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Caste at the City's Edge: Land Struggles in Peri-urban Bengaluru

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1 On one of our first days of fieldwork on the south-eastern fringe of Bengaluru, we encountered two individuals who became key interlocutors in our study of the peri-urban land transition. While driving around the area observing land use changes, we spotted four men who had parked their motorcycles, and were walking into an empty plot of land adjacent to the road. Thinking that they might be discussing a land deal, we tried to strike up a conversation. It turned out that two of the party were indeed local brokers—"Shekhar," a young man, and his uncle "Nagappa"[1]—who were inspecting a plot of land for sale. After we told them about our planned research on real estate development in peri-urban villages, they agreed to speak with us and we settled down on the steps of a closed shop. With little prompting, Shekhar and Nagappa began telling us about the rampant "land-grabbing" that was occurring in the area, especially "encroachments" on government land by members of the powerful Reddy community. Offering to show us an example, they led us down a lonely rural road till we came to a large barren piece of land on which a number of cricket pitches had been marked out. Shekhar explained that this was once *gomala* land (common land used for grazing or

other public purposes), which had been appropriated by a local Reddy family by bribing the Village Accountant to manipulate the land records. The usurpers first planted eucalyptus on the plot, but later decided to turn it into a cricket ground. The "owners" rent out the pitches to "techies" (software engineers) employed in nearby IT parks, who come to play cricket on the weekends. As we continued to drive around the area, they pointed out other examples of encroachments, especially *gomala* land turned into residential "layouts."

2 Subsequently, during our fieldwork, we heard about many such cases of "land-grabbing" (the English term has been absorbed into ordinary Kannada speech), and we also learned about the struggle that was being waged by local Dalits against what they view as the illicit activities of Reddys. Prompted by these stories, we began to investigate the caste conflict that seemed to be unfolding on the canvas of a booming land market. While there are many dimensions to the peri-urban land transition, in this paper we focus on the contested appropriation and conversion of land by powerful actors and the caste politics that has crystallized around these processes. In the stories about the urban land transition that we recorded, caste appeared time and again—as a form of social power that has allowed certain actors to capture the most benefit from the activation of land markets, and as the language through which struggles around land were narrated and pursued. We describe the contestations that have erupted around land as it is transformed from a productive asset in an agrarian economy to a key financial asset in a speculative urban economy (Goldman 2011), and explore how caste is reconfigured, invoked and respatialized through these struggles.

3 In the next section, we locate our ethnography in relation to recent work on postcolonial urbanism, land struggles and the peri-urban in south Asia. Section 3 describes Bengaluru's real estate-led urban transformation, the changes in this peri-urban site, and the engagement of Reddys and Dalits in the land market. It also provides a brief background on the agrarian political economy of the Mysore region to contextualize the discussion that follows. In the fourth section we describe how "land-grabbing" takes place, situating the dispossession of Dalits and the privatization of common lands within the wider politics of land in Bengaluru. Section 5 explores the modalities through which Dalits have challenged the social power of Reddys in this context, and reinserts these land struggles in their regional context by exploring the place-embedded caste identities that inform struggles around land. The paper concludes by arguing that caste should be at the center of analyses of urbanization and the land transition in India.

Agrarian Urbanism and the Land Transition

4 Postcolonial urban scholars have argued that received theories of urbanization are inadequate to capture the complexities and varieties of urban forms in cities of the global South (Robinson 2016; Roy 2011), where the "urban question" is also the "agrarian question" (Roy 2016). Gururani (2019) proposes the concept of "agrarian urbanism" to capture an "urbanism in which agrarian regimes of land and property endure and coproduce the urban" (p. 14). This concept is particularly relevant on the "urbanizing frontiers" (Gururani 2019) of south Asia where the "feverish non-metrocentric remapping of the urban-agrarian hinterland" is marked by a "heterogeneous politics of land" (Gururani and Dasgupta 2018:41).

5 To capture the entanglements of the agrarian and the urban, we need to be attentive to the specific regional locations and histories of south Asian cities (Nair 2013). In postcolonial settings, the urban transition is highly uneven and non-linear, socially as well as spatially, such that regional "agrarian regimes of territory, land and property are implicated and inscribed in ongoing urban land use changes" (Balakrishnan 2019:2). Landholding and agricultural production have historically been grounded in caste (Lerche and Shah 2018; Mosse 2018), albeit with significant regional variations (Lerche 2015), which means that such an analysis must attend to the intersections of caste and land within particular agrarian formations. To develop a deeper understanding of the contemporary politics of land in urbanizing peripheries, we need to draw on the large body of work on caste in sociology and social anthropology as well as the long tradition of agrarian studies in south Asia (Gururani 2019).

6 Work on peri-urban sites across south Asia have provided fine-grained illustrations of how the social logics of older agrarian formations are reconstituted and reflected in new contestations, as rural communities are absorbed into expanding cities and agricultural land is commoditized (Anwar 2018; Kundu 2016; Sarkar 2015). The activation of speculative land markets by urbanizing processes or land acquisition has complex and contradictory outcomes (Cross 2015; Shatkin 2016; Upadhya 2020), but most research points to the widening of class and caste inequalities. While large farmers may profit significantly from skyrocketing land prices, landless workers and marginal and tenant farmers tend to lose their livelihoods and access to land (Agarwal and Levien 2019; Vijayabaskar and Menon 2018). In addition, erstwhile cultivators and landlords often benefit from their new roles in the expanding peri-urban economy—as brokers, moneylenders, real estate agents, or rentier landlords (Cowan 2018; De Neve 2015; Dubey 2018; Nelson 2018; Sampat 2017). Not surprisingly, local actors who mediate the insertion of rural economies into multi-scalar circuits of accumulation are usually drawn from the dominant landowning castes (Balakrishnan 2018; Das 2019; Kennedy 2019; Levien 2015; Pati 2017), who transform their control over land into new forms of "caste capital" (Bandyopadhyay 2016; Deshpande 2013).

7 This literature highlights the reproduction of economic inequalities and caste power as agriculture is disrupted and land becomes primarily a source of financial value, yet the shifting intersections of caste and land as rural communities urbanize have not been closely mapped. As Gururani (2019:14) suggests, more attention must be paid to the mutual constitution, reconfigurations and fracturing of the relations between land and caste in peri-urban villages, and to how these changes "produce an uneven geography of spatial value." For example, Balakrishnan (2019) shows how agrarian elites in the Maharashtra sugar belt have leveraged their accumulated political and social capital to become "key protagonists in the making of urban real estate markets in liberalizing India" (p. 15). Theorizing these processes as "recombinant urbanization," she argues that "agrarian-urban land transformations are undergirded by the persistence of caste networks" (p. 14).

8 While other scholars have similarly conceptualized the operations of caste within the modern Indian economy as social networks that create monopolies in particular markets, Mosse (2018:432) argues that reducing caste to social networks elides the multiple ways in which power and resources (especially land) are sequestered and deployed through caste (cf. Mosse 2019). More work is needed to understand the protean nature of caste and its multiple manifestations in changing contexts. In this

paper we explore how caste, as a key "social structure of accumulation" (Harriss-White 2003) in the agrarian economy, is repurposed to capture value from (financialized) land and also becomes the major axis of struggle against such accumulation.

9 Recent work on the politics of caste in India's "new land wars" illustrate the diverse ways in which claims to land "shape realigned or reimagined caste identities" (Nielsen et al. 2020:685). These studies show that "caste consistently mediates land transfers ... by pre-empting, undermining or fuelling processes of social contestation" (Nielsen et al. 2020:684–85). The authors argue further that while "caste has historically shaped control of and access to land, recent changes to the political economy of land have had a direct bearing on caste as social relation and practice" (Nielsen et al. 2020:685).

10 Building on these insights, in this paper we explore how the historical relations that bound different caste groups to land—and to each other—have shaped strategies of accumulation and resistance on the edge of a rapidly growing city. We trace the reconfigurations of caste and land by understanding their inter-connections "diachronically and conjuncturally," as "recursively linked categories that are produced and reproduced in continuous interaction under the influence of the larger political economy" (Nielsen et al. 2020:685). We are particularly interested in how caste identity and social power are invoked, reconstituted or sharpened on an urban frontier, as land enters volatile real estate markets and is transformed from a factor of production in agriculture to a key source of financial and speculative value (Goldman 2020). Specifically, we ask how caste is reconfigured as a mode of accumulation as well as an axis of struggles around land. In doing so, we contribute to an understanding of the processes by which urban peripheries are co-produced by the social interactions of various groups, whether acting in concert or at cross-purposes.

Urbanizing Villages, Financializing Land

11 Bengaluru's spectacular growth and transformation since the 1990s as it became a key center of India's software outsourcing industry forms the backdrop to this paper. The rising demand for commercial and residential properties accelerated the spread of the city into its rural periphery, swallowing up thousands of hectares of agricultural land—a spatial expansion that is periodically reflected in the redrawing of the metropolitan boundary and the master plan (Sundaresan 2017). Between 1971 and 2011, the geographical area of the Bengaluru Metropolitan Region (which includes Bangalore Urban and Bangalore Rural districts) expanded four times to 710 sq km, while cropland shrunk to 7 percent of the area (Purushothaman and Patil 2019:121). The population of Bengaluru increased from 6.5 million in 2001 to 9.6 million in 2011, to an estimated 12.3 million in 2020. Much of this demographic growth was due to the incorporation of surrounding settlements into the city. In 1991, 189 villages of Bangalore North and South districts were brought under Bangalore Urban Agglomeration (Nair 2005:147), and another 110 villages were incorporated into the city in 2007 when the new municipal authority, Greater Bangalore Municipal Corporation (the BBMP), was created.

12 The rapid expansion of Bengaluru into its hinterland has been driven by government land acquisition for infrastructure and industrial projects and by private market

transactions for real estate development—both leading to the widespread alienation and financialization of agrarian land (Goldman 2020). Bengaluru's "neoliberal urbanization" (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009)[2] is most visible in the sprawling IT (information technology) campuses and upscale residential and commercial complexes that dominate the landscape of newer areas of the city, particularly on the southern and eastern fringes. But villages even far beyond the city's official boundary have also been transformed, as land aggregators and real estate companies created "land banks" in anticipation of future demand. The spiraling demand for land and water has led to the decline of agriculture in numerous villages surrounding the city and to the conversion of large swathes of agricultural land into (actual or anticipated) urban real estate.

13 While numerous studies have documented the consequences of compulsory land acquisition for infrastructure development, Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and real estate projects (Banerjee-Guha 2010; Levien 2018), there has been less research on the more piecemeal and incremental processes through which agricultural land is transformed into urban real estate (Ghertner 2014). Goldman (2020) points to the extensive appropriation and conversion of smallholder farmland and the rural commons on the northern fringe of Bengaluru, a process that requires a "deeper understanding of social, political, and institutional dynamics, rural and urban" (p. 3). In this paper we describe these quotidian, small-scale, "informal" and "illegal" modalities through which agrarian land becomes real estate, and the caste struggles that have erupted around the land transition in one peri-urban site. This process of change, as in similar cases elsewhere in India, is marked by "relentless negotiations, speculations, contestations, displacements, and dispossessions [that] produce new urban subjects and social formations" (Gururani and Dasgupta 2018:42).

14 The paper draws on three years of fieldwork in several villages on the southeastern edge of Bengaluru. This area was selected for a larger study because it is the location of one of the city's largest apartment complexes, "Lakeview Haven," developed on over 100 acres of land acquired from farmers and landowners of "G-halli" (see Figure 1). A major aim of the research was to understand how land was assembled for the Lakeview Haven project, tracing the chain of intermediaries who facilitated the process (Gidwani and Upadhya N.d.). However, we soon discovered that agricultural and common lands were being converted for other purposes as well, in diverse and more incremental ways —especially informal (and even "illegal") practices and transactions.[3] The ever-increasing demand for land has pulled "outside" money into local land markets, driving up prices and attracting a range of investors and speculators. Apart from gated communities such as Lakeview Haven, the area is dotted with numerous modest apartment blocks and high-end "villa" projects, as well as empty "layouts" advertising plots of land for sale (Figure 2).

Figure 1: View of Lakeview Haven, a large gated community

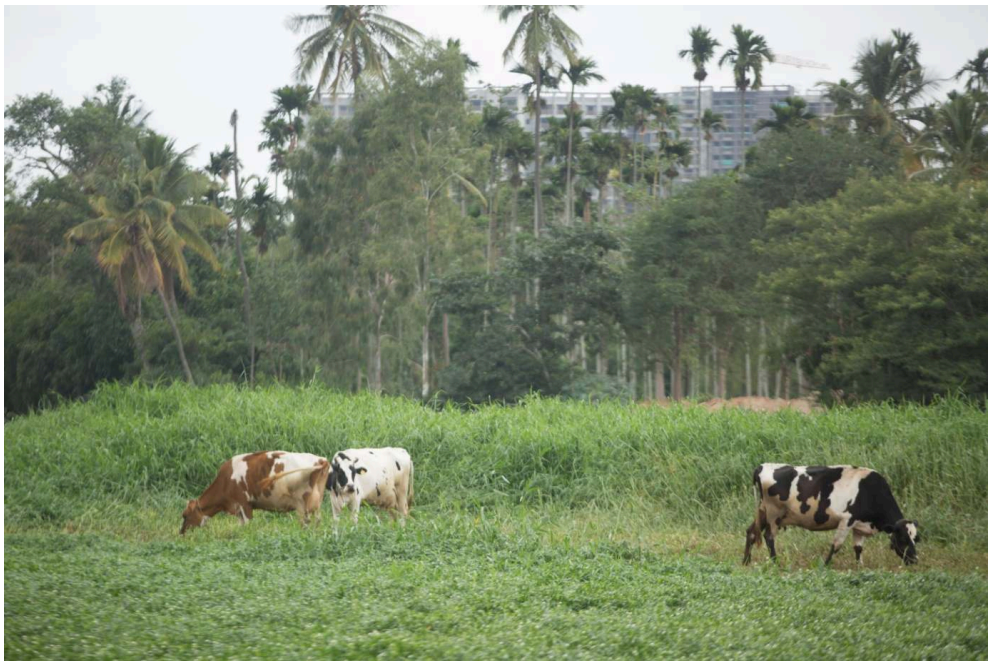
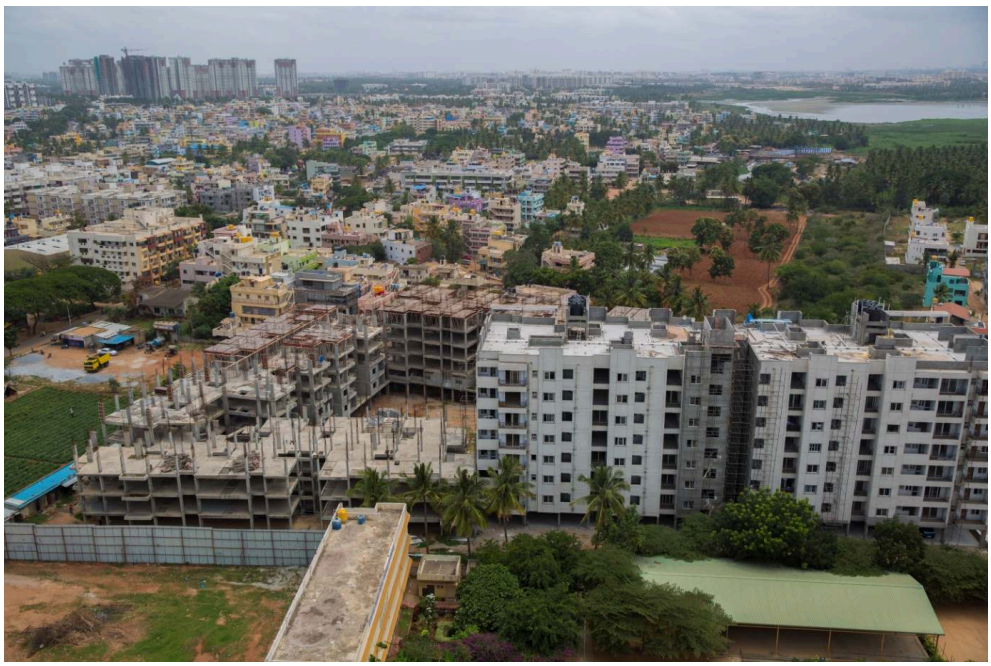


Figure 2: View of urbanizing village on periphery of Bengaluru



15 This paper is based mainly on research in two villages—G-halli and a neighboring village, "H-puram"—carried out between 2017 and 2019.[4] G-halli is a village of around 580 households with a geographical area of 793 hectares, of which 32 hectares is government land and the remainder private land.[5] H-puram has 258 households and covers 257 hectares. The major landowning group in these villages are Reddys,[6] who are much less populous in Karnataka compared to Vokkaligas and Lingayats (the main landholding and politically powerful castes), but occupy a similar position of social and economic power in the villages where they have settled.[7] The other important castes in

these villages are Dalits (Adi Dravida and Adi Karnataka), Kurubas, Tigalas, and Lingayats.

16 We do not have detailed empirical data on the distribution of land by caste for these villages, but interviews indicate that Reddys are by far the major landowners, followed by Kurubas and Tigalas. The Village Revenue Officer estimated in 2018 that only 5 percent of the land in G-halli was held by Scheduled Caste (SC) households. This region is characterized by small peasant farming: nearly half of agricultural holdings in Bangalore Rural district in 1998–99 were "marginal" (below 1 hectare). In the taluk where our study villages are situated, 57 percent of the holdings were marginal, while only 4 percent of holdings were 4 hectares or above (Government of India 2005:18). Although Reddys and Kurubas are the major landowners in these villages, it appears that many Dalit families at one time held small parcels of land, mostly land granted under various land distribution programs. But as we detail below, their access to land has been eroded over time while the hold of Reddys has strengthened.

17 Agriculture on the southern Karnataka plateau is dependent on rainfall and tank irrigation and is carried out primarily on small family farms which produce food grains (especially ragi) for consumption as well as some cash crops (Purushothaman and Patil 2019). Prior to around 2005, farmers in G-halli grew staple crops such as ragi, rice and pulses, produced vegetables and fruits for the market, and engaged in dairying and sericulture. Around half of the cultivated land was irrigated with water from tanks, lakes and borewells, while the rest was rainfed. However, agriculture has been largely abandoned and most of the land converted to other purposes. Land sales in these villages have been driven largely by lack of water for irrigation: tanks and lakes dried up as run-off channels were blocked by construction activities, and the water table has declined drastically due to excessive extraction of groundwater—first for eucalyptus plantations and later for sale to the city's "water mafia" (Ranganathan 2014). Cultivators also cite labor shortage as an important reason for giving up agriculture, reflecting the movement of Dalits out of the agrarian economy and dependence on Reddy landlords. In K-puram, some land is still under cultivation, but rather than cultivating multiple crops as in the past, many farmers grow only a single crop of ragi during the rainy season, or simply leave the land fallow. Several farmers have switched to dairying because fodder is more easily available (collected from the nearby lake) or can be grown without irrigation.

18 With the decline of agriculture and rapid urbanization, most households in G-halli have switched to other economic activities. Most of the younger generation of Reddy landowning families have been educated to college level and are employed in white collar or professional occupations in Bengaluru and other cities of India (as well as abroad). Reddys belonging to the older generation have moved into local business activities such as land brokerage and moneylending, or they have become rentier landlords—constructing apartment blocks with small rental units. Most Reddy families have sold at least some of their land and used the proceeds to purchase urban properties or agricultural land farther from the city where prices are lower.

19 When agriculture was still the mainstay of the village economy, most Dalits worked as agricultural wage laborers, cultivated their own or leased land, and/or were engaged in other livelihood activities such as dairying. With the mushrooming of apartment complexes, schools and commercial ventures in the area, they now prefer to work in the new service economy as gardeners, security guards, or housekeeping staff. Others

have taken up informal employment as construction workers, petty vendors, or domestic help. Several younger Dalits have received higher education and shifted to urban and white-collar occupations or, like Reddys, have become land brokers.

20 An important new source of income for both groups is land brokerage, or "real estate business"—as all kinds of land-related activities are called locally. Reddy landowners of G-halli were the first to enter this business, becoming land market intermediaries and inserting themselves into the multi-scalar networks that link local land markets into wider circuits of accumulation (Gidwani and Upadhya N.d.). Some have become small builders or contractors while others specialize in making layouts and selling the house sites. While large land deals are brokered mainly by Reddys, Dalit agents such as Shekhar tend to handle smaller transactions—particularly the sale of house sites or the mediation of property disputes. "Mallesha," a Dalit real estate agent from a neighboring village, explained that customers (even Dalits) prefer to work with Reddy brokers: "They think Reddys know everything and everyone in the Revenue Department offices, so they trust Reddys more." However, Shekhar said that he handles cases for people of different communities, including Reddys and Kurubas. Shekhar's work takes him to the local Revenue Department and Sub-registrar offices where, like other village-level brokers, he negotiates with lower-level officials and engages "touts" to access relevant documents and get the clearances needed to cement land deals.

21 In the following section, we detail the roles of brokers in the agrarian land transition. To contextualize our findings, we first provide some details on the history, agrarian structure and political economy of the Mysore region.

Land and caste in Mysore: Regional political economy

22 Before the formation of Karnataka state in 1967, the "Southern Maidan" region (where Bengaluru is located) formed part of the Mysore princely state. The land revenue administration system in Mysore derived from the precolonial "Palegar" (*poligar*) system, in which semi-autonomous provinces were administered by officials appointed by the king to collect taxes, protect villages, and maintain tank irrigation systems. At the village level, the "Ayagar" *(ayagar)* system institutionalized the traditional occupations and duties of the various castes.[8] Hereditary households from each caste carried out services for the village and were remunerated with a share of the harvest or the grant of *inam* lands (Wilks 1810:118, cited in Kashyap and Purushothaman 2017:9).[9] While Vokkaligas, Kurubas, Lingayats and other cultivating castes controlled the agrarian economy of Mysore, the former "untouchable" castes—mainly Holeyas and Madigas—provided the labor. These castes also had designated "traditional" occupations—the "right-hand" Holeyas were village servants while the "left-hand" Madigas (now Adi Karnataka) were leather workers.[10] As a consequence of social reform movements in the early 20th century, Holeyas are now known as Adi Dravida and Madigas as Adi Karnataka. Holeyas also use "Chalavadi"—a name recently revived through a caste assertion and unification movement.[11]

23 Thus, the rural economy as well as the governance of land in old Mysore were clearly structured by caste, a legacy that is reflected in contemporary caste relations, identities and struggles. However, in contrast to the irrigated rice-growing belts of southern India where the "untouchable" castes were mainly agricultural laborers not permitted to hold land (Kumar 1965; Viswanath 2014), in Mysore it appears that lower-ranked

groups could take up land for cultivation, at least in the dryland areas (Kashyap and Purushothaman 2017:11). However, the structure of landholding remained sharply stratified by caste, with most land held by middle-ranking castes such as Vokkaligas, Lingayats and Kurubas.

24 During the colonial period, the intersections of caste, political power and land were reconfigured in important ways. Although the "Ryotwari" system of land revenue administration introduced by the British created individual property rights in land and a direct relation between the cultivator and the state, Manor (1989) argues that the "processes of land settlement and revenue collection tended to be mediated through the village headmen and their close allies who in the large majority of villages were drawn from the dominant landowning groups" (p. 328). He traces the consolidation of the social power of the propertied agrarian castes to this period, when the "traditional prerogatives of the land-owning groups" were upheld by the state (Manor 1989:330). By the mid-20th century, Gowdas (Vokkaligas) had gained control over land in most Mysore villages, and these "dominant castes" (Srinivas 1959) gradually forged wider networks and became powerful actors in state-level politics (Manor 1989).

25 The region was characterized by smallholder family cultivation, with a relatively high proportion of owner-cultivators and a low incidence of landless laborers (Manor 1989:328). Dalit and other lower-caste households held or leased small parcels of land, which they cultivated with family labor, in addition to working as wage laborers (Damle 1986:1904; Manor 1989:334). Despite the skewed distribution of land, Dalits in Karnataka have had greater access to land compared to other south Indian states (Manor 1989:359). Although land reforms in Karnataka during the 1960s and 1970s were not very effective, they may have led to a more equitable distribution of agricultural land in the southern dryland region (Damle 1989:1903; Manor 1989:344–45). A village study in Bangalore district in the 1990s found that most SC households had acquired lands through land distribution programs, but the land grants had been negotiated by their Vokkaliga patrons who then purchased the land from them (Karanth 1998:96)—harbingers of the contemporary practice of "grabbing" Dalit lands discussed below.

26 To sum up, the agrarian political economy of Mysore allowed some scope for Dalits to hold land, but the structuring of the village economy by caste created relations of inequality and dependence as well as place-embedded cultural identities that still find expression in the region.

The Great Peri-urban Land Grab

27 The land market in this peri-urban site started to heat up in the 1990s, when two major real estate companies started buying up land. In such contexts, sleepy agricultural land markets with relatively stable prices are suddenly shocked into motion, pushing up land values and tempting farmers to cash in on their land. However, due to jurisdictional differences between G-halli and H-puram, land markets operate very differently in the two villages.

28 G-halli was incorporated into Bengaluru municipality when the boundary was expanded in 2007, bringing the village into the "yellow zone" of the Revised Comprehensive Development Plan 2015.[12] This important administrative change meant that agricultural land could more easily be converted to non-agricultural uses, attracting speculators and developers. By the time of our research (2017–20), around 80

percent of the agricultural land in G-halli had already been sold, including 120 acres for the Lakeview Haven project, and 60 percent had been legally converted to non-agricultural purposes. In contrast, H-puram remains in the "green belt" (but located just outside the municipal boundary) where the sale, conversion and development of agricultural land is prohibited, except for specified purposes. Nonetheless, land is rapidly changing hands and being converted to non-agricultural purposes in this village as well.

29 While farmers in G-halli were able to sell their land to developers or legally convert it for other purposes, land-use change in H-puram has taken place largely through illicit or quasi-legal procedures pursued by local landlords and politicians, reflecting the "frontier urbanism" of such transitional zones (Gururani and Dasgupta 2018). Our interlocutors spoke mainly about two kinds of land-grabbing—the occupation of *gomala* or government lands and the illicit appropriation or purchase of Dalit lands.

Capturing common lands

30 The progressive appropriation of *gomala* and other kinds of public land forms a key part of the Dalit subaltern history of dispossession in Karnataka. Such land (which is supposed to be controlled by the panchayat) was traditionally used by all communities for grazing cattle and other livelihood activities. But *gomala* and other vacant lands are often cultivated informally, especially by Dalits.[13] In G-halli, *gomala* lands had been gradually converted to other uses before the land rush (mainly through panchayat decisions), such as providing house sites for the poor or creating graveyards or recreational grounds, while some had been captured by local leaders by manipulating land records. But H-puram still had some *gomala* lands, which became the target of land-grabbing after 2005. For example, Reddy landlords have built educational institutions, clubs and marriage halls on such lands—a permitted use with government permission (obtainable for those with political connections). More significant has been the creation of unauthorized layouts on these open lands (Figure 3).[14]

Figure 3: Residential layout at H-puram

31 The conversion of agricultural land into layouts has historically been an important route for the creation of new housing in Bengaluru (Nair 2005:160), as is evident in the many "revenue layouts" that dot the city.[15] Revenue layouts are usually formed without government sanction but over time become "regularized" or attain quasi-legal status, often through political influence (Balakrishnan and Pani 2020; Benjamin and Raman 2011). One way in which layouts are created in the green belt is under certain panchayat rules that allow change of land use, but technically this does not constitute legal conversion of agricultural land.[16] A second method of land use change (for plots of more than 10 acres) is called "DC conversion," i.e., with the permission of the District Commissioner. Layouts in peri-urban areas mostly remain vacant—house sites are purchased mainly by middle-class urban residents for investment rather than to build homes. The spectacle of barren plots of converted agricultural land on the outskirts of growing cities (Upadhya 2018) mirrors on a smaller scale the vacant land left by unbuilt infrastructure projects through a process that Goldman (2020) terms "dispossession by financialization."

Dispossession of Dalits

32 The second major issue highlighted by our interlocutors was the appropriation of Dalit lands. Several Dalit interlocutors claimed that their communities used to own a significant amount of land in these villages, which gradually fell into the hands of Reddys. They outlined several routes through which this land grab was accomplished.

33 First, Dalit holdings were often grant lands, which legally cannot be sold or alienated but often change hands informally, leading to ambiguities of ownership.[17] Developers avoid buying "SC lands" because of their lack of "clear title," which means that Dalits are excluded from the more lucrative land deals (such as for Lakeview Haven) and are forced to engage in informal transactions if they wish to sell land, often at below market prices.[18] Those who purchase land from Dalits generally have the political clout

to get the sale regularized and the land registered, after which they can sell it to another party at a higher price. Our interlocutors said that many Dalits in these villages had sold their land to Reddy landlords in this way—usually because they were in financial distress or were coerced through various means.

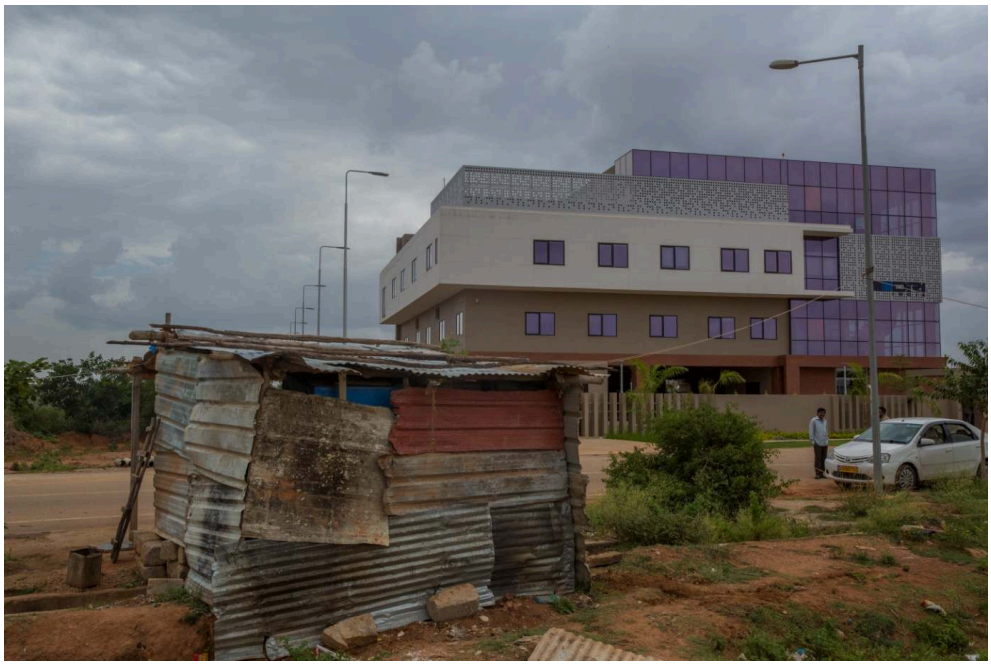
34 "Santosh" is a Dalit activist from a neighboring village. He is affiliated with "DPA,"[19] a city-based Dalit association and has been leading the local struggle against this kind of land-grabbing. He told us that Dalits in his village had experienced extreme "*dabbalike*" (exploitation) and "*dourjanya*" (oppression/violence) over the past twenty years because "local leaders" had made them sell their land cheap: "If a piece of land was worth one crore they gave the Dalits twenty lakhs." When asked why Dalits would sell at this price, he responded, "We wouldn't have seen lakhs [of rupees], no?" Illustrating this process, he said that his own family had sold 2.5 acres to a developer in 2007: "Back then, we did not know what was happening, but now after so many years, things are becoming clear." He spoke about the underhanded tactics used by brokers, working on behalf of developers, to prise land from farmers, for instance by creating "fights between brothers."

35 Second, Reddys have acquired land through moneylending, appropriating land pledged by Dalits as collateral when they were unable to repay the debt. Several respondents recounted cases where Dalits took loans from Reddy landlords to cover marriage or medical expenses and then lost their land: "Like this, the poor farmers give away their lands for their loans which will be accumulated by the rich, who then sell it for crores. The rich become richer and we are becoming poorer."[20]

36 Third, Dalit lands can be appropriated by bribing Revenue Department officials to falsify land records (cf. Reddy and Reddy 2007), especially because such land tends to have unclear or "fuzzy" titles (Pati 2019). Our interlocutors spoke often about the venality of Revenue officers: *"Duddu maadod onde guri* [their only motive is to make money]." Dalit activists believe that "anything can be done with land" if one has enough money, and that Reddys have the greatest capacity to persuade government officials to ignore land use violations or manipulate land records.

37 In summary, the urban land transition in our site has disproportionately benefited Reddy landowners, due to their legacy control over land and their involvement in "real estate"—an outcome that is reflected in the ostentatious new bungalows built by several Reddy families (see Figure 4). But they would not have been able to carry out such activities without solid political support, as we outline next.

Figure 4: House of a rich Reddy in G-halli



Politics of land-grabbing

38 The broader context of the conflicts that we observed in these peri-urban villages is the long-standing entanglement of political power with land in Karnataka, known for its "real estate politicians" (Pani 2017) who have built their careers on wealth gained from land deals and on creating housing layouts for their "vote banks" (Balakrishnan and Pani 2020). The stories that we recorded in these peri-urban villages draw on wider narratives about corruption that circulate widely in the city (Doshi and Ranganathan 2017), especially after land-grabbing became a major public issue in the 1990s. Numerous cases of illegal encroachments and constructions on government land (including water bodies) came to light and were blamed for the city's increasing congestion and rapid environmental degradation. The committee that was appointed to look into the matter, headed by A.T. Ramaswamy, found that 45,000 acres of government land worth 50,000 crore rupees had been encroached (Joint House Committee, Karnataka Legislature 2006, 2007). The report also revealed that politicians had participated in land-grabbing at all levels and across party lines. Dalit organizations in Bengaluru have been active in monitoring land-grabbing in the wake of these revelations, yet it continues largely unchecked due to the involvement of powerful politicians. Nagappa told us that anyone who questioned such activities would be targeted by "rowdies."

39 The connections between political power and land became starkly evident in our study villages, albeit on a smaller scale. Several interlocutors spoke about the "network" of corruption that enables the accumulation of land in the hands of a few, asserting that everyone from the Minister, Revenue Secretary, MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly), and District Commissioner (top state officials) down to the local Revenue Inspector, Tahsildar and Village Accountant all play a role in facilitating such transactions, taking their cut out of the bribes paid. This "network," which includes

local landowners and brokers, became apparent in the case of "G-halli Club." This private recreational and social club, situated on a road leading out of G-halli and surrounded by open fields, was established by a group of Reddy residents with the support of the local MLA. They were granted six acres of *gomala* land by the government on a 30-year lease.[21] The club has become an important place where local residents, party workers, and real estate agents meet to discuss politics and land deals over food and beer. The club is frequented by affluent local Reddys but rarely by Dalits. The gatherings we witnessed at the club illustrate how Reddy landowners and brokers cultivate caste and party connections to oil the wheels of their real estate businesses.

40 Members of the "big" Reddy families already had political connections before the recent land boom because they occupied most of the local elected positions when G-halli was still governed by the panchayat system. Reddy landowners in H-puram similarly benefit from patronage relations with city- and state-level politicians. These political networks are manifested in various ways. For instance, local Reddys may serve as "*benamis*" (proxies) for big politicians, who use land deals to generate election funding and launder "black money," in return for which they get support for their land dealings. Whenever we asked about land transactions, our interlocutors (of all castes) would mention the local MLA, who is said to have purchased 300–400 acres in the area, all in the names of his supporters. "This is a new mafia that is making crores of rupees," Nagappa exclaimed.

41 The importance of political patronage became clear during the 2018 Karnataka State Assembly elections, when both Reddys and Dalits campaigned vigorously for their candidates for the position of MLA. Reddys in these villages mostly support the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (which has been in power in Karnataka for several years), while Dalits usually vote for the Congress Party. Reddy brokers and landlords donated substantial funds to the campaign of the sitting BJP MLA because, as they told us frankly, they had done well during his last three terms in office. They were also determined to defeat the Congress candidate because they feared that their real estate businesses would be adversely affected if he were to win. Conversely, Dalits campaigned vigorously for the Congress candidate because they viewed defeating the BJP as central to their battle against land-grabbing. Despite their efforts, the BJP MLA was re-elected for a fourth term.

42 While Reddys cultivate political networks beyond the village to shore up their real estate activities, Dalit youth do the same—but mainly through Dalit associations rather than mainstream political parties. Several Dalit brokers of these villages also work as activists with city-based Dalit organizations. Indeed, it was noteworthy that the most politically active individuals in these villages—both Reddys and Dalits—make their livings as land market intermediaries. For Reddys this is not surprising, given the close linkages between land and political money in Bengaluru. Although we were puzzled at first by this convergence in the case of Dalits, the logic eventually became clear. In the next section we show how Dalit brokers draw on city and state-level Dalit organizations to help navigate the land bureaucracy, and also utilize their knowledge of the land business and connections with government officials to contest land-grabbing.

Fighting for Land, Contesting Caste

43 From long interviews with several Dalit brokers, we learned that their involvement in the real estate business is not driven only by economic motives but also by the desire to challenge Reddy dominance. For example, Nagappa said that his 15 years of experience as a broker had given him an understanding of Revenue Department procedures which enabled him to collect evidence of land-grabbing. He could recite from memory the survey numbers of all the contested plots of land in his village and recount the cases in detail—of encroachments on Scheduled Caste grant lands, *gomala* (common) lands, lakes and ponds, and temple lands—and who was involved. Nagappa had collected thick files of paperwork to prove his allegations.

44 The life histories of Dalit broker-activists further help to unravel how Dalit politics have become entangled with the land market. Shekhar had studied in a local English medium school and then enrolled in college, but he dropped out before finishing and joined a private company. It was never his intention to get into "real estate," he said, but he got involved in the business after fighting a court case that his family had filed against a powerful local Reddy landlord. "Subba Reddy" had been acquiring land in the village on behalf of a developer. When Shekhar's father refused to sell, Subba Reddy "grabbed" the land by producing a faked General Power of Attorney (GPA).[22] Shekhar's father filed a case against him, which languished in court for years until Shekhar took it up and finally won. Shekhar explained that it was fighting this case that made him aware of the extent of land-grabbing in the area, and he began helping other Dalit families to reclaim land they had lost. This in turn led him to join "ADP," a Bengaluru-based Dalit organization, to draw on its support in fighting these cases.

45 Although he makes his living a broker, Shekhar spends most of his time on land-grabbing cases. Like Nagappa, he says that fighting a land case gave him the experience to work as a broker, while working in real estate in turn has helped him to oppose land-grabbing. Indeed, these two activities are practically inseparable: Shekhar revealed that when he discovers cases of Dalit lands that have been transferred to other names, he approaches the original owners and offers to file a case on their behalf. If they agree, he covers the costs of litigation himself, and if he wins the case he takes part of the recovered land to cover his costs and remuneration. Thus, contesting the illicit appropriation of land is a part of his "real estate business."

46 Similarly, Santosh (introduced above) fights against land-grabbing with the help of DPA. He explained that being a member of DPA gave him the confidence to approach government authorities, and that he is able to "get work done" because officers in the BBMP ward office or panchayat offices know and respect him. Santosh also mentors local Dalit youth who have "put cases on land," suggesting that this is a common activity. According to Santosh, the Reddys had anticipated that prices would rise in this area and therefore started buying up whatever land they could. Later, when Dalits saw that their land was being resold at a profit, they felt they had been "cheated" and began to file cases to reclaim their property (by showing that the original land transaction was illegal). Shekhar, Santosh and other Dalit broker-activists specialize in such cases.

47 One day, Sachin accompanied Shekhar and four other residents of H-puram to a meeting at the Deputy Commissioner's (DC) office that had been arranged by "Manjunath," the state president of ADP. The recently appointed Deputy Commissioner

had agreed to the meeting after the ADP had protested his lack of attention to Dalit concerns. In a strong voice, Manjunath—a confident and straightforward man in his fifties—explained each issue to the DC, handing over files that had been carefully compiled to support their claims. The issues ranged from atrocities against Dalits and the need for basic infrastructure in Dalit colonies, to the allocation of house sites, encroachment of common lands, and "cheating" of farmers by developers. Manjunath also requested the DC to take action against corrupt officials, whom he named. As the cases were presented one by one, the junior officers at the meeting appeared increasingly uncomfortable as they had to answer tough questions from both the DC and Manjunath. On almost every matter raised, the DC agreed that Manjunath had a valid case and directed his officers to "take action against these illegal activities."[23]

48 The way in which this meeting unfolded suggests that Dalit organizations have some political leverage with the government. By aligning with these organizations, activists such as Shekhar are able to frame land-grabbing as an issue of caste exploitation. Thus, while Reddys have profited from the land boom by deploying caste networks or "caste capital," Dalit activists contest such accumulation by drawing on their own networks. Specifically, they call on a political identity that has been created and reinforced through a long history of Dalit mobilization in the state (Davidappa and Shivanna 2013). In the city of Bengaluru, such mobilization has been particularly focused on land and housing rights for the urban poor (Benjamin and Raman 2011:41; Kamath and Vijayabaskar 2014). In this struggle, Shekhar and his allies are not just protesting against the appropriation of Dalit and common lands through illegal machinations and the political influence of Reddys—they are making a collective claim about caste power and using their identity as oppressed Dalits to "hail the state" (Mitchell 2018), to insist that officials attend to their grievances and discharge their responsibilities. As Shekhar said:

> Ambedkar is like a railway engine and we are like railway compartments. When we go through Dalit organizations, our land-related work will be done immediately. Otherwise, it would have been very difficult.

49 This discussion reminds us that, historically, claims to land have been collective, in the sense that dominant landowning castes assert their collective right to control land (as well as the labor of the lower castes) in their villages. Although land is converted into real estate through numerous individual negotiations and transactions, the urban transition can proceed only by activating or building on social connections—of caste, but also patron-client relations with powerful politicians and state functionaries. Similarly, Dalit resistance to land-grabbing is mounted collectively, by invoking an historically embedded consciousness of caste oppression and utilizing knowledge and practices that have been honed through long-standing struggles for land rights and social justice. While rural Dalits draw on the experience of urban Dalits in claiming rights to land in their urbanizing villages, locally dominant caste actors reinforce their hegemony by rescaling their political networks.

Materiality of caste and land

50 Dalit activists' passionate fight against land-grabbing might suggest that their struggle is primarily about social justice and to challenge the power of Reddys, yet a closer look reveals that the situation is not so straightforward. For example, even as Shekhar contests the formation of unauthorized layouts by Reddys, he himself had participated

in creating a layout on greenbelt land and selling the house sites. When we asked whether he would get into trouble for this, he confidently replied that there is no "*dispute*" on the land and that the buyers can easily get their plots regularized. However, it appears that this venture did not go smoothly, for on another occasion he told Sachin angrily, "*Reddygalu maadidre okay, aadre dalitaru maadidre rocchigeltare* [if Reddys do illegal things it's okay, but if Dalits do the same, it infuriates them]."

51 Shekhar not only makes his living as a broker, he has also engaged in dubious activities like those of the Reddys he criticizes. Similarly, his fight to recover his family's property (described above) was motivated by the potential to profit from the land, which had been worth little prior to the land boom. After Shekhar succeeded in recovering the land (a plot of just under 1 acre), he sold it to Subba Reddy's son for one crore rupees. This example suggests that the Dalit struggle in these peri-urban villages is not only about contesting accumulation by Reddys, but also reflects a desire to participate in—and benefit from—the new land market on the same footing. Indeed, Shekhar mentioned that it was only when he fought the case that he realized the value of the family land they had lost.

52 More broadly, Shekhar and other activists are not critical of the rapid urbanization of their villages nor of the repurposing of common land for monetary gain—rather, their fight is against the monopoly of Reddys in these processes. To them, fighting against land-grabbing and profiting from the land market are not antithetical activities. As Manjunath (the ADP leader) told the group gathered at the DC's office that day: "*Sanna putta kelasa madisikolli, sanghatane kattri. Maadbeku, dudibeku, matte neevu beliri, summne kudilike hogbedri* [get small things done (from the DC's office) and build the organization. Work, earn well, grow and don't spend it all on drinking!]" This statement suggests that a collective movement against caste oppression and for land rights, fighting individual land cases, and generating value from "real estate" are not contradictory goals for these Dalits. Shekhar and other local activists have learned from the experience of city-based Dalit organizations, which have long carried out struggles for rights to the land on which informal settlements (largely occupied by Dalits) are built, thereby staking claims to property ownership rather than just housing rights or citizenship. As Roy (2017:A3) argues, subordinated groups may assert rights through a "politics of property" rather than political mobilization alone.

53 This account of a land struggle in peri-urban Bengaluru brings us back to the question of caste and land, highlighting the materiality of caste. Questioning why higher caste groups should monopolize the benefits of urbanization and the booming real estate market, Dalit activists challenge caste power on multiple levels—by appealing to the administration and the courts for justice, by uncovering and contesting cases of illicit land-grabbing, and through electoral politics and social movements. However, they know that they remain relatively powerless in a context where state actors and political leaders are at the center of the "land mafias" that control these processes of dispossession.

Entanglements and genealogies of place and land

54 The land struggle described here could be read as an example of "subaltern citizenship" or "insurgent citizenship" (Holston 2008; Nilsen 2016), where marginalized groups assert their rights as equal citizens. However, while making claims on the state through

the language of rights and on the "terrain of the law" (Nair 2015), these Dalit activists consistently foreground the *caste* basis of land-grabbing. Several researchers have suggested that caste identity may be strategically articulated as a political tactic in making claims on land (Benjamin and Raman 2011:42; Nielsen et al. 2020:7; cf. Oskarsson and Sareen 2020), but we argue that the invocation of caste in this case is not just instrumental. Rather, it reflects the specific and very material ways in which land has been historically embedded in caste in this region, the continuation of caste as a social structure of accumulation, and the history of Dalit struggles in Karnataka and Bengaluru around the land question. Further, for actors such as Shekhar, land is not only a key resource from which they have been excluded, but is also symbolic of their exclusion as Dalits (cf. Steur 2015).

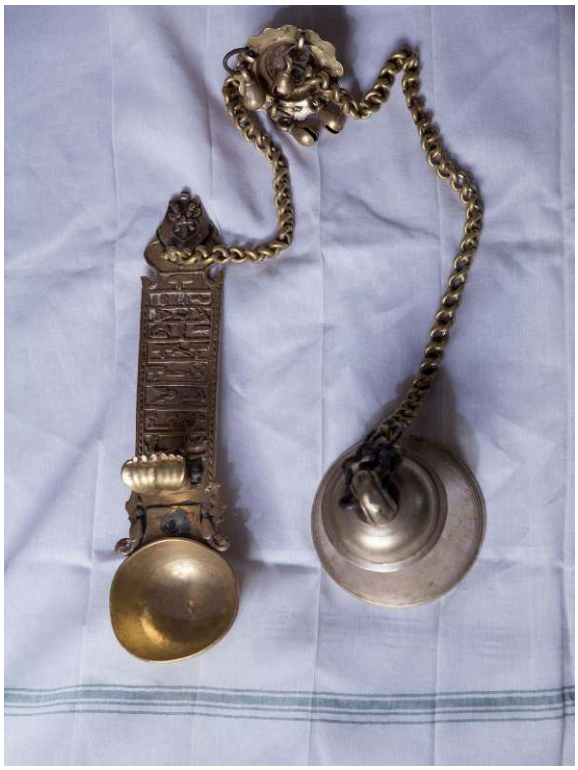
55 When asked to describe how their villages have changed over the last two decades, Reddy and Dalit interlocutors alike would begin their stories not in the 1980s or 1990s but at some time in the distant past. They told us about how their ancestors were granted land in these villages by a king (in the case of Reddys), or about the honored place they once held as messengers and tax collectors for the king (Dalits). Dalits related how land they had received from Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodeyar was snatched by Reddys: "During Raja's time, everything was fine, there used to be rules and regulations, but now wealth is going in the reverse direction, i.e., back into the hands of the upper caste (*kottirodu reverse hogbittide*)." While such stories are often interpreted as caste "origin myths" that explain low status in the caste hierarchy (Deliege 1993), they could also be read as sedimented memories, or subaltern histories, that anchor communities to particular places—especially through their connection to land.[24]

56 One day, while sitting with Shekhar and Nagappa in the former's small "sheet house"[25] in H-puram, they related the story of the Chalavadi community (to which they belong), which was traditionally the guardian of the right-hand caste order. One Chalavadi family in each village held the hereditary post of village servant or watchman (*thoti*), who represented the king. The duties of the Thoti included convening panchayat meetings, collecting taxes, making official announcements, and guarding the village (Karanth 1998:88). This authority was symbolized by their possession of the *gantebattalu* —an ornate brass bell and ladle connected by a chain—which was used to collect taxes. This instrument is mentioned in the 1911 Census Report, which describes how the Thoti would convene meetings of the Right-hand castes by going

> .... forth carrying a brass cup and chain as insignia, the cup having on it engraved the badges of different castes composing this section, such as the plough of the Vakkaliga, the scales of the Banajiga, the shears of a Kuruba, the spade of a Vodda, the razor of a barber, the washing stone slab and pot of an Agasa and the wheel of a Kumbara. (Aiyar 1911:167)

57 To our surprise, Shekhar brought out a beautifully crafted *gantebattalu* that had belonged to his grandfather, showing us the symbols of the various castes inscribed along its arm and proudly demonstrating how the instrument was used. For him, possession of this *gantebattalu* was proof not only of the important role that his community and family had once played in village society, but also of their claim to the *inam* land that had been granted to his ancestor (Figure 5).

Figure 5: *Chalavadi Gante Battalu*, inherited from Shekhar's grandfather



58 Dalit narratives about their dispossession by Reddys move beyond living memory or the recent past, expressing a deeper truth about the historical and contemporary relation between caste, land and power. By foregrounding their honored position in precolonial times and highlighting the role of Reddys in their downfall, they seek to legitimize their claims to land while contesting the social power of Reddys. These place-embedded histories inform the struggles that have crystallized more recently around land as villages are absorbed into the urban fabric. Although land has become detached from agriculture, the agrarian caste formation continues to structure accumulation through land, but in new ways. Thus, for Reddys and Dalits alike, land is central to caste identity as articulated in these histories. The social and symbolic values of land are not erased or submerged by the disintegration of agrarian life and the financialization of land, but are reworked and reappear in new ways, as in the contestations described above.

Conclusion: Revaluing Land and Caste

59 In this paper we have explored how the intersections of land and caste are reconfigured in the agrarian-urban transition in Bengaluru, as land is turned into a financial asset that produces new kinds of value as well as conflicts. We show how the social matrix of agrarian production, and the historical relations that different caste groups held to land and to one another, inflect processes of accumulation as well as struggles around land. Caste identity not only structures who can participate in, and prosper from, the urban land transition—it is also refashioned and deployed in new ways as peri-urban land markets are activated. Our analysis also uncovers the reshuffling of the relations between the state, political class, and caste identity as agrarian communities urbanize.

60 The analysis shows that while caste inequalities persist, they take on a different form in these rapidly urbanizing villages, as Dalits move away from their prescribed role in the agrarian economy, access education, and enter new occupations. Reddys retain their economic power due to their control over land and other forms of capital, but their social power and relation with Dalits—now less dependent on them for employment or patronage—has shifted. Caste solidarity becomes a base for Reddys to forge multi-scalar political networks that transcend a particular caste, even as they reinforce caste domination at the local level. Sale of land for real estate projects has enriched Reddy landlords, who accumulate additional wealth by capturing Dalit land, converting common land into layouts, and acting as land market intermediaries. Thus, caste remains a central axis of accumulation even as it works in diverse ways at different scales.

61 Dalits have opposed this caste-based mode of accumulation by marshalling the political resources available to them. They draw on the experience of Dalit movements to engage with the state on its own terms—invoking the language of law and rights and foregrounding the government's obligation to protect Dalits from exploitation and discrimination. This is not just a politics that uses caste identity in pursuit of other agendas, but one that derives from an ingrained sense of belonging and rights to land and recognition which builds on subaltern histories of oppression and struggle. Their involvement with Dalit movements leads to a reconfiguration of caste identity, one that draws on an imagined past but strongly engages with contemporary social movements and aspirations of mobility. At the same time, Dalits—like their Reddy adversaries—have participated in quotidian processes of urbanization and aspire to engage in similar strategies of accumulation through land.

62 The deep historical entanglement of land and caste that is illustrated by this study has been well documented in agrarian and rural studies, yet is only recently coming into focus in urban scholarship. The conflicts that erupt as agrarian villages urbanize have a clear genealogy in caste-based agrarian structures and colonial and postcolonial regimes of land governance, illustrating the importance of mapping how regional political economies are refracted in processes of urbanization. This paper also suggests that caste should not be understood as simply another axis of social and economic inequality or a basis for political identity that is deployed in certain situations. Rather, we need to reanimate the notion of caste as a social structure of accumulation, whose particular characteristics are defined by regionally specific histories of development, modes of production, systems of political authority, and collective memories of oppression and struggle. From this perspective, we can better understand how caste is repurposed or reassembled as agrarian land takes on new values and affordances—as a site of speculative investment, a source of investible wealth and social power, and an axis of struggle.

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NOTES

1. Names and identifying features of all people and places mentioned in the paper are anonymized. We retain the name Bangalore in relevant contexts.

2. Following other scholars, I use this term to capture a range of urban and economic reforms undertaken in India since the 1990s, which dramatically transformed the major cities. The opening up of the real estate sector to 100% foreign direct investment in 2005 was particularly consequential (Halbert and Rouanet 2014; Searle 2016) for real estate development and the financialization of land.

3. Of course, large-scale professional land aggregation and real estate development also involve a range of informalities and illegalities (Sundaresan 2017), but here our focus is on the smaller-scale operations of the peri-urban land market.

4. Most of the fieldwork was carried out by Sachin Rathod and Kaveri Medappa, with additional interviews conducted by other members of the research team between February 2017 and February 2020. Sachin lived in G-halli almost continuously for eight months, from August 2018 through March 2019, conducting interviews and participant observation in a small cluster of villages. This sustained presence allowed him to build good rapport with interlocutors from different caste groups. Although we rely here mainly on conversations with Dalit interlocutors, their stories of land-grabbing were corroborated by Reddy and Kuruba informants and documentary evidence.

5. G-halli now forms part of a municipal ward—the smallest unit of Census enumeration for urban areas—so we do not have official village-level demographic data. The ward in which G-halli is situated has a population of 54,625, of which 8,734, or around 16 percent, are Scheduled Caste (Census of India 2011; https://sw.kar.nic.in/PDF2018/Census2011Village/Bangaloreurban.pdf). H-puram had a population of 1,056 in 2011, of which 30 percent belonged to the Scheduled Castes.

6. Reddys are a large caste category of cultivators found mainly in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, they are placed in the "general category" (Forward Caste) as they are the major landowning caste in many districts (although some sub-castes are land-poor), but in Karnataka they are classified as OBC (Other Backward Classes). Reddys hold substantial land and properties in and around Bengaluru, which may also reflect more recent investments by Reddys from Andhra Pradesh.

7. Because of Bangalore's location contiguous to Tamil-, Telugu- and Kannada-speaking regions, the city and its surrounding rural areas have a complex linguistic and caste composition. Reddys are found mainly in villages to the east and south of the city, while Vokkaligas are the major landowners on the western and northern sides (Narendar Pani, personal communication, January 21, 2021). The history of Reddy migration to the Mysore region is unclear, but our interlocutors claimed that their forefathers were granted lands by a king in the precolonial period. Reddys and Dalits in these villages speak Telugu as well as Kannada, indicating their origin in the Andhra region. The 1897 *Gazetteer of Mysore* lists "Reddis" under the broad category of "Wokkaliga" (Vokkaliga), a label that was applied to a broad swathe of cultivating castes. They constituted one-tenth of the total Wokkaliga population of Bangalore District at that time.

8. Twelve hereditary positions were defined, each linked to a particular caste—Shanbhog (village accountant, a Brahmin), Patel or Gowda (village leader), artisans such as Kammara (Ironsmith), Madiga (Shoemaker), and Kumbara (Potter), and village servants such as Toti/Talliari (Watchman) (Rice 1987:576).

9. Shekhar's family had 2½ acres of land that his grandfather had received as *thoti inam* because he held the position of village watchman.

10. Our interlocutors often used the term "Dalit" while speaking about their political struggles, but also referred to themselves as Adi Karnataka, Adi Dravida or Chalavadi.

11. In Mysore, as in much of southern India, castes were traditionally divided into left- and right-hand categories.

12. The terms "yellow belt" and "green belt" derive from the Bangalore Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP), in which yellow designates land zoned for residential purposes while green is for land (mostly on the periphery of the city) reserved for agriculture or other non-urban uses (see Nair 2005:158–61). Villages brought into the BBMP in 2007 were automatically re-zoned as yellow, setting off a land rush in peri-urban areas.

13. Benjamin and Raman (2011) note the increased competition in Bengaluru for land categorized as "common" or *kharab* (unsurveyed vacant land). Such lands were earlier distributed to the poor, but since the 1990s it has been increasingly allocated to infrastructure and real estate projects. Cf. Nair (2005:160).

14. A layout is a development carried out on agricultural land which has been partially developed and divided into plots for sale. Such plots are considered by middle-class urban residents to be good investments, as land prices (in the popular imagination) "always go up." The phenomenon of agricultural land turned into empty layouts—a common sight on the outskirts of smaller cities as well—points to the democratization of "speculative urbanism" and the popularization of land as a key site of accumulation (Upadhya 2018, 2021).

15. The term refers to residential colonies formed on land in the records of the Revenue Department (mainly agricultural land).

16. Buyers of such plots receive "*B-khata*" documents, which they can later use to regularize the property. "*B-khata*" refers to a separate BBMP register where irregular properties are listed for tax purposes (the "*A-khata*" register is for authorized properties). Such conversions are common in Bengaluru (526,000 properties are currently listed in the *B-khata*), hence the BBMP periodically tries to regularize these properties to generate tax revenues, a move that has been opposed by civic activists (see: https://www.deccanherald.com/city/bengaluru-infrastructure/bbmp-could-legalise-25-lakh-b-khata-properties-to-generate-revenue-827922.html). The state government's

Akrama-Sakrama ("illegal-legal") regularization scheme has met with similar opposition. The constant pressure to regularize properties created in violation of laws and planning norms illustrates the entrenched informality of urban development (Roy 2009).

17. Grant land carries only conditional rights. For example, land can be transferred only within the same eligible category (such as SC) and after a specified period of time (usually 25 years). However, there are many ways to circumvent these restrictions, as we show here.

18. *Gomala* and "waste" lands have periodically been distributed to landless households (Karanth 1992), but Dalits and other marginalized groups may also hold "encroached" land which has been regularized, which is known as "Bagair Hukum" (Gopal 2015:149). Title to both kinds of land tends to be unclear because of their complicated genealogies. According to Benjamin and Raman (2011:49), the land record computerization programme in Karnataka reduced numerous forms of land tenure to a single category, such that only one type of document—one that many marginal cultivators may not possess—is now considered legal title by the courts. They argue that this change facilitated the accumulation of land by dominant groups while further marginalizing groups whose titles to land were unclear.

19. The names of the specific organizations with which our interlocutors are associated are anonymized with acronyms. Units of several Dalit organizations are active in G-halli and neighboring villages, including Dalit Sangharsh Samithi (DSS, the oldest Dalit association in Karnataka), Ambedkar Wada (a Congress Party-affiliated organization), Bhima Wada, and others. We have not provided more background on Dalit movements in Karnataka or their engagements in land struggles in the city because it is beyond the scope of this paper and the Special Issue, although this wider context would be important to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the complex connections between the land transition and Dalit activism.

20. One crore = 10,000,000; one lakh = 100,000.

21. While recreational facilities for the village can be developed on green belt land with government permission, the prohibitive membership fees at G-halli Club (2 to 3 lakh rupees per year) clearly exclude all but the richest villagers.

22. The GPA is a document often used in informal transactions through brokers as an intermediate step to conveying the land to the final buyer. GPAs are also used to hold land in "*benami*" (literally, "without name"). The quasi-legal domain constituted by the circulation of such instruments helps to explain how caste power works in tandem with (or against) the (fractured and porous) state in quotidian practices of accumulation. This is an example of what Gururani (2013) terms "flexible planning," in which informal and formal processes and institutions are deeply interdigitated.

23. We are not aware of the outcome of these cases.

24. We cannot verify to what extent Dalits actually held land in the past or how or when they lost it. However, the fact that several Dalit respondents related the same story of how Dalit lands fell into the hands of Reddys—about how they went into debt due to heavy expenditure on the village festival—this seems to be more like a caste "origin myth" than a collective memory. These narratives merge into accounts of more recent land-grabbing by Reddys, for which there is sufficient documentary evidence.

25. "Sheet house" refers to the use of corrugated metal or asbestos sheets for roofing, a marker of poor housing.

ABSTRACTS

Building on recent literature that explores how the social logics of older agrarian formations are refracted in processes of urbanization, the paper foregrounds the significance of caste in rapidly changing peri-urban spaces. Drawing on extended fieldwork in several villages on the outskirts of Bengaluru, it shows how the twin scaffoldings of agrarian society—caste and land—are reconfigured as the values of land change in this zone of transition. Caste identity not only structures who can participate in, or prosper from, the transformation of agrarian land into urban real estate—it is also refashioned and deployed in new ways, especially through the politics of land. This study demonstrates why caste should be understood as a social structure of accumulation, whose specific modes of operation are defined by regionally rooted histories of development and memories of oppression and struggle.

INDEX

Keywords: agrarian transition, peri-urban, land markets, caste, Bengaluru, India, accumulation

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