category followed by 15% plots for *Adibashi* category. Land plots of *Purbachal* are of four sizes: 3, 5, 7.5 and 10 *katha*. All the *Adibashi* plots are 3 *katha*. But majority 733 Government plots are of 5 *katha* and 89 of them are of largest 10 *katha* size. The other large allocations of plots are 10% for Affected, 9% for Autonomous and 8% each for Private Service and Expatriate categories. With history of corruption and political subservience of RAJUK, it is doubtful whether all of those who received plots in *Adibashi* and Affected categories are truly *adibashi* and affected peoples.

3. The Process of Dispossession

Capitalist accumulation process with its contradictions cannot take place without a simultaneous process of dispossession. This is particularly true for Dhaka city's LRE sector amid population pressures, corresponding crises of residential and other spaces, and subordination of concerned governance arrangements to capitalist accumulation. Harvey's (1978) earlier reading of Marx found that "accumulation cannot be isolated from class struggle." But while capital's domination of labor results into accumulation for the former it simultaneously causes dispossession for the latter. This capitalist contradiction in fact gives momentum to class struggle between the capital owning and associated classes and the working class. So, Harvey (2003a) was in a way correcting his reading of Marx when he conceived 'accumulation by dispossession.'

Harvey's accumulation by dispossession dictum is most appropriate in understanding capitalist accumulation of and through land as evident from Makki and Geisler (2011), Holt-Gimenez (2011) and Mishra (2011). Makki and Geisler (2011: 3-4) have done interesting analysis by linking 'enclosure' of early capitalist development in England and state acquisition of land for commercial agriculture with foreign investment in today's Ethiopia. They draw upon Karl Marx and Kal Polanyi to inform that through enclosures "common lands were integrated into market relationships, the hallmark of which was the displacement of commoners and their gradual conversion to wage labour." Land was thus refashioned from natural endowment into a commodity undermining moral economies. In little over two decades during late 18th and early 19th centuries, British Parliament granted 5,286 private enclosures that redistributed 7 million acres or about 21 percent of England's surface area.

Similarly, the capital accumulation from LRE sector's expansion in Dhaka city and resulting dispossession of farmers, poor and other marginalized sections of society may also remind enclosures of early capitalist development. The lands in this case are

common (for example, *khas* land⁶, low lying areas, water bodies and river banks) as well as private agricultural and/or residential land holdings. Imperial enclosures have been replaced by land acquisition in favour of the political economic elite by RAJUK and land grabbing (or land purchase through strong arm techniques) by LRE organizations.

Logan and Molotch (1987: 23) observed that land owners as a class enjoys complete control over the total supply of land commodity. But this is not necessarily true about all land owners especially those who are at the bottom of the country's capitalist social structure. It has become rather difficult for one to keep hold over one's own land in Dhaka city particularly in its fringe areas if s/he is a poor farmer or a middle or lower middle class property owner. But taking away the only piece of land a poor farmer may have is synonymous of death sentence for the family as this land might be their only source of livelihood. Similarly, a middle or lower middle class land owner in the urban fringe is likely to have invested his whole life's savings to buy that small piece of land with a dream of building own house. The high land price within the city that is beyond middle or working class peoples' reach ultimately drove him to the city's fringe. Now if he has to give up this property, he may never be able to afford another.

It is sometimes argued that land acquisition by government is necessary for urban development. This argument can be made over land acquisition for public projects like Jamuna Bridge that benefits large sections of population. But such argument cannot be made about land acquisition from poorer and weaker sections of population for addressing housing demands and property greed of different powerful actors. Land acquisition in case of RAJUK is often a class instrument of accumulation for powerful sections of society at the cost of working class and marginalized peoples' dispossession. Because limitations in the existing land acquisition laws and loopholes in their implementation create a situation where land acquisition is often not accompanied by appropriate compensation and rehabilitation packages.

This is the case with most of the land acquisitions by RAJUK over last 2-3 decades. *Purbachal* can be a case to the point. RAJUK claims it as the "biggest planned township in the country" that comprises of about 6,150 acres of land located in the north eastern fringe of Dhaka city in between the *Shitalakhya* and the Balu rivers at Rupganj of Narayanganj district and Kaliganj of Gazipur district. Purbachal will have 26,000 residential plots of different sizes and 62,000 apartments with all necessary infrastructure and urban facilities. But this project took shape at the cost of several thousand agricultural households' loss of rich agricultural land and farming livelihoods. The land acquisition drive for Purbachal affected about 5-6 thousand such families. There was neither any compensation for their lands nor any rehabilitation program. Each affected family has been promised to get a 3 *katha* plot once that is ready. But in the meantime they are displaced and their livelihoods are in disarray. Within short span of few months, they have been relegated into landless and homeless peoples from self-sustaining farmers and respected land owners.

But dispossession of poor and marginalized due to Dhaka's urban expansion is not confined to *Purbachal*. The same story is being repeated in other such satellite township

⁶ Public lands

projects as *Jhilmil*, Manikganj and Keraniganj. It is to be noted that dispossession is also caused by private housing and land development projects in around Dhaka. Private LRE firms may not have the privilege and coercive powers of state land acquisition. But they have stronger financial foundation and they can secure political backing. These enable them to subordinate relevant governance arrangements and deploy strong arm techniques in securing land in their own terms. Some other private LRE actors are also in such practices other than the LRE firms. Among the most influential ones are defense officers' and civil service housing associations. Again sometimes there is overlapping between LRE firms and other private LRE actors.

What is happening in a large rural fringe of Dhaka over last few years is illustrative of above phenomena. The area stretches from some villages at Rugganj and Kayetpara upazillas of Narayanganj up to Ashkona at Dakkhinkhan of Dhaka city. These villages are adjacent to Purbachal project but not part of it. But the proximity to Purbachal has made them lucrative to private LRE firms/actors and hence targets of land grabbing and forced land purchase. As discussed earlier, one LRE firm Ashian City has been widely reported in media for its land grabbing and forced land purchases in that area. The strong arm techniques applied by the firm are often not unique rather typical of the country's LRE sector. One resident of Barua village at Ashkona, Dakkhinkhan alleged that the owner of a LRE initially bought 5 *bigha* land in that village. Later he laid claim to 500 *bigha* land and started land development work there (The Daily Sun 2011). Armed goons allegedly deployed by the firm violently attacked affected villagers from time to time. They beat them, shot at them, made death threats and even ran bulldozer over them. The armed goons also attacked journalists and prevented them from taking interviews and photographs when they went to those villages for reporting about land grabbing. But the firm is being able to continue such activities despite DoE clamp down and widespread protest by the local residents.

Prior to LRE's move into the scene, groups of defense officials and Army were trying to get land in Ruggani to build housing for them. They were also resorting to strong arm techniques since local residents were not interested to sell their land. Initially some land was bought and pressure was created upon other land owners for selling land. Even some army camps were set up to facilitate the whole process. Tension mounted between army and the villagers. Then on the fateful day of 23 October 2010, about 10 thousand people from 40 affected villages clashed with security forces (police, RAB and Army) and local activists of a political party. Several villagers died or got injured from police firing. A handful of them also went missing. The agitated villagers burned down the army camp and beat some local leaders of ruling party and police officials. Finally, Army airlifted all its deployed personnel from the remaining camps by helicopter and land purchase drive was apparently given up. Recently, an environmental activist with sources in LRE industry informed that the groups of defense officials who were trying to get land in Rugganj have joined hands with LRE firm now. In this connection, a popular movie star has been appointed by the firm as a sort of their brand ambassador.

Land and property dispossession in Dhaka is sometimes not unique to the city's poor and sociospatially marginalized. This is also happening to others who are not poor or marginalized but who are in the way of some political economic elite's accumulation and who can't match their powers. This is exactly the case with the owners of Zindabazar

Eco Park at Rupganj. The Eco Park is on an area of 150 *bigha* that is owned by a group of five friends who pooled personal land properties to establish it. They kept the natural habitat of plants, animals and birds of the area untouched and unharmed. Thus the park has become a sanctuary for bird and animal species from all over the surrounding areas. It has already become an attraction to the city dwellers of Dhaka and Narayanganj who are regularly turning up in huge numbers especially in the weekends. The park is in fact an oasis of green amid concrete jungles to these city dwellers. But Zindabazar's area has fallen under RAJUK's land acquisition for *Purbachal*. The owners are frantically trying to stop RAJUK with support of local people, well wishers and environmental movements. Currently, there is a stay order from court for 3 months. But once that is over and if a new stay order cannot be secured, the fate of the park will be uncertain. So far RAJUK is refusing all sane arguments including the environmental ones to exclude the park from its planned land acquisition. In the meantime, the owners are being continuously harassed by RAJUK. They have also been approached by a RAJUK high official with a proposal of giving him 10 *bigha* land from the park in exchange of being excluded from land acquisition. There is even proposal from RAJUK side to give the park to a leading LRE Group that is a big player in LRE sector. But when the owners of Zindabazar argued instead to lease them the land, RAJUK refused.

Conclusion

With rapid expansion of urbanization in densely populated countries like Bangladesh, political struggle over urban space as indicated by Lefebvre (1974) has become widespread and more intensified. Thus Dhaka city's Land and Real Estate (LRE) sector as a proxy of urban space manifest contentious process of capitalist accumulation at the behest of the political economic elite and consequent dispossession of poor, working class, lower middle class and other socio-spatially marginalized peoples. LRE therefore has become the new theatre of "accumulation by dispossession" particularly amid space scarcity and housing crisis of emerging mega cities as Dhaka.

Residential and commercial spaces of Dhaka city being commodified and re-commodified as LRE products provide powerful actors and their subordinates with accumulation channels. Lands and properties in Bangladesh are underlined by various structural complexities: economic, social, political, cultural and legal. Land and property ownership is worth high monetary value that is ever increasing and of high utility for exchange and investment. But land and property ownership also has externalities like social status, cultural significance and political clout. Land and property are often at centres of legal and social disputes. While land and property ownership is a predicator of social power in Bangladesh, the level of this power is also a factor in the extent of that ownership. Hence, the scrambles for LRE where powerful sections of society are gaining while the less powerful and powerless sections are losing out.

Thus, the processes of accumulation and dispossession characteristics of Dhaka city's LRE sector bear features of accumulation by dispossession proposed by Harvey (2003a). There is commodification of land at scales, which was unforeseen in Bangladesh prior to the 1990s gave way to LRE sector's emergence as an economic mainstay. LRE became a major mode of formation, accumulation and investment of capital. The capital formed, accumulated and invested is overwhelmingly in private sector. But the private capital as

represented by real estate firms and land developers in private sector was generally facilitated by public actors like Housing and Public Works Ministry and RAJUK. This public facilitation of private accumulation is sometimes direct and sometimes indirect. It is direct in the forms of providing supportive legal framework and subordination of governance arrangements to capitalist interests. It is indirect mainly in the form of supporting individual asset accumulation of certain segments of political economic elite who are closer to or part of the governing political regime. Large chunks of urban space that includes cultivable land, open space and water bodies are being converted into LRE units that can be exchanged and invested for accumulation. Subordination of governance arrangements are allowing loopholes through which public and private land can be grabbed, private land can be purchased through force or be confiscated, and, water bodies like rivers and canals can be encroached upon. With physical growth of the city and worsening of its housing crisis, urban space is predominantly used for capital and asset accumulation of powerful actors. While the remaining city dwellers are being driven from one fringe to another in a never ending dynamics of socio-spatial marginalization. Thus, the situation demands action from policy actors and city planners and also definitely should come on the agenda of the politicians, who cannot ignore the plight of the dispossessed for too long.

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