

“Land Is the New Sugar”: A Review of Sai Balakrishnan’s *Shareholder Cities*

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Reviewed: Sai Balakrishnan, *Shareholder Cities: Land Transformations Along Urban Corridors in India*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019.

Shareholder Cities argues that India’s urban corridors are driven by complex negotiations, transformations, and power struggles, often led by the class and caste groups who control agrarian capital in urbanizing regions.

At the start of her book *Shareholder Cities*, Sai Balakrishnan quickly and convincingly dismisses popular conceptions of present-day India as a collision of superhighways and bullock carts, “modern, urban, Westernized India, and the primitive, rural, superstitious India” (p. 1). Such conceptions are all too common in Western mainstream media, but are also found even in India itself. Countering such views, Balakrishnan’s book examines the increasingly blurry urban–rural divide in India and traces the complex ways that new urbanization projects in India “accrete on former agricultural modernization programs” (p. 2).

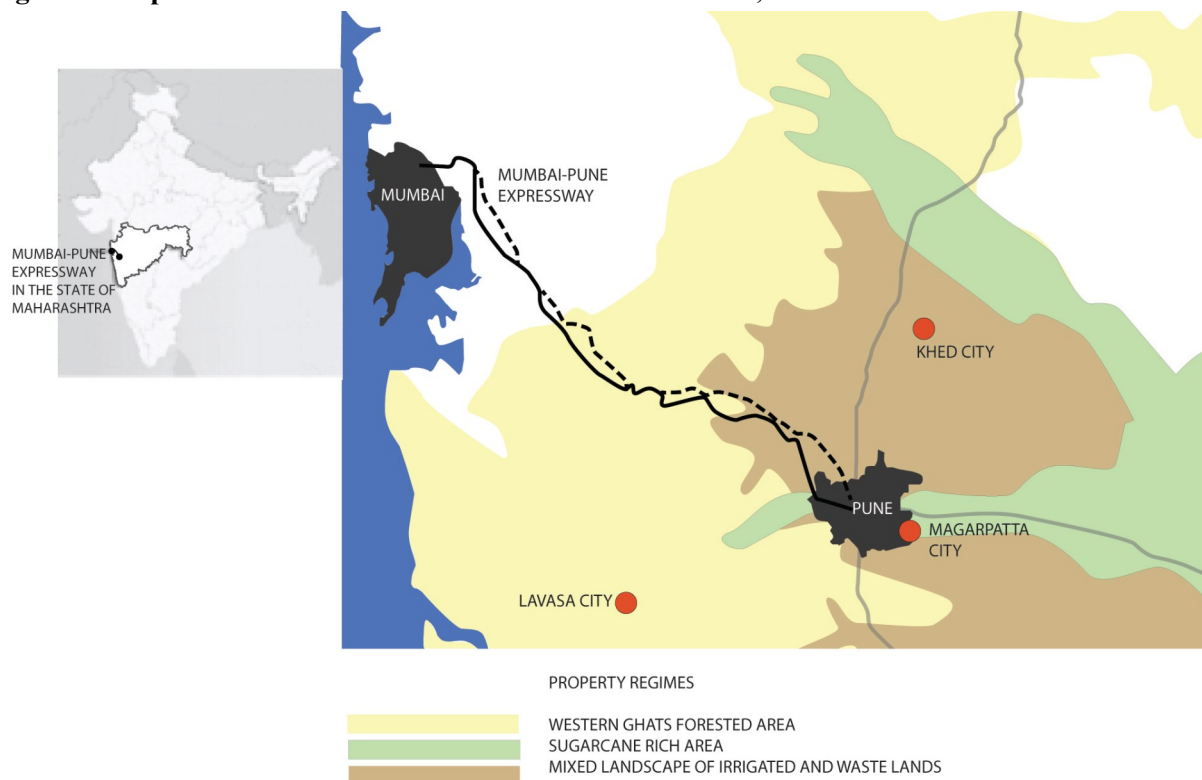
In addition to countering mainstream perceptions of “modern” versus “primitive” in urban India, the book deepens, and often complicates, received wisdom in critical urban studies, especially around global framings of land-grabbing and “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003). Joining other scholars who question whether such one-size-fits-all framings can accurately capture the dynamics driving urbanization in much of the world (Cowan 2018; Ghertner 2015), Balakrishnan suggests that the rise of urban corridors in India is not driven exclusively by dispossession, but rather by a complex range of negotiations, transformations, and power struggles, often led by those class and caste groups who control agrarian capital in urbanizing regions.

Balakrishnan advances this argument through an in-depth examination of three urbanization projects along India’s first economic corridor, the Mumbai–Pune expressway in the western state of Maharashtra. The expressway, connecting India’s largest and ninth-largest cities, was ostensibly built to provide a more efficient option for freight transport, but, due to its high tolls, most freight companies found it too expensive; instead, it ended up mainly benefiting wealthy private-vehicle owners. In an analogous way, Balakrishnan argues, India’s push for economic corridors, ostensibly set up to foster large-scale industry, has mainly spurred real-estate speculation in previously rural areas. And this speculation has not simply been imposed from outside, by urban or international capital. It has, at times, been actively encouraged through the investments of agrarian capitalists drawing on the sugar wealth they accumulated during the Green Revolution, when many regions of India turned to the input-intensive, capital-intensive forms of agriculture pushed by Western development organizations.

India is the world’s second-largest exporter of cane sugar, and over 40% of India’s sugar comes from the region Balakrishnan’s book analyzes. This massive production of sugarcane has only been possible as a result of the continued Green Revolution–style investment in the region, including the routing of water resources via dams and irrigation infrastructure, enabled by the political clout of

the region’s sugar barons. These barons are inevitably from the Maratha caste, the so-called “dominant caste” of the region, a term that denotes social groups that are not at the top of the caste system’s ritual hierarchy, but rather have become powerful because of their control of agrarian resources, including Green Revolution–derived agrarian capital. Such agrarian paths to capitalism have been explored by a range of scholars (including, for India, Gidwani 2008 and Chari 2004), but—as Balakrishnan notes—few studies have addressed “what is happening to these agrarian propertied castes/classes in the current era of post-liberalization land commodification” (p. 14).

Figure 1. Map of the Mumbai–Pune corridor in Maharashtra, India



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The Mumbai–Pune expressway, beginning in India’s financial capital and ending in the heart of the sugar-producing region, is used by Balakrishnan as an invaluable lens for analyzing the contested ways in which the region’s dominant caste—building on its long-standing control of the region’s sugar cooperatives—has sought to maintain its power in conditions of urbanization. By comparing three different urban projects along the expressway, each with a different social and ecological profile, Balakrishnan is able to construct a “natural experiment” (p. 150) that shows the complex ways in which previous regimes of agrarian social relations and capital accumulation adjust to waves of urbanization and an increasingly speculative land market.

The first case is paradigmatic of what Balakrishnan terms shareholder cities, “in which agrarian landowners become shareholders in new real-estate companies and thus continue to retain control over their landed assets” (p. 67). In some ways, the shareholder city is a typical example of urban neoliberalism, with increasingly private forms of municipal governance, which Balakrishnan critiques for its exclusion of the landless and its bypassing of democratic processes. The shareholder city’s uniqueness, though, is the way it was actively promoted by agrarian interests (that is, those often portrayed as the losers or the dispossessed in processes of urbanization) seeking to shift from sugar production to real-estate wealth.

While the first case “exemplifies the reproduction of agrarian privileges in a new market- and urban-oriented context,” the second case, situated in a forested zone that the Green Revolution

bypassed, “exemplifies the perpetuation of agrarian exclusions” (p. 100). Specifically, owing to earlier histories of disinvestment and displacement in the area studied in the second case, local groups are excluded from the speculative real-estate projects that have arisen there. It is only the third case, situated in what the government has deemed “waste” or agriculturally unproductive land, that the seamless reproduction of both privilege and exclusion is disrupted. In this case, an Adivasi or indigenous community is able to leverage the revaluing of their “waste” land (now sought after for its locational advantages in an urbanizing area) to escape lives of rural servitude and toil on Maratha agricultural land. Though this case, too, relies on the shareholder-city model, and thus was largely framed in the language of the market, not the public good, it nonetheless provides an opening for the contestation of hierarchical caste relations. Balakrishnan argues that such political openings are facilitated in part through the robust functioning of decentralized democratic structures such as *gram sabhas*, or village councils, introduced by constitutional amendment in the 1990s.

The three chapters charting the different results of Balakrishnan’s “natural experiment,” largely synchronic in nature, are complemented by the diachronic view presented in a compelling chapter that weaves together historical accounts of three major infrastructure projects in Maharashtra. As Balakrishnan notes, megaprojects “that seamlessly connect certain valorized nodes within the global economy while simultaneously disconnecting others” (p. 4) are nothing new—indeed, they were central to the rise of capitalism. And such projects often build on each other, with each new project taking the terrain established by the previous one as its ostensibly “neutral” starting point. Balakrishnan traces three such projects: railways in colonial times, which were essential to the British Empire’s control of the global cotton industry; irrigation projects, begun by the British and then considerably intensified during the Green Revolution; and, finally, present-day economic corridors.

These layered infrastructural histories make possible the varied outcomes that Balakrishnan analyzes in the present day, from the rise of sugar-cum-real-estate barons to the increasing assertion of some previously marginalized groups. It is the latter trend, enabled both by democratic decentralization and by an urbanization process that calls into question the dominance of agrarian elites, that Balakrishnan sees as holding out potential for social transformation, as historically oppressed groups look “hopefully” toward a “caste-equal urban future” (p. 63).

Is this, then, an update of Marx’s (1853) early optimism that “modern industry, resulting from the railway system, will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labor, upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power”? Balakrishnan would likely not be so sanguine, especially given her sharp analysis of the way that Indian railways inscribed a landscape of uneven development onto the geography of Maharashtra. Instead, for Balakrishnan, these modernization and urbanization projects represent a “Janus-faced process of social change that simultaneously empowers and disempowers, enfranchises and disenfranchises” (p. 145).

In this, Balakrishnan’s research resonates with a long tradition of radical anti-caste scholarship in Maharashtra (e.g. Patil 1979; Omvedt 1994; Teltumbde 2018). Though Balakrishnan’s book does not draw on this scholarship (it focuses more on histories of infrastructure than on histories of caste formation and contestation), its attention to the “caste/class/space” nexus (p. 7) contributes to long-running debates about the relationship between class and caste, including under neoliberalism.

This can be seen in Balakrishnan’s (2020) article on the Covid-19 response in India, which broadly draws on the theoretical and historical arguments elaborated in *Shareholder Cities*, and which aptly demonstrates the darker sides of “modernization” projects, including for the most oppressed castes. Scaling her argument up to the entire country of India, Balakrishnan succinctly shows how migrant laborers, who bore the brunt of India’s exceptionally strict Covid lockdown, traced paths of migration that depended crucially on the interplay of caste and geography—and, more specifically, the geography of the Green Revolution, which creates arcs of wealth, surplus, and trade links, and corresponding zones of exclusion. As Balakrishnan persuasively argues, these sedimented histories of accumulation and exclusion form the terrains on which struggles over

urbanization must be fought. Any vision for urban justice and social transformation must take this into account.

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