

Recasting Land: Agrarian Urbanism in Amaravati

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Abstract

The article explores how the unfolding of the Amaravati project in Andhra Pradesh, India, was shaped by the region's caste-based agrarian social and political formation. It shows how caste structures not only access to land, resources and power, but also the agrarian land transition in the context of a 'new city' project. In particular, caste structured the process of land pooling as well as the land market due to the historical embedding of caste in the land governance system. The article outlines two major ways in which caste inequalities and tensions were reproduced and sharpened—the rapid dispossession of Dalits by the unleashing of a speculative land market, and their marginalisation in the land pooling process. These processes are attributed to the institutionalisation of caste within the land revenue bureaucracy and the entrenchment of caste power and ideology within and beyond the state in the Coastal Andhra region, leading to a caste-based 'land grab'. In response, Dalits mounted opposition to their marginalisation by framing unequal compensation for assigned lands and the alienation of assigned lands as manifestations of caste oppression. The eruption of caste struggles around land in what was supposed to become India's first 'fully planned' city illustrates a key dimension of 'agrarian urbanisation' in contemporary India.

Keywords

agrarian land, caste, Amaravati, India, land pooling, new city project

Guntur, 15 July 2019: Two persons, including a retired tahsildar of Thullur, were arrested on 15 July in Guntur in connection with the Amaravati land scam that took place during the erstwhile TDP regime in Andhra Pradesh. The Thullur police in Guntur district arrested the retired tahsildar (mandal revenue officer) Anne Sudhir Babu (62) and Gummadi Suresh on Wednesday. The police said that Gummadi Suresh from Vijayawada was arrested on charges of illegally buying assigned lands that were being cultivated by the Dalits.

Sudhir Babu ... is accused of manipulating land records in connivance with some TDP leaders. The police said that it was a case of wilful and wrongful transfer of assigned lands and interference with the rights of the landless and poor Schedule Caste (SC) people. (*Newsmeter Network*, 2020)

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This excerpt from a news article provides a glimpse into an issue that erupted around Dalit lands in the villages where a new capital city for the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh was to be built. The ‘Amaravati’ project was the brainchild of N. Chandrababu Naidu, leader of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), which led the state government between 2014 and 2019. The announcement of this urban mega-project drove up land values in the area, leading to extensive transfers of land to outside investors and rich landlords. Allegations that ruling party politicians had accumulated large parcels of land swirled around the project from its inception, but it was only after the TDP was defeated by the YSR Congress Party (led by the current Chief Minister Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy) in the state elections of May 2019 that concrete evidence of these alleged ‘land scams’ began to emerge.

The appropriation of Dalit ‘assigned lands’ was only a footnote to the larger story of self-aggrandisement by powerful actors who profited from the land boom in Amaravati.¹ But, as I show in this article, the struggle that unfolded around the Dalit land issue threw into sharp relief how ‘agrarian regimes of land and property endure and co-produce the urban’ (Gururani, 2019, p. 14). I explore how a caste-ordered agrarian economy, and the embedding of caste in the governance of land, structured the politics of land in the context of planned urbanisation. In particular, I argue that the colonial inscription of caste in the land revenue system, largely reproduced by the postcolonial state, magnified caste inequalities as agrarian land was reallocated for urban development. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the conflicts that arose around land sales, property rights and urban citizenship took the shape of caste contestations.

This article draws on regular short-term periods of fieldwork carried out in Vijayawada and the capital region villages between 2013 and 2019. Research included formal and informal interviews with numerous village and town residents, government officials, activists, journalists and other interlocutors; observations of meetings and events; and analysis of official documents and media reports. This article draws on this large archive of research material, particularly on interviews with local and regional Dalit and other political leaders and activists.

In the next section, I discuss recent literature on the neoliberalisation of India’s development agenda, the resulting struggles around land and the heightening of caste inequalities in this context. The third section provides an overview of the Amaravati project against the background of the caste-based social order and regional politics in Coastal Andhra. The fourth section traces the colonial genealogy of the inscription of caste in land governance, while the fifth section describes the conflicts that erupted around land pooling for the Amaravati project and the alienation of Dalit lands. In the sixth section, I examine the mobilisation of Dalits around these issues. The article concludes by highlighting why caste should be placed at the centre of research on agrarian urbanisation in India.

Neoliberal Development, Agrarian Land and Caste

As a growing body of work has documented, land stands at the centre of the extensive and dramatic changes initiated by economic reforms in India since the 1990s. The sharply increasing demand for land for infrastructure development, Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and new townships has resulted in the dispossession and dislocation of rural communities across the country, as agricultural and common land are acquired or purchased, put to other uses or used for speculative gain (Cross, 2014; Levien, 2018; Ramachandraiah & Srinivasan, 2011; Sampat 2010, 2017), driving up land prices and setting in motion other transformations and contestations (Shatkin, 2017). These changes are driven by the logic of ‘neoliberal urbanisation’ (Peck et al., 2009), as state and municipal governments acquire occupied but ‘underutilised’ land for infrastructure, industrial and urban development projects, to raise financial

resources by monetising land (Goldman, 2020; Sud, 2014, 2017), or to facilitate inflows of private capital for real estate development (Goldman, 2011; Searle, 2016). The series of ‘greenfield city’ and ‘infrastructure corridor’ projects initiated by the central and state governments exemplifies this model of economic development, in which the state paves the way for private capital investment and speculative accumulation through land acquisition (Balakrishnan, 2013; Datta, 2015; Kennedy & Sood, 2016; Sampat, 2016). Researchers have focussed particularly on the protests and struggles that have erupted across the country in response to this land grab (Levien, 2013; Nielsen, 2017, 2018).

These processes operate differently across India’s regions, as land-hungry projects unfold against complex social landscapes where ‘market’ and ‘state’ institutions interdigitate in specific ways and diverse actors enter land markets and engage in a new politics of land (Shatkin, 2016; Sud, 2021). Conflicts around land are shaped by historically embedded structures of property and social power (Balakrishnan, 2018; Kennedy, 2020; Steur, 2015), leading to the reproduction or sharpening of caste and class inequalities (Agarwal & Levien, 2020; Das, 2019; Levien, 2015). The ‘cultivation of new, non-agrarian spaces of accumulation’ (Nielsen et al., 2020, p. 7) has reinforced the exclusion and dispossession of Dalits in particular. A recent collection of essays on India’s ‘land wars’ demonstrates how ‘caste consistently mediates land transfers in present-day India by pre-empting, undermining or fuelling processes of social contestation’ (Nielsen et al., 2020, pp. 1–2).

This literature resonates with recent calls by postcolonial urban scholars to attend to how southern cities and towns have been shaped by their regional and agrarian locations (Nair, 2013). As Gururani (2019, p. 14) argues, in South Asia ‘agrarian regimes of land and property endure and coproduce the urban’—a convergence that she terms ‘agrarian urbanism’. The entanglements of the ‘urban’ (a category that is increasingly difficult to sustain) with agrarian formations of social power and property are well illustrated in emerging literature on the peri-urban (Gururani & Dasgupta, 2018). Several studies highlight how deeply embedded configurations of class, caste and gender structure the fraught processes through which agricultural land is transformed into urban real estate, as ‘changing relations of caste and land produce an uneven geography of spatial value’ (Gururani, 2019, p. 14). Studies of peri-urban spaces find that agrarian elites are usually best placed to profit from the activation of land markets and also capture the benefits of new economic opportunities, while small landholders and landless groups are further marginalised by the transformation of land into real estate (Cowan, 2018; Sarkar, 2015). In this context, caste emerges as a particularly significant axis of differentiation and struggle (Upadhyya & Rathod, 2021).

Across India, regional political economies and agrarian class formations have long been structured by caste-based forms of control over land (Lerche, 2015; Lerche & Shah, 2018). Thus, to understand how ‘agrarian regimes of territory, land and property are implicated and inscribed in ongoing urban land use changes’ (Balakrishnan, 2019, p. 2), we need to unravel the variable historical entanglements of land and caste across different regions. This in turn will allow us to understand how caste facilitates accumulation by some groups while marginalising others, and in particular how caste works to produce and distribute value differentially during an agrarian land transition.

In this article, I focus on one dimension of Andhra’s regional agrarian regime—the embedding of caste in the system of land governance—and how it has shaped the agrarian–urban land transition in the case of Amaravati. In particular, I trace the consequences of the caste-based differentiation between ‘assigned lands’ (possessed mainly by Dalits) and regular *patta* (freehold) lands for processes of accumulation and marginalisation in the context of planned urbanisation. I argue that the agrarian social order, scaffolded by institutionalised state practices which govern control over land, reproduced caste inequality and exclusion in the land pooling system. Dalits were also marginalised by the booming land

market, exacerbating their dispossession. These developments did not go unchallenged, however, as affected Dalits mounted strong protests against this unequal treatment that highlighted the central role of caste in the production of the new capital.

Before turning to an account of these land struggles, in the next section I provide a brief overview of the agrarian structure in Coastal Andhra and describe the planning and implementation of the Amaravati project.

Amaravati: A ‘New City’ Project in an Agrarian Region

The southern Indian region of Coastal Andhra includes the districts of Guntur, Krishna and East and West Godavari, encompassing the agriculturally productive deltas of the Krishna and Godavari rivers as well as upland areas with ‘dry’ (unirrigated) lands. The region formed part of Madras Presidency during the colonial period and became the economic, cultural and political core of the new state of Andhra Pradesh (AP) when it was created in 1956 by joining the districts of Coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema with the Telugu-speaking districts of the erstwhile Hyderabad princely state. The three regions that made up undivided Andhra Pradesh have historically been dominated, politically and economically, by different caste groups or alliances of castes—Rayalaseema by Reddys (a large caste category that includes a range of endogamous groups), Telangana by Reddys and Velamas (a powerful landowning caste of the region), and Coastal Andhra by Kammas as well as other ‘peasant’ castes such as Kapus and Rajus (Srinivasulu, 2002). These differences have long been reflected in the politics of regionalism (Mitchell, 2009) which eventually led to the Telangana struggle and its separation from Andhra Pradesh in 2014.

With state bifurcation, the capital city of Hyderabad remained with Telangana, leaving the residual state of Andhra Pradesh without a capital. Rather than designating an existing urban centre as the state capital, the newly elected state government, led by N. Chandrababu Naidu of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), decided to build a new, ultra-modern city which would also serve as the state’s primary ‘engine of growth’ (Upadhya, 2018). After much debate about an appropriate location, a rural area in Guntur district on the banks of the Krishna River, just across from the major regional town of Vijayawada, was selected for the project. To achieve his ambition of creating a well-planned ‘world-class’ city, Naidu requested the Singapore government to help design the master plan.

The first phase of the Amaravati development plan covered an area of 217 sq km, encompassing 29 villages in Thullur, Mangalagiri and Tadepalli mandals (administrative sub-divisions of taluks), with a total population of around 100,000. Of the 54,000 acres required for the project, 38,000 acres (15,400 hectares) was privately held agricultural land while the remainder was ‘government land’. To assemble land for the project, the state government decided against compulsory land acquisition (which may have led to strong protests) and opted instead for a ‘voluntary’ land pooling (LP) scheme, in which landowners were invited to surrender their holdings to the government in return for smaller ‘developed’ plots in the new city. The Amaravati project exemplified the ‘neoliberal’ shift in India’s development agenda discussed above, which promotes urbanisation as an engine of economic growth. Such projects depend on private capital investments, incentivised through various modes of ‘land-based financing’ such as land pooling (Balakrishnan, 2017).

The land pooling process was initiated in January 2015, and by the end of 2017, around 34,000 acres of the targeted land (89 per cent) had been acquired from 27,000 households. Elsewhere (Upadhya, 2020), I have elaborated on why the Amaravati land pooling scheme went through relatively smoothly,

in contrast to the agitations that have been provoked by land acquisition—and even by land pooling (Levien, 2018)—in other parts of India. As noted above, Coastal Andhra is strongly identified with, and economically and politically dominated by, the Kammas—a wealthy agricultural, landowning and business community which also provides the main political and financial support for the TDP. According to some observers, this equation between the TDP, Kammas and the Coastal Andhra region explains the selection of Guntur district as the site of the new capital (Upadhya, 2017). Further, the majority of land in all but five of the 29 Amaravati villages is in the hands of Kammas. The political allegiance of Kamma farmers to the TDP and Chandrababu Naidu motivated many to participate in land pooling (Ramachandraiah, 2016; Upadhya, 2020).

The major Scheduled Castes (SCs) of Andhra are the Malas and Madigas.² In contrast to Kammas and other middle-ranked cultivating castes of Coastal Andhra (Kapus, Reddys and Rajus), these communities have historically been denied land ownership and are dependent on agricultural wage labour for their livelihoods.³ While most Dalits continue in this occupation, some have become tenant farmers or have acquired small or marginal holdings—mainly ‘assigned’ lands which are granted by the government to the poor for cultivation. The difference in the kinds of rights in land held by Dalits and dominant caste cultivators became a crucial pivot for the conflicts that emerged in the context of land pooling for the Amaravati project, as I explain below.

While many Kamma farmers participated willingly (or sometimes reluctantly) in the LP scheme, Dalits and members of other marginalised communities were largely excluded from the process—and not only because most such households were landless. The majority of pooled land was privately owned *patta* land (freehold property) belonging mainly to forward caste and OBC cultivators. Only a small proportion of land (around 2,200 acres) within the project zone consisted of ‘assigned lands’, which had been granted mainly to Dalits under land distribution schemes. It was this land that became one of the main points of contention as the land pooling scheme unfolded. To understand these contestations, in the next section I provide a brief history of the category of ‘assigned land’.

Governing Land Through Caste: Colonial and Postcolonial Genealogies

Viswanath’s (2014) history of caste in Madras Presidency illustrates in telling detail how ‘customary’ agrarian relations (defined by caste) were inscribed into land revenue administration and law by the colonial state. For example, in some Tamil districts, the *mirasidari* land revenue settlement confirmed the exclusive claims of particular caste groups to land, legitimising the dependence of landless labourers on them. In response to numerous petitions by ‘Pariahs’ (former ‘Untouchables’), the colonial authorities finally granted them rights to ‘wastelands’ that they were already cultivating. But, crucially, they were only given conditional occupancy rights and not *pattas*, or proprietary rights (Basu, 2008). Recipients of grant land were considered tenants rather than owners and were not allowed to alienate the land (Viswanath, 2014, pp. 159–160).

In most of Coastal Andhra, the ‘ryotwari’ (*raiyyatwari*) land revenue settlement (referring to ‘ryots’ or *raiyyats*, considered to be the ‘actual cultivators’ of the land) was implemented, apart from a few pockets of zamindari settlement.⁴ The settlement essentially established private property rights over land, and the detailed records of rights that were created at that time still form the main source of claims to land in the region. As in the Tamil districts, the colonial state also granted limited land rights to Panchamas in Kistna (Krishna) and Guntur districts, as a welfare measure for the ‘poor’ (Viswanath, 2014, pp. 171 *ff.*). Indeed, as discussed in the following section, some Dalit communities affected by the Amaravati plan were

cultivating lands that were granted to them prior to independence. Thus, the differentiation between Dalit ‘assigned lands’ and regular *patta* (freehold) lands has a clear colonial genealogy.

This caste-differentiated mode of land governance has been reproduced in postcolonial land distribution schemes through the category of ‘assigned lands’, also marked by conditional property rights—they are inheritable but not transferable or alienable—in contrast to the full property rights of *patta* lands. Eligibility for land assignment has been redefined away from socially marginalised groups (e.g., Scheduled Castes) to economic categories such as ‘below poverty line’ (BPL) households. But as Viswanath argues, the overlap between these categories is not coincidental—colonial discourses and governance practices first delinked caste from questions of land and labour and then reconnected them in state welfare schemes that sought to make the ‘Panchama a paradigmatic laborer’ (Viswanath, 2014, p. 188) who, by definition, cannot enjoy land rights on par with dominant caste cultivators. Although land titling programmes today are aimed at the ‘poor’, ‘they are still heavily determined by caste and are imbued with value-laden social stereotypes about personhood and capabilities corresponding to different groups’ (Jonnalagadda et al., 2021, p. 5).

Moreover, the fact that land distribution programmes are carried out by the Revenue Department (the main bureaucratic apparatus for governing agricultural land) means that they are marked by the legacy of colonial paternalism, which viewed Panchamas as profligate and undisciplined (Viswanath, 2014, p. 160). The distinction between ‘proper’ cultivators belonging to the upper and dominant castes, and lower-caste subjects, who cultivate grant or other kinds of lands (if at all), has become entrenched in the categories, record-keeping processes and rules and procedures of the land administration bureaucracy.

The Andhra Pradesh government initiated formal land distribution programmes for landless and poor households in 1954, but it was only in the 1970s that these schemes were expanded and steps were taken to ensure that assigned lands remain in the hands of the assignees (Ramachandraiah & Venkateswarlu, 2014).⁵ It is important to note that land assignment often simply recognises long-standing occupation and cultivation of ‘wastelands’ (categorised as ‘government lands’) by the ‘beneficiaries’ (indeed, the first such programme in the state was called ‘wasteland distribution’), yet is represented as a ‘gift’ or beneficence from the state rather than an entitlement or confirmation of existing usage. In undivided Andhra Pradesh, the large majority of assignees belonged to Scheduled Castes and other marginalised communities (Rama Rao & Murthy, 1980, p. 64).

Control over land has thus become a key instrument in the hands of the postcolonial state, through which it can engage in paternalistic ‘welfare’ activities (such as land redistribution) but also foster ‘development’ by acquiring and allocating land for infrastructure, industrial and other mega-projects. Dalits have become key subjects of both countervailing agendas—while they are recipients of grant lands, they are also the first to lose their land when it is acquired in the name of ‘development’. This is because assigned lands are regarded as ‘government lands’, which have been granted only for poor households to use—even when the land has been cultivated by the same family for decades.⁶ Grant land can be resumed at any time by the state, without compensation, when required for some ‘public purpose’, and so is often the first to be acquired for government projects (Balagopal, 2007; Nielsen et al., 2020; Oskarsson, 2013). Thus, land distribution programmes allow the state to patronise certain groups while also expanding the scope for dispossession.

In these and other ways, assigned land stands in opposition to *patta* land, which carries full property rights and is mainly possessed by non-Dalit castes. Through the category of ‘assigned land’, land distribution programmes create a ‘subaltern category of property’ (Jonnalagadda et al., 2021). The inscription of caste in land governance categories and procedures in turn shapes processes of land acquisition and resultant struggles, as I show below in the case of Amaravati.

Land and Caste in a New City Project

The land pooling scheme for the Amaravati project, when announced by the Andhra Pradesh government in late 2014, offered a ‘package’ of 1,000 sq yd residential land plus 300 sq yd commercial plot per acre of irrigated land pooled, and 1,000 residential sq yd + 100 commercial sq yd for ‘dry’ or unirrigated *patta* land.⁷ Most of the land in the capital zone was unirrigated or ‘dry’ (rainfed), producing only one crop of cotton or maize a year. For this reason, many landowners in the dry villages were happy to pool their land or sell it at dramatically increased prices. In contrast, farmers in the more prosperous ‘wet’ villages adjoining the Krishna River were unhappy with the deal because their land was more valuable, and they negotiated with the government for an increase in the ‘package’ (Upadhyaya, 2020). Finally, they arrived at an acceptable formula of ‘1000+450’ for multi-cropped, irrigated (*jareebu*) land and ‘1000+250’ for dry land.

In addition to the reconstituted plots, land pooling households are given an annual ‘lease’ payment of ₹30,000 per acre for dry land and ₹50,000 for irrigated land, for a period of 10 years, to compensate for the loss of agricultural income. In contrast, landless households in the affected villages receive a monthly ‘pension’ of ₹2,500, also for 10 years, to tide them over while they search for alternative employment. This amount is grossly insufficient to sustain a family, which created deep discontent amongst landless residents who lost their livelihoods with the cessation of cultivation.⁸ The highly uneven compensation provided to landowners (mainly Kammas) and agricultural workers (mainly Dalits) lays bare the unequal political influence and social value of these groups in the eyes of the state. As I argue in more detail below, the differential treatment of cultivators and labourers flows not simply from their ‘class’ positions (defined here by landholding), but also from their locations within an entrenched caste system which has long structured social power in this region.

The Amaravati project was unusual in India for the ease with which land was assembled, despite pockets of resistance. As noted above, there was a strong alignment between Kammas and the ruling TDP, and Kamma farmers largely embraced the imagination of the new city promoted by Chandrababu Naidu and believed in the prosperous future it promised. Thus, caste played an important ideological and political role in the success of land pooling, while also reinforcing divisions and inequalities. Indeed, local people speak openly about how the ‘caste factor’ helped the government obtain ‘consent’ for the project, pointing out that this area was chosen for the new capital because of the preponderance of ‘Kamma villages’.

Another reason for the success of land pooling was that many Kamma landowners saw the project as an opportunity to realise the value of their lands in a context of declining agricultural incomes (Ramachandraiah, 2016). Many leveraged their control over land by selling a portion of their holdings to outside investors before pooling the rest, using the proceeds to buy land or property in other places, build rental units, or start small businesses—thereby profiting from the activation of the land market as well as land pooling. Vakulabharanam and Prasad (2017) argue that the government’s decision to allow owners to sell their land even after land pooling papers had been filed also helped persuade farmers to pool their land: ‘As most of these buyers were closely linked to the political class, the government was able to facilitate and quickly wrap up the process of registration’ (Vakulabharanam & Prasad, 2017, p. 71).

Caste identity also provided the social networks and political leverage for Kamma farmers to negotiate with the government to maximise their gains from the project and keep Dalits from participating on the same footing. The land pooling scheme created a new constituency of ‘capital area farmers’, or ‘LP (land pooling) farmers’, who came to view themselves as important stakeholders in the Amaravati project. They formed associations to collectively represent their interests to the CRDA (Capital Region Development Authority—the parastatal agency in charge of the project) and the state government, and

kept close watch over development works, the allocation of plots and other aspects of the project, to ensure that their interests were protected (Upadhya, 2020).

In contrast, Dalits—both landless and landholders—were systematically marginalised as the project unfolded. The few Dalits who owned land lacked the social connections and political influence to stake a claim as equal partners, unlike the Kamma farmers. However, small and marginal Dalit landowners did not simply accept their exclusion—instead, several mobilised to pressure the government to protect their rights and to claim equality in the new city. In the next section, I describe these exclusions and the contestations that erupted around them.

Struggling for Equality in the ‘World-class City’

The first controversy concerned the question of compensation for assigned lands. Assigned lands are found in most of the capital area villages. While most are rainfed and unproductive, an important sub-category of assigned lands—*lanka* (island) lands, located in or on the banks of the Krishna River—were productive and sustained lucrative commercial farming for many Dalit farmers. The specific issues that arose around *lanka* lands are discussed below.

As noted in the previous section, assigned lands are considered ‘government land’ and so can generally be resumed by the state without compensation. Accordingly, the Andhra Pradesh state government initially excluded assigned lands from the LP scheme, planning to simply reclaim them, even though these lands had been cultivated by the assignees for decades. However, politically aware Dalits quickly mounted resistance to this injustice. Explaining their objections, ‘Babu’⁹—a Dalit leader—said:

We have not asked anyone not to give their land [for pooling], we are not saying they should not construct the capital here. We are just asking for a good package. Why can’t we be treated equally?

After a two-year struggle, the protesters succeeded in getting assigned lands included in the LP scheme, but the compensation provided was less than that for regular *patta* lands. The government’s stance, as explained by a CRDA official, was that assigned lands are granted only for cultivation and are non-alienable, hence they are classified differently from lands with *pakka pattas* (title deeds) and transferable rights. The revised LP scheme designated six categories of assigned lands, defined according to when the land was granted, whether it had been sold or not, and who had current possession, and a different ‘package’ was given to each category. Only land granted prior to 1954 enjoyed the same compensation as *patta* lands, while land assigned after that date (the majority of assigned lands) was given less compensation.¹⁰ In contrast, other categories of assigned land, such as that granted to former servicemen and ‘freedom fighters’ (in recognition of their service to the nation), received the regular *patta* package—clearly demonstrating discrimination against beneficiaries of land distribution schemes that benefitted the ‘poor’ or Dalits.

Another injustice mentioned by several Dalit interlocutors was that even after signing the consent forms for pooling, the annuity of ₹30,000/₹50,000 was not forthcoming, whereas *patta* holders were receiving the ‘lease’ payments regularly. The CRDA offered various excuses for this delay—the land records were unclear so they could not determine the rightful recipient, or the land had been sold without permission and so was eligible only for the ‘encroached land’ package (which does not include annuity). While on the surface it was the administrative status of assigned lands or the fuzziness of titles that created these problems, the caste basis of differential treatment of assigned lands becomes clear from

other issues faced by Dalits. For example, some assigned landholders had applied for the pension for landless households after they were told that their land would be resumed by the government. A human rights lawyer (and local landowner) who was active in opposing land pooling said, ‘Once you take the pension and sign the document which declares you are landless, that will become a weapon for the government to say that they own no land’. Conversely, those who applied for land pooling were not eligible to receive the monthly pension for landless households, since by definition they had declared that they own land—thereby trapping them in a ‘legal limbo’ (Kolsto, 2017, p. 55).

It is important to note here that assigned lands were brought into the LP scheme only after most of these lands had been sold by Dalits to absentee landlords and local Kammas. This brings us to the second major controversy that erupted in the context of land pooling—the widespread alienation of Dalit lands, driven by the booming land market.

Alienation of Dalit Lands

Because of the speculative land boom that followed the decision on the site of the new capital, assigned lands began to pass out of the hands of Dalits—a process that continued even after a ‘package’ for assigned lands had been announced. Most Dalits were forced to sell at low prices—in contrast to many Kamma farmers who benefitted from both land pooling and the land market.¹¹ Babu articulated this difference: ‘Upper caste people in our village [Kammas] sold a quarter of an acre for 5–6 million, but even if we sell one acre it would not fetch 5 million, as our lands are assigned lands’.¹² Although there are no reliable figures on how much assigned land had been sold, ‘Narayana’, a local CPI-M activist, estimated that 80 per cent of the approximately 2,000 acres of assigned lands in the capital region had been alienated. Allegations that land was sold to TDP politicians in particular (Ramachandraiah, 2016, p. 73) have been supported by recent government investigations.¹³

During fieldwork, many narratives emerged from Dalits about how they lost their land, as well as about the disputes that arose because of these sales as land values increased. It was difficult at first to understand why they would sell at low prices in a boom situation, but the reasons gradually became clear from multiple conversations. First, local politicians and government officials had informed assigned landholders that their land would not be included in land pooling, which led to panic sales by assignees who hoped to realise at least some value from their lands before they were resumed by the government. Second, even after assigned lands were included in the LP scheme, many Dalits preferred to sell because they would get more money than what the inadequate package provided. Third, Dalit landholders found it easier to sell rather than try to negotiate the bureaucratic maze of the land pooling system—especially since their documents were often missing or unclear, making it difficult to prove their claims.

Fourth, Dalits could not easily sell their land in the open market because of the restrictions on the transfer of assigned land. Buyers took advantage of this conditionality by purchasing assigned lands through informal ‘agreements’, in which a small portion of the price (usually 10 per cent) was paid up front and the balance after the land was registered in the purchaser’s name.¹⁴ According to Narayana, such deals carry little risk for the buyers because if for some reason the transfer gets blocked, the buyer stands to lose only the advance payment.¹⁵ Such buyers are essentially wealthy land speculators who ‘gamble’ on the purchase of assigned lands, using ‘black money’ (unaccounted funds or cash); for them, occasionally forfeiting the advance payment is not a major loss. Moreover, the (mostly Kamma) buyers had the political and bureaucratic connections and finances needed to sort out the paperwork with the Revenue Department. As indicated by the news article quoted at the beginning of the article, several

cases of manipulation of land records by government officials—presumably enabled by strategic under-the-table payments—came to light after the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) government took office in 2019. Pointing out the caste-based differential treatment of such sales by the state, Babu said:

When I purchased assigned land, I was served a notice saying that the transaction was illegal and that the land will be taken over by the government. I told them, first you should take back the land from the upper-caste people who illegally purchased assigned lands from SC farmers.

Dalits were placed at a disadvantage in such sales because they did not receive the full price at once and so could not utilise the proceeds productively by investing in other land or property or in small businesses—in contrast to Kammas who sold land outright. Consequently, according to our interlocutors, many Dalits ‘wasted’ the money they received from selling their land. Caste segmented the land market not only with regard to assigned lands but also for *patta* lands owned by Dalits. Narayana related his own experience:

I owned regular patta land which I sold for 1.19 crore an acre, whereas land belonging to a Kamma just adjacent to my field fetched 1.5 crore. The excuse given by the broker was that there are so many legal issues [property disputes] in SC families, so you can’t expect the same price. Dalit lands always go for less.

Through this systematic ‘land grab’, Kammas as a community increased their control over land in the capital area villages, while many Dalits with small and marginal holdings became landless.

Several studies have shown that small and marginal landowners are often the first to sell when land markets heat up, and consequently, they receive lower returns compared to larger landowners who can hold out for higher prices (Levien, 2015; Vijayabaskar & Menon, 2018). But in this case, it was not just differences in landholding status that made it more difficult for Dalits to participate in the land market or the LP scheme; the ‘caste factor’ clearly worked to produce this differentiation. For example, the Revenue Department passed an ordinance stating that under the land pooling scheme, the compensation could be given to the *current* owner of assigned land, that is, the person who purchased the land rather than the original assignee—even though the transfer of assigned land is prohibited by law. This ordinance, which was widely seen as a mechanism to grab Dalit lands, was reversed by the YSR Congress Party government in December 2019, which ordered that the compensation plots would be given only to the actual assignees (*Hindustan Times*, 2019).

Bureaucratic Ambiguities and Confusions: The Case of Lanka Lands

The agitation around assigned lands was initiated mainly by Dalits from the riverfront village of Uddandarayunipalem (UD Palem), who cultivate a category of assigned lands known as ‘*lanka* lands’. *Lanka* lands are situated on the floodplains of the Krishna river as well as on islands in the river. These lands, which are found in several villages of the capital region, have been cultivated by Dalits since before independence. *Lanka* farmers spoke about how their grandfathers or great-grandfathers had brought the lands under cultivation, giving them a sense of entitlement. However, *lanka* lands are not found on village revenue maps, and their physical area expands and shrinks over time with the ebb and flow of the river—giving rise to numerous disputes over the years about boundaries and cultivation rights. They are now regarded as assigned lands, but their geographical peculiarities and complex administrative status created particularly thorny issues in the context of land pooling. These lands also

became a major site of controversy because the Amaravati Master Plan included extensive plans to develop high-end recreational and other facilities along the river front and on the islands in the Krishna River (Figure 1)—on the same land that was under cultivation by Dalits. In this section, I present examples of these issues from UD Palem and a neighbouring village, Rayapudi, to illustrate how land governance categories and rules may operate to dispossess Dalits when land becomes the target of acquisition by state or capital.

In 1975, rights to the *lanka* lands of UD Palem were granted to a Harijan Cooperative Society, which initially included 125 families and held a total of 450 acres. Later the land was divided amongst the individual households, who received ‘D-Form *pattas*’ (locally called ‘DK *pattas*’) for their plots. DK *pattas* confer conditional rights to cultivate land, rather than full ownership. The *lanka* lands of UD Palem are highly fertile and these cultivators prospered from growing crops for the market such as guava, sugar cane, banana, turmeric, and vegetables (Figure 2)—especially after 1984 when the Society received funding from the SC Corporation to install borewells. Farmers also secured agricultural bank loans by pledging their *pattadar* passbooks, which they provided as evidence of their land rights.

The story of the Rayapudi *lanka* is similar—the land was initially granted to a cooperative society but was later divided amongst the member households, which received individual DK *pattas* in 1986. In contrast to the UD Palem *lanka*, the Rayapudi *lanka* lands are situated on islands in the Krishna River

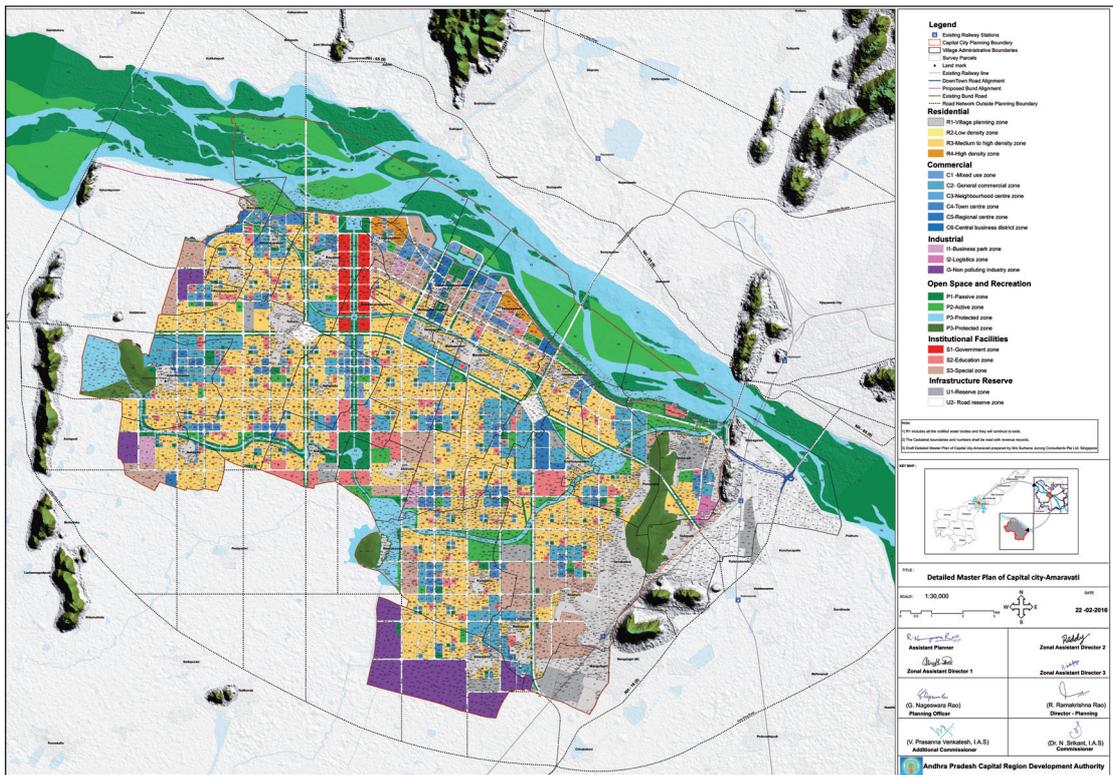


Figure 1. Amaravati Master Plan

Source: <https://crda.ap.gov.in/apcrdav2/views/masterplansDraft.aspx>



Figure 2. Lanka Lands

Source: The author.

and can only be reached from the opposite bank. Due to this inaccessibility, many assigned landholders in Rayapudi had leased out or informally sold their lands to other cultivators much before the capital city project began. Some of these sales had been deemed illegal by the Revenue Department, creating ambiguities about the ‘ownership’ of the land. In addition, plots had been broken up into smaller ones as they were passed down from one generation to the next, making it more difficult to identify the rightful assignees of each land parcel. In addition, according to a Dalit activist, TDP leaders had told the Rayapudi *lanka* farmers that their land would be resumed by the government without compensation, which intimidated them into selling their lands for as little as ₹1–₹1.5 million per acre.

The complex history and tenorial status of *lanka* lands delayed the pooling process because the government could not identify the legitimate holders of each plot (who would be eligible for the land pooling scheme). To resolve this problem, the Guntur District Joint Collector decided to carry out a ‘social enumeration survey’ to ascertain the boundaries and tenure holders of each individual plot of *lanka* land. Several rounds were conducted but each yielded different results.¹⁶ Finally, the Revenue Department identified around 2,000 acres of *lanka* land for pooling and issued notifications to the holders. However, by that time many *lanka* farmers had already sold their lands. Vakulabharanam and Prasad (2017, p. 72) suggest that the survey was a deliberate delaying tactic to create confusion and force *lanka* landholders to sell.

The widespread alienation of *lanka* lands created many disputes amongst the Dalit farmers, as well as between them and the government. One issue was that the surveyors recorded the names of both the buyer and seller for plots that had been sold, but later several original assignees denied that they had sold their lands. In such cases, rather than getting embroiled in a long dispute, the original assignee would often come to an agreement with the buyer to share the compensation. Alternatively, the assignees and

buyers agreed to sell the land to third parties and share the proceeds. The story of the Rayapudi *lanka* lands is just one illustration of the complications and disputes that can arise from the deployment of bureaucratic categories in the context of a state-led agrarian land transition where individual land and tenurial rights, for historical or other reasons, are fuzzy.

In contrast to Rayapudi, UD Palem *lanka* cultivators preferred to fight to be included in the LP scheme rather than sell their lands. According to several interlocutors, UD Palem Dalit *lanka* farmers had prospered from commercial farming and were more politically astute, and it was this group that first raised the demand for an ‘equal package’ for assigned lands. Their desire and ability to organise around this issue also drew on a long history of caste tension between Madigas, who owned *lanka* land in UD Palem, and Kammas of the same village. The theme of caste discrimination emerged consistently in Dalit farmers’ narratives about these issues. When asked if he would give his land for pooling, a Rayapudi cultivator said: ‘Yes, I already went to the office, but they are saying wait as there is no clarity on lanka lands. When it comes to SCs, there is no clarity!’ Another resident declared:

They are delaying solving the lanka land issue so that Dalits sell their lands to others. They don’t want Dalits to grow in the capital city. TDP is Chowdarys, Chowdarys are TDP and Capital is Chowdarys!¹⁷

Similarly, Babu (the Dalit leader from UD Palem) blamed Kamma farmers for the lower package given to assigned lands:

The Kammas here are very casteist. Kamma farmers thought, how can they [SC farmers] get the same package as us? They even asked this question in front of us at a CRDA meeting in Thulluru. In fact, they don’t even let us talk at these meetings. To give an example, when the distribution of the reconstituted plots was taking place here, we went to the meeting to share our problems.¹⁸ The police asked us who we are; when we said that we are UD Palem SC farmers, they said, ‘All you SC farmers come and stand here by the wall’. I nearly died of shame. They did not allow us to go near the stage. All these are humiliations. Because of these humiliations, there is no scope for SC farmers to give their lands happily.

Thus, Dalits’ resentment about such humiliations, underwritten by the regional history of mobilisation against caste oppression and violence (Berg, 2014), played a major role in the resistance by assigned landholders. In the next section, I explore how they mobilised around this issue by foregrounding their exclusion not only by Kammas but also by the state.

Land Struggle as Caste Struggle: Strategies of Mobilisation

The first demand put forth by the protestors was that assigned lands should be given the same package as *jareebu* (multi-cropped, irrigated) *patta* lands. As a Dalit leader explained, pointing to the floor tiles at our feet, ‘My land is separated from patta land by just a bund,¹⁹ yet the government is giving us a different package. Actually, our lands are more fertile than the registration lands’. While the Revenue Department justified the differential treatment of these lands on the basis of administrative categories and rules, Dalits framed it as an issue of caste discrimination. Similarly, Babu recounted the story of their struggle since 2015:

We filed a court case pleading that if our land is to be taken, we should be compensated on the terms given in the Land Acquisition Act, 2013, rather than via pooling. Alternatively, if the government insists on pooling, they should give us the same package as *jareebu* lands. Also, we prayed that if people are not willing to give their

lands they should be left in peace. First Naidu promised us the jareebu package, then it came down to 1,250 square yards, and finally it was brought down further to 1,000 sq yds. Why did he go back on his word?

In mounting their resistance, UD Palem *lanka* farmers took the help of retired Dalit government officers, social activists and opposition parties to make public representations.²⁰ The theme of caste discrimination was articulated repeatedly in their narratives at public meetings and petitions to the courts, government authorities and international bodies. For example, a hearing of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (hereafter, SC Commission) was held in Vijayawada in February 2017, in response to a petition filed on behalf of assigned landholders alleging caste discrimination in the LP scheme. The meeting was well-attended by capital area Dalits, human rights activists, representatives of political parties such as the Dalit Bahujan Front (DBF) and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M),²¹ and several big Kamma farmers who were opposing land pooling. The Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of CRDA, who had been summoned by the Commission, were also present. One of the petitioners, Bhagya Rao of the DBF,²² argued that by giving different packages for Dalit lands, the government was practicing discrimination. Father Francis, a social activist who was the other petitioner, added that assigned landholders had been threatened into pooling their lands for a lower package. He highlighted that the *lanka* lands had not been notified for land pooling or acquisition even though they were clearly included in the Master Plan. Nirmalata, a Vijayawada-based lawyer who had filed court cases on behalf of anti-LP farmers, said that the government is practising a ‘divide and rule policy’ for owners of *patta* and assigned land. Kamamma, a member of the panel, then admonished the CRDA officials for violating the law and the rights of Dalits:

You are discriminating against Dalits by giving a different package for assigned lands. GO 41²³ itself is against Article 14 of the Constitution, and against the 2013 Land Acquisition Act. When the government itself is showing discrimination, where can SCs go? You cannot protect the purchasers of assigned land or force the assignees to share the compensation with the purchasers.

On hearing Kamamma interrogating the CRDA Commissioner so harshly, applause exploded in the room. She then declared that the Commission would recommend suspension of GO 41 and that assigned land should be given the same package as *patta* land. She concluded by asking the Commissioner, ‘Do you want SC people to leave the capital? Is that your thinking?’ The headline for a story on the hearing in a Telugu newspaper the next day read, ‘Do you Want Dalits to Leave the Capital?’

Assigned landholders also made representations at hearings conducted by the World Bank Inspection Panel in September 2017.²⁴ A farmer from UD Palem informed the panel that a proper survey of *lanka* lands had not been carried out. He stated, ‘The CRDA Commissioner had declared before the National Green Tribunal that there are no houses on the *lankas* and the land is not arable!’—pointing out a clear misrepresentation. The following narrative by another *lanka* cultivator illustrates the difficulties they faced because of the Amaravati project:

We have been cultivating these lands for the past 140 years. How can the government now say that we don’t have any title and so we are eligible only for the 600 sq yd package? The land adjacent to ours is *patta* land. Both plots are the same type of land, but we get different packages. We were given DK *patta* in 1979. The Land Acquisition Act, 2013 clearly says that all types of land should be treated equally, but here there are three types of packages. One caste, one package—and another package for politicians! We have gone all the way to the SC Commission with our complaint, but the government here is so adamant. In the entire capital region, the government has never conducted any meeting with SCs.

These narratives illustrate how Dalits and their supporters employed the language of law and justice to press their case, particularly invoking laws that protect Dalit rights and affirm their equal citizenship. These tactics can be viewed as a way of ‘hailing the state’ (Mitchell, 2018), deploying their identity as oppressed Dalits to insist that their grievances be heard and rectified. But in this case, the regional and local states—framed as a ‘Kamma government’—could not be expected to deliver justice, so the protesters shifted scale, bypassing the CRDA administration and state government to present their case directly to national and international bodies.

The case of Dalit assigned lands in Amaravati illustrates how, because of conditional land titling, ‘questions of property and citizenship have become thoroughly entangled in land policies and in the politics of marginalized groups’ (Jonnalagadda et al., 2021, p. 3). Further, ‘the presence of differentiating conditionalities results in land and property claims continuing to be articulated in a moral register and as an object of collective struggle as opposed to individual entitlements’ (Jonnalagadda et al., 2021, p. 7, *italics added*). I emphasise the ‘*collective*’ here because these struggles around assigned lands—while they appear to be about claims to individual property rights and fair compensation—were articulated collectively on the basis of a common (caste) identity. The authors argue, based on their case studies, that the possession of conditional titles may strengthen the moral and legal claims of the dispossessed, thus forcing the government to recognise their right to compensation. But in the case of Amaravati, the conditional titles held by Dalits were deemed insufficient to claim compensation equal to that of *patta* holders. Thus, while the existence of a subaltern category of property opens up spaces for negotiation with the state, it also limits the ability of Dalits to claim equal citizenship. Instead, they must engage in collective mobilisations from a subordinated position that is inscribed in the land administration system itself.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how the unfolding of the Amaravati project was shaped by the caste-based agrarian social formation of the Andhra region. By showing how the process of land pooling was structured by caste, and by exploring the politics of land that was engendered by bureaucratic procedures as well as the speculative land market, I have argued that caste permeates an agrarian land transition set in motion by a neoliberal ‘new city’ project. I have outlined two major ways in which this ‘world-city’ project reproduced and sharpened caste inequalities and tensions—the rapid dispossession of Dalits by the unleashing of a speculative land market and their marginalisation in the implementation of land pooling by the state. I have traced these processes to the institutionalisation of caste within the land revenue bureaucracy and its categories and practices, as well as to the entrenchment of a particular formation of caste power and ideology within and beyond the state in Andhra. The complexity and ambiguity of land documents and property transactions, and the potential for land records to be manipulated at the behest of powerful actors, also facilitated a caste-based ‘land grab’.

On its face, the bureaucratic classification of land has nothing to do with caste, but the inscription of caste in the category of ‘assigned land’ was immediately apparent to those who were marginalised by such government procedures and categories. The close historical entanglement of land and caste evoked a strong response from Dalits to their exclusion from land pooling and the land market—echoing the case of late nineteenth century Panchamas in Madras Presidency, for whom caste struggle and the demand for land were one and the same (Viswanath, 2014). In the Amaravati riverfront villages in particular, political consciousness forged through a long history of caste oppression and struggle in the region (especially between Kammass and Dalits) crystallised in the assigned lands issue. Utilising wider

political networks and organisations to forward their moral claims to the (supralocal) state, and invoking the legal principles of equal citizenship and abolition of caste discrimination, the movement was initiated and led by local Dalits drawing on their collective memory of caste violence. This mobilisation—to press for an equal ‘package’ for their lands, to recoup land that had been ‘sold’ through trickery or coercion, and more broadly to be recognised as legitimate citizens of the new city—points to the potential of subaltern politics to disrupt the best-laid plans of the state and capital.

This analysis demonstrates that caste, understood as a basic structure of social power and agrarian production rooted in control over land, is not simply either reproduced or erased as agricultural land is appropriated for infrastructure projects or real estate development, but configures these processes in variable and subtle ways. This case supports the argument that our understanding of India’s current urban transformation—pushed forward by regional and national states as well as internationally circulating policy prescriptions—would be enriched by a deeper engagement with regional agrarian social structures and histories of land. As Li (2014) argues, ‘land’ is not a natural category because it is intrinsically social; to become a marketable commodity, it needs to be produced as property and reassembled in specific ways. The process of moving agrarian land (for long a marketable commodity in Coastal Andhra) out of agricultural production and into wider circuits of capital accumulation, pushing it into an imagined urban future, is never smooth or straightforward. To build a new city, agrarian land was appropriated for infrastructure development, or carved up, levelled and rematerialised into ‘reconstituted plots’ to be allotted to farmers under the LP scheme. Land was also converted into a financial asset to be monetised by the state and investors. Through these processes, land traverses multiscalar and ramifying pathways striated by entrenched arrangements of social and political power and structured by permeable legal-bureaucratic frameworks—all of which, I have argued, are deeply marked by caste.

This study casts doubt on the popular notion that land pooling is a more equitable and democratic strategy for assembling land for large projects, compared to compulsory land acquisition. The asymmetrical status of different categories of ‘stakeholders’ in the Amaravati land pooling process raises questions about the politics and ethics of ‘participatory’ strategies of land assembly in contexts where caste continues to determine access to land, resources and political power. Further, land pooling as a mode of aggregating land for state-driven projects is based on the (rather optimistic) premise that the variable, ambiguous and (sometimes) collective rights inscribed in the land revenue system can be equitably smoothed, homogenised and transformed into individualised and transparent property rights—in this case, into ‘reconstituted’ plots of land. Instead, the long-standing stamp of caste on bureaucratic categories and procedures produced caste-differentiated categories in the context of land pooling which, in tandem with the burgeoning land market, brought into sharp relief and deepened the cleavages of caste that have long defined power and wealth in the region.

By laying bare these inherent inequalities, land pooling produced a novel wave of caste-based political activism in the Amaravati region, as the question of compensation for different types of land got converted directly and sharply into the issue of caste oppression. In response to Dalit protests on several fronts, dominant caste (Kamma) landowners too organised to defend their privileged position, forming new caste-based political networks to apply pressure on the state and the ruling party to resist Dalit demands, or to (surreptitiously) manipulate land records to their own advantage. Yet, the demise of the project after the new government led by the YSR Congress Party took office, and the prosecution of cases of land-grabbing, point to the limits of Kamma power in the residual state of Andhra Pradesh. Although the assigned lands issue was not a major reason for the defeat of the TDP in the 2019 state assembly elections, the ascent of the YSR Congress Party owed much to the activism of capital region Dalits, who articulated so clearly the contours of caste power in Coastal Andhra, rooted in control over land—which they understood would only become more deeply entrenched in the new city of Amaravati.

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Notes

1. In this article, I use the generic term 'Dalit' to refer to the Scheduled Castes (SCs), although my interlocutors in Andhra often refer to themselves simply as 'SCs'.
2. Scheduled Castes form 19.59 per cent of the population of Guntur district, according to the 2011 Census.
3. Caste-wise data on the distribution of land by caste is not available for the state or district, but the control of Kammas over land in Guntur and Krishna districts (and to a lesser extent in East and West Godavari districts) is attested by all sources. A study in the 1950s estimated that Kammas formed 40 per cent of the agricultural population of the Krishna delta but owned 80 per cent of its fertile land (Harrison, 1956, p. 383, cited in Benbabaali, 2018, p. 1950). Other important middle-ranking cultivating castes, such as Rajus, Kapus and Reddys (all 'Forward Castes'), also hold substantial lands in certain areas of these districts. In addition, several Other Backward Class (OBC) communities, such as Gowdas and Balijas, hold land in some villages. According to the Socio-Economic and Caste Census in 2011, only 12 per cent of SCs in Guntur district held land, compared to 42 per cent of 'other' castes. An independent survey of 88 villages carried out in undivided Andhra Pradesh in 2008–2009 found that Reddys and Kammas, which constituted only 10.47 per cent of the total households, owned 31.01 per cent of the total land, while Malas and Madigas, who constituted 25.17 per cent of households, owned only 9.77 per cent of the land. The average landholding for Reddy and Kamma households was 7.04 acres and 6.09 acres, respectively, while for Mala and Madiga households it was 0.97 acres and 0.77 acres. Except for Yadavas or Gollas (shepherd caste), all other communities were found to hold a very small proportion of agricultural land in the state. This disparity was even greater in the districts of southern Coastal Andhra, where Reddys and Kammas constituted only 13.72 per cent of the total households but held 46.36 per cent of the land (based on data from 24 villages). In that region, 87.20 per cent of Mala households and 88.67 per cent Madiga households were found to be landless (Sambi Reddy et al., 2012, pp. 58–60).
4. The ryotwari system was intended to dismantle the claims of superior tenure-holders (such as *zamindars*, who retained part of the tax collected) and confirm the 'actual cultivators' as rights-holders as a means of enhancing revenue collection (Frykenberg, 1969).
5. The Andhra Pradesh Assigned Land (Prohibition of Transfer) Act, 1977 was passed after it was found that much of the land assigned earlier had passed out of the hands of the assignees. The law prohibits the sale or transfer of such land except within the same designated categories, after a certain period of time, and with the permission of the authorities (Ramachandraiah & Venkateswarlu, 2014, pp. 48–56). The assignees are given 'DK *pattas*', which recognise the holder as the cultivator but does not confer ownership.
6. The distribution of conditional land titles ('D-Form *pattas*') is referred to as 'land assignment'. Assigned lands include ceiling surplus or other government lands granted to households in designated categories (such as SC,

ST, the landless poor) for cultivation. This process is distinct from ‘land regularisation’ in which titles are given to ‘unauthorised’ occupants of land on the payment of a fee. These two modalities of land management through titling—land assignment and land regularisation—delineate two categories of citizens, marginalised groups and ‘general population’ (Jonnalagadda et al., 2021, p. 5).

7. Land pooling is a market-based mechanism for land assembly and project financing that situates private landowners as ‘stakeholders’ in the project. Owners receive smaller ‘returnable’ plots in the new city as compensation for the agricultural land they surrender. The balance land (usually ranging from 40 to 70 per cent of the total area, and in this case 60 per cent) remains with the government, which uses it to create infrastructure or to raise financial resources. The compensation package is expressed in square yards for each acre of the land pooled. In this case, both residential and commercial plots form part of the ‘package’, hence ‘1000+200’ and so on, in popular speech. Land pooling farmers could choose from among various plot sizes, to make up the total compensation area to which they were entitled. The Andhra Pradesh Capital City Land Pooling Scheme (Formulation and Implementation) Rules 2015 were issued vide G.O.Ms.No.1, Municipal Administration & Urban Development (M2) Department, dated 01.01.2015, based on Chapter IX of the Andhra Pradesh Capital Region Development Authority Act, 2014.
8. Three-fourths of all households in the CRDA villages were landless and so could not participate in the land pooling scheme. Moreover, they lost their main sources of livelihood (tenant farming, agricultural wage labour, or other agriculture-related occupations) when cultivation was forcibly stopped by the government. Most could not find alternative employment in construction jobs or other occupations stemming from the new city project, as had been promised. This is another dimension of the exclusion of Dalits by the Amaravati project which I do not have space to discuss in this article.
9. Pseudonyms are used for the names of respondents unless their words or actions have been publicly reported.
10. For lands assigned prior to 1954, the package was the same as for ordinary *patta* lands—1000 + 200 / 1000 + 450. Lands assigned after that date were given 800 + 100 for dry land and 800 + 200 for wet or semi-urban land. The other categories include ‘eligible encroachers’ on ‘non-objectionable government land’ (500 + 50 and 500 + 100 for wet/dry land), while encroachers on ‘objectionable’ government lands receive 250 + nil sq yd plots for both types of land. For both categories of ‘encroachers’, annuity is not payable. See, APCRDA, Amaravati The People’s Capital: Innovative & Inclusive Land Pooling Scheme, 2017. <https://crda.ap.gov.in/apcrdacommuni/Media/APCRDADOCS/LPS/2018/APR/APCRDA%20LPS%20Book%208th%20April.pdf>. In addition, AP GO No. 41 of February 2016 states that land that had been alienated (sold) was ‘deemed to have been resumed to Government’ and the cultivators would receive only 500+50 or 500+100 sq yd.
11. Data on the volume of land transactions in the capital zone are not available, but several knowledgeable sources estimated that one-third to one-half of agricultural land had changed hands after (or just before) the announcement of the Amaravati plan. A fact-finding report by the National Alliance of Peoples’ Movements brought out in December 2014 found that 3,500 acres of privately owned agricultural lands had been transferred within a month before the official announcement of the capital-city project, involving a very large sum of money paid almost entirely in cash (cited in Kolsto, 2017, p. 57). According to an opponent of the land pooling scheme, most of this land was sold to ‘real estate people’ or powerful politicians at prices ranging from ₹5 million to ₹20 million per acre. He claimed that some 17,000 acres of capital area land is held in *benami* (fake names).
12. 1 lakh = 100,000, 1 crore = 10 million. At exchange rates prevailing in January 2015, ₹1 lakh was roughly equal to \$1,500, and ₹1 crore to \$150,000.
13. The ‘land scam’ has been widely reported. See, for example: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/andhra-pradesh/2019/dec/30/44466-acres-of-assigned-land-acquired-by-tdp-men-benamis-in-amaravati-csc-2082679.html>
14. Sale of land by ‘agreement’ is a common practice across India. In such transactions, the parties enter into a contract (usually on ₹100 stamp paper) to sell the land at a particular price. Upon signing the agreement, a portion of the price is paid and the original documents are handed over to the buyer, and the balance amount is remitted after registration.
15. In such cases, the seller gains as he keeps the advance money as well as the land. Because of such deals that fell through, several Dalits in the Amaravati villages were temporarily flush with cash.

16. According to the President of the UD Palem Society, one source of confusion was that of the original 450 acres assigned to the Society, 20 acres had been earmarked for a government nursery and 10 acres for houses and roads. These lands had been left out of previous government surveys and so did not appear in the records, but the farmers demanded that the missing 30 acres should be included for the purpose of land pooling. For more details on *lanka* lands issue, see Kolsto (2017, pp. 52–55).
17. Chowdary is another caste name for Kammas.
18. The distribution of compensation plots by computerised lottery was done through an elaborate ceremony organised by the CRDA in each village. Participants were mainly Kamma ‘LP farmers’. Several Dalit interlocutors claimed that even this process was manipulated by Kammas to ensure that Dalits would not be allocated plots close to theirs. While we could not verify this complaint, the selection of plot sizes by LP beneficiaries (with larger landowners selecting larger plot sizes) could work to ensure caste-based spatial discrimination in the new residential layouts—signalling another way the new city might be shaped by its agrarian past.
19. Mud embankment built between fields to retain water.
20. Notably, many Dalits of UD Palem were earlier supporters of the Telugu Desam Party, but after this experience with the government, they switched loyalties to the YSR Congress Party.
21. The local unit of the CPI-M has long been active in organising agricultural labourers in the area and has strong networks amongst Dalits in the capital area villages.
22. The membership of DBF mainly consists of Malas, whereas the *lanka* farmers are mostly Madigas. There have long been political and social tensions between these two communities in Andhra Pradesh, most recently around the splitting of reservations for the Scheduled Castes between the two castes (Gundimeda, 2009). It is not clear how the DBF became involved in this case; we were told that they did not coordinate with the local leaders.
23. GO 41 is the government order that sanctioned the package for assigned lands, detailed above.
24. After the state government applied for a World Bank loan to finance the construction of major roads in the new city, activists and farmers who were opposed to land pooling requested the Bank to conduct social impact assessments in the affected villages as a strategy to undermine the project. The loan was ultimately not approved. On the mobilisation of some Kamma farmers and Reddys in a few villages against land pooling, see Ramachandraiah (2015, 2016) and Kolsto (2017).

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