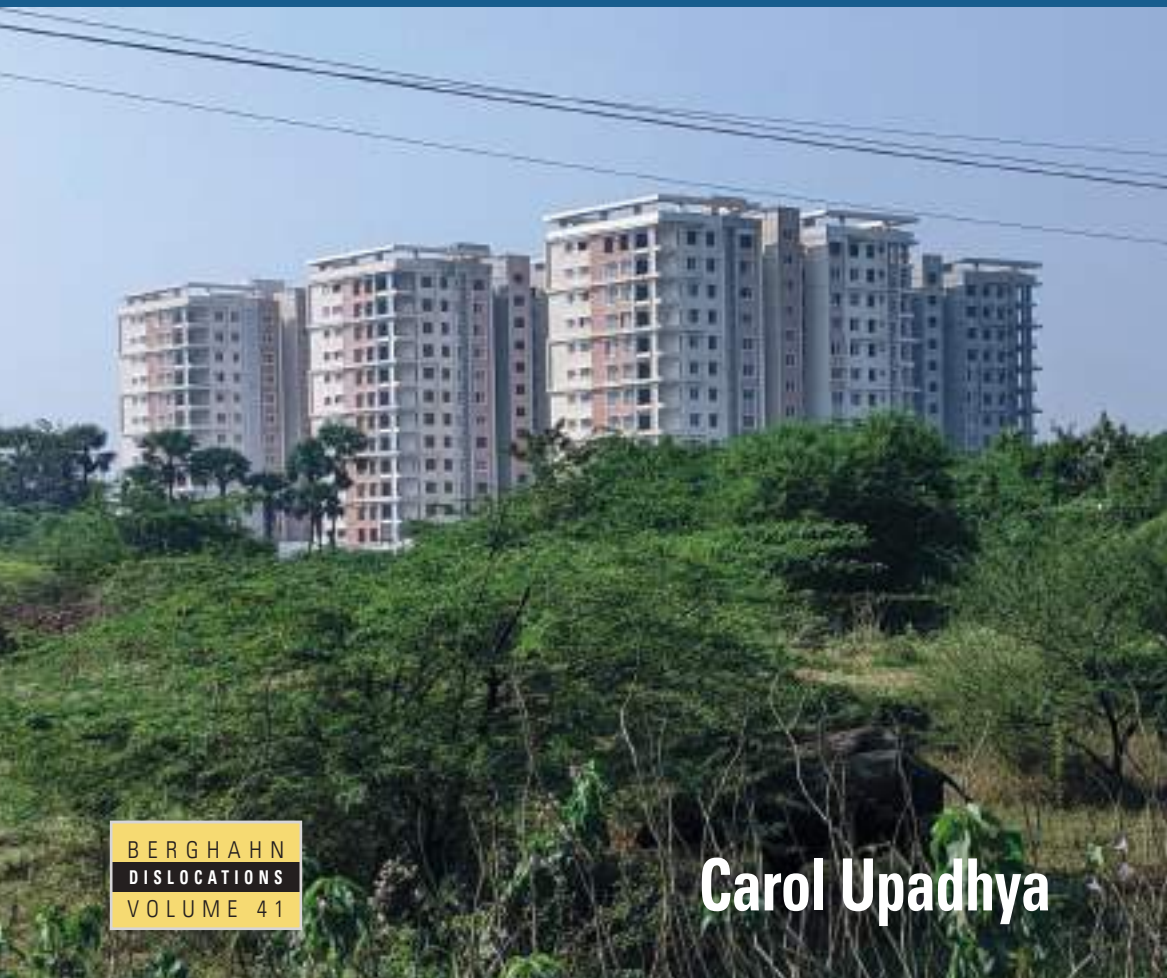
Urbanizing the Future

A New City Project in Agrarian South India



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Carol Upadhya

Urbanizing the Future

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The project was conceived when I was carrying out research in Andhra as part of the "Provincial Globalization" program that I co-directed at the National Institute of Advanced Studies in collaboration with Prof. Mario Rutten of the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, which was funded by WOTRO, The Netherlands (2010–15). In 2014, when the Andhra Pradesh government announced its intention to build a brand-new city to serve as the state capital, I became captivated by this vision for the future of the new state. I decided to study the planning and development of Amaravati—by definition a long-term project—over several years. Although I did not imagine that the research would stretch to ten years, various events intervened that made it important to return to the region time and again to follow what was happening. The most intensive period of research was between 2016 and 2019, when fieldwork was generously supported by Azim Premji Foundation, Bengaluru.

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Chapter 2: Upadhya, Carol. 2018. "Capitalizing on the Future: Negotiating Planned Urbanization in South India." In *Urban Asias: Essays on Futurity Past and Present*, ed. Tim Bunnell and Daniel P. S. Goh, 169–182. Berlin: JOVIS Publishers.

Chapter 5: Upadhya, Carol. 2021. "Recasting Land: Agrarian Urbanism in Amaravati." *Urbanisation* 6 (1): 82–103.

Chapter 6: Upadhya, Carol. 2020. "Assembling Amaravati: Speculative Accumulation in a New Indian City." *Economy and Society* 49 (1): 141–69.

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INTRODUCTION



In November 2014, I traveled to Guntur to meet a prominent politician and farmers' leader, intending to interview him about the political situation in Andhra Pradesh in the wake of the recent bifurcation that created the new state of Telangana. The recently elected state government had unveiled its plan to build a hyper-modern new city in a rural area of Guntur District, between the major regional cities of Guntur and Vijayawada, to serve as the state capital. When I reached his home, I found several farmers from nearby villages gathered there, animatedly discussing the land pooling scheme that had just been announced by the government to acquire all the agricultural land within the designated capital zone—some thirty-eight thousand acres (fourteen thousand hectares). Apprehensive about the prospect of losing their land, they were seeking the advice and support of this former MP (Member of Parliament)—also a fellow member of the regionally dominant Kamma community. The farmers explained that, in addition to the public land pooling notification (the details of which were then unclear), they had received notices from the state government directing them to stop cultivating crops from the next season.

Meetings in several of the targeted villages were planned the same evening to bring farmers together to discuss these developments and formulate a collective response. "Ramakrishna,"[1] a large landowner and cultivator from the centrally located village of Mandadam (who became one of my key interlocutors as I followed the development of the new city over several years), was on his way to the meeting at Rayapudi village and agreed to take me with him. As we drove along the well-maintained rural road from Guntur to a string of villages

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located along the Krishna River—India's third longest river and a major lifeline for Coastal Andhra—he gave me a quick lesson in the agrarian economy of the region. Pointing out the various crops growing in fields that stretched to the horizon on either side, he explained that in this "dry" upland part of Guntur District, cultivation was mainly rainfed and farmers were able to grow just one "long crop" of cotton or maize and perhaps a second "short crop" of pulses a year. This poor productivity meant that the price of land in the "dry villages" was relatively low. But cultivators located closer to the river were harvesting up to four lucrative commercial crops each year, drawing on the plentiful supply of water from borewells and lift irrigation schemes. Farmers in the seven "wet" villages that were slated to be swallowed up by the new city were reaping substantial profits by growing vegetables, fruits, bananas, and other horticulture crops for sale in the markets of Vijayawada.

As we drove toward the river, Ramakrishna pointed out plots of agricultural land that had already been converted into "real estate" (the English term is commonly used in the region, even while speaking in Telugu) in the wake of the announcement of "Rajdhani" ("the capital," as the new city is popularly called)—small patches carved out of fields adjoining the road, marked by flags planted on posts. These fallow fields signaled the kind of "development" that had already been set in motion by the declaration of the new capital in September 2014.

Before we reached the meeting, Ramakrishna stopped his car near the river to show me a lift irrigation installation, illustrating his misgivings about the planned project: "The government has invested money in these schemes to improve agriculture, but now they want us to stop cultivation altogether!" he exclaimed angrily. According to him, most farmers in the more prosperous riverfront villages were strongly opposed to the capital city plan: "They are asking why the government should take such fertile land to build a new city. Let them go to the dry areas, where farmers are willing to part with their land!" Ramakrishna lamented:

> If they take all the land, what about our livelihoods? I am sixty years old. I have a postgraduate degree, but I never took up a job since I was responsible for my family. I came back here to look after the land. I only know agriculture—what else can I do?

When we arrived at Rayapudi, I was invited into the old, stately, but somewhat run-down bungalow of the erstwhile "*zamindari*" family of the village, where a number of farmers had assembled.[2] Showing me

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copies of a map delineating the area that the government planned to acquire for the new capital city, they queried angrily: "How much land is required to build a capital? Two hundred acres? Two thousand? Twenty thousand? Why is so much land needed here? Nowhere in the world will you find such a project." "Is this a democratic way of doing things? Did they ask any of the farmers before making this plan?" "Who are they to market our land, do business with our land?" Voicing their suspicions about the government's motivations, they declared, "They just want to grab land so they can sell it." The farmers also pointed out that their villages lie in a flood zone, noting that some 5 tmc (thousand million cubic feet) of water flows through the area during a ten-day period during the rainy season each year, water that cannot empty into the Krishna River because it is in spate at that time: "If the capital is built here, where will the water go?" Another farmer noted: "They want to include the river and the islands in it! People are living there. Does he want to kill all the people?"

Yet, within a few months, these same landowners had become avid supporters of the project, lauding the Chief Minister's vision for the new capital city, surrendering their land to the government, and eagerly anticipating the financial gains they believed would flow from the land pooling scheme. The speed and relative ease with which cultivators and other landholders were separated from their land is practically unprecedented in contemporary India, where widespread protests around land acquisition for similar mega-projects have erupted in the recent past. How can one explain this rapid shift in sentiment, from passionate resistance to active participation in the promised urban future? Why did small cultivators as well as large landowners agree to participate in the risky land pooling scheme, which replaced their agricultural land with rights to urban plots in a city yet to be built?

In this book, I attempt to answer these and other questions about this ambitious "new city" (Moser 2015) project—the largest of its kind to be attempted in contemporary India—from the vantage point of the residents of the twenty-nine rural villages encompassed by the master plan. Following the tangled threads of the story of Amaravati—as the new capital was named—over a period of ten years, I explore how farmers, agricultural workers, and tenant cultivators, as well as businesspeople, government officials, and other residents of the region and the state responded to the dreams and disruptions it produced. The book uncovers the ways in which the Amaravati project built up on and deepened hierarchies of caste and class embedded in longstanding agrarian structures of control over

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land, while also producing new political formations and mobilizations and altering the relations between citizens and the state.

An important thread that runs through the chapters that follow is the question of land—the changing values, meanings, and affordances of agricultural land as it was converted from the major source of livelihoods in the Amaravati villages into urban real estate by a speculative land market and the land pooling scheme. The project separated farmers from their land and reconstituted them as (future) urban citizens endowed with a very different form of property: abstract and dematerialized financial assets. Not only was there relatively little protest, but most farmers in the Rajdhani villages became enthusiastic proponents of the project, absorbing and articulating the imagination of development that it represents. In contrast, landless agricultural laborers and tenant farmers, rendered surplus to the future urban economy of the planned city, were repositioned as clients of a neoliberal welfarist regime. But the modest entitlements they received as subjects of social development programs did little to compensate for the severe dislocations induced by the project. The following chapters highlight the deepening precarity of agricultural workers and other landless residents of the capital zone who were further marginalized by deagrarianization and the assetization of land.

In this book, I analyze the diverse roles of capital, political formations, and the state at different scales—regional, national, and transnational—in the making, unraveling, and revival of the Amaravati project over a period of ten years. My telling of the Amaravati story foregrounds the predicament and agency of rural landholders who surrendered their patrimony to participate in the forging of a new urban future, impelled in part by the instability and precarity of their agrarian life-worlds. This story shows that even as rural communities' livelihoods and ways of life are threatened by mega-projects or the forces of urbanization, they may seize the new opportunities presented by enlivened land markets or the prospects of alternative pathways of mobility—engaging with the state or market in new ways, cultivating roles as political leaders of dispossessed groups, promoting post-agrarian visions of the future, or formulating novel strategies to navigate the multiplying uncertainties of their lives. But, of course, some actors are better placed than others to reap rewards from the turbulence wrought by the model of development represented by the Amaravati project. Asymmetries and inequalities of caste, class, and gender are magnified or reconstituted as India pursues an economic growth strategy that banks on urbanization, massive infrastructure investments, and land monetization rather than

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striving to enhance social development, ecological sustainability, or equity. In the following sections, I situate the Amaravati project within these wider currents of neoliberal policies, urban planning, and political-economic change in India and the global South.

Urbanization as Development

Policy prescriptions formulated and propagated by international development agencies such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, over several decades, have foregrounded urbanization as the route to development. Promoted in various avatars such as "smart cities," "livable cities," and "sustainable cities," this infrastructure-centric policy agenda aims to create "world-class cities" as a means of attracting global capital investments to foster economic growth.

In India, this urban-oriented policy framework was introduced as part of a larger set of economic and urban governance reforms in the 1990s, including disinvestment from government-owned industries, monetization of public assets, encouragement of private investment in public infrastructure projects, and a strategy of "urban entrepreneurialism" (Nagaraj and Motiram 2017; Sood and Kennedy 2020). Embraced by many of India's political leaders and business elites as well as the urban middle classes, this vision equates infrastructure and urbanization with "development."[3]

This policy agenda has been pursued through (amongst other initiatives) the establishment of special economic zones (SEZs) across the country from the 1990s, the more recent "Smart Cities" program, and the building of massive new highways and "infrastructure corridors" connecting major cities to promote industrial development. A series of privately developed "greenfield cities," such as GIFT City and Dholera Smart City in Gujarat and Sri City in Tamil Nadu, exemplify this policy thrust.[4] In such projects, land acquired mainly from farmers is made available by the state (usually by subnational state governments) to encourage corporate investments in rural areas. However, the Amaravati project is even more ambitious than these other "new city" projects, most of which are constituted as SEZs to house industrial and service sector enterprises. In contrast, Amaravati is planned as a full-fledged city—one that will not only serve as the seat of the state government but is projected to become Andhra Pradesh's major population center, with a diversified economy driving the development of the entire state.

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Land stands at the center of this urban-centric development agenda. Countless rural and urban poor communities have been dispossessed or displaced by the spate of land-hungry infrastructure and industrial projects promoted by the Indian state since the 1990s, wielding coercive land acquisition laws based on the power of eminent domain (Levien 2011; Sampat 2017). In contrast to the early post-independence years, when land was forcibly acquired from rural and Adivasi communities for industrial, mining, and other public sector projects in the name of national development, land acquisition in the post-liberalization period has been impelled by a different logic—the monetization of land. Policy instruments of "land value capture" or "land-based financing" are widely deployed to raise financial resources and attract private capital investments (Balakrishnan 2017). In "greenfield city" projects such as Mahindra World City in Rajasthan (Jenkins, Kennedy, and Mukhopadhyay 2014; Levien 2018), land is appropriated from farmers not as the ground on which to build industries or housing, but for its potential value as a financial asset or equity.

Across postcolonial countries of the global South, similar development plans are unfolding, as seen in the recent spate of spectacular city-building across Asia led by corporate capital.[5] These "new cities" are exclusivist by design, touting "world-class amenities" or aiming to become global financial hubs (Moser and Côté-Roy 2022: 1–2).[6] As the future state capital, the Amaravati plan also reflects the "spectacular urbanism" of similar new capital cities in Asia, where spectacle and "synecdoche" are deployed as political technologies to consolidate state power (Koch 2018; cf. Al Faruq 2025).

This pattern of urban development is also linked to the financialization of the global economy since the 1990s. The destabilizing circulation of finance capital through real estate markets around the world has pushed up property and land prices, compromising the economic stability of cities, exacerbating housing crises, and displacing poor communities.[7] The increasing use of market-linked mechanisms to fund infrastructure development has entangled state and municipal governments in the volatile currents of global finance capital, unleashing a conglomeration of forces and conditions that Goldman (2011, 2023) terms "speculative urbanism." In Indian cities, private equity capital has flooded into large real estate projects—investments that can be regarded as speculative because investors generally exit before the project is completed, deriving their profits not from the creation of new housing or public facilities but from the escalation of the value of the land (Goldman and Narayan 2021).

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Although foreign capital investments in real estate have had dramatic impacts in major cities such as Mumbai and Bengaluru (Upadhya, Goldman, and Gidwani 2024), the gyrations of land markets in most regions of India cannot be attributed to transnational capital flows, given the continuing restrictions on the direct purchase of land by foreign entities. Instead, Chakravorty (2013a) attributes the very high property values prevailing in India (not only in metro cities) to rapidly expanding wealth inequalities and the consequent growing demand for real estate by the newly rich middle classes, ultra-wealthy investors, and the Indian diaspora. Most investments in Indian property markets still emanate from domestic capital and small investors (Chakravorty 2013b; Sood 2021), pointing to the significance of land and real estate markets for understanding regional political economies, class formations, and modalities of accumulation—a point to which I return below.[8]

In the "land-assetization economy" that has emerged across the world, land has become a major form of collateral for governments seeking to borrow capital and global financial actors increasingly participate in land transactions (Goldman, Peluso, and Wolford 2024: 13). But financialization has proceeded unevenly, especially in the global South.[9] Moreover, as Levien (2012) points out, in India the "land broker state" has played the leading role in the acquisition of land for private capital. Here it is important to specify the scale of the state that is operating, given that in India the central, state, and municipal governments are all empowered to undertake compulsory land acquisition for infrastructure, industrial, or housing projects—creating axes of power and accumulation at different scales. Indeed, a significant plank of India's economic and urban reforms was the decentralization of governance and planning functions, leading to processes of "state rescaling" (Brenner 2004). Subnational political units were encouraged to forge direct connections with international capital and multilateral agencies, bypassing the central government, to achieve their development objectives (Kennedy 2014; Sud 2017).[10] Consequently, infrastructural and urban mega-projects have been heavily promoted by state governments competing to attract investments from national and international capital. Through their control over land, states have been able to "shape the conditions for capital circulation and accumulation" within their territories (Nielsen 2017: 846), a pattern that is starkly evident in the Amaravati project.

The eruption of "land wars" across India from the 1990s, as rural communities mobilized against the expropriation of their land or to bargain for better compensation,[11] led to the replacement of

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the draconian colonial-era land acquisition law by a new one: the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 (popularly known as LARRA), which provides for higher monetary compensation and imposes stricter guidelines for land acquisition. However, this law made land acquisition more expensive and onerous, leading state and municipal governments to increasingly opt for indirect or "voluntary" modes of land assembly that integrate market and state mechanisms. The land pooling scheme used in the Amaravati project—discussed in detail in the following chapters—is a prime example of this approach.

Land into Real Estate

Scholars have extensively explored processes of land dispossession and the forced displacement of rural communities by the state. But a distinct trend of market-led land alienation has taken hold over the last two decades, stimulated by expanding urbanization and neoliberalization (Sud 2021). The growing demand for land by real estate developers and other corporates has activated rural land markets on the perimeters of expanding cities and in the vicinity of planned mega-projects. "Voluntary" sales of agrarian land and its conveyance into urban property markets have been exacerbated by the agrarian crisis experienced in many regions of India in the post-reform period. As agriculture becomes less profitable or riskier, farmers are tempted to cash in on the rising market values of their land (Vijayabaskar and Menon 2018). Much of the real estate development seen in India in recent years—massive apartment complexes, "world-class" business parks, elite gated communities, and gleaming shopping malls—has occurred on the edges of mega-cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru, as they expand into their rural peripheries, gobbling up agricultural land purchased by real estate developers.

The activation of land markets has created new opportunities for accumulation by rural elites, who often profit from skyrocketing land values, while tenant farmers and Dalits with tenuous access to land lose their rights and agricultural laborers are displaced—exacerbating existing inequalities. But this route of land alienation does not simply transform agrarian land into urban real estate—it is a messy, conflicted, and patchwork process in which rural landowners, various intermediaries, and state actors are deeply implicated (Cowan 2022).

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The recent body of literature on "agrarian urbanism" explores this land transition, highlighting the re-entrenchment or reworking of caste-based agrarian structures of land control and social power in processes of urbanization (Balakrishnan and Gururani 2021; Gururani 2020; Gururani and Kennedy 2021). Studies of Delhi, Chennai, Mumbai, Kolkata, and other major Indian cities have uncovered the diverse ways in which "agrarian regimes of territory, land and property are implicated and inscribed in ongoing urban land use changes" (Balakrishnan 2019a: 618). Not only are profits from booming peri-urban land markets often cornered by members of dominant landowning castes, but land transactions are usually mediated by rich farmers or big landlords—creating additional opportunities for profit.[12] Caste stands at the center of these strategies of accumulation as well as exclusions and dispossessions, especially of Dalits (Nielsen, Sareen, and Oskarsson 2020). For instance, Balakrishnan (2019a) traces the ways in which Maratha agrarian elites of the Maharashtra sugar belt leveraged their political and social capital to become significant players in the real estate markets of Mumbai and Pune. Studies from Hyderabad (Parthasarathy 2013) and Bengaluru (Gidwani and Upadhya 2023) similarly track the extensive investments in real estate development and urban property markets by rural elites, acting as land aggregators, property brokers, small builders, and consumers.

Attending to the "interscalar relations" (Leitner and Sheppard 2020) that facilitate the conversion of agricultural land into real estate, this stream of research demonstrates that corporate or transnational capital does not flow seamlessly into rural land markets. Instead, developers must negotiate with local intermediaries and engage with multi-layered political and economic institutions to assemble land and turn it into real estate (Gururani 2024; Searle 2016, 2018). In his work on the "urban agrarian frontier" of Gurgaon in the National Capital Region—India's first privately developed city—Cowan (2022) argues that mediation by Jat landowners in land deals for real estate projects created "direct coalitions between corporate capital and the agrarian world" (2022: 5). But rural landholders may lack the cultural or financial capital to join the class of corporate or real estate capital operating on a wider scale, remaining confined to the role of intermediaries. A contrasting example is that of Magarpatta City, a new township on the outskirts of Pune developed by local Maratha farmers who pooled their land and capital for the project (Balakrishnan 2019b). As in the case of Amaravati described in this book, Magarpatta points to a reorientation of agrarian landowning

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classes toward urban- or real estate-based modes of accumulation—at least in some regions.

Because of India's enormous economic, social, and political diversity, processes of urbanization, agrarian change, and land alienation have proceeded in divergent ways across different regions. India's regions are distinguished not only by their distinct languages, social formations, and cultural traditions but also by historically embedded agrarian social structures and landholding regimes. The institution of regionally distinct systems of land revenue administration under colonial rule created or reinforced land tenure systems that varied in relation to agrarian ecologies, forms of production, and political histories (Lerche 2015; Lerche and Shah 2018). These agrarian systems were and are firmly grounded in caste (Mosse 2018), as the colonial state promoted or consolidated the superior economic position and social power of selected cultivating and landholding groups.[13] These caste-based structures of agricultural production not only gave rise to regionally distinct social formations,[14] but also continue to shape regional configurations of capital accumulation and state power based on control over land and labor (Lerche 2015). Viswanath (2014), for example, in her history of Madras Presidency, demonstrates how the superior land rights granted by the colonial state to upper caste cultivators *vis-à-vis* the "lower" caste laboring classes became entrenched in law and administrative structures that continue to govern land today (Jonnalagadda, Stock, and Misquitta 2021).

The increasing circulation of capital through land, at different scales, to extract profits from the escalation of land prices, together with the acquisition and hoarding of land by real estate companies, land aggregators, and state agencies, have profoundly reshaped rural and peri-urban land markets as well as the social values of land. To understand processes of accumulation in urbanizing locales, we need to attend to the dynamics of land markets, the investment practices of various actors, and the different modalities through which financial value is extracted from land. The uneven geography of real estate-led development in India also underlines the importance of tracing the multi-scalar processes through which land is delinked from the agrarian economy and converted into a financial asset. This means tracking not only to the operations of global finance capital or the influence of macro-level policy regimes on economic planning or urban development, but also modalities of accumulation at subnational and regional scales. The task, then, is to uncover the diverse interconnections and articulations between

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global trends of financialization and social structures of capital at regional or local scales.

Provincializing Capital

To understand how an "urban fantasy" (Bhan 2013; Watson 2014) such as Amaravati could capture the imagination of so many people and attract substantial investments, we need to track the global story of neoliberal development through the political economy and social configuration of the sites where it unfolds.[15] Many scholars have grappled with the problem of theorizing capitalism as both global and particular—a tension that Tsing (2005) captures through the notion of "friction." Kalb (2024: 19) deploys the idea of "frontlines of capital" to highlight the multifarious and uneven routes and processes through which "insidious capital" is manifested in local economies and social relations, and to uncover the "multiple frictions and contradictions of capital" as they "emerge as lived relations of value." Further, he argues that

> capitalism is a deeply differentiated and spatially uneven, multi-scalar global social formation, with shifting observable ensembles of domination and exploitation variably soaked in the always evolving "rule of value," which encapsulates personal and collective lived histories that are never separate from the histories of accumulation and class struggle. (Cowan, Campbell, and Kalb 2023: 16)

In this book, I build on these theoretical formulations to understand the planning and pursuit of the Amaravati project, locating it within Andhra's caste-based political economy and social formation as well as currents of capitalist development and urbanization at larger scales. The Amaravati project was conceptualized, constructed, and obstructed by intersecting and conflicting ambitions and strategies of transnational capital and development agencies, the subnational state, and regional capital and political actors. I present Amaravati not as just another new city project, but "provincialize" the story (Sheppard, Leitner, and Maringanti 2013) by situating it within the social history and political economy of Coastal Andhra. I attempt to track and untangle the interconnections and conflicts amongst the diverse agents, conditions, and processes, operating at different scales, that went into the making, and unmaking, of Amaravati.

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In the chapters that follow, I examine the ways in which this "world city" plan was shaped by its embedding in provincial capital and the regional state and reshaped by its encounters with the landscape and people of Rajdhani as it developed on the ground. The argument centers the interests and activities of "provincial capital" (Parthasarathy 2015)—a regional capitalist class rooted in agrarian land ownership and caste domination and entrenched in a political party that captured power in the state—and its practices of accumulation and value extraction from land across city and countryside. This mapping of the provincial configuration of capital accumulation is essential to understand how it articulates or collides with interventions or capital flows emanating from other sites or scales.

Critical scholarship on neoliberal reforms, land grabs, and the agrarian crisis in India has focused mainly on the activities of global or national capital acting in alliance with the state, while relatively ignoring the role of provincial capital in shaping investment and welfare policies and directing capital flows (Parthasarathy 2015: 817). This literature also neglects earlier bodies of work that documented the transformation of rich peasant groups into "capitalist farmers" in several regions—especially those that experienced a "green revolution" in the 1960s and 1970s, like Coastal Andhra. These agrarian entrepreneurial groups diversified into other economic activities to become leading actors in regional economies across rural and urban domains. In many regions, it is provincial capital that spearheaded the movement of agrarian surplus into small industries, trade, finance, and real estate development in regional towns and cities (Chari 2004; Harriss-White 2015; Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar 2021b).

Most research on provincial capital in India foregrounds agrarian surplus as the main source of capital for enterprising farmers investing in non-agricultural commercial activities—drawing on the classical agrarian transition debate (Byres 1991). However, in the post-reform period the role of land in processes of accumulation has shifted, as real estate (rather than industry or trade) has become a major site of investment for the rural rich, business families in provincial towns, as well as the urban middle classes. Land is increasingly valued not for its productive capacities but purely as a means of multiplying wealth—investments that have pushed up land and property prices in many regions. Although real estate investments by agrarian landed groups and regional business classes tend to be small and localized, they shape patterns of urbanization in rural and peri-urban areas in ways that have not been sufficiently documented (De Neve 2015; Parthasarathy 2013). The rapid growth of provincial

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towns and the expansion of urban property markets have altered the social meanings of land while creating new (and diverse) pathways of accumulation.

The category of provincial capital also spotlights the thorny question of caste and its relation to the organization and activities of capital. Caste works in multiple ways in the Indian economy, as a key "social structure of accumulation" (Harriss-White 2003) or as a social network that governs access to resources and markets (Mosse 2020; Witsoe 2017). For example, Chari (2004) traces the transformation of Gounder cultivators into a class of urban industrialists by leveraging their control over land, agrarian identity, and a caste ideology and habitus that valorizes "toil," derived from their history as smallholder commercial farmers. Similarly, in his history of agrarian capitalism in central Gujarat, Gidwani (2008) deploys Stuart Hall's (1980) concept of articulation to theorize how caste and class are historically co-constituted (cf. Cowan 2024b, Hart 2024). But caste also has ideological and affective dimensions with important implications for the economy, as caste identity and belonging have emerged as increasingly significant anchors of collective action and political assertion in contemporary India (Palshikar 2024). Finally, histories of colonial capitalism in India reveal a diversity of economic practices and institutions that continue to shape modes of accumulation and explain the close articulation of caste and capital, and caste and class, in India (Chhabria 2023). For example, Birla's (2009) excavation of the formation of "vernacular capitalism" under colonial rule provides inspiration for an analysis of "variegated capitalism" (Peck and Theodore 2007) and its diverse regional histories and instanciations in India.

In this book, I build on these insights to explore the conjunctures of caste and capital in the development of Amaravati. I situate the project within the distinctive regional political economy of Coastal Andhra, where agrarian landowning groups (especially the Kammas) spawned a prosperous regional (now transnationalized) and politically powerful business class. To understand how caste operates to consolidate and sustain Andhra provincial capital, I view caste not only as a social network solidified through kinship relations, cultural identity, or economic cooperation, but also as a political bloc sustained by a sense of honor and strong collective identity tied to the region.

In the next section, I return to the question of land—still the most important source of livelihood for the largest proportion of India's population—and the modalities through which it has increasingly

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been detached from its social moorings, emptied of social value, and reconstituted as a crucial site for the circulation and multiplication of regional, national, and international capital through monetization, rent, and exchange (D'Costa and Chakraborty 2017).

Land Assetization

In the following chapters, I examine how the values of land were transformed as the Amaravati project unfolded. I explore the technologies and discursive strategies through which land—imbued with multiple meanings and affordances and marked by concrete materialities—is converted into a financial asset freed from its social appurtenances and physical constraints, making it available for global investment. As agrarian land on the edges of growing cities or infrastructure projects is drawn into circuits of capital accumulation or its price inflated by speculation or real estate investments, its social values are disrupted.

The reorientation of India's development paradigm has driven this shift, transforming land from the key base of production or subsistence, primary form of household wealth, and the core of social status and power in rural caste society, into an asset whose value derives mainly from its (present or potential) financial value in the market. From cherished family property that connects agrarian households to past and future generations and anchors them in the village and region, land becomes primarily a vehicle of capital accumulation through exchange or a site for the storage of wealth or "laundering" of illicit money.

In tracking this land transformation, I deploy the term "value" in two ways:

(1) *Value* in the singular, as used in the political economy tradition to theorize the production and accumulation of different forms of value under capitalism ("use value," "exchange value," "surplus value," and so on). I also use value in its everyday use to refer to economic value or price, as in "property values."

(2) *Values*, most often used in the plural, to refer to the significance, worth, or importance ascribed to objects, practices, ideas, beliefs, social relations, religious traditions, and so on, by human actors. "Values" in this sense represent attachments that impart affective meaning or social significance to collectivities or cultural identities.[16]

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The distinction between "value" and "values" has been invoked by researchers tracking the tensions that arise when financial values are ascribed to land and its resources, conflicting with their nonfinancial values (Rissing and Jones 2022: 195). The question of value is particularly difficult to unravel in the case of land, which is not like other commodities—not only because land is immoveable (unlike a mat, it cannot just be "rolled up and taken away"),[17] but also because "people feel differently about the buying, selling, and investing of land than they do the exchange of other things" (2022: 196).

All "property" in land is a fiction, in a strictly legal sense, since land cannot be "possessed" in the same way as moveable property—what is "owned" or transacted is not the land itself but a title or other kinds of rights to control or utilize it in specific ways. This means that establishing rights in land is a more deeply political process compared to most forms of property-making, one that was central to racial regimes of colonial governance in much of the world (Bhandar 2018; Blomley 2004). Precisely because "land is *not* 'just another asset class'" (Rissing and Jones 2022: 196), we need to closely examine what happens when land encounters the disruptive forces of commoditization, monetization, or assetization.

Several scholars have explored the ways in which land's "intrinsically social character" (Li 2014b: 600) is disrupted and reassembled by commoditization, through "technologies of property" (Bhattacharyya 2018). Land, which is imbued with multiple meanings and life-giving affordances, multi-layered claims and uses, and specific materialities, is made "investable" through "inscription devices" (Li 2014a). Building on Polanyi's ([1944] 2001) framing of land as a fictitious commodity, Ghertner and Lake (2021: 17) explore the "land fictions," or "expert techniques of abstraction, simplification, and standardization," that are employed to transform land into particular kinds of commodities (especially real estate) that "align with desirable social imaginaries of value."

These interventions illustrate the ways in which the social relations built around land, and the cultural meanings invested in it, may be unsettled or reconstituted as it is incorporated into projects of accumulation. But converting agricultural land into a financial asset requires additional steps to extricate it from its historically embedded legal and political framing and reconstitute its social meanings. As I elaborate in this book, in Amaravati land was not simply commoditized—a transformation already accomplished in the late colonial period. Instead, it underwent a more profound change, that of

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assetization, producing a new form of property capable of multiplying financial value through circulation.

Assetization is generally defined as the creation of property that will afford a future revenue stream. A focus on assetization shifts the analytical gaze "from 'value' to 'valuation'," understood in "socio-technical and performative terms" (Langley 2021: 386). The concept of assetization points to the "restructuring of capital flows, urban spaces, social relations, and governance practices" as land is mobilized as a financial asset (Birch and Ward 2024: 15). It also foregrounds the technologies through which assets are produced and attain value. Importantly for my argument, the idea of assetization provides a

> useful bridge between the macrosocial focus on capital as an accumulation process … with the micro-social focus on a range of social, cultural, and political practices, techniques, values, and devices that engender geographically distinct and diverse asset forms and their consequences. (Birch and Ward 2024: 20)

In the following chapters, I analyze the land pooling process in Amaravati and the new property markets that it created through the lens of assetization. I map the reconstitution of agricultural land as an abstract financial asset in relation to macro-level structural shifts as well as regionally grounded practices of accumulation. I also explore the wider implications of assetization, or the "unleashing" of the value of land, for the people and landscape of Rajdhani.

Speculative Planning

A key indicator of assetization is the periodic volatility of land and property markets, generating higher returns than are available in the "real economy" (Fairbairn 2014: 780–82)—an observation that resonates with the Indian experience. The announcement of an SEZ or new infrastructure project in a rural area usually sets off land bubbles. as investors rush in to buy up cheap land around the planned site in anticipation of rising prices, transforming land into a speculative asset that is valued mainly for its anticipated future price. This conjuncture of development planning and land speculation was evident in Amaravati, a state-led project, but one that depends on the extraction of value from privately owned land that circulates in the market. The entanglement of volatile land markets with planned development reflects the post-reform incorporation of

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private interests into the domain of public policy and governance, reflected in practices that Laura Bear (2011) terms "speculative state planning." This concept highlights the intersections of planning, infrastructure development, and speculation—a conjuncture that also animated the Amaravati project.

Anthropologists have explored these overlapping sites of capitalist development and social imaginary—planning, infrastructure, and speculation—through the lens of temporality. Urban planning, like state planning in general, creates a template for progress, holding out the "promise" of a new future (Abram and Weszkalnys 2011). Similarly, the development of new infrastructure has "long promised modernity, development, progress" (Appel, Anand, and Gupta 2018: 3). Urban planning and infrastructure development, like narratives of economic growth and modernization, all hinge on linear temporality that Appel (2018) terms "developmental time." The pursuit of modern infrastructure and the desire for development fold into one another: infrastructure is the "imagined materialization of this thing called an economy" (Appel 2018: 48). But the future that is projected by urban planning or infrastructure is always "slightly out of reach, the ideal outcome always slightly elusive" (Abram and Weszkalnys 2013: 3), as linear time "fractures into constellations of futurity and deferral, teleology and stasis" (Appel 2018: 58). As I outline in the following chapters, this insight captures the halting and disputed progress of Amaravati, as infrastructure development and construction projects were obstructed or slowed by various interventions and conflicts, and as the project was finally halted altogether by political opposition and the time of development it harbingered was reversed.

The anticipation of new infrastructure and faith in urban planning as a road to development were key elements of the urban future promised by the Amaravati project. However, "infrastructural developmentalism" needs to be understood not only as an "epistemological frame" that shapes orientations to the future, but also as an ideology that facilitates global processes of capital circulation (Buier 2023).[18] As Beckert (2016) argues, imagined futures create "fictional expectations" that influence economic decision-making and action.

Like planning and infrastructure, speculation can be understood as a temporal practice—an orientation to the future that generates new meanings and values, reshapes people's aspirations and risk tolerance, and produces novel imaginations of the future (Bear 2020a). "Speculation is a temporality of the could be and the yet to come. It is defined by futurity, anticipation, aspiration, risk, reward,

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and, as often as not, spectacular loss" (Rissing and Jones 2022: 200). Research on resource frontiers and "land rushes" in the global South (Campbell 2015; Fairbairn 2020; Tsing 2000), as well as on real estate markets in post-socialist economies (Humphrey 2020), demonstrates that speculation as a strategy of accumulation is both temporal, as investors purchase land purely in anticipation of future profits, as well as spatial, pushing frontiers outward.

Speculation has become a key category in anthropological and political economy studies of financialized capitalism, but the distinction between speculation and investment is not clearcut—both hinge on the concepts of risk and uncertainty. Beckert (2013) argues that the need for anticipatory knowledge—gauging potential risks and rewards of decisions—is characteristic of capitalist practices in general, which also require the "management of expectations" (Leins 2022: 348). In the world of finance as well as sociological accounts of the "risk society" of western modernity, uncertainty is distinguished from risk. This distinction draws on Knight's (1921) classical definition of risk as a "measurable category" that can be "quantified by calculations of probability" in contrast to uncertainty that "cannot be expressed in numbers at all" (Leins 2022: 348). However, the Enlightenment project of controlling the inevitable uncertainties of the future through risk management (Reith 2004) breaks down in the era of finance capital. In contrast to the conventional view of economic decision-making as a process of seeking out and analyzing information to calculate risk and reward, Bear deploys the concept of speculation to theorize capitalist action. Defined as a "future-oriented affective, physical and intellectual labour that aims to accumulate capital for various ends" (Bear 2020a: 2), speculation lays bare the connections between "economic" practices, forms of sociality, and affective dispositions, re-embedding economic practices in cultural orientations and moral economies (Leins 2022: 349). Further, Bear argues that the extraction of surplus value depends on "calculations of risk based on the imagination of social differences":

> Speculation is not just calculation. It proceeds by making value uncertain and then projecting unseen ethical orders using technologies of imagination that can help navigate this uncertainty. Crucially, therefore, the labour of speculation connects directly to the recreation of inequalities of race, nation, sexuality and gender as well as class. (Bear 2020a: 2–3)

Moreover, "speculative labor," which uses "practices of valuation and evaluation in order to anticipate, stimulate and control the future," has become central to the generation of surplus value (Bear

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2020b: 48). This formulation helps to uncover the ways in which inequalities of caste and class operated to produce surplus value, and were also reproduced by the speculative economy of Rajdhani. I also bring together these reflections on infrastructure, planning, and speculation in analyzing the land pooling system, land and property markets, and landowners' investment decisions as temporal strategies of accumulation.

The Amaravati Story, in Brief

In 2014, the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh (AP) was divided, the result of the long and passionate Telangana movement for a separate state. Hyderabad, India's fifth largest city and the capital of the undivided state, is located within the new state of Telangana (although it was to remain the official capital of both states for ten years), leaving residual Andhra Pradesh without a capital. Soon after bifurcation, elections were held in residual Andhra Pradesh and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), led by N. Chandrababu Naidu, returned to power after a gap of ten years.

In his previous term as Chief Minister of undivided Andhra Pradesh (1995–2004), Naidu had earned a reputation as a neoliberal reformer who transformed Hyderabad into a major hub of India's IT industry, spurring the growth and modernization of the city. "Babu," as he is popularly called, was determined to foster similar development in the truncated state of Andhra Pradesh, which was left largely rural and agrarian by the loss of Hyderabad. His ambition centered on the idea of building a hyper-modern "greenfield city" that would serve not only as the state's capital but also as its main "engine of economic growth."

After a long debate about where the new capital should be located, a site in Guntur District was selected, just across the Krishna River from Vijayawada, the second largest city in the residual state. The planned capital was named Amaravati, after the former capital of the Satavahana dynasty that ruled the region from the second century BCE to the third century CE, gesturing to the ancient Buddhist history of Andhra. Billed as the first "fully planned city" to be built in India since the early post-independence period, this urban megaproject embodied Chandrababu Naidu's ambition to propel the truncated state into global modernity. The Amaravati master plan, designed by Singapore-based consultants, covers 217 square kilometers (84 square miles), encompassing twenty-nine villages with a

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population of around 100,000 along with the agricultural land that sustained most of the population.

To acquire the approximately thirty-eight thousand acres (fourteen thousand hectares) of privately held land within the project zone, the state government devised a "voluntary" land pooling scheme rather than invoking the power of eminent domain. Although strong opposition to the project emerged in several pockets, most farmers and other landholders soon agreed to give up their land. By 2017, the government had assembled about thirty-four thousand acres and participating farmers had been allotted compensation plots in the future city.

Between 2016 and 2019, some progress was made on building the new city, including an Interim Government Complex to house the state government, a temporary High Court building, and some basic infrastructure such as major roads. However, after the TDP was defeated in the 2019 state election, most work on the capital came to a standstill. The new government, led by Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy of the Yuvajana Shramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP), was strongly opposed to the project and proposed an alternative plan to "distribute" government functions across three locations. As a result, the Amaravati project was practically abandoned, leaving behind a landscape of abandoned agricultural fields, half-constructed buildings, and unfinished infrastructure, and a decimated rural economy.

But this was not the end of the Amaravati story. Farmers who had surrendered their land for the new capital organized the "Save Amaravati Movement" to force the state to continue the project. The protestors won a series of cases in the A.P. High Court against the government, giving them a major victory. But before judicial orders to continue building Amaravati could be implemented, the YSRCP was soundly defeated in the election of May 2024 and the Telugu Desam Party returned to power (in alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party, the party in power at the national level, and Jana Sena, a regional party). With Chandrababu Naidu again at the helm, the Amaravati plan was quickly revived. As I was finalizing this book manuscript, the project appeared to be on track again, with the resumption of construction activity supported by a large infusion of funds from the World Bank and the central government. In February 2025, when I last visited Amaravati, the mood amongst investors and Rajdhani farmers who had pooled their land was one of cautious optimism and revived hope for the promised urban future.

The gyrating fortunes of Naidu's "dream capital" have several dimensions that would be fruitful to explore—the intensifying

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salience of real estate as a site of accumulation, producing new modalities for the extraction of value from land; the changing political language and strategies of communities seeking to push back against, or profit from, state-driven development projects; the shifting and entangled roles of regional, national, and transnational capital in processes of urban development; and the regional and caste rivalries that have long shaped electoral politics, and therefore development, in Andhra Pradesh. While it is impossible to elaborate on all these themes with the same level of detail, in the chapters that follow I try to weave them together by traversing between the experiences, expectations, and desires of the people of Rajdhani; the designs and tactics of the regional state and provincial capital in promoting and profiting from the project; and the larger context of global finance capital and policy paradigms that inform development imaginations and shape projects such as Amaravati.

Research in the *Longue Durée*

In the chapters that follow, I build on theoretical insights from the literature discussed above while locating the Amaravati project firmly within the social history, political economy, and agrarian structure of the Coastal Andhra region. This book adopts a *longue durée* approach, situating the dislocations, contradictions, and ambitions of the Amaravati project within the social geography and history of the Andhra region. However, I understand the region not as tightly bounded or disconnected from transnational financial flows or larger political imperatives, but as produced by a history of global conjunctures and connections. In unraveling the Amaravati story, I follow the strategies and interventions of state and capital understood not as abstract structures or forces, but as constituted historically by social actors and institutions located concretely in time and space.

The research on which this book is based was conducted over a span of more than ten years (2014 to 2025) through intermittent field visits to Amaravati and Coastal Andhra. To track the planning and development of the new city, I followed a longitudinal strategy and employed a kind of "patchwork ethnography" (Günel and Watanabe 2024; Tsing 2005), visiting the area periodically on short research trips of ten to fifteen days each. Each time I visited the same places and caught up with my regular interlocuters, but I also explored new sites and met new people to follow up on recent events or understand developments in the project. This research design allowed me

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to cultivate long-term relationships with several interlocutors—farmers, activists, government officers, real estate agents, and others—with whom I had continuing conversations over several years. This in turn enabled me to track their shifting responses to the project and to follow the twists and turns of the Amaravati story through their eyes. This strategy also helped me to integrate insights and findings from temporally dispersed research trips. Excerpts from conversations with these regular interlocutors appear throughout the book, providing a narrative thread that connects the diverse themes of the chapters.

The research design was not only longitudinal but also multi-scalar. I traced the unfolding of the project by speaking with diverse residents of the Amaravati villages; haunting the corridors of power in the planning authority and the state government; interviewing activists, lawyers, journalists, middle-class professionals, real estate agents, builders, and business owners in Vijayawada and Guntur; and tracking the interests and influences of transnational capital and international development agencies.[19] By documenting the imagination, planning, and implementation of the Amaravati plan and the responses and strategies of the people who were engulfed by it, I draw connections among the politics that produced, and were produced by, the project, changes in land governance, and the macroeconomic currents and hegemonic policy paradigms that have shaped India's development over the last three decades. I follow the circulation of development ideas and strategies of accumulation through ramifying transnational networks and across multiple scales, while zeroing in on their manifestations and mutations on the ground—especially in the form of future-making strategies forged by citizens making claims on a permeable local state and a socially embedded political class.

To protect the privacy and confidentiality of my interlocutors and interviewees, all personal names are anonymized in this book, indicated by quotation marks on first use. I have made every effort to conceal the identity of all those who participated in the research, for instance by locating them in villages other than their own or changing details of their biographies or our encounters. Despite these efforts, several key characters might be identifiable to those familiar with the Rajdhani villages and the Amaravati story—especially those who appeared frequently at public events or in the media. In such cases, I hope that my descriptions accurately reflect their views and interventions. In addition, given the subject matter of the book, I had no choice but to retain the real names of most places and public figures.

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A larger ethical problem that confronts researchers working on divisive issues such as Amaravati concerns their positionality and politics. In researching and writing about subjects such as oppression, inequality, or dispossession, authors take positions—explicitly or not. In choosing to explore problems such as the reproduction of caste inequality or exclusion, accumulation through land, or the monopolization of economic or political power by particular social groups or classes, the researcher's stand is already clear. My focus on the political struggle around the Amaravati project foregrounds caste as a key structure of domination and exclusion—an argument that is likely to provoke criticism and even backlash from non-academic audiences. But I hope that readers can see beyond the structural analysis of inequality and accumulation (a perspective that is fundamental to social research) and find in these pages an accurate and empathetic account of the uncertainties and contradictions that are inherent to such an ambitious plan—including the predicament of small cultivators and other members of "dominant" landowning groups whose lives were upended by Rajdhani. It is through their stories and narratives that I attempt to answer a key question that animates the arguments in this book—why was there so little resistance by farmers to the acquisition of their land, but instead active participation in their own "dispossession"? Although much of the book centers around the experiences and strategies of landholding cultivators, I have tried to do justice to the much more difficult situation of landless agricultural workers, tenant farmers, Dalits, and other groups whose marginalization was sharpened and deepened by the project.

A final note on methodology: in many places I use "we" in recounting interactions in the field. This is because I was generally accompanied during fieldwork by a research associate—S. Uday Bhanu in 2016–17 and Rohith Gutta from 2017 to 2025. Their research assistance went beyond the crucial activities of arranging meetings, acting as interpreters during interviews conducted in Telugu, writing up interview notes, and providing other kinds of research support. Their dedicated participation in the research was central to my efforts to make sense of things, pointing me toward new avenues of enquiry and helping me to pin down the key issues. Although Uday and Rohith are also credited in the Acknowledgments, it is essential to recognize their contributions in this discussion of methodology (without implicating them in any errors or arguments with which they may disagree). Social research, by definition, is never a solitary effort; this book is a product of many interactions and conversations among us as a research team and with the many unnamed

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interlocutors who patiently shared their knowledge, experiences, and insights with us over the years.[20]

Outline of Chapters

In the chapters that follow, I build my argument around the predicaments, aspirations, and strategies of key actors who drove the Amaravati project as well as ordinary people who became entangled in it—the state agencies and private consultants that devised and prosecuted the master plan; the farmers who gave up their land and those who refused; Dalits who contested their exclusion from the potential rewards of the project; other residents of the Rajdhani villages whose lives were upended; builders, real estate brokers, and other businesspeople who sought to extract profit from the land boom and the new city; and the invisible actors who seemed to be operating behind the scenes—powerful politicians, provincial capital, and members of the Telugu diaspora who invested in Amaravati and continued to support its development imaginary even after the project was stalled. Without losing sight of the global currents of financialization and the circulating economic policy and planning models that frame projects such as Amaravati, I track the everyday currents of uncertainty, enthusiasm, anger, and cynicism that swirled around this audacious plan to build a brand-new city in an agrarian landscape.

Chapter 1 presents the regional and historical context of Amaravati to provide background for understanding the frictions, slippages, and deep fissures that troubled the project from its inception. It provides a detailed sketch of the colonial and postcolonial agrarian and social history and political economy of Coastal Andhra that produced the region's distinctive configuration of land, caste, and capital. The chapter highlights the crystallization of Andhra provincial capital out of the pre-eminent landholding group of the region, the Kammas, and discusses the regional and caste politics behind the public debates around the siting of the new capital city and that pervaded the Amaravati project.

Chapter 2 covers the conceptualization, planning, and execution of the Amaravati project, unpacks the urban imaginary that Rajdhani encapsulated, and outlines the discursive and political strategies deployed by the state government to muster public support for the project and persuade farmers to give up their land. The chapter also describes the financial architecture of the project, focusing on the

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extraction of value from land through the land pooling scheme. To explore the interests of transnational capital in the project, it details the involvement of a Singapore-based consortium in the "Seed Capital" project and the obstacles they encountered. The chapter then examines the government's strategy to develop the new city and monetize the land it had gathered by allocating plots to investors. It tracks the unruly land and property markets that emerged both within and beyond the new capital zone, attending to their close entanglements with state planning processes. The discussion juxtaposes the slow progress of the project against the hectic real estate development that was occurring around the perimeter of the site. Overall, the chapter demonstrates how top-down urban planning was inextricably tied up with a speculative land market, generating opportunities for accumulation that various actors attempted to capture.

Chapter 3 delves further into the repercussions of land speculation and the land pooling system, tracking the changing meanings and values of land as it was delinked from its productive affordances, divested of its social meanings, and converted into a source of purely financial value. To explain why so many farmers chose to pool and/or sell their land, it examines their strategies for maximizing returns and minimizing risks in a radically altered environment and their planning for a post-agrarian future. Finally, the chapter explores the consequences of the circulation of new wealth in the Rajdhani village and beyond.

Chapter 4 focuses on the efforts of the state to urbanize the settlements and people of this rural landscape after agriculture was banned. It contrasts the state's plans to develop and integrate the twenty-nine villages of Rajdhani into the new city with the informal processes of urbanization that were already transforming them, driven by new wealth generated from the sale of land. The chapter explores the responses of different social classes and caste groups to the Amaravati plan as it interrupted everyday life and generated new uncertainties and tensions, especially for landless labor households. It examines the ways in which individuals and communities that were swept up in (or swept aside by) the promised urban future became agents or subjects of a developmental state, which attempted to manage this "surplus population" through welfare schemes and skill training programs. Overall, the chapter highlights several ways in which inequalities based on land ownership were reproduced and sharpened by the Amaravati project.

Chapter 5 presents Rajdhani as a landscape of value struggles, as divergent visions of development and meanings of land came into

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conflict. The chapter first outlines the incorporation of participating farmers as "partners" in the project and their consolidation as a new political constituency as they began to embrace a post-agrarian future. It then turns to the opposition movement, a coalition of diverse groups that clashed with the state as well as with "land pooling farmers." The second half of the chapter details the Dalit critique of the land pooling scheme and their experiences of marginalization and dispossession by the state and the landowning class as the project unfolded. These sections focus on the controversy around Dalit "assigned lands," highlighting the reproduction of rural axes of social power by land speculation and the land pooling process. The discussion traces the ways in which the colonial land revenue system, built around a caste-based structure of agricultural production, continues to frame property relations and administrative policies in post-liberalization India.

Chapter 6 recounts the intricate negotiations between the planning authority and farmers who pooled their land, as they intervened in the planning of Rajdhani and the development of the new layouts where their compensation plots were located. As "LP [land pooling] farmers" asserted their status as stakeholders in the Amaravati project, they also reconstituted themselves as propertied urban citizens. The chapter then tracks the technologies through which agricultural land was assetized and transformed into abstract digital tokens and the circulation of these assets through an online transnational property market. It also examines the contradictions and ambiguities that were generated by the procedures through which these digitized assets were to be rematerialized on the ground.

In chapters 3 through 6, I attempt to explain why cultivators were persuaded to surrender their land and participate in the urban future embodied in the Amaravati project. I argue that land pooling farmers began to engage with the state and market in new ways, collaborating in the building of a new city in an agrarian space and demanding due recognition of their rights and position by the state. In chapter 7 I turn to the "Save Amaravati" movement, which revealed the terms of this engagement most clearly. The movement crystallized in 2019 in response to the abandonment of the project by the newly elected state government. The chapter describes the evolution and organization of the movement and explores its implications for the formation of new publics and politics through property in post-liberalization India.

The Conclusion draws together these different threads of the Amaravati story and brings it up to date with a brief discussion of the project's revival after the return of Chandrababu Naidu to power

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in Andhra Pradesh in May 2024. The chapter explores the significance of this case for larger questions about the reproduction of caste and re-entrenchment of structures of inequality through neoliberal urbanization, the politics of development and land, and the shifting relations between state, capital, citizenship, and democracy in contemporary India.

Notes

1. Names of all interlocutors are anonymized, indicated by quotation marks on first use.
2. This region was not governed by the colonial *zamindari* system (found in several pockets across Coastal Andhra), but big landlords are often referred to as "zamindars."
3. While producing a growth spurt, economic reforms led to a restructuring of the Indian economy with largely negative consequences, including the shrinking of industrial production, the expansion of services, and a pattern of "jobless growth." The service sector now provides more than half of the country's GDP but employs less than one-third of its workforce. The contribution of agriculture to national income declined from 35 percent in 1990–91 to 15 percent in 2022–23, although the share of agriculture in total employment remained disproportionately high, decreasing slowly from 58 percent in 1999–2000 to 42 percent in 2019 (Basole and Narayan 2020). Significantly, construction and real estate have been among the fastest-growing sectors of the Indian economy, accounting for about 10 percent of economic output and providing the second largest source of employment after agriculture—indicating that India's "growth story" hinges on real estate and infrastructure development.
4. Of course, these "greenfield" cities are not built on empty land but on land that has been delinked from its prior uses. See Kennedy and Sood (2016), Nielsen (2017), Sood and Kennedy (2023).
5. As Kalb (2024: 29) notes, urbanization and land have become key "frontlines of value" across the world. For examples of similar "new city" and urban renewal projects, see Evren (2022), Harms (2016), Hirsch et al. (2022), Kenney-Lazar (2023), and Wittekind (2024).
6. Indeed, several of these new cities, such as Forest City in Malaysia (built by Chinese capital and aimed at the Chinese market), are private real estate projects (Moser and Avni 2024). This level of privatization in urban development is not yet possible in India, which retains some restrictions on foreign investment in land and property markets, but state-driven mega-projects such as Amaravati are clearly designed as platforms for private investment and capital accumulation. India opened the real estate sector to 100 percent foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2005, allowing transnational capital to be invested in real estate projects and urban property markets. The inflow of private equity capital bolstered the fortunes of Indian developers, leading to the rapid expansion and consolidation of the real estate industry (Goldman and Narayan 2021) and the mushrooming of large residential and commercial projects in major Indian cities (Searle 2016; Shatkin 2017). However, foreign investors are not allowed to directly purchase land to develop property, but instead must tie up with Indian real estate companies through joint ventures.
7. See: Aalbers (2019), Birch and Muniesa (2020), Christophers (2023), Leitner and Sheppard (2023), Swyngedouw and Ward (2022, 2024), Ward and Swyngedouw (2018).

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8. As Chakravorty (2013b: chap. 9) notes, regional variations in agricultural productivity and histories of land administration have resulted in very uneven levels of activity in land markets across India. Variations in the values of land (as a tradeable commodity or a productive asset) may account for the diverse responses to land acquisition across different regions of India.
9. The "global land grab" literature has documented the extensive flows of foreign capital into the purchase of land in the global South (Fairbairn 2020; Hall et al. 2015). However, in India land dispossession and displacement have not been propelled *directly* by global capital, in most instances.
10. This strategy was first pursued by Chandrababu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh, as I discuss in the next chapter.
11. See Levien (2013), Nielsen (2018), Sampat (2016b). Resistance to land acquisition has received the most scholarly attention, although landholders often acquiesce in their displacement due to pressure from the state (Subramanyam and Kudva 2021).
12. See, for example, Anwar (2018), Balakrishnan (2018), Cowan (2024a), Levien (2015), Upadhya and Rathod (2021).
13. This convergence of caste with control over land was captured by sociologist M. N. Srinivas in the term "dominant caste" (Srinivas 1959)—a formulation that retains its relevance despite various anti-caste and caste-based mobilizations in postcolonial India. Examples include Jats and Yadavs in Punjab and the United Provinces, Marathas and Patidars in Bombay Presidency, and Kammas and Reddys in the Telugu-speaking districts of Madras Presidency.
14. A rich historical literature has explored the intersections of property rights and structures of social power instituted by colonial land revenue systems. See, for example, Bhattacharya (2018), Frykenberg (1969), Ludden (1985), Washbrook (1981).
15. The term neoliberalism—in the Indian context and in general—is contested, and several scholars have suggested that it has become too capacious to be useful. However, here I retain the term as shorthand for the range of economic policies, governance practices, and ideological orientations that have been documented by many scholars (Ganti 2014; Harvey 2007).
16. There is no space (or need) here to delve into the theoretical discussions that have swirled around the concept of value. See Kalb (2024) for an extended treatment of these debates and a critique of Graeber (2001), whose retheorization of value as the product of human action is often cited. Kalb also critiques the value/values binary, proposing a dialectical relation through a refurbished concept of "value regime," or a "spatially networked articulation of 'value and values'" (2024: 20–21).
17. This is what William Archer's indigenous subjects in Chotanagpur argued in response to his demand to show him their title deeds (Damodaran 2002: 93, cited in Li 2014b: 589).
18. Several scholars have critiqued this stream of theorizing for elevating infrastructure "from object and concept to an epistemological frame and a *sui generis* ontology" (Buier 2023: 49). Bear (2020b: 46, 64) cautions that the anthropological positioning of infrastructure as a key conceptual category of neoliberalism mimics the efforts of international financial institutions and consultancies to produce infrastructure as a "global asset class" and key site of value extraction. Bear's (2020b) history of the Indian railways also underscores the importance of tracing the colonial and postcolonial genealogies of even apparently hyper-modern projects such as Amaravati.
19. I conducted field research two or three times a year between 2014 and 2019 and made several follow-up visits in 2022 and 2025. Fieldwork included unstructured or semi-structured interviews with residents of the Amaravati villages from across the socio-economic spectrum; government officials, political leaders at various levels, and employees and consultants of the AP Capital Region Development Authority

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(APCRDA); real estate developers, builders, land brokers, and other business owners and executives from Hyderabad, Vijayawada, and neighboring towns; journalists, activists, and academics; and many others. I attended several public events in Vijayawada and official meetings and gatherings such as *gram sabha* and SIA (social impact assessment) meetings in Rajdhani villages. I also held several semi-formal group discussions with selected categories of Rajdhani residents. When I was not in Andhra, I closely followed developments in Amaravati through media reports, online research, and communication with acquaintances in Vijayawada. An important part of the research archive consists of the reams of government and planning documents, unpublished reports, and media reports (mainly English language) that I collected over these years.

20. Although I can follow conversations in Telugu, I am no longer sufficiently fluent or confident to carry out full interviews on my own. However, discussions with government officials and other middle-class actors were usually conducted in English. Most excerpts from interviews quoted in this book are translations from Telugu by Uday or Rohith, apart from interviews that were conducted in English or in a mix of English and Telugu. Where significant English terms were used by respondents while speaking in Telugu, I mark them with italics.

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— Chapter 1 —

LOCATING RAJDHANI



This chapter situates the story of Amaravati within the history and sociology of the Coastal Andhra region—the site of the planned city, known as "Rajdhani" (capital). Emphasizing the variegated nature of postcolonial capitalism, the chapter provides an overview of the fashioning of the distinctive political economy of the region, highlighting the materialization of provincial capital and the politics of region and caste that framed both state bifurcation and the Amaravati project. In subsequent chapters, I build on this background to argue that the caste foundation of Andhra regional capital is a fundamental element of the Amaravati story, as is the historical embedding of party politics in caste and regional rivalries in the state of Andhra Pradesh.

The first section describes the formation of Coastal Andhra's distinctive regional political economy from the late colonial period, focusing on the commoditization of land and the crystallization of provincial capital out of the pre-eminent landholding group of the region, the Kammas. Section 2 outlines the transnationalization of the Kamma community and the Andhra middle classes and tracks the changing values of land in the context of agrarian change in the post-liberalization period. The third section traces the history of caste and regional politics in Andhra Pradesh and the contestations that led to the bifurcation of the state. This discussion provides the background for section 4, which reviews the debates that swirled around the selection of a site for the new state capital, leading to land speculation. Finally, section 5 provides an overview of the agrarian structure and caste configuration of the region and describes the social landscape of the twenty-nine villages encompassed by the new city.

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Genealogy of Provincial Capital

> Guntur is a rich, surplus district. Its plain is a luxurious carpet of green the year round. Palm-fringed squares of sugar-cane, rice, and other staple crops are laced together by irrigation canals. Tobacco fields bring foreign exchange from Britain and America. Arterial canals carry cargo vessels parallel to the coast. The Grand Trunk highway is fed by metalled roads from the interior. Mainline railways, joined by subsidiary lines at Bezwada, connect the district with the leading industrial, commercial, and population centres of India … (Frykenberg 1965: 1)

This description of Guntur District in Robert Frykenberg's history of early British rule conjures a vivid picture of the landscape. The prosperous agrarian economy he describes was an outcome of the construction of the Prakasam Barrage, designed by the British engineer Sir Arthur Cotton, across the Krishna River in 1852, together with a canal irrigation system in the downstream areas of Guntur and Krishna Districts, creating a surplus rice-producing zone.

Coastal Andhra's distinctive political economy was also shaped by the system of land governance and revenue extraction put in place by the colonial state, in several ways. The "ryotwari" (*raiyatwari*) system of land revenue collection that was instituted across much of Madras Presidency (apart from a few pockets of *zamindari* settlement) dismantled the claims of superior rights holders to a share of the produce of the land and devolved land rights (and responsibility for paying taxes) to a class of peasants deemed to be the "actual cultivators" of the soil (although most agricultural labor was performed by "untouchable" landless workers).[1] The ryotwari settlement in effect produced individual property rights in land by creating detailed records of rights, which continue to form the basis of land governance and claims to property in the region.[2] With the establishment of a legal infrastructure for property ownership, land became a fungible commodity and a lively land market emerged in the region—in sharp contrast to other provinces where the sale of land was circumscribed by social or legal restrictions.[3] While confirming the land rights of caste groups framed by British administrators as hardy and productive yeoman cultivators—especially Kammas and Reddys—the ryotwari settlement also institutionalized the exclusion from land ownership of the "untouchable" castes (now Scheduled Castes [SCs] or Dalits), a highly oppressed class of agricultural laborers (Kumar 1965).

In her history of caste in Madras Presidency, Viswanath (2014) uncovers the ways in which "customary" agrarian relations

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(structured by caste) were reaffirmed and cemented by the colonial state. In Tamilnad, the British authorities accepted the claims of *mirasidars* (landlords, mostly Vellalars or Brahmins) to the ownership of entire villages and their lands, as well as their rights to the labor of untouchable "Paraiyars" (Raman 2018). When the colonial government, in response to numerous petitions from "Pariahs," finally granted them rights to the "wastelands" that they were already cultivating, they were not given *pattas*, or proprietary rights, but only conditional occupancy rights (Viswanath 2014: 159–60). In Coastal Andhra, limited land rights were similarly granted to Panchamas in Kistna (Krishna) and Guntur Districts—a measure that was directed at alleviating the miserable conditions of the poor (Viswanath 2014: 171 ff.). The reproduction of caste-based distinctions in land rights by the postcolonial state had political repercussions for the Amaravati project, which I discuss in chapter 6.

The extension of canal irrigation across the deltas of the Krishna and Godavari Rivers in Guntur, Krishna, and West and East Godavari Districts of Coastal Andhra allowed cultivators to turn from dryland subsistence crops to commercial crops such as oilseeds, sugarcane, turmeric, and chillis, and especially paddy. The imposition of the ryotwari system, which levied taxes in the form of money, also incentivized cultivators to grow high-value cash crops (Duvvury 1986). These developments enabled cultivating households belonging to the major landowning castes—especially Kammas and Rajus but also Kapus, Reddys, and others—to accumulate surpluses (Baker 1976; Washbrook 1976).

But it was not only the delta areas that underwent profound changes in the late colonial period. The "dry" or rainfed upland areas of Guntur District were also transformed by the commercialization of agriculture following the introduction of Flue-Cured Virginia (FCV) tobacco by the British American Tobacco Company in the 1920s. The district's black soils were highly conducive to this crop, which was cultivated through a direct contract system, tying farmers closely to commercial capital (Duvvury 1986). Guntur became the major center for FCV tobacco production, processing, and export in India, a development that intensified an already skewed land ownership pattern in the district as cultivators expanded their activities by acquiring additional land (1986: PE50). From the 1970s, tobacco production gave way to cotton as the main commercial crop, mainly due to the new availability of irrigation from the Nagarjuna Sagar Project that was built further upstream on the Krishna River (Reddy 1985: A138). The history of commercialized agriculture in Guntur

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District and across the region left a deep imprint on the political economy of Coastal Andhra and on rural culture. Andhra's landowning cultivators, or *raiyats*, gained a reputation for innovative and market-oriented farming.

The spread of commercial cultivation in Guntur between 1865 and 1930 led to the "emergence of a stratum of peasants who entered the commodity markets and rapidly prospered at the lower level of intermediaries" (Duvvury 1986: PE47) by trading in rice and various dryland crops. Rich cultivators also began to invest in agro-processing industries and engage in rural moneylending (1986: PE47). By the 1930s, prosperous farmers across the region were channeling agricultural profits into a range of business activities such as trade, finance (such as "chit funds"), agro-industry (oil mills and rice mills), road transport companies, cinema halls, and hotels, giving rise to a diversified regional economy. Profits from business also flowed back into the accumulation of agrarian land, creating a circular movement of capital between the rural economy and growing market towns such as Vijayawada, Guntur, and Rajahmundry (Ananth 2007a: 24–26; Rao 1985: A65–67).

The linking of agrarian land with expanding circuits of finance stimulated local land markets. Even in the late colonial period, land in Coastal Andhra changed hands frequently, although most transactions were confined within local areas and communities (Dasari 2004). This history of commoditization, which positioned land as a key site for the investment of profits generated from other economic activities, means that valuing land as a financial asset is not a new concept. The routine circulation of land may also account for its historically very high prices in the region—much beyond its productive value (and apart from periodic speculative bubbles).[4] This background helps to explain the central place that land holds in Andhra's political economy and economic culture, apart from its social value for peasant and elite households alike as a repository of family wealth, signifier of social status, and key source of power in rural society.

Ananth (2007a) argues that Coastal Andhra developed a distinctive "culture of business" during this period, dominated by speculative finance capital and marked by a search for super-profits through high-risk investments. The region is noted for the efflorescence of finance companies (legal and illicit) offering lucrative investment opportunities as well as "get-rich-quick" scams (such as pyramid schemes) that often leave investors bankrupt (Ananth 2007b). The popularity of such questionable investments offering high returns

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suggests a culture of investment marked by an appetite or high tolerance for risk, as does the popularity of gambling in the region.[5] Even today, investors, big and small, tend to move their wealth frequently between different asset classes—bank deposits, stocks, cash, land, and gold—following fluctuating relative returns and prices.

These developments led to the formation of a regional "vernacular capitalism" (Birla 2009) in Coastal Andhra, based on an economy centered on commercialized agriculture as well as accumulation through "secondary circuits of capital"—trade and finance. The class of rich cultivators (mainly belonging to the Kamma community) became firmly embedded in growing regional towns such as Vijayawada and Guntur, retaining their houses and agricultural land in their villages but expanding their family portfolios through the acquisition of urban property and commercial investments. Rural elites invested not only in business activities but also in higher education for their children, many of whom moved into urban occupations and professions, creating a strong convergence between middle class and caste identity in Andhra (Upadhya 1988, 1997).

The Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s reinforced this pattern of accumulation from agricultural surplus through economic diversification by enhancing the prosperity of middle and large landowning and cultivating families of Coastal Andhra. This "interlinked moneylender-merchant-input-agent class … managed all kinds of agricultural transactions related to commissions, inputs, credit, and marketing of agricultural produce in the coastal Andhra region" (Prasad 2015: 80). Building on their dominant position in regional trade and finance, the rural rich also began to invest in industries. The first generation of Kamma entrepreneurs, most hailing from *zamindari* families, established sugar mills and other agro-processing units and cotton spinning mills, as well as investing in the film industry during the 1940s and 1950s (Damodaran 2008: 98–102). Damodaran (2008: 101) observes: "While the majority of early Kamma industrialists belonged to the landlord class, by virtue of being from a 'peasant' community they became at the same time role models for enterprising caste brethren of more humble stock." By the 1960s, the "provincial propertied classes" (Balagopal 1987) had expanded their commercial and industrial activities, within the region and beyond, into infrastructure contracting, construction, transport, finance, and the film industry (Damodaran 2008: chap. 4; Srinivas 2013). As S. V. Srinivas's work on the Telugu film industry shows, peasant capital "was perpetually on the move, exploring possibilities and shifting from one speculative investment to another" (Srinivas 2010, cited

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in Parthasarathy 2015: 823). These strategies underwrote the consolidation of the class that Parthasarathy (2015) terms "provincial capital," which continues to control the regional economy even as it has expanded its business interests and investments across India and abroad.[6]

In the wake of economic reforms in the 1990s, Andhra regional capital began to flow into new industries such as IT, pharma, and real estate, as well as the newly privatized health care and education sectors. Kamma entrepreneurs established numerous private engineering and medical colleges, hospitals, software companies, and "coaching centers" in Hyderabad and regional towns and even rural areas of Coastal Andhra (Upadhya 2016). Kamma, Raju, and Reddy businessmen set up large companies in key sectors such as construction (for example, Nagarjuna Construction floated by A. V. S. Raju) and power generation (such as the Lanco Group owned by Kamma entrepreneurs), as well as finance (for example, Nagarjuna Finance), IT (Satyam Computer Services established by Byrraju Ramalinga Raju in Hyderabad in 1987), pharmaceuticals (Dr. Reddy's Laboratories), and other domains of manufacturing (Damodaran 2008: chap. 4).[7]

Andhra regional capital also became prominent in the infrastructure sector after it was opened to private sector participation (Parthasarathy 2015: 827–28). Large-scale infrastructure development in Andhra Pradesh revealed the "nexus of politics with caste," as Kamma or Reddy contractors loyal to the party in power were awarded contracts for the construction of road, power plants, and other projects (Cross 2014: 50–51). The mushrooming of SEZs around Hyderabad in the early 2000s signaled the capture of land by provincial capital, as land acquired by the state was transferred to private developers and later denotified, allowing it to be sold or put to other, more profitable uses (2014: 52). Cross (2014: 52) suggests that property developers in Andhra Pradesh "discovered that it is just as lucrative to imagine infrastructure as it is to actually build it." Consequently, substantial land acquired for SEZs in the state remains unused—in 2013, only 38 of the 115 sanctioned economic zones for which land was acquired were operational (2014: 52).[8] This land-hungry pattern of investment by even successful industrial and service sector entrepreneurs is exemplified by the infamous Satyam scandal.[9]

This brief history of the formation and consolidation of Andhra regional capital provides background for the discussion below of the politics of state bifurcation and the aspirations that were embodied

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in the Amaravati project. In the following section, I first trace the formation of a transnationalized regional middle class, grounded in caste and land.

Mobilizing Land and Caste

Kammas are the most prominent caste group within the provincial propertied classes of Coastal Andhra, owning a large proportion of the land in the region and wielding significant political and social power—although other major landowning groups such as Rajus (also known as Kshatriyas), Reddys, and Kapus constitute important segments of this class. Kammas are popularly characterized as an enterprising and dynamic community that has been responsible for the region's relatively high levels of social and economic development.

Kammas' reputation as "progressive" (Kurian 2025) and risk-taking farmers was consolidated through a significant trend of outward migration by Kamma farming families from the deltas, starting in the 1930s, to newly irrigated areas of Telangana and Rayalaseema where they bought up cheaper lands and formed new agrarian settlements (Benbabaali 2018). While small Kamma farmers became middle or rich peasants through migration, wealthier Kammas invested their surpluses in the towns of Coastal Andhra. "This migration of capital and people ultimately forged unity among the different classes within Kammas," consolidating the political and social power of the community (Prasad 2015: 79). Kammas often explain their success in business and relative prosperity by highlighting their hardworking and entrepreneurial nature, an image that was at the center of the self-fashioning of the community as it accumulated capital and followed investment opportunities beyond the region (Roohi 2019).

Kammas form the backbone of the regional elite as well as the Andhra middle classes, drawing on investments in higher education and the transition from agriculture to urban occupations and professions. The consolidation of this powerful caste-class category owes much to a marked trend of international migration by educated professionals from the region beginning in the 1960s and 1970s. A "first wave" of medical professionals and engineers who moved to the USA, UK, and other countries of the global North was followed by a "second wave" of software engineers who migrated mainly to the USA, especially following the "Y2K" crisis (Roohi 2017; Xiang 2007). This pattern of spatial mobility gave rise to a large and affluent Telugu diaspora that retains close social ties with the region, creating

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dense transnational networks through which social, symbolic, and financial resources are channeled to their families and villages back home (Roohi 2018, 2019, 2023). Children living abroad or in Indian metro cities such as Bengaluru or Hyderabad often provide economic and social resources to their families in villages or regional towns of Coastal Andhra, bolstering the social standing of their parents in the community. As I show in the following chapters, investments by Andhra "NRIs" (Non-Resident Indians)[10] and urban professionals were key drivers of the speculative land boom that erupted in and around Amaravati.

These elements of "caste capital" (Deshpande 2013) underwrote the solidification of the social and political power of Kammas as a community as well as the accumulation strategies of provincial capital. Caste networks stretch across boundaries of social class and rural-urban location, tying even small and marginal Kamma farmers into a larger community that provides social and political connections with more powerful or affluent members. Kamma cultivators interviewed in the Rajdhani villages frequently invoked their kinship or other social relations with prominent Kamma professionals, businessmen, or politicians as a way of articulating their status—connections that burnish their self-identity and contribute to strategies of accumulation.

The political economy and cultural politics of Coastal Andhra have been deeply marked by the transnationalization of the region, as diasporic networks serve as circuits of social reproduction and capital accumulation. NRIs invested extensively in real estate in Hyderabad as well as rural land and urban properties in Andhra (Upadhya 2018), financial flows that were redirected to the new capital region after the announcement of the Amaravati project (Upadhya 2017). A popular saying in Andhra is that the "dream" of youth is to have "lands in Andhra, a house in Hyderabad, and a job in America" (Xiang 2007: 32). More recently, this dream was updated to include a plot of land in Amaravati.

This aphorism suggests that for Kammas across the economic spectrum, land and real estate are the most important sites for the sequestration and augmentation of family assets as well as for the assertion of social status within the community. Property in land is highly valued across India (as elsewhere), but land is a particularly important form of wealth and honor for agrarian communities, one that is infused with social meanings and affordances that go much beyond its monetary value (Nielsen 2018: chap. 2). This characteristic is often cited to explain why land markets in India tend to be "sticky"—farming

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households usually hold onto their land unless faced with a major crisis requiring a large amount of cash (Chakravorty 2013b: 143). Although many landholding families of Coastal Andhra have moved out of their home villages, they have largely retained their agricultural lands—contributing to the high level of absentee landlordism in the state. Even second- and third-generation migrants from Coastal Andhra, living and working in cities such as Hyderabad and Bengaluru or abroad, often still own land and houses in their native villages, or even buy additional agricultural land—pointing to their strong sense of identification with the region.

However, the values of land for the regional elite have been changing, from a symbol of social class or affective attachment to the village to primarily a vessel for the multiplication of wealth. "As the next generation of this class migrates to the United States, Europe, or Australia, or the rich new-economy sectors in urban India, and realizes its acquisitionist 'dreams', there is a great rush to buy agricultural lands mainly for future value" (Prasad 2015: 81). Land prices in Andhra rose ten to twenty times between 2000 and 2015, a trend that was exacerbated by the mushrooming of SEZs across the state. These inflated prices suggest that investments in land are driven not by the rent or agricultural income it may yield, but mainly for its potential to produce value through speculation (2015: 81).

The centrality of land and real estate in the investment strategies of the Andhra regional elite, the urban middle classes, and the diaspora is indicated by the pattern of urbanization in the region. As regional towns such as Vijayawada and Guntur grow, they expand into surrounding rural areas, driving up land prices and encouraging the conversion of agricultural land (legally or illicitly) into urban property. This property often takes the form of housing "layouts" offering plots for sale—a form of property that is affordable for middle-class urban residents who often snap them up. But these layouts generally remain vacant and undeveloped for years, reflecting the speculative nature of these "real estate" ventures (Parthasarathy 2015: 823; Upadhya 2018).

This transformation in the values of land in rural Andhra is also linked to significant changes in the agrarian economy of the state since the 1990s. First, Andhra Pradesh is noted for its very high rate of agricultural tenancy—the leasing out of land for cultivation. The "Green Revolution" that raised agricultural productivity in the rice-growing deltas in the 1960s and 1970s had led to a sharp decline in tenancy, as landowners resumed their lands to reap profits from direct cultivation. However, the post-reforms period (1990s onwards)

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saw a dramatic "rebirth of absentee landlordism" (Prasad 2015: 81; see also Vakulabharanam et al. 2011). As landowning households (especially in rich delta villages) turn to other sources of income or migrate to urban areas, they usually lease out their land to tenants (often belonging to "lower caste" households) to keep it under cultivation and realize some revenue. Andhra Pradesh now stands first amongst Indian states in the share of land area cultivated by tenants (Rao 2019).[11]

Second, the high incidence of tenancy has contributed to the agrarian distress witnessed in the state since the 1980s, especially in upland areas where declining groundwater levels and other sources of ecological stress led to a rash of farmer suicides and distress migration (Veluguri et al. 2021: 909). As Matthan (2023: 119) notes, agricultural intensification, the adoption of new technologies, and increasing dependence on multiple markets have complicated the known risks of cultivation with new uncertainties. While landowning households have been able to mitigate these uncertainties by diversifying their incomes, small and marginal farmers and tenants (mostly belonging to Dalit and "Backward Class" communities) are forced to continue in high-risk and high-input forms of agriculture, driving them into debt.[12] A study of two villages in Guntur District carried out twenty years ago found that farmers were already experiencing agriculture as unviable due to indebtedness (Rao and Suri 2006)—a situation that, according to many of my interlocutors, was a key reason behind the willingness of farmers in the Rajdhani villages to sell or pool their land (see chapter 3).

These features of Andhra's agrarian economy suggest that the historical entanglements of land, lease, and credit markets (discussed above) continue to mark the region's political economy. High land values induce owners to hold onto their land, further pushing up prices due to short supply. The escalation in land values signals the financialization of agricultural land in the region, as its potential price in the market far exceeds its "use value" or productive value from cultivation. This transformation in the values of land is closely linked to the promotion of the Amaravati plan by regional elites and provincial capital, who pumped money into the speculative land market that was set off by the project (chapter 3).

In the next section, I provide an overview of the regional and caste politics of Andhra Pradesh that led to the bifurcation of the state, as background to the debates that erupted around the location of the new capital outlined in the subsequent section.

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Politics of Region, Caste, and Development

The region known as Coastal Andhra, comprising the districts of Guntur, Krishna, and West and East Godavari, has a complex political history marked by the periodic redrawing of provincial and state boundaries during the late colonial and postcolonial periods. These four districts, which formed part of colonial Madras Presidency, were absorbed into Madras state after Indian independence along with the "Ceded Districts" of Rayalaseema and Tamil-speaking areas to the south. The perceived subordination of Telugu-speaking people and regions to Tamil domination in Madras state led to a movement for a new state based on language (the Vishalandhra, or united Andhra movement), culminating in the formation of Andhra Pradesh in 1956 by merging the Telugu-speaking districts of Madras state and erstwhile Hyderabad princely state. The demand for a separate state reiterated grievances articulated during the late colonial period by the Non-Brahmin movement, which protested against the monopolization of government posts and educational opportunities by Brahmins (especially Tamil Brahmins) in Madras Presidency. These movements, led by prominent members of the major landowning groups of Andhra (including Reddys and Kammas), facilitated the consolidation of these "peasant" castes into powerful, region-wide political entities (Baker 1976; Keiko 2008; Washbrook 1973, 1976). These leaders claimed that educational opportunities and bureaucratic posts had been cornered by Tamil speakers and that the government was neglecting the Telugu-speaking districts, leading to their "backwardness" (Mitchell 2009: 26). Thus, the movement for a united Andhra state not only articulated a new language of political rights but was also driven by a desire for progress (Mantena 2013). Because of these political assertions, which foregrounded a distinctive regional identity, and the growing wealth of rich peasants, the Coastal Andhra region came to be equated with Kammas (Keiko 2010), and the Kamma-dominated delta districts identified as the region's cultural core.

Thus, the regional identity of Andhra that was crafted during this period was based not only on language and territory but also on demands for access to development resources and political power—a narrative that resurfaced during the division of Andhra Pradesh in 2014. The imagination of development that is encapsulated in the Amaravati project draws on this history of regional assertion and political struggle by Andhra rural elites against their perceived domination by Brahmins and Tamil speakers—memories of which

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remain alive today. However, political claims about the neglect and backwardness of the Andhra districts under Madras Presidency (and later Madras state) seem to be at odds with the economic history of the region outlined in the previous sections. Even within Andhra, the region's history is popularly narrated as a story of technology-led economic progress based on the extension of irrigation facilities and the commercialization of agriculture. The iconicization of Sir Arthur Cotton in the region, as indicated by the many statues of him that grace public spaces, is indicative of this popular history of progress, rooted in agricultural development and commercialization (Damodaran 2008: 92).

The creation of the linguistic state of Andhra Pradesh merged three cultural regions historically dominated, politically and economically, by distinct caste groups or alliances of castes: Reddys in Rayalaseema, Reddys and Velamas in Telangana, and Kammas in Coastal Andhra (together with other groups that hold land in some areas, such as Kapus and Rajus). Alliances and contestations between these different caste groups (including, more recently, the large category of BCs, or Backward Classes) have strongly shaped party and electoral politics in the state. Reddys (a large caste category that includes a socially and economically diverse range of endogamous groups) displaced Brahmins to exert control in the Congress Party from the 1950s, while Kammas embedded themselves first in the Communist Party and later the Telugu Desam Party. Thus, state politics has long been marked by political rivalry between the two major landowning groups (Kammas and Reddys), which also had different regional bases.[13]

The longstanding dominance of Reddys and the Congress Party in the state was disrupted in 1983 by the election of the newly formed Telugu Desam Party led by the popular film star N. T. Rama Rao ("NTR")—a Kamma from Krishna District. The TDP's victory was popularly viewed as a sign of the political and economic ascendance of Kammas, and of "Costa" capital, in the state. Indeed, the victory of the TDP was widely attributed to the support of the Telugu newspaper *Ee Naadu*, started in 1974 by well-known Kamma entrepreneur C. Ramoji Rao—whose investments later expanded into a large media conglomerate.[14]

With the formation of united Andhra Pradesh, members of the affluent and middle classes of Coastal Andhra began to migrate to Hyderabad (the state capital and the largest city in the undivided state) to pursue educational, business, political, and employment opportunities, along with provincial capital. The incorporation

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of Hyderabad into networks of capital and caste emanating from Coastal Andhra was greatly strengthened under N. Chandrababu Naidu's (also a Kamma and son-in-law of NTR) leadership as Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh from 1995 to 2004. Fashioning himself as the "CEO" of the state, Naidu initiated far-reaching economic and governance reforms, supported by a loan from the World Bank—the first to be given directly to a state government in India. He invited foreign companies to invest in Hyderabad and promoted the software services and business process outsourcing industries by developing a new area on the outskirts of the city, "Cyberabad," to house IT (information technology) and IT-enabled services companies.[15]

Under Naidu's leadership, the TDP became an "aggressive and sophisticated political player in the game of globalization" (Sunder Rajan 2006: 85). Naidu's neoliberal agenda, which included economic and urban governance reforms to make Hyderabad an attractive investment destination, enjoyed substantial support from the Andhra business class as well as the expanding "new middle class" (Mooij 2007: 46–47), composed largely of educated professionals from Coastal Andhra. These migrants benefited from the opportunities created by the state government's business-friendly policies and infrastructure investments in Hyderabad, making the city a key site of accumulation for Andhra provincial capital as well as international capital (Parthasarathy 2013: 21).

The flow of investments and people from the Andhra region into Hyderabad substantially altered the cultural and political fabric of the city (Srinivas 2013), and their growing economic power (Kamat, Mir, and Mathew 2004) and cultural pre-eminence in the city became key issues in the movement for state bifurcation (Mitchell 2023). The popular demand for a separate state of Telangana was driven by a perceived history of domination by the richer coastal region (Mitchell 2009: 43–44; Srinivas 2015) and a widespread belief that Telangana had been exploited by Costa people, creating sharp regional disparities in development (Maringanti 2010; Vakulabharanam and Motiram 2014). The conflict revolved around control over Hyderabad, suggesting that rural elites seek control of the capital city "not only for political domination but also to respatialize their economic interests by plugging into global financial circuits" (Parthasarathy 2013: 27).

The proposed division of the state, and especially the imminent "loss" of Hyderabad, engendered angry protests across "Seemandhra," a new term for the districts that would remain in Andhra Pradesh if the state were divided (i.e., Rayalaseema and

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Coastal Andhra). As the Telangana agitation intensified, opposition to bifurcation crystallized into the Samaikya Andhra (United Andhra) movement, whose proponents argued that because Hyderabad had been "developed" by Coastal Andhra people the city also belonged to them. The fact that the creation of a separate Telangana would leave Andhra Pradesh without a major metropolitan city was a key concern. Even two years after bifurcation, the division was still perceived as a major injustice inflicted by Telangana activists and the central government (which had accepted their demand) on the coastal region. Inverting the claim of the Telangana movement that Andhra was the more "advanced" region, politicians in residual AP demanded "Special Category" status for the truncated state because of its "backwardness."[16]

In discussions about the future of "New Andhra," the language of resentment and humiliation was quickly replaced by more positive expressions of regional pride revolving around the inherent capabilities and determination of Costa people. Local citizens and leaders began to proclaim that "we don't need Hyderabad" and that they would "show Telangana" by building a better state and a grander capital city. These narratives highlighted the "entrepreneurial drive" and "courage" of the people of Coastal Andhra who, having transformed Hyderabad into a "global city," would now develop residual Andhra Pradesh in the same way. These claims echo Chandrababu Naidu's frequent assertions that he had built up Hyderabad as the software capital of the country and his promises to repeat the feat with the new capital of Andhra Pradesh.

Indeed, Coastal Andhra had remained largely agrarian, with little industrial development or growth in high-end services—apart from in Visakhapatnam ("Vizag"), located in northern Coastal Andhra and home to a public sector steel plant and other major industries. Regional capital and educated professionals had largely moved out of the region, and despite retaining strong affective and social ties with their hometowns or villages (especially to Hyderabad), Andhra entrepreneurs did not view Coastal Andhra as an attractive investment destination. But as the Telangana movement gained momentum, Costa businessmen and politicians began buying up parcels of land in strategic locations and exploring economic opportunities in Andhra. The division of the state in 2014, and the announcement of a plan to build a modern capital city, stimulated a reverse flow of people, resources, and capital back to the region (Upadhya 2017).

This background partly explains the victory of the Telugu Desam Party in the state elections held in May 2014. The TDP's election

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campaign was heavily funded by Andhra business groups, who viewed Naidu as a pro-business and effective leader. Andhra NRIs also actively raised funds and campaigned for the party.[17] The close alignment of the TDP with provincial capital (mediated by caste) is indicated by the fact that several affluent Andhra businessmen stood for election for the first time in 2014 and then became ministers or key advisors to the government—a development that pointed to a naked alliance between provincial capital and the TDP (Nag 2018; Prasad 2014).[18] A prime example of this nexus is the well-known education entrepreneur P. Narayana, founder of the very successful Narayana group of "coaching institutes," who was appointed Minister of Municipal Administration & Urban Development and served as Naidu's point man for the Amaravati project.

This convergence of caste, class, and political power in Coastal Andhra is reflected in post-bifurcation state politics as well as the Amaravati project. The counter-assertion by regional elites and middle classes in the wake of bifurcation, and their mobilization around the TDP during the 2014 election, drew on Chandrababu Naidu's record as a neoliberal reformer and proponent of development. As I discuss in subsequent chapters, middle-class citizens as well as substantial farmers interviewed between 2014 and 2019 frequently expressed strong confidence in Naidu's leadership abilities and his plans for the new capital, justifying their faith in him by pointing to how he had "transformed" Hyderabad. The Amaravati plan also reflected the interests of regional political and economic elites in transforming residual Andhra Pradesh into a vibrant, fast-growing state through inflows of global capital and expertise.

The central place of the Kamma-dominated core delta districts in the construction of Andhra regional identity helps to explain the popular demand to build the new capital in the Guntur-Krishna region. This framing of regional identity also inflected the imagination of a "new Andhra" following the division of the state, under the leadership of Chandrababu Naidu (Upadhya 2017). But the contestations around the site of the new capital, and the identity of the truncated state, were also shaped by the history of regional and caste politics in Andhra Pradesh.

Siting the New Capital

Even before the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh was completed, an intense debate erupted about where the new state capital should

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be located.[19] The central government appointed an expert committee, headed by the prominent urban development expert K. C. Sivaramakrishnan, to examine the question. As the committee traveled across all the districts of the residual state, local politicians, business owners, and prominent citizens lobbied for their towns to be selected as the capital, eager to benefit from the development that would flow from becoming the seat of the state government. At public meetings in Guntur and Vijayawada, participants demanded that the capital be located in the Vijayawada-Guntur region, popularly viewed as the Andhra "heartland."

Intense interest in the question of the site of the future capital fed rumors about the likely choice, leading to land speculation and windfall profits for some landowners and early investors in one place after another. Prices of agricultural land skyrocketed to unprecedented levels in Ongole, Nuzvid, and other towns following rumors that they had been chosen as the site of the new capital, creating bubbles that eventually burst—bankrupting some players while making small fortunes for others. This speculation was driven by the anticipation of the development that (it was widely believed) Rajdhani would bring, which in turn would make land even more valuable.

In September 2014, the state government finally announced its choice of location for the capital—a rural area in Guntur District, just across the Krishna River from the major regional town of Vijayawada.[20] The decision to build a "greenfield city" rather than designate an existing town as the capital reflected Chandrababu Naidu's strong desire to create a showpiece—a "fully-planned," hyper-modern, and smartly governed city unlike any other in India (chapter 2). The following month, the government revealed the exact boundaries of the planned city, which would cover over 200 square kilometers, engulfing twenty-nine villages. Two months later, the government unveiled a land pooling scheme to acquire thirty-eight thousand acres of privately held agricultural land.

The selected location for the new capital satisfied the demands of local elites as well as the transnational Kamma business class. Because Guntur District is a TDP stronghold, the government expected to meet less resistance to land acquisition there. However, the choice of location ignored the recommendations of the Sivaramakrishnan Committee, whose report stated that the Guntur-Vijayawada region was an unsuitable choice for the capital for several environmental, social, and economic reasons (Sivaramakrishnan Committee 2014). The Committee had also suggested creating dispersed administrative

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centers across the state rather than building a single "super-city," but Naidu announced the Amaravati plan just one day after their report was submitted to the government. Justifying this decision, he asserted that the capital "must reflect our Telugu culture and ethos, who we are as people, what we wish to become and the path we choose" (*Economic Times*, 14 June 2014)—alluding to the popular notion that the Guntur-Krishna region is the cultural center of Andhra. Critics complained that the Chief Minister was catering to the real estate lobby or favoring his supporters who own land in the region, and they also questioned why such a large amount of land was required to build the capital (Ramachandraiah 2015, 2016). But the plan slowly gained support in the region.

The announcement of the capital site predictably led to a land rush in that area, with prices reportedly escalating from just 20 to 40 lakh rupees an acre to 8 to 10 crore rupees (or about 150,000 US dollars in 2014) within a few weeks.[21] Rumors swirled about alleged large purchases of land by prominent industrialists, real estate developers, politicians, and film stars from across the state and beyond, especially through "*benami*" transactions.[22] In November 2014, as I was driving around the area with a local farmer, we passed by the Sub-Registrar's Office at Tadikonda where he pointed out the line of expensive SUVs and Mercedes sedans parked along the road, most bearing license plates of big cities such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Chennai. Wealthy people from neighboring cities who had purchased land in the area were coming down to register their properties, he explained.

Reliable data on the volume of land sales in the capital zone villages is not available, but several sources estimated that one-third to one-half of all privately owned agricultural land changed hands just before or immediately after the location of the new capital was revealed. A fact-finding report by the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), brought out in December 2014, claimed that 3,500 acres of agricultural land had been transferred within a month prior to the official announcement of the Amaravati project, with large amounts of cash changing hands (Kolstø 2017: 57). An opponent of the project asserted that 80 percent of this land was sold to "real estate people" or to ruling party politicians at prices ranging from 50 lakh to 2 crore an acre, and that some seventeen thousand acres of land in the capital area was held in *benami.*

But the land boom was not driven only by big "outside investors." Local businessmen and ordinary middle-class citizens were quick to pick up small parcels of land in the expectation of even higher

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Figure 1.1. "Office" of a land broker, new capital area, November 2014. Photograph by Carol Upadhya.

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land values in future. A new class of brokers appeared in capital region villages to cater to this market, operating out of small, brightly painted shacks hastily erected along rural roads (Figure 1.1), or circulating on motorcycles to catch prospective customers passing by. Almost overnight, this sleepy agrarian landscape was transformed into a prime real estate market, giving rise to stories of sudden wealth as well as dispossession.

The scale of land speculation evoked much controversy. Critics alleged that the Amaravati project was just a big "real estate deal" benefiting Naidu's "cronies." According to rumor, ruling party politicians and businessmen close to the Chief Minister received advance notice about the selected site and bought up large amounts of land in the area at low prices, later profiting from the escalation in land values. The AP Capital Region Development Authority, or APCRDA—the parastatal agency established to manage the planning and development of the new city—was sarcastically dubbed "Chandrababu Naidu Real Estate Development Agency."[23] But the Amaravati story was much more than a straightforward land grab by powerful actors (although it was also that). The project was a highly risky venture with uncertain returns for investors, landholders, and the state. Above all, the success of the plan depended on the assembly of privately held land by the government and its monetization to generate financial resources and attract investments. At the same time, land markets continued to operate in their usual unruly and opaque fashion, allowing various players to siphon off value for themselves.

Underlying the land boom was also faith in the promised future that Amaravati represented. The government's vision of a well-planned, modern city captured the imagination of middle-class and elite residents of the region and beyond. Soon after the announcement of the project, I met a young software engineer, "Srikant," a native of Vijayawada who was working in the USA. He had come home to purchase a piece of land in the new capital region. When I asked him why he would want to buy land only to hand it over to the government (under the land pooling scheme), he replied:

> If you have seen the cities in India, most of them are unplanned. There are congested roads, no public areas, no parks, no decent infrastructure. Our leader is trying to build a well-planned city here, with wide roads and parks and all. I want to live in such a city.

Srikant had already purchased one acre of land for 85 lakh rupees (about 130,000 US dollars at the time) and was planning to buy

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another acre together with several cousins (also NRIs). They were pooling their money on this deal because the price of land had already doubled, to 1.5 crore rupees (260,000 US dollars). When I remarked that this investment seemed risky (since the future value of the compensation plots was unpredictable), he replied: "The reason I am buying is because I trust in Chandrababu Naidu."

This enthusiasm for Amaravati, as well as the cooperation of so many farmers in the land pooling scheme, cannot be explained without reference to the "caste factor" (as it is openly called locally). Guntur District is a Kamma stronghold as well as an important support base for the TDP. The convergence of caste with party affiliation underwrote the strong belief of many landholders in Chandrababu Naidu's abilities and their sense of entitlement and ownership of the project. As Ramakrishna stated baldly: "Except for Kuragalu, Penumaka, and Undavalli, all the villages here are Kamma villages. That is why the capital is being constructed here. Had this not been so, the capital could have never been made here." Caste identity also provided social and political networks that Kamma farmers could deploy to maximize their gains from the project and minimize risks. Such connections extend from provincial capital and ordinary farmers deep into the political class and the bureaucracy, facilitating their negotiations with the state while marginalizing Dalits and others and reinforcing existing divisions and inequalities (see chapter 5).

Thus, the Amaravati plan was not just a megalomaniacal fantasy of Chandrababu Naidu, as several critics suggested. It represented a development agenda that aligned with the interests and aspirations of provincial capital, the powerful Kamma community, and the transnationalized regional middle class. As I discuss in the next chapter, this imagination of progress embraces modern technology and infrastructure, efficient governance, and well-ordered urban spaces modeled on cities like Singapore or Dubai. As a potent symbol of the new state and its future, Amaravati condensed this development template and projected it onto the space of the region.

Mapping Rajdhani

To reach the new government complex in Amaravati from Vijayawada, the quickest route is to cross the river via the road atop the old Prakasam Barrage that connects Krishna and Guntur Districts. The view of the Krishna River from the top of the dam is stunning—at least in the rainy season when it is full of water.

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Leaving the thick traffic and cacophony of the crowded city behind, a right turn across a small bridge over the right bank irrigation canal takes you to the narrow Karakatta (Embankment) Road atop a *bandh* (embankment) built on the south side of the river as a bulwark against flooding. Stretching down and away from the road on both sides, a luxuriant green vista of banana plantations, vegetable gardens, and fruit trees presents a stark contrast to the urban chaos one has just left behind.

On a narrow strip of raised land between the embankment and the Krishna River, a series of posh bungalows interrupts the view of the river—structures that have been deemed illegal encroachments constructed on the prohibited riverbank. One of these homes—built by a prominent Vijayawada businessman—is occupied by Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu. The neighboring house, belonging to an affluent NRI couple who returned to Andhra after many years in the USA, was rented by Naidu's son (and heir apparent) Lokesh. At the end of this stretch stands a popular nature cure and yoga treatment center, said to have been illicitly constructed on the riverbank through the intervention of a powerful politician.

Viewing the lush landscape of the river and its banks from this elevated road, it is obvious why Naidu was determined to construct the new capital in this location. The planned "Seed Capital" and central business district are slated to come up just opposite Bhavani Island, a large land body in the middle of the river currently inhabited by fisherfolk and Dalits who till the land, but which is marked in the master plan for the development of tourism. After passing Mantena Arogyalayam, a sharp left turn onto a rural road takes you to Venkatapalem village and then onwards to the Temporary Secretariat at Velagapudi, where a series of ghostly structures looms up out of the empty landscape like a mirage.

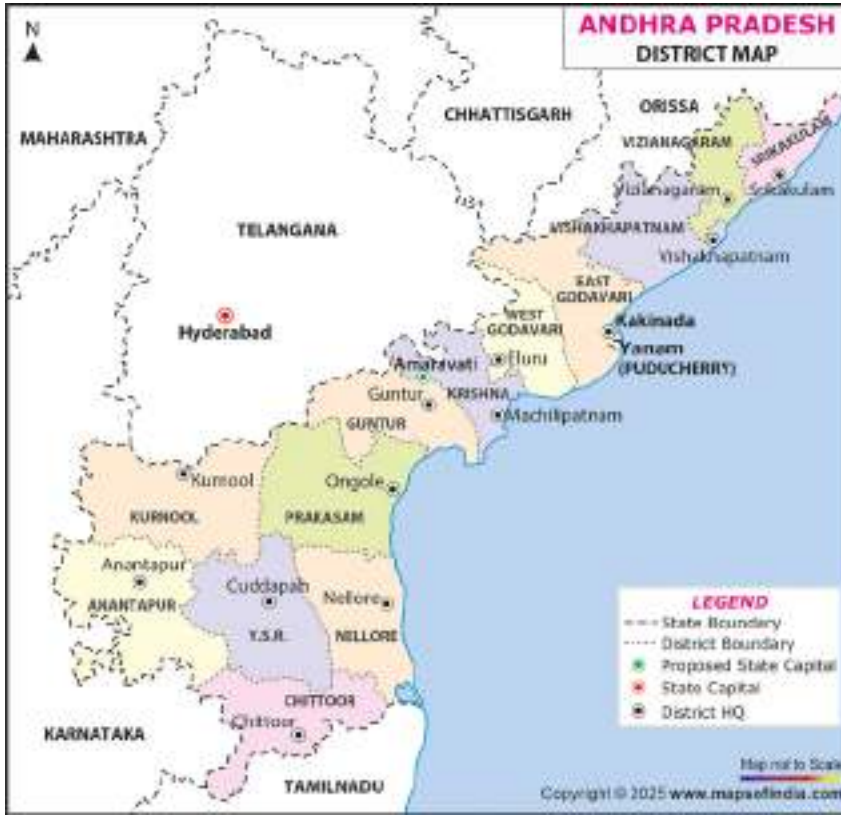
Guntur District is the southernmost of the four core districts of Coastal Andhra (Map 1.1). Prior to the recent reorganization of districts in Andhra Pradesh,[24] it covered an area of 2,443 square kilometers with a population of nearly five million (according to the 2011 Census), encompassing the fertile irrigated belt of the Krishna delta and a larger semi-arid inland zone. But even in the dry upland zone, most agriculture is commercially oriented, producing crops for the market such as cotton, maize, chillis, pulses, and tobacco.

Rooted in the history of landholding and agricultural production in Coastal Andhra outlined above, the agrarian structure of Guntur District—which can be divided roughly into owner-cultivators, tenant farmers, and agricultural workers—is closely aligned with

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caste. Kammas are the major landowners in the district, although other cultivating castes—including Rajus, Kapus, and Reddys (known as "Forward Castes," or FCs)—also hold substantial amounts of land. In addition, several BC ("Backward Class") communities, such as Gowdas, Yadavas, and Balijas, are landowners in some villages.[25] Although landholding in the district is highly unequal (as it is across the state), and the proportion of landless laborers among the rural working population is very high at over 60 percent, most cultivated holdings are small (Sambi Reddy et al. 2012).

In contrast to the upper castes, most Scheduled Caste households ("SCs," as they are also commonly referred to in Andhra) are landless and dependent on daily agricultural wage labor or other manual occupations. The largest Dalit communities, Malas and Madigas, were historically excluded from land ownership and worked as



Map 1.1. District map of Andhra Pradesh (prior to reorganization of districts in 2022). Copyright: MapsofIndia.

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agricultural laborers on the land of upper caste cultivators, often in the form of permanent or "tied" labor. Some Dalit families now cultivate land as tenants or have acquired small or marginal holdings—mainly land parcels that were granted by the government to the poor for cultivation, known as "assigned lands." According to the Socio-Economic and Caste Census of 2011, only 12 percent of Scheduled Caste households in Guntur District held land, compared to 42 percent of other groups.[26]

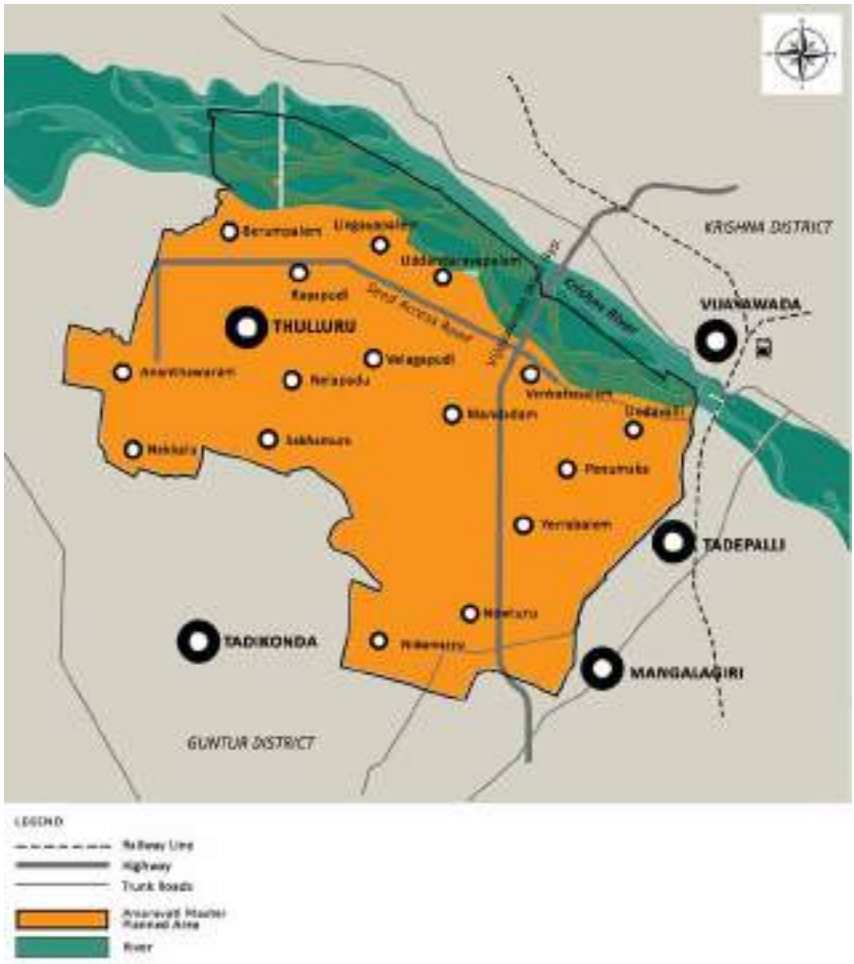
In Coastal Andhra, most Dalits have converted to Christianity—a process that began during the colonial period—and their social identities are strongly connected with the church (mainly various Protestant denominations). While missionary interventions enabled some Dalits to acquire education and produced a degree of social mobility, conversion has not ameliorated the extreme caste discrimination and oppression they face, especially in rural areas (Still 2013). The region became notorious in the 1980s and 1990s for several cases of extreme violence by upper caste youth against Dalits (especially the Karamchedu and Chunduru massacres), leading to the formation of a strong Dalit rights movement in Andhra (Berg 2014; Gundimeda 2016). This history of caste antagonism between Kammas and SCs undergirded the Dalit protests that arose in the context of land pooling in Amaravati (see chapter 5).

The town of Guntur, the administrative headquarters, is the commercial and industrial hub of the district, with its market yards and tobacco factories, rice mills, cotton ginning mills, and other agro-processing units (Reddy 1985: A143). It is also an important center for education, attracting students from across the district and beyond. However, many of the Rajdhani villages have closer economic and social ties with Vijayawada (located close to the new capital but on the other side of the river, in Krishna District).

The twenty-five official revenue villages (twenty-nine settlements) encompassed by the Amaravati project vary greatly in terms of topography, natural resources, agricultural production, livelihoods, and social composition (Map 1.2). Most villages in the western and southern portions of the capital zone, such as Nekkalu and Sakhamuru, were dependent mainly on relatively unproductive "dry" or *metta* (rainfed) agricultural land, capable of producing just one "long crop" of cotton or maize per year (in the *kharif* season) and perhaps a second "short crop" (in the *rabi* season) of pulses. These villages are scattered far apart, poorly connected to other settlements and neighboring towns by narrow, rutted roads. A second category includes the wealthier "wet" villages located closer to the

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river and almost contiguous to one another, including Mandadam, Uddandarayunipalem ("UDpalem"), and Venkatapalem, which were endowed with some irrigated or *jareebu* lands that yielded three to four crops a year. Third, two villages situated close to the bustling town of Mangalagiri on the Vijayawada-Guntur highway, Yerrabalem and Nowluru, have more diversified economies. They host small industries and service sector enterprises, with a significant proportion of their residents engaged in non-agricultural occupations. The fourth category includes the large villages of Undavalli and Penumaka, located close to Vijayawada and practically peri-urban in



Map 1.2. Villages encompassed by Amaravati master plan. Illustration by Deepa William.

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character—densely populated, with multi-story buildings in their crowded lanes providing rental housing to people working in the city. But cultivators in these villages—most of whom are Reddys—also hold irrigated, multi-cropped lands close to the river, from which they earn good livelihoods growing horticulture crops such as vegetables and banana for sale in Vijayawada markets. Finally, a fifth category includes several other Reddy-dominated villages such as Nidamarru, which specialize in floriculture using water from a lift irrigation scheme.

The population of the Rajdhani villages totaled around 100,000 in 2011, of which approximately 30 percent belonged to the Scheduled Castes and 4 percent to the category of Scheduled Tribes. Although detailed data on landholding by caste are not available, the agrarian structure of the Amaravati villages is broadly the same as described above for the district and the region: just one-third of households owned land (most of them Kammas), while Dalits were largely landless and dependent on daily wage labor in agriculture for their livelihoods. Amongst the BC communities, one finds small landowning cultivators as well as tenant farmers and landless workers.[27]

Of the twenty-nine villages encompassed by the Amaravati master plan, most are known as "Kamma villages" (i.e., land is held by Kammas who also form a large proportion of the population), while a few are "Reddy villages." Several other settlements, such as Sakhamuru, are inhabited mainly by BC communities such as Yadavas. In chapter 5, I outline how these variations in caste composition and control over land, type of agricultural land (rainfed or irrigated), cropping patterns, and village economy shaped residents' responses to the Amaravati plan and the land pooling (LP) scheme.

* * *

The regional society and political economy of Coastal Andhra described in this chapter forms the ground upon which Chandrababu Naidu's government sought to construct a grand new capital city, buoyed by aspirations for development and assertions of regional pride. The willingness of Amaravati farmers (most of them Kammas) to hand over their land for the project cannot be explained without reference to the role of caste as a strong form of affective and political identity and a key source of social capital.

In the next chapter, I turn to the planning and implementation of the Amaravati project, for which the state had to carefully manage the expectations and apprehensions of the residents of the Rajdhani villages as well as potential investors and other stakeholders in the

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project. I also explore the entanglements of provincial capital and land markets with the Amaravati plan and the land pooling scheme.

Notes

1. "Ryot" is the anglicized version of *raiyat*, or *raitu* in Telugu, meaning cultivator.
2. The *pattas* (land deeds) that cultivators hold even today are derived from these original records and subsequent land surveys.
3. The institutionalization of land as private property that could be freely bought and sold stands in contrast to other regions of India, such as Punjab, where the sale of land was circumscribed historically by the *bhaichara* ("joint property") land administration system (Cowan 2022; Pati 2022).
4. According to Rao (1985: A-65–67), in the early twentieth century newly rich farmers invested their agricultural surpluses mainly in the purchase of more land, and some speculated in land by buying unirrigated land and waiting for water to reach their plots (Ranga 1926: 37).
5. For example, the infamous AgriGold scam defrauded over three million investors of 7,000 crore rupees (Sana 2025).
6. Damodaran (2008: chap. 4) provides a detailed account of the establishment and growth of business enterprises by Kamma, Raju, and Reddy entrepreneurs. Kamma entrepreneurship is a major theme of narratives about Kamma history and identity found on the numerous websites, blogs, and social media pages dedicated to the Kamma community. See, for example, https://www.kammavarkalyanamalai.com/naicker_naidu_history.php. These websites laud the accomplishments of Kammas in various fields but especially in business. This site provides a list of "Kamma billionaires": https://kammasworld.blogspot.com/2021/10/list-of-30-kamma-billionaires-and.html.
7. Several scholars suggest that provincial capital (mostly comprised of members of agrarian-based middle or "lower" caste groups) rarely crosses regional boundaries to transition into national or transnational corporate capital operating at wider scales (Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar 2021a: 21; cf. Damodaran 2008). Provincial capital, it is argued, tends to remain provincial because agrarian surplus is invested in "localised sources of rent generation rather than in circuits of accumulation that transcend the region" (Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar 2021a: 22). Lerche (2021) suggests that neoliberalization shrank the role of agrarian capital in industrial development (a trend that was always confined to a few regions), even as huge corporates (such as the conglomerates owned by the Adani and Ambani families) with close connections to the national state prospered enormously. However, Andhra provincial capital may be an exception to this pattern, having transcended its regional base to some extent by investing in Hyderabad and beyond, and by building on its strong transnational ties even as it remains rooted in control over land and regional circuits of accumulation. For example, Andhra has produced diversified multinational conglomerates such as GMR Group, which specializes in construction and infrastructure development—especially airports.

   An important question that cannot be explored here is the potential looming conflict between regional capital and national capital, as conglomerates with diverse interests in infrastructure, manufacturing, trade, and finance (such as the Adani and Ambani groups) expand their operations into every corner of the country—for

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instance, buying up ports and other infrastructure projects initiated by provincial capital in Andhra Pradesh (Rajshekar 2023). The largest corporate groups in India today benefited from patronage by political regimes—at the center—the Ambanis from their close ties with the Gandhi family and, more recently, Gautam Adani from a close relationship with Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Jaffrelot, Kohli, and Murali 2019).

8. One-fifth of the SEZs (115) established in India during this period were in Andhra Pradesh (Prasad 2015: 82, n. 4).
9. Ramalinga Raju, whose family hails from West Godavari District, was already a real estate developer when he established Satyam, a software company that quickly became one of the top five infotech companies in India. The company collapsed in 2009 after it was discovered that its top leadership had embezzled huge sums of money by manipulating the balance sheets. These ill-gotten funds were invested mainly in the Hyderabad property market (*The Hindu*, 23 September 2017). The Satyam case also highlights the centrality of caste and kinship networks to the operations of provincial capital (Parthasarathy 2009).
10. Non-Resident Indian (NRI) is the official designation (for taxation purposes) for Indian citizens who live abroad for more than half the year. In Andhra as elsewhere in India, the term "NRI" is popularly used to refer to anyone living abroad regardless of their citizenship status.
11. The extensive leasing out of land by both resident and non-resident landowners (absentee landlordism) has had a negative effect on agricultural productivity as well as the incomes of tenants (Sreenivasulu 2020; Vijay and Sreenivasulu 2013).
12. Andhra Pradesh also has the highest rate of indebtedness in India, with over 90 percent of farm households in debt (Veluguri et al. 2021: 910)—a burden that falls most heavily on tenant farmers who must part with a large share of their produce as rent while also bearing the high costs of agricultural inputs.
13. See: Elliott ([1970] 1995), Mantena (2014), Reddy (1989), Srinivasulu (2002).
14. The Ramoji Group is the largest Kamma-owned business group, with interests in food processing, films, hotels, finance, and media (Damodaran 2008: 108).
15. The state government also created a software park, "HITEC City," where IT majors such as Microsoft and Oracle set up their Indian operations. The development of Hyderabad as an IT hub was underwritten by the mushrooming of private engineering colleges set up by Kamma and Reddy entrepreneurs and politicians in Coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema (Kamat et al. 2004; Upadhya 2016). Many engineering graduates from the coastal districts moved to Hyderabad for computer training or higher education in the 1990s, feeding into the Indian IT workforce and the Telugu diaspora (Xiang 2007).
16. During the debate in Parliament on the proposed bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh, then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh promised that the residual state would be given "Special Category" status—a designation usually accorded only to the most economically backward states to provide extra financial aid—for a period of five years, to compensate for the loss of revenue and other resources to Telangana (most state revenues were generated by Hyderabad). After the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government led by Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, the new Prime Minister reiterated this promise, but it was not fulfilled. The special status demand is a simmering issue that periodically provokes political agitations in the state.
17. The spread of social media reinforced the consolidation of the transnationalized Kamma community, which has a strong online presence (Roohi 2018, 2019). A successful online campaign called "Bring Back Babu" was mounted by NRIs in the USA. See https://www.facebook.com/BringBabuBack/.

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18. Although it is "common knowledge" that the Telugu Desam Party is supported by funds from the Kamma business community and other wealthy caste members, it is impossible to substantiate these claims with hard data.
19. According to the terms of the bifurcation, Hyderabad was to remain the capital of both states for ten years, but because a new capital would eventually have to be established for residual AP, debates about its location began even prior to bifurcation.
20. The Krishna River forms the boundary between Krishna and Guntur Districts. Vijayawada is in Krishna District, across the river from the designated capital zone in Guntur District.
21. *Lakh* and *crore* are terms used in the Indian numbering system: one lakh = 100,000, one crore = 10 million. Land prices are generally quoted in lakhs or crore rupees per acre, a practice that I retain here. At exchange rates prevailing in December 2014, one crore rupees was roughly equivalent to 150,000 US dollars.
22. *Benami* is a Hindi word that is used across India in discussions of land transactions. It literally means "without name," referring to the registration of land in the name of someone other than the actual buyer or owner—an illicit practice meant to evade taxation or land ceiling regulations.
23. The opposition YSR Congress Party constantly leveled accusations of corruption against the TDP government. See *Chandrababu Naidu: The Emperor of Corruption*, booklet published by YSRCP in January 2016.
24. The districts of Andhra Pradesh were reorganized in 2022, reducing the size of Guntur District to about 2.1 million acres. About half of the population of the truncated district lives in urban areas. The description of Guntur District in this section refers to the larger district prior to reorganization, which carved out the delta area to form the new Bapatla District while the inland mandals constitute the new Narasaraopet/Palnadu District. The designated new capital zone remains within Guntur District.
25. Although recent data on population by caste is not available, according to one estimate "Forward Castes" (including Brahmins, Kapus, Kammas, Reddys, Komatis, Rajus, and Velamas) form about 30 percent of the population of in Andhra Pradesh; Backward Classes (BCs) 46 percent; and Scheduled Castes (SCs or Dalits) 17 percent (Venkatesu 2022: 304). BCs are also known as "Other Backward Classes" (OBCs).
26. An independent survey of eighty-eight villages carried out in undivided Andhra Pradesh in 2008–9 found that Reddys and Kammas, which constituted only 10 percent of the total households, owned 31 percent of the land, while Malas and Madigas constituted about one-fourth of households but owned less than 10 percent of the land (Sambi Reddy et al. 2012: 58). 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 and Gollas (BCs), 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 less than 14 percent of all households but held 46 percent of the land (based on data from twenty-four villages). In that region, about 87 percent of Mala households and 89 percent of Madiga households were found to be landless. In one village of Guntur District, Kamma households constituted only 20 percent of the village but were found to own nearly three-fourths of the land (Sambi Reddy et al. 2012: 58–60).
27. The initial socio-economic survey of the Rajdhani villages carried out by the Social Development Unit of APCRDA found that about 80 percent of the population was landless. However, data generated by this survey are unreliable because the report does not include enumeration by household (and I was not able to access the raw

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data set, despite repeated requests). Calculating the number of landowning and landless households in Rajdhani is complicated by the fact that many families "split" their ration cards so they could apply for additional landless pensions (see chapter 4). With a total population of about 100,000, the Amaravati villages should have around 25,000 households. But with 21,000 households claiming landless pensions, that would mean just 15 percent of households were landholders—a figure that does not tally with the land pooling data. A reasonable estimate would put the proportion of landless households in the Amaravati villages at the time the project was declared at around 70 to 75 percent.

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— Chapter 2 —

Capital Futures



This chapter charts the conceptualization, planning, and promotion of the Amaravati project, exploring how the master plan reimagined a riverine agrarian landscape as a site of urban development, capital investment, and economic transformation. It examines the modalities through which value was sought to be extracted from land to finance the construction of the new capital, and the ways in which political and ground realities pushed back against the aspirations of global investors.

The first section traces the formulation of the Amaravati master plan by Singapore-based consultants, highlighting Chandrababu Naidu's dream of a hyper-modern city as driver of economic development in the state and emblem of a resurgent Andhra Pradesh. It explores the imagination of development and modernity encapsulated in the Amaravati master plan, and outlines the strategies deployed by the state government to disseminate its "vision" of the future. The second section describes an early opposition movement that foregrounded the environmental fragility of the new capital zone and proposed an alternative plan. In section 3, I turn to the financial architecture of the Amaravati project, which aimed to attract private capital investment through the monetization of land. This financial strategy is explored further in section 4 through the case of the controversial "Startup Area" to be developed by a consortium of Singapore-based real estate companies. The discussion illustrates the designs of international capital seeking to invest in emerging real estate markets such as India, as well as the ways in which local politics and regional capital may complicate or derail such plans. The fifth section traces the development of infrastructure and the

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allocation of land to companies and institutions within the planning zone between 2015 and 2019. In section 6, the slow pace of development within the new capital city is contrasted with the real estate boom just outside the boundaries of the project. Finally, the chapter explores the transnational flows that connected Amaravati with the regional diaspora.

Envisioning Development

After the site of the new capital was selected, the Andhra Pradesh (AP) state government engaged the consultancy firm McKinsey India to create a roadmap for the development of the capital region. One of their recommendations was the formation of a semi-autonomous planning authority to manage the planning and development of the new city. The AP Capital Region Development Authority (APCRDA, commonly known as CRDA)—a parastatal agency—was established under the Andhra Pradesh Capital Region Development Authority Act 2014, which came into force in December 2014. The law gave APCRDA absolute power to acquire, sell, transfer, or alienate land to private parties for the purpose of development or redevelopment (Ramachandraiah 2016). In addition, another parastatal—Amaravati Development Corporation Limited (ADCL)—was set up later to handle infrastructure development for the project.

Apart from its responsibility for the planning and construction of the city, APCRDA was given a mandate to plan and control development in the much larger designated Andhra Pradesh Capital Region—a huge area of 8,600 square kilometers that encompasses 953 villages and 12 urban local bodies (towns or municipalities) in 26 mandals (development blocks) of Guntur District and 30 mandals in Krishna District. This new urban development zone also included the major regional towns of Vijayawada and Guntur, superseding the existing VGTM (Vijayawada-Guntur-Tenali-Mangalagiri) planning region (see Map 2.1). The stated purpose of creating such a large planning area is to control urban growth beyond the boundaries of the capital city, given that the inception of such mega-projects usually leads to unplanned urbanization in the surrounding areas.[1]

The APCRDA Act granted broad powers to CRDA to plan and implement the project, bypassing existing political and administrative structures and constitutional provisions for local self-government. For example, with the declaration of the new capital zone, the functioning of panchayats in the twenty-six villages was suspended,

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and the CRDA took over planning and decision-making on matters of village development that are normally under the purview of these elected local bodies. In addition, the government formed new village committees whose members were almost entirely TDP supporters (and Kammas). Modeled on the village-level Janmabhoomi Committees constituted by the TDP during its previous tenure to implement its policies and programs, the role of these new committees was to channel information about the Amaravati project to local people and persuade them to cooperate with the government's plans. "Ashok," a member of the CRDA Committee of his village, explained



Map 2.1. Outline map of APCRDA planning region. Illustration by Deepa William.

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that their main function was to "convince people to give their land for pooling."

In pursuit of his ambition to build a "world-class city," Chief Minister Naidu asked the Singapore government to help design the Amaravati master plan "free of cost."[2] A Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the two governments in December 2014, and Singapore-based urban design firms Surbana International Consultants and Jurong International were commissioned to execute the project.[3] Although the government's decision to invite foreign firms to participate in the project attracted criticism, Naidu argued that international expertise was needed to create a "model capital" with "all futuristic infrastructure." Justifying his decision to build a "greenfield" city rather than designating an existing town as the capital, he stated: "After all, I am building a capital city for grandsons and daughters of AP who would like to work in a global environment" (*The Hans India*, 12 February 2015).

The Draft Perspective Plan for the larger capital region was completed in March 2015, the Capital City Master Plan in June 2015, and the Seed Capital Plan (for the main commercial area and core government complex) in July 2015. These plans were subsequently revised several times in response to objections raised by residents during *gram sabha* (village assembly) meetings that were conducted to share the plans[4] and to petitions submitted by residents who feared that their houses would be demolished due to the alignment of roads. The final Detailed Master Plan was accepted and officially notified in February 2016 (APCRDA 2016). The master plan marked out 217.23 square kilometers as the capital city area, encompassing twenty-four revenue villages (twenty-nine settlement villages) located in Thullur, Mangalagiri, and Tadepalli mandals of Guntur District, and part of Tadepalli municipality (Map 1.2).

The master plan covered such a large area because land was needed not only to accommodate the future growth of the city, but also because the government planned to acquire privately held agricultural land through a land pooling scheme rather than direct acquisition. In a land pooling scheme (LPS), owners who surrender their land receive smaller "developed" plots of land in the new township or development as compensation, while the remaining land is utilized by the state for infrastructure development or to raise finance. To ensure that the government has sufficient land remaining after creating the reconstituted plots for the participating landowners and building the required infrastructure, an extensive area needs to be acquired. A CRDA official explained:

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> Of the 53,000 acres in the capital region, about 15,000 is river or water bodies, forestland, and so on—land that cannot be utilized. So, we needed to take a large amount of land to build a liveable city, one that is also a growth engine. Once the land is pooled and developed, investments will come in. We are not just building an administrative center but an entire city.

As this statement highlights, Amaravati was planned to be much more than an administrative capital. It was also the cornerstone of the economic development plan for the residual state (reflecting current policy thinking about urbanization-led development). The "Vision 2029" document developed by the state government, titled "Sunrise Andhra Pradesh," chalks out an economic plan that promises to make Andhra Pradesh the "best state in the country" by achieving a double-digit growth rate, foregrounding Amaravati as the "hope for the future."[5] Moving away from the failed SEZ-focused strategy, it emphasizes "high growth sectors" such as construction, logistics, and tourism, providing a list of planned "mega investment projects." The vision document also stresses the controversial Coastal Economic Zone project, formulated earlier under a central government scheme, that aims to take advantage of the state's long coastline to foster port-led export-oriented industrial development. The government planned to acquire 100,000 acres of land in every district to facilitate this economic development plan (Vakulabharanam and Prasad 2017: 73).

Vision statements of this kind, produced routinely by newly elected governments on the advice of external consultants and multilateral agencies, should not be read as planning documents providing concrete roadmaps for economic development in the near term, but as "fantasies" or speculative artifacts that aim to disseminate an imagined future as a mechanism for attracting capital investments (Appel 2018: 51; cf. Guyer 2007). Like master plans, vision documents represent a "documentary mode of anticipation that incorporates forms of modern technical expertise and modes of knowledge to envision the future … [and] make dreams of development authoritative and precise, legitimate and useful" (Cross 2014: 47).

The Amaravati Perspective Plan projects the new capital region as the primary growth center of the state, with a "radial growth corridor plan" for the development of "clean industries," infrastructure, and logistics activities. To draw investments into various sectors, the entire capital region should be well planned and boast world-class infrastructure:

> The New Capital of Andhra Pradesh is envisioned to be the pioneer Smart City of India. It aims to be World Class and at par with the standards set

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> forth by countries such as Singapore. The new capital will be an economic powerhouse that will create a range of jobs for existing resident villagers by upgrading their skills, as well as provide high-tech and knowledge based industry jobs to be globally competitive…. (APCRDA 2015b: chap. 2)

Echoing language found in planning documents for new city projects across the world, the Amaravati master plan report invokes concepts such as "Smart City" and "Sustainable City," promising people-friendly, green urban design, smart governance systems, sustainable transportation systems, and walkable neighborhoods. A striking element of the project is the "Green and Blue Plan," a flood management system that will create recreational parks, artificial lakes, and waterways throughout the city by channeling water from existing canals and water bodies (Figure 2.1). The key principles of sustainability and smartness are articulated through six goals: "Jobs and Homes for All, World Class Infrastructure, Clean and Green Environment, Quality Living, Efficient Resource Management, and Identity and Heritage" (APCRDA 2015c: 12). While drawing on "world-city" models, the Amaravati plan also gestures to local cultural traditions by invoking the principles of *Vaastu*: "The Amaravati Capital city concept suggests development of a north-eastern axis to welcome flow of positive energy into the new city" (APCRDA 2015a).[6]

In the master plan, a network of roads connects interspersed residential, commercial, and institutional areas. "Anand," a consultant working with ADCL, criticized the grid pattern of the roads, a feature that was included apparently on the insistence of Chandrababu Naidu, for whom such a design is emblematic of modern urbanism: "Instead of following the contours of the land and villages as they are, we have roads passing through villages and over graveyards." Even in late 2017, after the project was well underway, he pointed out:

> As per the master plan, there are roads going right through the center of existing villages like Mandadam and Malkapuram. People were promised that their villages will not be disturbed, but according to the master plan they will be disturbed. We have given alternatives, but will the government accept our suggestions? If it doesn't, then the villages will have to be displaced. Why are people unaware of this and why are they not raising their voices?

Amaravati was billed as the "People's Capital," but the visualizations presented in the planning documents suggest an elite enclave where urban professionals can comfortably live and work, away from the chaos and overcrowding of most Indian cities, where the political class will preside over the development of the state and global corporations can set up operations. The artist's impressions

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in the documents feature gleaming high-rise towers and wide green spaces along the riverfront, interconnected by broad expressways and high-tech transport systems, and with an "iconic bridge" linking the new capital with the old city of Vijayawada across the river—an imagined future that stands in stark contrast to the existing villages and agricultural fields over which the city will be built (APCRDA 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). Like the trend of spectacular city-building across Asia, driven by real estate capital, Amaravati is designed to attract corporate capital. As Moser observes:

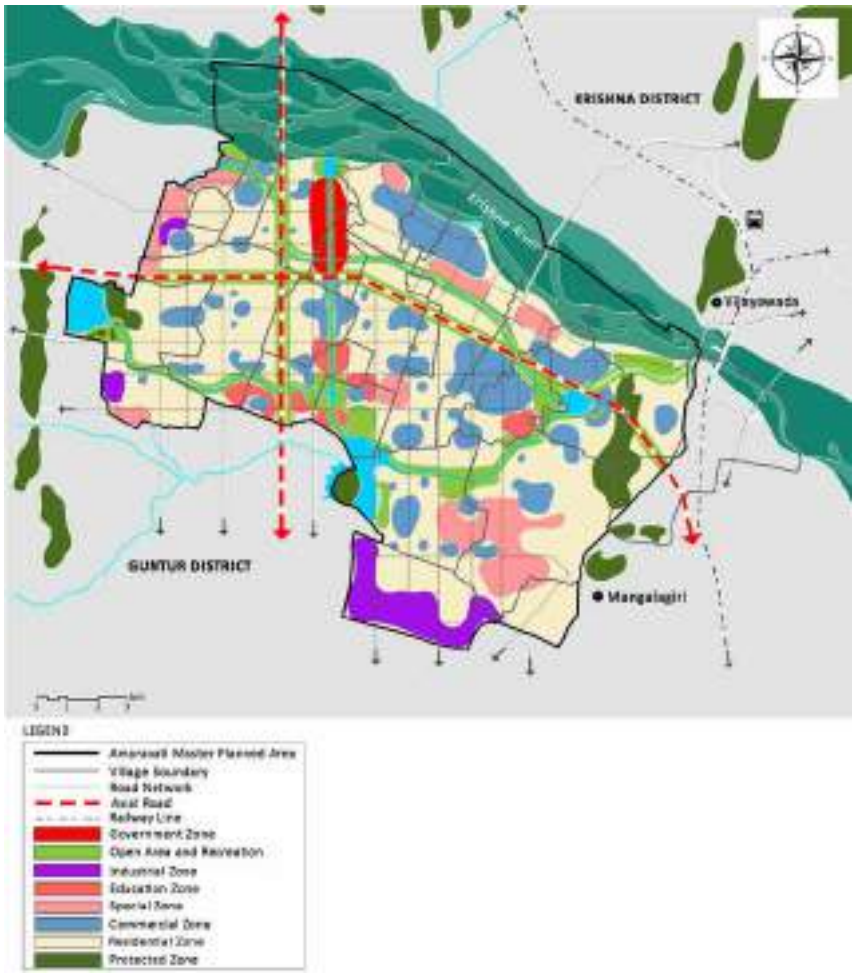


Figure 2.1. Impression of Amaravati master plan. Illustration by Deepa William.

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> current new cities seek to emulate corporate office parks, filled with placeless gleaming towers that showcase global capital … resulting in the creation of a visual hierarchy that positions global corporate culture as the modern future and the local and indigenous as the "backwards" past. (Moser 2015: 33)

Although the planning documents promise inclusivity by providing space for low-income housing and generating new employment opportunities through business investments, Anand was critical of these claims:

> For residential properties they are planning layouts with independent houses rather than apartment buildings. This is why the capital is not for low-income people. We told this to the government a year ago. Now they are planning affordable housing for the poor in apartments, but how many will they build? This city is only for the upper and middle classes.

The Amaravati plan includes demarcated zones for different economic activities—"Knowledge City" (for educational institutions), "Health City," Government City," "Electronics City," "Sports City," and so on. To create jobs "close to home," several "employment nodes" provide dedicated space for commercial development and business parks. Residential areas—the new layouts for the reconstituted plots that landowners will receive—are slated to become "vibrant townships" with necessary facilities nearby. A major attraction is the Amaravati Waterfront, designed as a public space to promote tourism, with amphitheaters, convention centers, and "traditional street hawkers to create an interesting yet compatible mix of activities" (APCRDA 2015c: xvii)—an idea that clearly draws on the relocation of street vendors into regulated markets in Singapore.

The master plan reflects contemporary urban planning models and technologies that circulate across the world, marketed by consultants, real estate developers, and IT companies offering "smart solutions" to urbanizing countries of the global South (Bunnell 2015; Bunnell and Goh 2018). Beyond such "world-city" aspirations (Roy and Ong 2011), the idea of building brand-new cities in "empty" (or emptied) spaces, far from the congested urban environs of older cities, has taken hold across Asia—from Malaysia's Putrajaya project to Naypyidaw in Myanmar and Nusantara in Indonesia (Moser and Côté-Roy 2022: 4). These master-planned projects usually take little account of the local landscape, environment, or ways of life, although they may incorporate religious or national cultural forms to distinguish these new cities from decontextualized, hyper-modern cities such as Singapore or Dubai (still favored as models by many Indian leaders). New capital cities such as Astana in Kazakhstan

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(which Chandrababu Naidu admired and visited while planning Amaravati) are held up as "paragons of progress" (Koch and Valiyev 2015: 577), icons of modernity, and harbingers of the future (Laszczkowski 2016). Such "urban utopias" (Datta and Shaban 2016) also function as "points of persuasion" that demonstrate "developmental possibilities for emulation" or "articulate future expectations" (Bunnell et al. 2022).

Although the Amaravati plan draws on these models, it also reflects an earlier trend of master planning as an instrument of modernization (Holston 1989), as seen in South Asian cities such as Chandigarh and Islamabad built in the early years after independence. However, contemporary "new city" projects are distinct from the earlier new town developments, which aimed to alleviate urban overcrowding, provide housing for the masses, and foster new forms of civility or industrial growth (Glover 2012; Shaw 2009). Moser (2015: 33) suggests that India's new greenfield cities, such as Dholera and Amaravati, may have more in common with colonial urban projects in their "prioritization of grandiose and top-down efforts over more incremental urban interventions" and their perpetuation of "geographies of exclusion through expropriating land and cutting the poor off from their livelihoods."

The Amaravati project was projected as a pathway to development through organized, state-managed urbanization and close control over the landscape and its inhabitants (Scott 1998), utilizing planning understood as "instruments, ideologies, models and regulations aimed at ordering society through a set of social and spatial techniques" (Abram and Weszkalnys 2013: 3). As a state-driven scheme of "improvement" (Li 2007), Amaravati promised a prosperous future, at least for the propertied classes. But urban planning also aims to produce and disseminate expectations of a reimagined future (Abram and Weszkalnys 2011). As in the case of the SEZ in northern Coastal Andhra studied by Cross (2014), politicians and bureaucrats attempted to "conjure up the prospect of material improvement and social transformation" and project the new city as a "future-oriented space" to which "visions of development, economic security and upward social mobility" are attached. These promises of development "invoke local registers of aspiration and tap into vernacular dreams for social and material transformation that are assembled from globally circulating media forms and out of local social histories" (Cross 2014: 67–68).

At least for provincial capital and the urban middle classes of Coastal Andhra, Amaravati tapped into the post-bifurcation dream

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of revitalizing the wounded state, by offering not just material benefits but an intangible "promise of modernity." Such mega-projects produce not only concrete infrastructures but also new "forms of national and regional identity" (Gupta 2018: 75). The future capital city was explicitly staged as a symbol of regional identity and pride as well as the vehicle for the development of the "New Andhra." The name of the capital itself invoked the region's Buddhist past (embodied in an ancient stupa in "old Amaravati"), and Hindu religious symbolism and rituals formed the basis of public ceremonies such as the laying of the foundation stone.[7] The desire of political leaders and provincial capital to transform a "backward" rural landscape into a "world-class city" also built on an earlier construction of regional identity around the idea of technology-led development. Through political performances that combined images of the urban future with potent symbols of regional identity, the state sought to engender popular support for the new capital plan.

To generate public confidence in Chandrababu Naidu's "dream city" and create buzz about the project, the state deployed various "technologies of the imagination" (Sneath, Holbraad, and Pedersen 2009). The Amaravati plan was closely tied to the image of Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu, whose "success" in putting Hyderabad on the world map was often cited as evidence of his administrative prowess and ability to attract global investors. Media management was particularly important for the state's advertising campaign: appearing almost daily in local newspapers were stories about the project, laudatory accounts of the master plan or the architectural designs, and photographs of Naidu meeting foreign leaders or inaugurating construction projects—reinforcing his image as a hardworking and "visionary" leader. Shaping the present through a "politics of anticipation" (Gupta 2018: 63), infrastructure stood at the center of these publicity campaigns. Futuristic images of high-tech transportation systems and hyper-modern towers, culled from the planning documents, featured prominently in publicity materials and saturated public spaces as posters adorning the walls of government offices (Figure 2.2) or plastered on electricity poles pointing the way to the new Government Complex at Velagapudi. The omnipresence of these visual representations helped to concretize the urban imaginary represented by Amaravati, just as the later circulation of copies of micro-planning maps, various government orders, and land pooling documents made the plan appear to farmers to be both possible and desirable.

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Figure 2.2. Poster and model of planned capital city, APCRDA office, Vijayawada. Photograph by Carol Upadhya.

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Landscape of Value Struggles

"Planners are not seeing what is there on the ground!"

Early in the planning stage, a movement opposing the Amaravati project emerged, led by several influential Kamma landholders in Rajdhani villages and environmental activists. This conflict around the master plan created a landscape of "value struggles" (Anwar 2018), reflecting the insight that "processes of inscribing landscapes with market *value* always exist in tension with the diverse *values* simultaneously ascribed to the same landscapes—in the past, present, and future" (Rissing and Jones 2022: 195; italics in original).

As discussed above, riverfront development is a key feature of the Amaravati project that is expected to attract investors, tourists, and real estate developers. But because of its location on the west bank of the Krishna River, much of the designated capital zone falls in a fertile floodplain. The area experiences flooding every few years through a channel known as Kondaveeti Vaagu and other non-perennial streams flowing toward the river. Early opponents of the project highlighted the environmental disaster that might ensue if a city were to be built in this catchment area. They also argued that the main source of water for the city would be destroyed by the planned riverfront development, along with the productive multi-cropped agriculture in villages close to the river.[8] In addition, critics pointed out that the plan violates the recommendations of the Sivaramakrishnan Committee (2014) as well as the environmental impact assessment (EIA) report that had been commissioned by APCRDA.

The planning documents prepared by the Singapore consultants acknowledged the danger of flooding and proposed several solutions, including raising the bed level of the land at crucial sites and undertaking extensive flood control works to create channels and reservoirs as part of the "blue and green" design of the city (APCRDA 2015a: 82). The Environmental and Social Management Framework (ESMF) submitted to the World Bank also included several ameliorative measures (APCRDA 2017b: 62 ff.). The height of the Seed Access Road was raised to avoid inundation and work on a costly flood control system was initiated (*The Hans India*, 8 September 2018).

Opponents of the plan also pointed out that the water table in areas close to the river is very high—at a depth of less than twenty feet in areas where the Seed Capital was planned. Together with the soft black cotton soil found across most of Rajdhani, this creates ideal conditions for cultivation but makes construction very difficult; expensive deep piling is needed to build high-rise structures. These

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problems were flagged by engineers and other experts at the design stage, but Naidu was determined to create a riverfront city, arguing that all great cities (such as London or Chicago) are built along rivers or other water bodies.

Rajdhani residents, especially those in low-lying villages, similarly questioned the design, fearing that their homes would be inundated during heavy rains because of runoff from roads and other structures that had been raised. A farmer who had pooled his land also expressed concern about layouts for the compensation plots located in low-lying areas. The bed level of the land where the Secretariat and other government buildings were constructed had been increased by five to seven meters, but there were no plans to raise the ground level for the residential layouts, he complained. When he brought this problem to the attention of the CRDA Commissioner, he responded that residential plots in such areas are also located close to the main commercial area in the master plan, so they would eventually attract higher prices (presumably, despite this problem)! But several farmers were reluctant to accept plots in low-lying areas that are prone to flooding: "Planners are not seeing what is there on the ground!"

This opposition campaign, arguing that the city as planned was unsustainable, offered an alternative vision of development that hinged on a different set of values attached to land and its productivity as fundamental to human well-being. Rather than foregrounding arguments about historical land rights or social justice (as in most anti-land acquisition movements), this group warned of environmental degradation and foregrounded the loss of productive agriculture. They proposed an alternative model for a "Green Capital" that would be more in harmony with the ecology and terrain of the area (Soni and Khosla n.d.). The protestors submitted their "Natural City" plan to the government but received no response: "They say they want to make a liveable city. If they follow our natural city plan, I would support it," said a leader of the movement.[9]

In short, extensive engineering was needed to redesign the natural topography of the area to prevent flooding and to build even basic infrastructure such as roads. Water permeated the narratives of many of my interlocutors when speaking about the landscape where the city was to be built and the dangers it posed. At a meeting convened by CRDA to discuss the World Bank reports with affected communities, a participant queried:

> Villages like Nidamarru, Nelapadu, and Bethapudi are low-lying villages. The Krishna River flows at a height of 24 feet. These villages are at a height

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> of 16 to 17 feet. Without filling those low-lying areas, what can be done there? Are you going to fill these areas, provide the infrastructure, and then hand over the plot to us? Or just hand over the undeveloped plots as they are?

Even civil engineers working on projects in Rajdhani were critical of the plan. A manager with a large construction company on a university campus explained:

> Since these lands have fertile black cotton soil, we need to use pile foundations and dig 100 meters deep for each pile. It took us 600 piles in total for just these two buildings. We started construction in March 2017 and by July 2017 we had only completed the Academic Block. For the Secretariat buildings, which have only ground floor plus one, they have gone down to 100 feet with piles. If you build more floors you need to go even deeper.

The narratives of opponents of the project highlight the tensions between different values and meanings invested in the landscape of the new capital site—an agrarian or environmental perspective that accounts for topography, flows of water, quality of soil, and the productivity of the land, in contrast to a state planning perspective that views land as unmarked and empty space to be re-engineered and carved up in conformance with the master plan. Although these contradictions marked the Amaravati project from its inception, most landowners gradually readjusted their understanding of the landscape and the future it holds by reinscribing land with purely financial value—as I outline in the next chapter.

Financing the Future

The Amaravati project required a large infusion of capital before any work could begin. As a greenfield project, everything had to be developed from scratch, including land leveling, flood control works, and basic infrastructure such as roads, drainage, and power installations. The state government, already struggling with a large budget deficit after bifurcation, appealed to the central government for funds and applied to multilateral agencies such as the World Bank for loans.

The initial estimated cost of the Amaravati project was around 30,000 crore rupees (4.24 billion US dollars), but by 2019 the projection had escalated to nearly 52,000 crore rupees, or more than 7 billion US dollars.[10] This estimate included nearly 20,000 crores for basic infrastructure, 18,000 crores for the development of the LPS layouts and second-level infrastructure, and 14,000 crore rupees for the Government Complex and other public buildings. The government

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planned to pay for all this by mobilizing 37,000 crore rupees of debt financing from multilateral agencies, commercial banks, and HUDCO (Housing and Urban Development Corporation, a Government of India undertaking that provides finance for housing and infrastructure development), as well as grants from the central and state governments. Reflecting the policy thrust on the financialization of urban development discussed in the Introduction, CRDA raised 2,000 crore rupees by selling bonds on the Bombay Stock Exchange (APCRDA 2024). The CRDA Commissioner was also authorized to mortgage land and other project assets to raise loans.

A key part of the financial plan was to monetize the land acquired from farmers by allocating it to private and public sector organizations. Of the 5,500 acres of land reserved for commercial monetization, the government planned to monetize 3,700 acres from 2023, which was expected to yield a revenue of 78,563 crore rupees over eighteen years.[11] The balance land was reserved for future monetization.[12] Thus, assembling land was central to financing the project, apart from the requirement of land on which to build the new city.

Of the 54,000 acres marked out for the first phase of the Amaravati project, 38,000 acres (15,400 hectares) consisted of privately held agricultural land—most belonging to small and marginal farmers—while the remaining land was already held by the state. As noted above, the government formulated a land pooling scheme rather than deploying compulsory land acquisition to assemble land for the project, which would be more expensive and generate resistance. In a land pooling scheme, landowners are allotted smaller developed plots of land in the new city. These reconstituted or "returnable" plots are the most important part of the compensation that landowners are allotted for the agricultural land they surrender. The land remaining with the government, after providing for the compensation plots (usually ranging from 30 to 70 percent of the total area, depending on the type of project and the compensation formula), is used for infrastructure development or is monetized by selling plots to investors. Indeed, the monetization of the excess land acquired by transferring it to private capital is essential to the financial viability of such schemes.

As discussed in the Introduction, land pooling is increasingly used by state and municipal governments in India to assemble land for large projects. It is promoted as a "win-win" proposition because the state can acquire land at lower cost (compared to compulsory acquisition under the new law), while landowners receive potentially higher compensation. This method is also thought to forestall opposition by setting up landowners to reap the benefits of

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the market—an unwarranted assumption as cases in other regions suggest (Levien 2015; Sampat 2016a). Although land pooling, also called land readjustment, has been used widely across the world as a mechanism of land consolidation, in India it has been effectively employed mainly in small township projects on the outskirts of large cities, such as Pune and Delhi, where the benefits are more immediately visible to rural landholders and returns are quicker. The use of land pooling at this scale is unique to the Amaravati project (Ballaney et al. 2022: 21).

The Amaravati land pooling scheme is chalked out in the APCRDA Act 2014, which provides for the "return to the original landowners of about 20 percent of developed land for residential use and up to 10 percent for commercial use within the city, besides an annuity payment for 10 years." Thus, 30 percent of the pooled land was to be returned to the owners in the form of residential and commercial plots, leaving 70 percent with the government. Other benefits provided to owners who pool their land include an annual "lease" payment, or annuity, for ten years (with an annual enhancement of 10 percent), to compensate for the loss of agricultural income, and waiver of outstanding agricultural loans (APCRDA n.d.).

Several farmers complained that the proportion of land returned was too low, but "Subba Rao," a CRDA official, argued that the Amaravati scheme provided a higher ratio of "returnable plots" than is usual for a greenfield project:

> Land pooling is turning out to be much more expensive than land acquisition. This is because the land pooling package here is better than land pooling schemes elsewhere in the country. Nowhere else have landowners gotten such a deal—at most the package has been 1,000+100.[13]

Anand concurred, citing other schemes where the proportion of land returned was just 15 percent, compared to over 25 percent in Amaravati: "This rate of return is not viable for a land pooling scheme. If you add to that the land required for infrastructure, the government is hardly left with 12 to 18 percent of the land pooled to use for other purposes." These observations raise questions about the financial viability of the project, which depended heavily on the monetization of land available with the government.

The land available with the government was also deployed as incentive to attract private capital. Chief Minister Naidu traveled across the world—to Japan, Singapore, Australia, China, Korea, Malaysia, Kazakhstan, the UK, the USA, and to the World Economic Forum at Davos—to promote Andhra Pradesh and Amaravati as

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prime investment destinations. Several foreign governments signed Memoranda of Understanding with the Government of Andhra Pradesh to help build the new capital, primarily through public-private projects, but most of these deals did not materialize. As I discuss further below, most companies and institutions that were allocated land within the new city were domestic players—many owned by provincial capital (see chapter 1).

The financial plan for Amaravati depended heavily on an expected USD 500 million loan from the World Bank for infrastructure development (roads) and flood mitigation works. Despite several rounds of negotiations and assessments, the loan was ultimately not approved by the Government of India after the TDP government fell in April 2019. Finance remained a major obstacle to the development of Amaravati right up to the election, providing grounds for the new YSR Congress Party government to virtually abandon the costly project. However, the Government of Singapore displayed a keen interest in Amaravati, which they viewed as a key entry point for their larger investment strategy in India.

The Singapore Connection

As noted above, a separate plan was drawn up for the "Seed Capital," a core area of the new city that would be initiated first to stimulate development through targeted investments in infrastructure and commercial properties. As described in the planning documents:

> the proposed site is strategically located along the river Krishna waterfront amidst the scenic hills encompassing the only 100 percent prone island on the river. This unique setting gives the site an edge in comparison to other commercial areas within the city. (APCRDA 2015c: 9)

The Seed Capital Plan features an exclusive "downtown" area with public spaces and "landmark towers" integrated with cutting-edge transportation infrastructure (2015c: 43). The Seed Capital also includes the Government Complex spread over 1,575 acres, marked by "iconic" structures designed by the famous British architectural firm Foster + Partners to house the Legislative Assembly, High Court, and Secretariat buildings, as well as Raj Bhavan (governor's residence), bungalows for ministers and High Court justices, and apartment complexes for government officers. The Seed Access Road—a major thoroughfare connecting the proposed Seed Capital with the interior of the capital zone—was among the first infrastructure

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projects to be initiated in Rajdhani, reflecting the priority that was accorded to this part of the plan.

To kickstart development of the Seed Capital, the state government signed an agreement with a consortium of Singapore-based real estate and infrastructure development companies (Ascendas-Singbridge and Sembcorp Development) to build a smaller "Startup Area" within this zone. The only major international deal the government was able to cement, this public-private partnership—signed in May 2017 between ADCL and the Singapore consortium—granted development rights on 6.84 square kilometers (1,691 acres) of prime riverfront land. The Startup Area plan focused on creating an upmarket central business district (CBD) to attract private corporate investments. This is the only area where the construction of high-rise buildings is permitted, with a sanctioned floor space index (FSI) of 3.5 to 5 compared to an FSI of 1 for most of the city (which allows for only low-rise development).[14]

Under the joint development agreement that was signed, the government was to hold the land and the Singaporean companies would develop the real estate, eventually selling or transferring the developed properties back to the government. A new entity, Amaravati Development Partners Pvt. Ltd. (ADP), was formed and appointed "Master Developer" of the Startup Area, granting it sole rights to sell the commercial space and plots of land it developed. The deal was then cemented in a Concession and Development Agreement signed by APCRDA and Singapore Andhra Investment Holdings (SAIH, as the Singapore consortium was called).[15] The state government's share of capital investment in the project was 42 percent while SAIH was to contribute 58 percent.[16] That this was a "sweetheart deal" is suggested by the fact that the government provided various incentives and concessions to the Singapore consortium beyond what is mentioned in the agreement. For instance, taxes that would normally have been levied on the transfer of land and on the signing of the agreement itself—amounting to 47 crore rupees—were waived at their request.[17]

Explaining their investment strategy, "Jayden"—a Singaporean manager working on the project— said that Singapore (the largest sovereign investor in India) employs an "asset recycling" model: they construct a property and sell it to a real estate trust (REIT), which then leases it out and manages it. This was the model they followed as master developers for the International Tech Park Limited (ITPL) in Bengaluru, which catalyzed the growth of Whitefield as a major software (and real estate) hub in the city. However, the Startup Area

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project ran into several issues. First, several parcels of land within the designated area had not been pooled. The owners had been issued land acquisition notifications, but the land had not yet been acquired. Second, part of the designated area fell within the river bund area where development was prohibited by norms laid down by the National Green Tribunal in its decision on the Amaravati case.

Although the Startup Area agreement was ultimately scrapped after the change of government in 2019, it is useful to delve into some aspects of the plan to glean insights into the financing of mega-projects such as Amaravati and to understand how land was to be leveraged to extract value for investors. The investment by the Singapore consortium is a prime example of the strategy of global urbanism based on the financialization of land, discussed in the Introduction. The project became controversial because the contract was awarded to a pre-selected Singaporean real estate group, but the financial structuring of the project was perhaps even more troubling. The ADP project not only relied upon the monetization of land to raise finance; it also entailed the alienation of land acquired by the state from farmers to a private entity, which was then given full and exclusive rights to develop and sell property built on that land.

This feature of the deal became clear when the consortium proposed to start with a smaller "Catalytic Development Area" on fifty acres of land within the Startup Area, because consolidating legal rights to all the land and developing infrastructure over the entire 1,691 acres was proving to be very expensive and time-consuming. For the Catalytic Area, located in the vicinity of Rayapudi and Lingayapalem villages, ADP wanted to directly purchase the land from CRDA and then independently develop and sell 1 million square feet of commercial space as well as a small township adjacent to the planned Government Complex. However, this proposal was highly unusual in India, where foreign entities are not legally permitted to purchase land; they can invest in real estate ventures only through special purpose vehicles (SPVs) formed in partnership with Indian companies.

The Catalytic Area plan ran aground because the Singapore consortium and the state government could not agree on several technical and legal issues, although they had negotiated a sale price of 4 crore rupees per acre—much lower than prevailing land values in the area. The main issue was that of land rights: the Singaporean partners demanded clear title to the land before going ahead with the project because they wanted to use it as collateral to get loans from Indian banks. Although they could arrange offshore financing for the

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project, Jayden said they wanted to raise finance locally. "We don't want to go to Blackstone and guys like that, we want to do good for the state. We are afraid that if they come and things don't go as planned, they will take all the land!"[18]

In response to ADP's request to purchase the land outright, CRDA offered to sign a sale agreement (a typical mode of transacting land deals in India) instead of executing a final sale deed, but this was unacceptable to the Singapore group. Another obstacle was that some of the land even within the fifty acres designated for the Catalytic Area had not yet been transferred to the government, while other parcels had title issues. As a solution, the Singapore group asked the government to sign an indemnity agreement, which was refused because it would "set a bad precedent." The negotiations around the fifty-acre Catalytic Area were stuck at this stage when the entire project was scrapped after the YSR Congress Party came to power in April 2019.

Jayden explained that they closed the Startup Area project (by "mutual agreement") because they had received "signals" from the new government that they would not support the project going forward, and the Singaporeans chose to withdraw rather than getting "kicked out" (which would have entailed loss of face). But this meant writing off several million dollars already invested in laying the groundwork for the project. According to him, the state government had never put up its share of the capital of 528 crore rupees; all the funds that had been spent had come from their side. During several conversations in 2019, while Jayden was busy winding up ADP, he complained bitterly about how they had been treated by the state government. The consortium had already transferred 200 crore rupees to India to buy the land for the Catalytic Area project. This money, lying in an Indian bank "earning only 6 percent interest," would have to be repatriated to Singapore, involving much paperwork and expense.

Given all these (perhaps predictable) difficulties with a greenfield project such as Amaravati, why were Singaporean real estate and infrastructure companies so interested in investing? According to Jayden, they were following a well-established strategy that Singapore companies have successfully employed in several Asian countries—especially China. He explained their business model this way:

> We see the Amaravati project as a long-term investment. We need to spend up front to fund the project and create the distributive infrastructure. We get our money back only by selling the developed plots, because after we build the roads they are turned over to the government. But this is very difficult in a greenfield city. Whether someone buys the developed plots we offer depends on a lot of factors—on economic development, on the government. So, the

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> risk is significant. If we can manage the costs and sell the developed plots, we can pay back the banks and then get some return. If the land prices go up, then we can make money. But land prices go up only if economic activity is generated. I cannot artificially inflate land prices—buyers won't come, they have other choices. So that's where the catch is. That's why our single focus is economic generation, but this is also the main obstacle. We can make money, but you recover your investment only after twenty years. Not many developers are interested in such a long timeframe. So, we as master developers need to look at economic growth, not just developing property. Chandrababu Naidu asked us to come and do this, and that is what we were doing.

Jayden emphasized that in contrast to ordinary real estate developers that just acquire land, build, and sell, their goal was to promote economic development in the long term through property development. But he complained that government and CRDA officials did not understand their approach. "They were surprised to learn that we have projected only 18 percent returns, and that too not starting immediately. They thought that like all real estate projects [in India], it would yield 30 percent profit!"

The saga of the Startup Area project illustrates the multiple and conflicting roles of land, and land prices, in mega-projects such as Amaravati. The success of the Amaravati project depended not only on the capacity of the state and its corporate partners to create the required infrastructure and real estate, but also—crucially—on land prices and the performance of the property market. Although escalating property values are key to profitability, speculation had inflated land prices in the Amaravati area steeply, threatening the investment by the Singapore consortium. Jayden argued that the state should have made more effort to control the land market: "If the government had a long-term vision, it would protect land values." Instead, he complained, they were "looking at this as a real estate project rather than an economic development project"—echoing the criticism of many opponents of the Amaravati plan.

Although the Singaporean investment strategy appeared reasonable, given their track record in similar projects such as ITPL in Bengaluru and in China, it is remarkable that these investors had such confidence in a plan to construct a high-rise central business district on a floodplain, in a densely populated agrarian zone already embroiled in conflicts around land rights, and with no clear plan for the existing settlements (chapters 4 and 5). The logic of capital accumulation through land assetization and real estate development appears to override even clearly visible social and ecological realities that are likely to impede the realization of this urban fantasy.

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Developing Rajdhani

Between 2016 and 2019, the new capital zone underwent drastic changes. Apart from the speculative land market that led many farmers to sell their holdings, the government used coercive strategies as well as persuasion to induce farmers to give up their land. The most drastic measure was the order issued by the state government in late 2015 that all cultivation in the Amaravati villages should cease from the next season, severely disrupting the lives and livelihoods of most residents. Consequently, except for a few villages where many farmers refused to cooperate and continued to cultivate their land, most of the designated capital zone was transformed into a huge expanse of empty land, which soon became populated by goats and buffaloes brought from other districts to graze on weeds sprouting in the fallow fields.

To convince the public and potential investors that the new city would materialize as planned, the state government quickly initiated several infrastructure and construction projects. First, contracts were awarded for the construction of the Interim Government Complex, known as the "Temporary Secretariat," at Velagapudi. Naidu had ordered government employees to shift from Hyderabad to Amaravati by June 2016 and pushed for the facilities to be completed by then, to demonstrate to the public that the new capital would materialize as planned. The complex, consisting of five two-floor buildings, was built in record time using prefab technology and the labor of thousands of migrant construction workers brought from northern and eastern India, working round the clock in three shifts. Apart from five administrative blocks, it included a building for the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council (elected governing bodies of the state). The government started functioning from the Temporary Secretariat in late 2016. A farmer in Nelapadu observed, "Now that the Secretariat has come, people have belief that the capital too will come."

The government also initiated key trunk infrastructure works, including the Seed Access Road, other arterial roads, and the flood control plan. In addition, a temporary building to house the Andhra Pradesh High Court was inaugurated in early 2019 and work on the (permanent) Government Complex was started. Several of these projects, such as the judicial complex, MLA (Members of the Legislative Assembly) Quarters, housing for government employees, and residential layouts for top government officials and ministers, were at various stages of completion when the government changed, and

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about half of the trunk infrastructure had been completed by early 2019 (APCRDA 2019: 15; APCRDA 2024: 27).

To stimulate the development of the new city, CRDA soon began allocating land to various institutions that expressed interest in setting up campuses in Amaravati. Proposals were invited from well-known private education and health conglomerates as well as central and state government organizations. To attract investors, land was allotted at relatively low rates (50 lakhs an acre, in most cases—much below the going market rate in the region). A CRDA official explained the procedure for reviewing project proposals:

> We select only reputed institutions. They must submit a plan of action with a timeframe. If approved, they are given a provisional allotment. If they do not meet the stated timeline, the allotment will be withdrawn. This is because the government wants institutions to come up quickly in Amaravati.

According to another CRDA official, they were focusing first on the education and health sectors,[19] but they also expected to receive proposals for international residential schools and five-star hotels. In the end, most proposals submitted and sanctioned were for commercial projects such as hotels and shopping malls. In addition, forty-two acres of land was allocated for the development of a convention center. These approvals reflect the pattern of economic development that now predominates in Andhra Pradesh and across India, centering on corporatized service industries (private educational and health institutions, tourism-oriented ventures, hotels and entertainment complexes).

The government issued an order specifying the price range of land allocated to different types of institutions, but the rate was decided on a case-by-case basis. In an interview in early 2019, a CRDA consultant admitted that they were undervaluing the land. "Even if we allot land at 1.5 crore per acre, the price would be subsidized because the prevailing market rate was in the range of 8 to 12 crores." According to him, the minimum price under the Amaravati land allotment rules was 4.1 crore per acre, but in many cases land was sold at a lower rate to "kickstart development."

Pushed by the government to build and start operations quickly, four private educational institutions started functioning in Amaravati between 2017 and 2019.[20] In addition, three government organizations initiated construction of their facilities. But these institutions are scattered across the capital zone, poorly connected to any other institution or town, and surrounded by acres of vacant land. A visit to SRM University in 2018 revealed that students were

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virtually trapped inside the campus, with no development beyond its walls and no transportation apart from regular buses for students staying in hostels in Guntur. Even if they were to venture outside the campus, students would not find so much as a tea shop—only empty land stretching out beyond the unfinished road leading to the site.

Jayden was critical of the way in which CRDA was allotting subsidized land to institutions, implying that the choice of projects would do little to stimulate economic activity: "The locational choices were not good—why have these institutions located all across this vast area? It would have made more sense to give concession land near the Startup Area at two crores an acre, to create synergies." Further, he argued that land should be released for development in a systematic way, "not by giving out parcels randomly here and there," to stimulate organic growth between the different sites. He also questioned why schools and universities were allocated such large plots (for example, VIT was allotted two hundred acres). "Of course, schools are lucrative concerns, but why so much land?" He believed that these institutions could eventually profit from selling the excess land or use it for some other enterprises. Anand was similarly critical of these allocations:

> The government is going on an MoU [Memorandum of Understanding] spree with no follow-up whatsoever. They have signed MoUs left, right, and center. After signing, no one is bothered about anything. It is only enterprises like hotels that are benefiting from this exercise. The only revenue the government will generate from this is the tax paid by these hotels!

Many of the projects were proposed by companies owned by Andhra provincial capital, most based in Hyderabad. For example, a well-known Hyderabad-based entrepreneur outlined his investments in Rajdhani:

> I bought 9.5 acres in Amaravati—2.5 acres in Venkatapalem and 7 acres in Thullur. The Venkatapalem land was acquired by the National Highway Authority of India. I purchased the land in Thullur when the capital was announced. I gave that land for pooling, and I got a commercial plot of 1,400 square yards. I will use that plot to construct my corporate office, since Thullur is in the center of the capital region. I also bid for projects to set up an international school and a hotel in the capital city and was awarded land by CRDA.

Similarly, "Ramesh," a prominent Vijayawada-based businessman, proposed a project to develop tourist facilities and a hotel in

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Amaravati. During an interview in 2025, he recalled the close involvement of local businesspeople with CRDA and their consultants in the development of the new city between 2016 and 2019:

> At that time, so many of us were working on projects with CRDA. Although we had our own businesses to run, we were devoting 50 percent of our time to these projects. Teams had come from consulting companies and were working on a war footing. CRDA was full of smart youngsters. We used to enjoy going there and working with them, it was very different from a typical government department. Instead of asking for money they would ask us about our issues!

These narratives illustrate the enthusiasm of the Andhra business elite for the Amaravati project and their optimistic expectations of garnering substantial returns from their investments.

By 2019, 1,277 acres of land had been allocated to 130 private and public sector organizations to set up schools, universities, hospitals, hotels, resorts, and shopping malls, as well as to government departments and public institutions. In most cases, land was allotted at 50 lakh rupees an acre, yielding a total revenue of 1,278 crore rupees. However, only thirty-five of the approved projects had signed agreements and eleven had started construction by the time the government changed in April 2019 (APCRDA 2019). Many of these institutions had not even paid for or taken possession of the land allotted, citing their inability to start construction due to lack of key infrastructure such as access roads.

Frontiers of Provincial Capital

The fact that APCRDA held (most of) the land and totally controlled development within the capital zone meant that the entry of real estate developers and private investors was limited to approved projects of the kind discussed in the previous section—projects that would take time to materialize because investors were awaiting the development of infrastructure. With this avenue of investment virtually blocked, hectic real estate activity sprung up all around the capital zone, especially along the Vijayawada–Guntur highway that runs just beyond the project boundary. A Vijayawada-based builder explained:

> No real estate projects are happening in the capital. This is because there is no good road to the capital—how do you expect it to develop? Until infrastructure comes, real estate projects won't come. We need a direct bridge to

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> the capital. Without this, development is taking place naturally along the highway. Development will happen between Guntur and Vijayawada, but outside the capital zone.

Anand affirmed that most real estate development would take place outside the new capital area for the foreseeable future:

> The new hotspot for real estate in Vijayawada will be Ibrahimpatnam.[21] Once they start constructing the new iconic bridge, that area on the Krishna District side of the river will be in demand. Already land values have gone up to 7 crores there. There is a lot of speculation happening and apartment buildings are coming up on that side.

Apart from the lack of infrastructure, there was little scope for builders to develop residential property within Amaravati since the residential plots were entirely in the hands of farmers who had pooled their land. Moreover, housing in the new layouts was expected to develop slowly and mainly in the form of single bungalows and low-rise buildings. Anand remarked: "In the twenty-nine villages of Amaravati, it is next to impossible for developers to invest—you cannot get three or four acres through consolidation," that is, by buying up several compensation plots and amalgamating them.

Between 2015 and 2019, extensive real estate development transformed surrounding rural areas, driven by expectations of future demand stimulated by the Amaravati project. All along the highway and other major corridors, multi-story apartment complexes and commercial developments of a kind and scale usually seen only in metro cities such as Hyderabad and Bengaluru sprouted up, mainly built by Hyderabad-based real estate companies founded by Andhra regional capital. In addition to these large projects, across the APCRDA region one could see the unbridled and haphazard conversion of agricultural land to create residential layouts or smaller real estate projects, promoted mainly by local builders—despite the government's declared intention of regulating urban growth within larger planning zone.

The real estate boom was an opportunity for local builders as well as a risk, with larger players from Hyderabad entering the market. A Vijayawada builder noted:

> Lots of guys [developers] from outside moved in after bifurcation and created land banks, and now they have started construction. International companies are the biggest threat to us [local builders], but they will only do very large projects. Locals will have a run for three years before foreign players come in.

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The capital region promised to become a real estate "hot spot," like peri-urban areas of Hyderabad or Bengaluru, even as investments within the capital city itself were slow to materialize.

Much of the investment in the Amaravati region could be regarded as speculative, hinging on the expectations and imaginations that had been built up around the new capital. As Rissing and Jones (2022: 200) note, "frontiers of capital become housed in real estate speculation, a commodity whose value is at once real and imagined." Real estate development around the edges of Amaravati hinged entirely on the anticipation that the new capital would be built as planned, creating substantial demand for property as people moved in to take advantage of new economic opportunities. That these investments were very risky, if not speculative, was borne out by the collapse of the market after the defeat of the TDP in 2019. With the abandonment of the project by the YSRCP government, these hopes and expectations were dashed, bookings for new apartments flatlined, and developers faced substantial losses.

Diasporic Dreams

As discussed in the previous chapter, many members of the Andhra regional diaspora were fervent supporters of Chandrababu Naidu during the 2014 election and later of the Amaravati project. Not surprisingly, real estate and business development in the areas surrounding Rajdhani was led in part by NRIs, with the support of the state. To capitalize on their enthusiasm, the government formed the Andhra Pradesh Non Resident Telugu (APNRT) Society, whose mandate was to provide services to NRTs around the world and channel their contributions to the development of the state (echoing earlier engagements with the diaspora; Roohi 2018). A key activity of the APNRT Society was to encourage software companies and other startups to set up in the region, by constructing a technology park and IT tower at Mangalagiri town, located just outside the Rajdhani boundary.[22] Since many Andhra NRIs work in the IT industry or run software companies, the government was keen to attract investments in this sector. The NRT Society also floated a real estate project called Icon Towers at Mangalagiri offering high-end commercial and residential space (the latter in the form of 4,500-square-foot condominiums), catering to the expected influx of "highly paid professionals" to Amaravati.[23]

Apart from these projects, CRDA developed its own real estate project within the project zone—"Happy Nest," a large apartment

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complex of twelve towers with 2,900 units constructed on a thirty-acre parcel of land. "Vikas," employed with an international real estate consultancy firm that was engaged to design and implement the project, explained:

> The government decided to step in to develop residential property within the capital because private real estate developers were not coming forward. The government wanted to ensure that adequate housing would be available for public servants and other employees who would be shifting to Amaravati.

A "demand assessment" estimated that twenty-nine thousand residential units would be required for government employees alone and that the Happy Nest project would cater to just 10 percent of that demand. Vikas's consultancy firm performed "all the functions of a developer," coordinating with various actors in designing and developing the project. Because the government wanted to develop a "high class property" with "all modern amenities," they engaged a prominent architectural firm to create a "world-class design." According to Vikas, the project was aimed not at the very high end or low end of the property market, but at the "upper-middle segment."

Happy Nest proved to be very popular with middle-class investors from across India and abroad. When online booking was opened for the first batch of three hundred apartments, CRDA's server crashed due to the heavy traffic. All 1,200 apartments offered in the first phase were booked within a few hours: "We had record bookings, and still 7,000 people are asking for flats." CRDA collected 10 percent of the price upfront from customers as booking fee, promising to complete the project by December 2020. Vikas informed us that 40 percent of their customers were from outside the region—mostly private sector employees living in cities like Hyderabad and Bengaluru—while only 15 percent of buyers were government employees, 20 percent were NRIs, and the remainder were people from the local area.

Vijayawada builders were unhappy about the project, accusing CRDA of "killing the market" because Happy Nest apartments were offered for rates lower than the prevailing market rate. "We are developing Happy Nest with a projected 10 percent margin, while developers expect a 30 percent rate of return," Vikas explained. A builders' association in Vijayawada approached the government with their objections, but the Chief Minister strongly supported the project because the heavy bookings demonstrated that Amaravati was an attractive investment destination. The contract for the project was awarded to a major construction company and ground clearing work was initiated in early 2019 on the project site near Nelapadu.

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The demand for Happy Nest apartments reflected the strong interest within the spatially dispersed Andhra middle class in acquiring property in Amaravati. Vikas emphasized that 100 percent of the payments were by check or "in white" —an indication that most customers were salaried professionals. But most buyers were "investors" rather than "end users" (as they are termed in the real estate business). That is, most clients purchased property in Amaravati because it was viewed as a good investment, not because they planned to relocate: "Many of the customers bought flats in Happy Nest only for the short term. They expect prices to rise and then they will turn it over." Enthusiasm for Happy Nest apartments did not wane until mid-2019, when the YSRCP government stalled the project and angry customers began demanding their money back.

During our conversation about the Happy Nest project, Vikas outlined the dynamics of the regional land market and its impact on the development of the new city, echoing Jayden's narrative:

> The government is intervening in the land market by putting up its own project to bring about a price correction. If land prices inflate too much, development will stop. But it is the CM [Chief Minister] who is responsible for driving up land prices. At one point, he announced in a speech that land rates had increased, so then people started asking for more! But beyond a point, people won't buy here. For example, NRIs can buy anywhere in India. If it's too costly here [in Amaravati], they will look elsewhere. They care for the yield, not location. Beyond 80 lakhs to 1 crore, they will not invest. It is footloose money.

The speculative land market and frenzied real estate development that exploded in and around Rajdhani reflect strategies of accumulation of provincial capital as well as the transnationalized regional middle classes. Although these groups are closely aligned with the TDP, the substantial flow of money into speculative land and real estate markets had the potential to undermine the Amaravati plan.

* * *

This chapter has explored the imagination, planning, and construction of the new capital city and the financial architecture upon which it is to be built, highlighting the entanglements of state planning practices with the speculative land market. This account suggests that provincial political actors and business classes may formulate and pursue development agendas that draw on regional history and political culture, even as they are influenced (or at times overwhelmed) by hegemonic urban imaginaries that traverse national or global scales.

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In part because of these frictions, the progress of infrastructure development and other projects within the planned city was slow, in contrast to the rapid growth of real estate activity in neighboring areas. In the next chapter, I build on these insights by examining the changing values and meanings of land in the wake of land speculation and the land pooling scheme.

Notes

1. The institution of this new planning authority covering such a large area created jurisdictional conflicts and contradictions that are yet to be resolved, which there is no space to discuss here.
2. Most reports mention that Singapore provided planning expertise free of cost, but the Government of Andhra Pradesh bore part of the costs.
3. Singapore's Centre for Liveable Cities also contributed to the project. Surbana and Jurong were later merged to create Surbana Jurong International Holdings. Surbana Jurong and Centre for Liveable Cities specialize in exporting Singapore's urban expertise to developing countries (Huat 2011).
4. APCRDA claims to have conducted *gram sabha* meetings in all the twenty-nine villages of the capital city area during January 2016 and recorded 4,740 objections and suggestions (APCRDA 2024).
5. These vision statements, "Vision 2029" and "Vision 2050," were also created by McKinsey. The production of such documents is standard procedure for international consultancies and development agencies working in the global South (Appel 2018). The economic development plans articulated in Vision 2029 echo those in the earlier Vision 2020 document developed during Chandrababu Naidu's first term as Chief Minister of undivided Andhra Pradesh, which was designed by McKinsey in line with requirements laid down in the World Bank loan to the state. Vision 2020 similarly targeted a 10 percent growth rate based on huge investments in infrastructure and the establishment of SEZs to promote export-oriented industries across the state (Cross 2014: 43).
6. *Vaastu* refers to architectural principles drawn from ancient Indian texts, which are often followed when building a house or buying land in India to ensure auspiciousness.
7. I elaborate on these strategies in Upadhya (2017).
8. The acquisition of irrigated, multi-cropped land for non-agricultural purposes is prohibited under the 2013 law, but the state government was able to bypass this provision by using land pooling rather than compulsory land acquisition.
9. Opponents of the Amaravati plan also filed a case before the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in August 2016, arguing that the project is environmentally destructive and dangerous to life, but the NGT refused to set aside the environmental clearance that had been obtained by the government in October 2015.
10. GO No. 50, MA&UD Department, Government of Andhra Pradesh, 5 February 2019, cited in APCRDA (2024).
11. At 2025 exchange rates, this is equivalent to about 10 billion US dollars.
12. GO No. 50, MA&UD Department, Government of Andhra Pradesh, 5 February 2019, cited in APCRDA (2024).

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13. This is shorthand for the compensation "package" of 1,000 sq. ft. of residential property and 100 sq. ft. of commercial property given in return for one acre of land pooled. The scheme is described in detail in later chapters.
14. The Startup Area project attracted serious opposition from civil society activists because of the "Swiss Challenge" method that was utilized to award the project. In this type of bidding for projects, an "unsolicited bid" is submitted by a company and other players are then allowed to offer competing bids—in contrast to the usual government procedure of issuing a tender and calling for sealed bids. Critics argued that this process was non-transparent and hence provided scope for corruption, and they alleged collusion between political leaders and the Singapore consortium. A writ petition opposing the award was filed in the Andhra Pradesh High Court in 2016, which issued a stay order, but the process was subsequently allowed to go ahead after the government made some modifications.
15. The project was set up through a complex structure. The Singapore consortium, Singapore Andhra Investment Holdings (SAIH), was a wholly owned joint venture company of Ascendas-Singbridge Andhra Investment Holdings and Sembcorp Development India. ADCL formed a joint venture with SAIH called Amaravati Development Partners Private Limited (ADP), which then floated another entity, Amaravati Management Services LLP. This entity was the "implementing arm" tasked with developing the distribution infrastructure (mainly roads) as well as managing the project for a fee (thus providing shorter-term returns from the project to the Singapore investors). This structure changed when Ascendas-Singbridge was acquired in 2019 by CapitaLand, Singapore's largest real estate group. Temasek, a Singaporean sovereign wealth fund, holds 51 percent of the company. CapitaLand India holds or manages a portfolio of 2 million sq. ft. of real estate assets (mainly commercial space) across eight cities of India.
16. However, it is not clear how the land (contributed by the state after acquiring most of it from landholders) was to be valued within this agreement. A GO (government order) issued in June 2018 by the Revenue Department, in response to a request by the CRDA Commissioner for waiver of stamp duty (tax) on the land concession agreement, pegged the value of the land at 140.62 crore (as per government guidance values), or around 8 lakhs per acre – an extremely low rate for the area (or anywhere in AP). Government of Andhra Pradesh, Revenue Department GO Ms. No. 289 dated 4 June 2018.
17. The GO states that the government had decided to waive stamp duty amounting to 47.05 crore rupees on the request of APCRDA. Government of Andhra Pradesh, Revenue Department GO Ms. No. 289 dated 4 June 2018.
18. See Fauveaud (2024), Goldman (2023), and Goldman and Narayan (2021) on the investment strategies of Blackstone and other private equity firms in India's real estate sector.
19. It is not surprising that prominent amongst the institutions allotted land were private educational institutions, which have historically been a key avenue of capital accumulation for provincial capital in Andhra and across south India (Upadhya 2016).
20. These include SRM University, Vellore Institute of Technology-AP (VIT), Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, and the National Institute of Design (NID). Except for NID (a public institution), all are established private educational institutions based in south India, which were invited to set up new campuses in Amaravati. Many rumors circulated about the cheap land deals they received due to the political connections of their promoters.
21. This is a locality on the outskirts of Vijayawada where the proposed new bridge across the Krishna River is to connect Vijayawada and the national highway with Amaravati.

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22. In 2018, the Chief Minister's son (also Minister for Information Technology in the state government), Nara Lokesh, inaugurated sixteen IT firms that had leased space in NRT Tech Park. On the same day, he also launched a new branch of TiE (The Indus Entrepreneurs)—a Silicon Valley-based association that encourages entrepreneurship and startups in the tech sector—at Vijayawada (*Times of India*, Vijayawada, 17 January 2018). TiE has been very active in Indian cities such as Bengaluru with strong IT sectors, but its presence in a smaller city such as Vijayawada is unusual.
23. See: https://www.apnrts.ap.gov.in/icon/.

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— Chapter 3 —

LAND OF SPECULATION



Rajdhani engendered a dramatic shift in the meanings and values of land, as it was delinked from the agrarian economy and converted into a new form of property by the land pooling scheme and a speculative land market, creating financial assets that moved through ever-expanding circuits of real estate investment. The fate of the new city, and of the residents of the Amaravati villages, hinged not so much on the state's capacity to implement the master plan as on a volatile land market that had become a prime site of accumulation for a range of actors. As discussed in the previous chapter, the project required the "unleashing" of financial value from land while ensuring that land and property values did not escalate to a level that would discourage investors. But the announcement of Rajdhani set off a speculative land market both within and beyond the project zone that was beyond the state's control, even as the boom allegedly benefited ruling party politicians, well-connected businesspersons, and others who bought land early.

This chapter tracks the changing meanings of land as it was delinked from the agrarian economy and converted into a financial asset. It explores the practices of "speculative accumulation" (Campbell 2015) deployed by erstwhile farmers as they pursued post-agrarian futures. Through the stories and narratives of landowners and others caught up in the whirlwinds of change that were set in motion by Rajdhani, the chapter outlines several ways in which the planned city was closely entangled with, and also disrupted by, an unruly land market and the aspirations and interventions of "dispossessed" farmers. It also traces the reverberations of the circulation of new wealth generated from land in the Amaravati villages and beyond.

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Section 1 examines the dynamics of the land market and how the values of land were altered as windfall gains accrued to landowning households. Section 2 highlights farmers' calculations of the potential risks and rewards as they considered whether to sell and/or pool their land. The third section discusses the agrarian crisis that pushed farmers to look toward post-agrarian futures, while section 4 explores their imaginations of this new urban future. Section 5 traces the investment strategies of farmers as they sought to sequester and multiply the wealth gained from selling land and their reverberations within and beyond the new capital zone.

Revaluing Land

"Land that was not valuable has now become equal to valuable land!"

The advent of the Amaravati project created an atmosphere of optimism and excitement, as well as uncertainty and fear, in the Rajdhani villages—especially amongst landowning families. The first outcome of the announcement of the new capital site was the eruption of a volatile land market, with land values shooting up to as much as 10 crore rupees an acre. The project created new modalities for the extraction of value from land, as a range of actors from the region and beyond pumped money into the land market and landowners capitalized on skyrocketing prices.

The land bubbles that erupt around project sites whenever a new real estate or infrastructure project is announced in India illustrate the "economies of anticipation" (Cross 2014, 2015) that entwine development imaginaries with speculative investment. In Amaravati, land bubbles punctuated the planning of the new city in ways both expected and unanticipated. Like settlers in the Amazon forest, Amaravati farmers were urged to participate in the creation of that future by becoming "self-conscious participants in the dreams and dramas of the frontier" (Campbell 2015: 241). This they did, in the first instance, by selling land to "outside investors" at highly inflated prices.

Although the land market is key to understanding how the Amaravati project unfolded, it is difficult to track empirically. Across India, land sales often involve a large proportion of "black money" (unaccounted wealth held outside the formal banking system and beyond the reach of tax authorities), which means that recorded data on land prices is unreliable. In addition, many land transactions in

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Amaravati were "*benami*" (in the name of someone other than the actual buyer)—especially purchases by prominent politicians—making it even more difficult to gather information on who bought land in Rajdhani or at what price. Although interlocutors would provide estimates of the volume of trade and land, what is more significant is how different actors talked about the land market. As in the area around the SEZ studied by Cross (2014: 73), the price of land was the most common topic of conversation and talk "constantly returned to numbers," indicating how this change was experienced. "Personal stories about the coming of the zone were stories of calculation and calculated decision making, stories of profit and loss, of how much money had been made by selling at the right time and how much had been lost by selling too early, or too late" (2014: 73).

"Sudhir," a Vijayawada real estate agent who became one of my key interlocutors, opined: "A few people bought hundreds of acres in the Amaravati region. I would say that 10,000 to 12,000 acres have changed hands." It was rumored that most of these buyers were politicians or businesspeople close to the ruling party, who had inside information about the project that allowed them to buy early and cheaply. Just after the decision on the capital site, a Rajdhani landowner asserted:

> All the real estate people had been informed earlier so they could buy land—they are hand in glove with the government. Already they have bought so much land! … But no one here [in the villages] knew anything about this beforehand.

"Krishna Rao," an affluent organic banana farmer, explained:

> When the capital region was announced, people started coming to buy land at 1.5 to 1.8 crore rupees [per acre]. This is what convinced farmers to pool their land, because they understood that the [compensation] plots would have a high value. Before pooling, the price of land was just 10 to 12 lakhs. In my village, at least 150 to 200 acres of land has been sold. Land prices were highest just after the announcement of Rajdhani. Later, in July 2015, it went down to 70 lakhs. But after the package for *jareebu* [irrigated] land was increased,[1] investors started coming in again and the price went up to 1.6 crore. Now the market has stabilized at 1 to 1.2 crore.

A prominent builder in Vijayawada remarked on these gyrations in the land market: "This is the only place where land prices have fluctuated like the share market, one day up, one day down. This went on for one year after Rajdhani was announced!"

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A farmer in Nowluru told a similar story in 2018: "When the government said that Rajdhani would come here, land started selling at 1.5 to 2 crore, but when land pooling came the prices crashed to 50 lakhs. But then the price came up again, to 1.5 crore. The current price is 12,000 rupees per square yard." This narrative illustrates a shift in the character of land from agrarian property to urban real estate, in the minds of owners as well as buyers. Before the announcement of Rajdhani, land prices were quoted in lakh or crore rupees *per acre* (as across India). But as the land pooling (LP) scheme unfolded, which would transform agricultural land into (future) urban plots, people began to quote prices and calculate gains in terms of rupees *per square yard*—the standard metric for urban property prices. This shift took place even before the reconstituted plots had been allotted to farmers and began circulating in a new property market.

In assessing the potential returns from selling their land, my interlocutors would make quick mental calculations, converting the price per acre into the equivalent value in square yards. They displayed detailed knowledge of property prices in neighboring towns such as Vijayawada (around 80,000 rupees per square yard in 2016), which they would compare with the price of land in their villages. These calculations convinced many farmers that they would gain substantially from pooling their land, despite the small proportion that would be returned to them in the form of urban plots.

Although land prices in the Amaravati villages soared, the government did not increase the guidance value (an "average" official rate that is used to calculate taxes on property transactions), which remained as low as 6 lakh rupees per acre. Guidance values had been recently revised across the state, but the government apparently decided to keep them at their old levels in the Rajdhani zone until all the land had been assembled, because higher rates would push up the cost of land acquisition (which the state planned to use if land pooling failed).[2] But this decision further encouraged the circulation of black money through land and deprived the government of tax revenue, since buyers were paying much higher prices than the value stated on the sale deed (on which basis the tax on property transactions, or "stamp duty," is calculated). In addition, the vibrant land market presented a problem for the government: although high land prices fostered investor confidence in the project and induced farmers to sell or pool their land, if land prices were to escalate too much it could discourage investments. The state government periodically tried to control land prices in the capital region, for instance

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by stopping the registration of land sales, but each time they reversed course and allowed the market free play.

"Satyanarayana," a big landowner who opposed land pooling, argued that by failing to increase the registration value of land in the Rajdhani villages, the government had intentionally created a speculative land market and encouraged money laundering. With such low guidance values, he claimed, one could convert 2 to 4 crore rupees of black money into "white" money or legal property by paying just 5 to 10 lakhs per acre as stamp duty. He believed that the government also used this strategy to force landowners to pool their land, by creating the apprehension that they would receive very low compensation if the government were to invoke compulsory acquisition. Interestingly, several opponents of land pooling (including Satyanarayana, it was rumored) tried to push up the guidance values by selling some of their land and registering the transactions at the full price paid—up to 2 crore rupees—expecting that they would get 6 crore rupees as compensation if their remaining land were to be acquired by the state!

The price of land was a constant topic of conversation in the Rajdhani villages. After cultivation was prohibited, farmers had little to keep them occupied, and many spent their time tracking the movements of the land market and following the progress of the project. Whenever I visited Ramakrishna, the large farmer we met in the Introduction, he would talk at length about the prevailing prices in different areas. In August 2016, he informed me that land was selling for 1.3 crore in dryland villages such as Inovolu and Thullur, while in villages near the river such as Velagapudi and Mandadam the price was 2 crores. He explained that demand was higher in the latter villages because they are situated in the planned Financial District, pointing to the imprint of the Amaravati master plan on the land market. In Uddandarayunipalem and Lingayapalem—close to the planned Government Complex—the price was even higher at around 2.5 crores. Before Rajdhani, he emphasized, *jareebu* (wet) land cost 78 to 80 lakh rupees per acre and *metta* (dry, unirrigated) land just 15 to 20 lakhs. The price of land thus became a key index of the progress of the Amaravati project. Indeed, whenever work seemed to be stalled or negative rumors circulated, prices would fall. As "Venkateswara Rao" queried rhetorically: "If there is no progress, why is land worth 30 lakh [43,000 US dollars] per acre being sold at 3 crore [430,000 US dollars]? If there is no development, why would the prices go up like this?"

These narratives illustrate a profound change in the meanings and values of land in the Amaravati villages, at least amongst land

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pooling farmers. Land had been transformed from a source of sustenance and accumulation through agricultural production, the main anchor of household wealth, and the basis of prestige and social power in agrarian caste society, into a financial asset valued mainly for its (present or future potential) sale price. "Lakshmi," a floriculture farmer in Nidamarru who refused to pool her land, commented astutely on this shift. She pointed out that lands in low-lying areas that are regularly inundated during floods used to be valued at just 10 to 15 lakh rupees per acre, but now they were going for 70 lakhs:

> Land that was not valuable has now become equal to valuable land. Land value has been delinked from productivity. Even flooded land has become valuable. Twice a year, in July and November, Kondaveeti Vaagu floods parts of Inavolu, Sakhamuru, Neerukonda, Nelapadu, and Mandadam, for ten to fifteen days each time. The government has even paid compensation for crop damage in these villages. But look at the land prices now!

Lakshmi's observations succinctly capture how the valuation of land had shifted, from a function of its productivity as agricultural land to a financial asset whose price reflected its potential as urban property in the city yet-to-be. Speaking further about the flood-prone areas, she noted:

> People in those villages are selling their land, thinking that anyway they are always flooded, why not get rid of them while the price is high? Those who have given land for pooling have kept the [reconstituted] plots in the hope that they will fetch higher prices in the future, although they are flooded regularly!

Lakshmi could not accept the logic (to her, illogic) of assetization that endowed flood-prone and unproductive agricultural land with such high prices. She was also clear-eyed about the speculative nature of land pooling, pointing out the risks of giving up their agricultural land in exchange for small plots with uncertain future market value. Lakshmi asserted that the lure of the future riches had muddled the reasoning powers of farmers. Speaking about the wave of support for Rajdhani in other villages, she commented astutely: "People rallied around Babu when he said the word 'development'. They came under a spell!"

Although not all the Amaravati villages are Kamma dominated, their predominance in the region, and their access to the state bureaucracy and the political class, partly explain the participation of most Kamma farmers in land pooling after an initial phase of distrust and protest.

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Calculating the Future

Witnessing the soaring land market, most landowning households—even those with very small holdings—reaped windfall profits by selling a portion of their land and then pooling the remainder. Indeed, it was the inflated price of land that motivated many farmers to participate in land pooling, especially in the dry upland zone where agriculture was not very productive and land values were historically low. The sharp escalation of land values in these "dry" villages, from 15 lakhs to over 1 crore per acre, induced many farmers to give up their land in exchange for potentially more valuable plots in the new city.

But it was not only the land market that was speculative. Land pooling provides adequate compensation to farmers only if the reconstituted plots eventually attain higher value than the agricultural land they surrendered—what Levien (2011) terms a "compensation through speculation model." That is, the compensation received by farmers is not fixed, but depends on the (unpredictable) future value of the "returnable plots." In greenfield projects, the price that the reconstituted plots command in the future real estate market is determined by several factors, such as the pace of infrastructure development, inflows of private investment, and the winds of political fortune. Moreover, property markets respond to perceptions and expectations of development, which may be disconnected from the situation on the ground. Uncertainty about the future value of the Amaravati compensation plots was exacerbated by the fact that the residential and commercial layouts where they are located are scattered across a very large area. The development of these layouts (and hence the price of the plots) depends on the progress of infrastructure development in the surrounding areas (land leveling, roads, drainage, water supply, electricity, and so on), which in turn is contingent on the state's financial resources and its success in attracting private capital investments. This means that farmers who pooled their land were essentially gambling with their property, because the value of the reconstituted plots cannot be predicted or controlled.

In December 2014, just after the government unveiled the land pooling scheme, farmers in the Rajdhani villages began to avidly discuss its implications, especially debating the future value of the reconstituted plots. Extrapolating from prevailing real estate prices in Vijayawada, my interlocutors calculated that a compensation plot received in return for one acre of land pooled might be worth 1.5 crore rupees. Compared to current land values in their villages,

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which had skyrocketed to 1.8 to 2 crore an acre, they concluded that pooling their land would represent a "loss" and resolved to oppose the scheme. In 2015, Krishna Rao articulated their uncertainty:

> People don't know when they will see the benefit—even our next generation [children] may not see the development [of the new city]. But if the [land pooling] certificate can be sold, they can take the money and do something else… Still, mentally it is not okay—there will be lots of adjustment. Many people who have always lived and worked here are worried about this new situation.

According to rumor, "outside investors" were encouraged by the ruling party to buy land in the project area to push up prices, creating a land bubble and thereby motivating cultivators to pool their land. Absentee owners were among the first to pool their land creating a trend that helped to persuade local farmers to participate in the scheme (Ramachandraiah 2016: 71). Sales of land continued even after land pooling was underway, facilitated by a state government order that allowed owners to sell their land even after they had filed the "consent form" (indicating their intention to pool their land)—a decision that also boosted the pooling process.[3] Thus, the volatile land market and the land pooling scheme were closely entangled, reflecting the logic of land pooling as a mechanism for extracting value from land.

In 2016, Krishna Rao—who in 2014 had proudly shown me around his lush organic banana farm—had stopped cultivating his land and moved to an apartment in a neighboring town. After a short period of resistance, he (along with most Kamma farmers) quickly became an avid supporter of land pooling. He expressed sorrow at giving up his "chosen profession," but he was satisfied with the compensation package: in addition to the plot certificates, he was receiving the annual "lease" payment of 50,000 rupees per acre of land pooled. Krishna Rao was confident that the Amaravati project would be completed as planned and that he would eventually realize substantial returns from giving up his land. "I was the first in my village to give my land," he boasted. When I asked him whether people in villages outside the capital zone were jealous of them, he replied: "Yes, really! Most of my friends call me a *crore-pati* [millionaire]."

In late 2014, Ramakrishna was not interested in selling or pooling his land. When asked what would happen to his farm in the future, since his sons had left the village (one was employed in Hyderabad and the other in USA), he simply said, "We will give the land on

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lease." But soon he too had pooled his land and became an enthusiastic supporter of the Amaravati project.

The advent of Rajdhani threw landowners in the capital zone villages into an unprecedented situation, as they were forced to make decisions about their land and the futures of their families in an increasingly unpredictable environment, weighing the potential returns against the risks of pooling their land. Farmers formulated strategies to manage the uncertainties they faced while realigning their expectations to the imagined future of Amaravati. As Rajdhani began to seem inevitable and even desirable, many landowners began to think about pooling as a long-term but potentially lucrative, if risky, investment. But the decision to alienate their land, by selling and/or giving it to the government, was a difficult one for most landowning households, one that they came to after much debate within families. Many families had small holdings of one to five acres, while only a few were large farmers owning ten to thirty acres. For small farmers, giving up their land represented a major sacrifice as they had few other assets or sources of income to sustain them.

However, most farmers did not depend upon the compensation plots for their future economic security. Instead, as noted above, once they had decided to participate in pooling, most sold a portion of their land to capitalize on the inflated prices, channeling the proceeds into urban property in Vijayawada or Hyderabad or agricultural land outside the new capital area. This strategy reflects not so much the logic of speculation as a calculated risk—an attempt to manage the unknowable future by seizing the opportunity to extract financial value from their land and use it to create diversified portfolios of property.

When I asked Krishna Rao why most farmers ultimately decided to pool their land, he responded that they view it as a long-term "investment" from which they do not expect "immediate returns." "It's a ten-year plan," he quipped. When I asked if they were confident that the compensation plots would attract high prices in the future, he cited property values on the outskirts of Vijayawada, where a 1,000-square-yard residential plot was worth around 2 crore rupees. "If we were not sure about this calculation, we would not have given up our land," he declared. Thus, large landowners such as Krishna Rao began to think of their land as urban real estate or simply a financial asset, projecting its future price based on the (inflated) property market in neighboring towns and counting on the popular belief that land values always rise. On another occasion, when I again pressed

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Krishna Rao to explain why they believed that the property market would yield the desired results, given the many uncertainties about the project, he retorted: "In farming also there are so many risks—this is also a risk!" To illustrate this point, he spoke about the regular flooding caused by Kondaveeti Vaagu. Farmers are accustomed to handling risk, he argued, and uncertainty about the future of their investments in the new city was no different.

This statement suggests an orientation to the future that accepts uncertainty and risk as inevitable. This logic seemed to frame the thinking of Amaravati landowners as they made decisions about their land and other assets, appraising and apportioning different risks and balancing them against the need for economic security. In response to my persistent queries about how they were planning their futures amidst the disruptions of Rajdhani, my interlocutors would outline in detail their reasoning behind selling a certain amount of land at a particular point in time, or their decision to invest the proceeds in another type of property or a business venture. Thus, most Amaravati farmers sold part of their land to realize immediate gains and then made a calculated gamble or long-term investment by pooling the rest. But not all were keen to cash in on their land. For some, it made sense to sell only if there was an urgent need for money, because a sudden infusion of liquid cash would lead to other problems. As a farmer pointed out:

> What should we do after selling the land? We should invest the money somewhere, buy land elsewhere. But where should we invest that money? We can't keep it in the bank. There will be an income tax problem if you get so much money.

Amaravati farmers gradually began to think of their land as just one element in their long-term financial planning, as they adjusted to a post-agrarian future. Illustrating the kinds of calculations they were forced to make, Ashok explained that he had sold 0.8 acres of his family's twelve-acre holding for 80 lakh rupees in November 2014, before land pooling was announced. He acknowledged that the price was less than what he might have received had he waited, since the same land was now worth 2 crore rupees. When I asked if he regretted the decision, he replied philosophically:

> Yes, you can say that I would have gotten more if I had waited. But you should remember that a few months before I sold, land prices were hardly 20 to 25 lakh an acre. In that sense, I gained a lot, right? It is difficult to live if we cannot counterbalance a loss somewhere with profit somewhere else.

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Post-Agrarian Planning

In making decisions about their land, Rajdhani farmers evaluated the potential gains from selling or pooling against the declining returns from cultivation, emphasizing the unviability or unprofitability of cultivation. Time and again, I was told that agriculture is no longer remunerative, or that labor is in short supply or too costly, and so it made sense to give up or sell their land when the opportunity arose. Kamma farmers in particular complained about diminishing returns from cultivation compared to the potential gains from alienating their land:

> Actually, all farmers are disgusted—not only here, but everywhere. We cannot sustain farming any more, we are not earning much money, so why continue to do farming? The earlier generations had fewer expenses—now there are more demands and farmers can't get the income they want from agriculture. They cannot have a good life from agriculture.

Such narratives partly reflect the wider agrarian crisis experienced in Andhra and across many regions of India since the 1980s, exacerbated by the effects of climate change that has transformed "historically managed agrarian risks … into chronic uncertainty" (Matthan 2022: 118). As discussed in the first chapter, small and marginal cultivators and tenant farmers in Andhra Pradesh have been the most adversely affected, while large capitalist farmers have the resources to better cope with these uncertainties. However, in Amaravati, large landowners were the most vocal about the difficulties of agriculture. Krishna Rao often mentioned the "ferocious" Kondaveeti Vaagu: "I have suffered a lot from flooding … Now they will manage it with bunds, reservoirs, flood control works. But when it was affecting the poor farmers, they didn't do anything about it." He continued:

> Had the *vaagu* been tamed, perhaps it would perhaps have deterred people from giving their lands. But farmers are tired of agriculture … Perhaps only 10 percent of the land yields good profits. Had it not been for the acute shortage of agricultural workers and the problem of flooding, no one would have pooled their land. There are several risks in farming that are not in our control—the weather, the market, the labor problem—so why should I continue like this?

Most Kamma farmers blamed the declining profitability of agriculture on the "labor problem" instead of decreasing government support for farmers, environmental risks, or climate change. Across Andhra, talk about the fecklessness of agricultural workers is

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common, representing an "occlusion" of their contribution to agricultural production (Kurian 2024) as well a devaluation of their labor (Cowan, Campbell, and Kalb 2023). A large farmer in Thullur complained:

> There was a labor shortage in the village. We could not even find housemaids to work—80 percent of the farmers have washing machines in their homes [due to lack of domestic help]! Because of the labor shortage, agriculture became dependent on machines like corn harvesters. For labor-intensive crops like cotton, we had to depend on migrant workers from Rayalaseema.

Krishna Rao asserted that agricultural workers had been "spoiled" by the government's social welfare policies:

> Laborers are not willing to work. The government is giving them everything free, like rations, pensions, money without working [referring to the national employment guarantee scheme]. Workers are lazy because the government has made them so. Due to the high cost of labor, the expenses of cultivation have increased, so our margins have reduced. For marginal farmers, if they take land on lease and do the work themselves, then they can make money. But we [Kammas] have to hire workers so we cannot make money.[4] So, we are happy to just sell or pool the land and get a lump sum of money.

Other interlocutors claimed that young people belonging to the "labor class" no longer come for agricultural work because they are getting educated and moving into other occupations. One remarked: "Earlier people used to work for their entire life for us, now we hardly know their younger generation."[5] As in the tobacco-growing region of neighboring Prakasam District studied by Kurian (2024: 474), farmers framed agricultural workers as "unruly political subjects, sources of exasperation, and subjects of disparagement … demonized as disruptions to the smooth flow of crops to markets."[6]

Echoing these statements, Ashok declared: "The life of a farmer is only one of tension—from planting of the seeds to ripening to harvest, and then we have to worry about price. At least labor gets a wage!" He clearly articulated the changing value of land, from a productive household asset to a commodity with purely market value:

> There is no sentimental attachment to the land or agriculture now. Agriculture only gives loss, it is not remunerative. The climate is erratic. In my grandfather's day we could live on one acre of land, but now you need money for everything and even ten acres is not sufficient! Anyway, we would have been the last generation doing cultivation, our kids are not interested. We have not lost our love for agriculture, but now it is not profitable.

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This narrative points to another major reason that Amaravati farmers were willing to pool their land: the children of most landowning families have received higher education and are employed outside the village (mostly in urban professional and white-collar occupations) and so are unlikely to return to farming.

For rural communities in India, the value of agricultural land derives not just from its economic function as a source of sustenance. Land ownership is central to a family's social standing in the community—it holds immense symbolic, social, and affective value as the key source of family wealth and ties to the village. Sudhir, the Vijayawada real estate agent, commented: "In Andhra villages, people generally sell land only if it's a life and death situation. They want to keep it in the family. If they sell at all, it is to a relative." In addition, agricultural land is legally considered "ancestral property" in which all immediate family members have rights. Although older Amaravati farmers spoke about the importance of keeping inherited land in the family, most believed that their children did not value it in the same way: "I inherited agriculture from my parents and have practiced it since I was young, but now my children don't even know where our fields are!" Another farmer said:

> This land was given to my father by his father, who then passed it on to me. I have lived on this land and will pass onto my son. But their generation sees land as money, they see owning ten acres as having 15 crore rupees!

For many Amaravati farmers, the sudden infusion of cash was a prime opportunity to pay off debts they had accumulated due to low returns from agriculture. According to Ramakrishna, the average debt per acre was around 50,000 to 60,000 rupees, but after Rajdhani came most farmers had settled all their debts. A cultivator from UDpalem said: "We had debts, so this was like winning a lottery. We sold land and paid off our debts, then bought all the comforts like a house and car and set aside money for our children's marriages." After clearing their debts, farmers used the money to provide expensive higher education for their children or cement good marriage matches for their daughters (by offering high dowries). Several interlocutors pointed out that agriculture does not yield enough income to cover their household expenses, such as children's education (given that school fees had become very expensive). Thus, everyone was "happy" about the arrival of Rajdhani: "If not for Rajdhani, I would have been deep in debt due to the rising cost of living. The cost of education has gone up, the cost of living is more than what you can earn." Because most cultivators benefited

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from selling some of their land at the peak of the market, the sudden loss of agricultural income did not represent a major financial blow.

Our interviews with Kamma smallholders and some tenant farmers suggested that Rajdhani had also been a boon for them.[7] Small cultivators were able to pay off their debts by selling all or some of their land. One farmer recalled that agriculture used to provide them with sufficient income, but they had to live frugally: "In agriculture there was no surplus money, but there was rotation of money so we used to get by." Those who leased additional land for cultivation had been the deepest in debt: "If not for Rajdhani, I would never have been able to pay off my debts, even by selling land," one such farmer said. Several interlocutors even remarked, "If not for Rajdhani, people would have consumed pesticides" (a common method of farmer suicides).

Thus, many farmers viewed Rajdhani as an opportunity to complete a transition out of agriculture that was already underway, by cashing in on their land.[8] The close links of many Kamma cultivators with the urban middle class, through their children or other relatives living in regional towns, Indian cities such as Hyderabad, or abroad, facilitated their acceptance of a post-agrarian future. Because of Kammas' history of social and spatial mobility, caste as a cultural identity and a strong social network stretches across the rural-urban divide as well as boundaries of economic class, shaping the aspirations of even small Kamma farmers. This orientation to the urban, combined with ambitions for upward mobility (especially for their children), inflects their imaginations of development and of the future, such that a "dream city" such as Amaravati becomes a realistic aspiration.

Development Dreams

Many residents of the Rajdhani villages were initially skeptical of or opposed to the Amaravati plan, but eventually most Kamma landowners became strong supporters of the project. As discussed above, a major reason for this change was the rise in land values, which not only enriched farmers who sold land but also persuaded them that the planned city had a viable future and that their compensation plots would eventually be worth much more than the agricultural land they surrendered.

However, the shift from stiff resistance to enthusiastic participation in land pooling did not occur smoothly or automatically. To

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persuade farmers to give up their land, the state deployed discursive and political strategies to incorporate them as "stakeholders" in the project, in addition to the important coercive tactic of banning cultivation in the Rajdhani villages. The "stake" of these farmers in the project was of course the reconstituted plots of urban land that they would receive in return for their land.

CRDA officials arranged frequent meetings with local landowners to share information about the project and solicit their suggestions on various aspects of the development plan. Through regular village-level discussions and negotiations about the details of the land pooling scheme, ruling party politicians and state functionaries put substantial effort into convincing landowners that they would reap spectacular returns from the project. These strategies, together with their growing conviction that the project would go ahead regardless of their cooperation, produced a measure of "consent" amongst most capital region farmers. These frequent engagements with the state contributed to the formation of a new political constituency known as "capital area farmers" or "LP [land pooling] farmers," a development that had significant repercussions for the project as it moved forward.

Most LP farmers seem to have absorbed the urban imaginary that was promoted by the state, explicitly equating top-down urban planning and the development of modern infrastructure with "development." The main topic of conversations with my LP farmer interlocutors between 2016 and 2019 was the pace of development of the project. Whenever I dropped in on a Kamma landowner, I would barely have sat down before he (and most of my interlocutors in this category were men) would start talking about the progress of the Seed Access Road, the pouring of the foundation for a new government building, or the educational institutions that had broken ground or started functioning. They would tell me about the various infrastructure projects that had started since my last visit, urging me to tour the construction sites to admire the advanced technology being used. LP farmers revealed detailed knowledge of the technical and financial aspects of the plan, noting which companies were building different projects, explaining the design of the flood control works, or listing the organizations that were planning to set up base in Rajdhani. This close attention to the progress of the project seemed to concretize their imagination of an urban future. Monitoring the development of the new city also enabled participating farmers to sustain their faith in the plan: "Everyone is waiting for development to happen. The government has no money, but

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now there is more confidence among the people because they can see things coming up."

In August 2016, Krishna Rao talked animatedly about the progress of the project, pointing out that the Temporary Secretariat had been erected in "record time" using the latest technology. He believed that the new city would come up soon. But what about the problem of funds, which was being widely discussed? "Money will come. There is a ten-year plan. In the old days, we would buy a car only if we had the money. Now we take loans. That's how we buy things nowadays, and in the same way the capital will be built." Demonstrating a keen understanding of the land-based financing of the project, he continued: "It's just like real estate developers work, like a joint development agreement. I contribute my land, and they construct the building on an equity share basis. The same way the capital will be built, but on a larger scale."[9]

When I met him again in October 2018, Krishna Rao was still happy with the progress of infrastructure development: "Work is going on at a fast pace in Amaravati. Naidu is a man of vision, that is why he can attract money from foreign investors." Explaining the economic planning behind the project, he endorsed the idea of developing tourism to promote growth:

> People are spending more now, they want recreation facilities and so on. I went to Disneyland in America. There is nothing around that place—why has it developed? It is for tourism, people with money come and spend there. Like that, our capital will have tourist attractions on the river. The location is very good for this. The deltas are rich, there is a lot of spending capacity. So, the capital will promote tourism, which will generate business and money.

Infrastructure was a major theme of LP farmers' narratives, as the appearance of new roads, canals, or pipelines solidified the dream of development. During a conversation in 2018, Venkateswara Rao reeled off a list of infrastructure projects that had taken off since we had last met. Consulting his smart phone, he shared links to web pages where one could access data on the contracts given to different construction companies. Ramakrishna talked about the new bridge to be erected across the river to connect Amaravati with Krishna District, for which L&T (a major construction company) had been awarded the contract. He went on to explain the planned water supply system: "They are constructing another barrage upstream, and now there is the Patiseema project linking the Godavari with the Krishna River—so there will be enough water for the capital." When I raised the problem of finance, he responded: "They have

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issued bonds—corporate and individual. And HUDCO has given loans." [How will they repay these loans?] "CRDA also will become a builder. They have chosen land where they will make apartment buildings and sell the flats to make money!"—alluding to the Happy Nest project described in chapter 2. Sharply criticizing opponents of the project, Ramakrishna asserted that the growth of Amaravati cannot be stopped:

> I say to them, you have seen SRM and VIT [universities] come up. The construction is almost complete! What will you obstruct now? By the end of May 2018, the construction of B.R. Shetty Medicity [a health care project], the Seed Access Road, and the Arterial Road will be completed. Then there will be some development to be seen, and investors will come in.

Ramakrishna acknowledged that many institutions were waiting for the major infrastructure to be completed before initiating their projects. But he spoke enthusiastically about the laying of the foundation stone for Amritha University, the construction of government officers' quarters underway at Nelapadu, and the IT companies that had started operations in Mangalagiri. Venkateswara Rao asserted that Amaravati would become another Cyberabad [Hyderabad's software hub]: "IT employees and companies will come here, and the city will grow."

A second major theme that runs through LP farmers' narratives is that of *planning*, a favorite topic of Krishna Rao:

> Cities in India were not properly planned, they are not up to the mark. The roads are very narrow, traffic cannot pass, so they cannot plan for the future. Here the capital city is being planned properly, accounting for future needs, so we won't have those problems … This is why so many farmers have given their land, they believe the city will come up like this.

Responding to critics' questions about the large amount of land acquired for the project, Venkateswara Rao argued: "If you take only 1,500 acres to make the city, then it won't be planned—there will be unplanned growth all around it and it will then become like other cities."

The association of Amaravati with the idea of development and the promise of a better future becomes clear in LP farmers' reflections on the changes they had already experienced in their lifetimes. Krishna Rao mused:

> When I was young, I had to go to school in Vijayawada by steamer launch [to cross the river]. Later, I stayed with relatives in town to pursue my stud-

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> ies. Now we don't have these problems—this is the growth we have seen. Villages are also improving. Earlier we thought we can't live without agriculture, but people are living lavishly now!

Another strategy deployed by the state to persuade Rajdhani farmers to part with their land was to organize all-expenses-paid trips to Singapore. The objective was to show Amaravati farmers what their futures would look like and to "train" them to handle their new properties. While seeing off the first batch, the Chief Minister declared that Amaravati farmers should "become entrepreneurs by learning from the dramatic transformation of the once small fishing enclave which Singapore was, into an economic powerhouse" (*The Hindu*, Vijayawada, 31 October 2017). During a conversation with Ashok after he returned from Singapore, he spoke enthusiastically about what he had seen there—describing how clean and orderly the city is and how technology is used for everything from tollgates to hotel room keycards. Not surprisingly, Ramakrishna—wealthier and better educated than Ashok—did not join the trip: "I've already been to Singapore, and to the USA more than once! What is there to see?"

LP farmers' belief in the Amaravati plan was closely tied to their support for, and faith in, Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu:

> I believe that only if Naidu retains power will the capital city be developed. Look, he has vision. He can develop it. TDP can mesmerize people, they know how to manage the mind of the voter. It is all a mind game. Many still support Babu because he has vision.

Justifying their confidence, LP farmers often pointed out that it was Naidu who had "made Hyderabad what it is today." When the World Bank loan was stalled, an interlocutor asserted: "The amount promised by the World Bank is nothing in comparison to Mr. Naidu's commitment. If it doesn't come, there will be a financial impact, but still Naidu can pull it off."

These narratives should not be understood simply as blind faith in a political leader. For LP farmers, Amaravati represented an urban future that many had already seen and experienced, during trips to Hyderabad or other Indian cities or while visiting their children living abroad. Rajdhani created an "economy of anticipation" (Cross 2014), in which diverse expectations and promises are brought together into a new assemblage of desire—the aspiration for a revitalized and developed region and the imagination of a fully planned world-class city to rise out of a "backward" rural landscape.

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Mobilizing Money

"You need to grow money instead of just keeping it!"

With many households now flush with cash, the circulation of new money in the capital region villages transformed the local economy as well as landholders' imaginations of the future. I asked "Rama Rao," marketing manager for a large developer in Vijayawada, what the farmers were doing with their new money. "This is a cash economy—they may use it to buy some other land or a car, or build a house." But there were few productive outlets locally for the large amounts of money that was now available for investment.

Most landowners sold pieces of their land strategically, using the proceeds to purchase agricultural land or house sites in other places or apartments in Vijayawada or Hyderabad, or to build new houses in their villages. For example, a smallholder family in Mandadam sold one acre of their four-acre holding for 2.3 crore rupees before pooling the rest. With that money, they bought a two-bedroom flat in Gollapudi (a rapidly developing area on the outskirts of Vijayawada) for 56 lakhs, which they were renting out for 20,000 rupees a month. Such decisions signal not just a strategy to transform agricultural land into rent-yielding property, but also a longer-term plan to move out of the village entirely.

When asked how they had used the proceeds from land sales, most farmers said that they first cleared their debts and then saved some money for future family expenses such as children's education or marriages. After this, the most common expenditure was on constructing new buildings in the village to create rental units, with the expectation that they could profit from the growing demand for residential accommodation in Amaravati. Relating his story of land pooling, an elderly Kamma farmer explained:

> I had 2½ acres and together with my son we leased around twenty acres of land. I have done agriculture for forty years, and by the time Amaravati came I had 10 lakhs of debt. Now we are fed up with agriculture. We sold one acre for 1 crore and with that money we are constructing a three-story building. We will live off the rent from the flats.

Several farmers built new homes for their own families and rented out their old houses. In 2018, Ramakrishna proudly pointed to the construction site behind his ancestral home, where he was constructing a new building at a cost of one crore rupees, using money he received from selling half an acre of land. Once his family moved

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into the new home, he planned to rent out the old one. But he was able to build this spacious two-storied home with a large garden and parking area in front because he already owned a large parcel of land on the main road, a short distance outside the village. Within the village settlements plot sizes are small, so most new constructions were narrow, vertical buildings.

LP farmers' investments in the construction of rental units demonstrate that rentiership—a key indicator of financialization—manifests at different scales, driven by ground-up processes of "everyday speculation" (Leitner, Nowak, and Sheppard 2023). This pattern is visible in peri-urban sites across India, where rural landowning groups have transformed themselves into (largely informal) small-scale rentier landlords. But unlike examples from Delhi (Pati 2017, 2022) and Gurgaon (Cowan 2018, 2019), where most landowners built low-cost housing for migrant workers, students, or middle-class employees, in Rajdhani farmers catered to the strong demand from government officers and employees of construction companies posted to projects in Rajdhani. LP farmers constructed buildings with several two- or three-bedroom units offering amenities similar to those found in urban middle-class housing in India, commanding rents of 12,000 to 15,000 rupees per month—very high for a rural area.

However, Krishna Rao was skeptical about these investments:

> They are constructing houses that don't even have parking space [because of the narrow lanes and small plot sizes in the villages]. I have advised people not to make such investments, expecting that it's easy to get tenants. They will be at a loss—you can't just build a house somewhere and expect to get returns. Secretariat [government] staff come from the city—they won't stay in a village. Government employees are staying at Vijayawada or Guntur and commuting to the Secretariat for work. There are many cases of people who built extra floors that are lying empty. They thought they could live on the rental income, but they have not calculated correctly.

Similarly, Venkateswara Rao criticized the construction of multistory buildings in the villages, on roads of just six to eight meters in width: "No one would take a house on rent where the roads are so bad. It's a bad investment." Yet, between 2017 and 2019 most of these new apartments were occupied.

Ashok's story illustrates the risky and speculative nature of these investments. His family constructed a new building next to their old tile-roof home in the village. The ground floor is an open space for parking, his family was living on the first floor, and the second and third floors were leased to managers employed in a large construction company for 18,000 rupees per month each. In 2018 he told us:

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> Now this rent is our main source of income. I sold 80 cents of land for 80 lakhs, which I invested in this house. I spent all the money I had to build this house. With the rent money and the annuity from the government, I am managing.[10]

But when we went to see him in 2019, after the change of government, the two flats were empty. The lift shaft where Ashok had planned to install an elevator was still a dangerous, gaping hole adjoining the unfinished concrete staircase. On a subsequent visit in 2022, we found that he had managed to find tenants for the flats, but at a much lower rent of 6,000 rupees per month.

Hectic construction activity was seen mainly in centrally located villages such as Venkatapalem and Mandadam. In more remote villages, the impact of the land boom was less visible. Villages such as Ananthavaram and Nekkalu, located at the edge of the planning zone, appeared desolate and abandoned rather than "developing" with the circulation of new money, unlike villages closer to the river. In Nekkalu, most households owned small or marginal holdings of dry land on which they grew cotton or chilies. After Rajdhani was declared, many farmers sold their land and bought agricultural land elsewhere in the state with the proceeds. Others had purchased buffaloes, since "now there is plenty of grazing land!"

However, in 2016 we encountered a smallholder Kamma family that had started constructing a three-story building on the site of their old village house in Nekkalu, with the intention of earning rental income. This eight-member household (middle-aged husband and wife, their unmarried adult daughter and son, and another adult son with his wife and two children) was living on the second floor of the unfinished building whose outer walls had not even been completed, because they had demolished their old home to make way for the new structure. They explained that they had sold 1.5 acres of their three acre holding and pooled the rest of their land. With the proceeds, they first cleared their debts amounting to 20 lakhs and then spent the rest on this building. Like Ashok, they planned to live on one floor and rent out the others, which they believed would yield an income of 80,000 rupees per month. But they ran out of money before they could finish construction. Now they were trying to complete the building incrementally, as and when some cash came in. They would hire masons and other workers through small contractors to complete some jobs but were carrying out much of the work themselves. While we were talking with this family in their "apartment," their adult son and a friend were busy installing electrical wiring.

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The image of this family camped out in an unfinished structure, their belongings scattered about on the bare concrete floor and with wires hanging haphazardly around the rooms, has stayed with me. The scene vividly encapsulated the construction mania that had gripped the capital region, as well as the new risks it imposed on farmers liquidating their lands without adequate knowledge or support to handle their sudden wealth. This family's decision to construct a new building was clearly unwise, since it was very doubtful that any salaried government or private sector employee would rent an apartment in this isolated and poorly serviced village, far from the Secretariat or anything else. Nor were any of the Amaravati projects likely to come up in this far-flung corner of Rajdhani anytime soon. Yet, caught up in the currents of change that were swirling through the capital zone, many rural landowners became convinced that constructing rental housing was a smart investment.

Apart from construction, a major outlet for the money farmers gained from selling land was informal moneylending. Locally, moneylending is called "rotation" or "rotating money" (the English word is used even while speaking in Telugu), implying the growth of money through circulation. Several farmers were providing private loans at an interest rate of 2 percent per month, or 24 percent per annum, according to Krishna Rao: "Bank loans are cheaper, but they give less money. People may take out such private loans to perform marriages or because of unforeseen problems." He mentioned that builders from Guntur and Vijayawada were borrowing money from farmers who were flush with cash, at a rate of 1.5 percent a month or 18 percent per annum. Ramakrishna explained: "No one is keeping money in bank accounts. They are either investing in land, circulating money, or keeping cash in bank lockers."

Ashok, who was himself lending out money, spoke about how the moneylending business had changed since the coming of Rajdhani:

> Rotation has increased now. Taking loans for agriculture was different—there were two or three people in the village who would advance money for cultivation. I used to borrow money to sow the crop and repay the loan after the harvest. Now, circulation is for different reasons. Now everyone is a moneylender! It's not that we want to do moneylending, but *you need to grow money instead of just keeping it—so we rotate it*. Not everyone can be a moneylender. We give money only to trusted people. We know everyone in the village, so we know we can get the money back.

He continued:

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> Now there is nothing else we can do … When we sell land, buyers are only giving cash. Even if they give some amount in white, it is the official value of the plot, like 650 rupees per square yard, whereas the actual rate might be 24,000 rupees … We can't put money in the bank because it would attract an income tax notice. So, money [cash] is kept in a bank locker or the house or it is rotating through moneylending.

The multiplication of wealth through circulation illustrates the afterlives of the speculative land market, creating new forms of accumulation and deepening the divide between property owners and everyone else.

Another lucrative part-time occupation for erstwhile farmers in Rajdhani was land brokerage—a pattern seen in urbanizing villages across India, as it is dominant caste landlords who often facilitate the conversion of agricultural land into real estate by serving as brokers (Cowan 2022; Gururani 2024; Upadhya and Rathod 2021). Sudhir (the Vijayawada real estate agent) explained that they have "agents" in every village who inform them about people who might be interested in selling their property. These agents are not full-time brokers but residents with good networks and intimate knowledge of the affairs of their village. If a deal works out, the seller pays commission to the local intermediary while Sudhir's company charges commission from the buyer (usually 1 percent at each end).

Venkateswara Rao, earlier a big farmer and a village leader, was helping his son in his land brokering business: "People from across the twenty-nine villages approach me for advice. Cheating is going on during the process of sale registration—the seller may not actually own the land they are selling! So, you need a broker you trust, someone who knows the area." He said that brokers from Guntur and other towns rely on well-connected local people like him to negotiate land deals. But with so many people entering this market, the profit margin had shrunk:

> The buying and selling of land or plots takes place only through brokers. They used to charge 1 to 2 percent of the sale price, but now the rate has come down to 20,000 or 50,000 rupees per transaction because there are too many brokers. These brokers are all former farmers, they are from these villages. If you go to the village center looking for land, 100 brokers will approach you!

A farmer in Penumaka echoed this comment: "Now that there is no agriculture, there is one real estate broker for every house!"

Apart from engaging in moneylending or becoming rentier landlords, many families invested money gained from selling land in the education of their children—replicating the longstanding strategy

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of social mobility amongst Kammas through the augmentation of cultural capital. For example, Ramakrishna's cousin paid 1.8 crore rupees for his son's admission to a postgraduate course in a private medical college. Several young men from small landowning families, who had completed engineering degrees from local colleges but were unemployed, were planning to go abroad to pursue higher education. One explained that such options were not available to them earlier because their families lacked the financial resources, but now that they were out of debt and money was available, they had the "confidence" to seek admission abroad.

However, as in other project sites where speculative land bubbles yielded sudden cash, stories of money "wasted" on expensive consumer goods or lavish weddings also circulated through Rajdhani. According to Krishna Rao, several families had spent their newfound money buying motorcycles, cars, gold, and so on, instead of investing it:

> A person owning 10 acres of land, even if he sells one acre he will get 1.5 crore rupees. He will construct a three-story house for 70 to 80 lakhs, spend around 2 to 3 lakhs on a house-warming party, then he will buy a car. But even then, he can't spend all the money.

Another interlocutor observed: "People now are buying more consumer goods. Drinking has gone up. Agriculture is all gone now." But Ramakrishna was pleased with these changes:

> Have you not seen everything around here? New roads have come, people are building houses, there is a change in the people's lifestyles. Most have sold half an acre or one acre of land and have bought cars and built new houses. They are spending money lavishly on family ceremonies.

The new wealth of Rajdhani was also multiplied, or lost, through other forms of speculation. Reflecting on the culture of gambling in Andhra, a Penumaka farmer observed that opportunities for betting had increased:

> There is now huge interest in betting. Before people would bet small amounts, in thousands. Now that there is a lot of cash, the amounts have gone into lakhs. Guntur and Vijayawada have emerged as new havens for betting—you can bet on cricket matches, elections, whatever.

The circulation of new money in Amaravati had reverberations much beyond the capital region, as many landowners purchased agricultural land in other parts of the state where prices were lower. My interlocutors cited several examples of small farmers who had

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bought land elsewhere in Guntur District or places further away, such as areas of East and West Godavari Districts bordering Telangana, for as little as 10 or 15 lakhs an acre—most with the intention of leasing it out. However, the influx of Amaravati money drove up land prices in these areas, only to fall later. "Wherever Amaravati people have bought lands, the market has collapsed."

> Amaravati farmers were coming with cash so the price of land in those areas escalated. They wasted their money. Now if they want to liquidate the land there are no buyers at such inflated prices, or else rates have crashed, so they are left penniless.

Ashok had purchased two acres near Kancherla for 40 lakhs, but the price of land later dropped to 20 lakhs an acre. He regretted this decision, also because the returns from leasing out such land are low: "People bought land for 25 lakh an acre but they get only 10,000 rupees as lease—it's a poor return. It's better to invest here in building a house to rent." He continued:

> Only small farmers here sold land, big ones held onto theirs. [Why did they sell?] They were not interested in pooling. They thought if I sell my land here, I can buy more land in some other place. It was not because of distress, it's just that they wanted to have more land. Mostly SCs and BCs did this, but a few Kammas also bought.

These narratives suggest that it was mainly landholders from non-dominant communities who made these poor investment decisions. Ramakrishna told the story of a Lambada (ST) man from his village who sold seven acres for 7 crore rupees and bought land near the Telangana border at 25 lakhs an acre, whose price later dropped to 18 lakhs. Ramakrishna pointed out that the land he had sold in Rajdhani would now fetch 3 crores an acre: "He put all his money into buying land there and now has no money even to dig a borewell." Sudhir confirmed: "Hundreds of acres of land were purchased in districts like Nellore and Prakasam at 5 to 6 lakh rupees an acre, mostly by small farmers who had sold their land. They even sold off their compensation plots, whereas big farmers are holding onto their plots."

These stories reinforce the argument, which I develop in later chapters, that the land boom and land pooling in Amaravati allowed medium and large farmers (especially Kammas) to consolidate and augment their wealth and property, while small and marginal landowners belonging to non-dominant castes were more likely to make unwise and risky investments leading to economic distress.

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The speculative land boom engendered by the Amaravati project generated substantial financial value, which circulated through the Rajdhani villages and beyond, creating ripples or tidal waves of change. Wealth accumulated mainly through the "secondary circuit of capital" (Harvey 1982)—finance (moneylending), rent (the creation of rental housing in the villages), and trade (land brokerage). New wealth also flowed back into land and real estate markets (much of it in the form of cash or black money)—within Rajdhani, in neighboring towns (as farmers invested in urban property), and in other areas of the state (where Amaravati money created minor land bubbles). As erstwhile farmers sought new ways of multiplying their newfound wealth and generating income, they embraced economic practices that accelerated the circulation and accumulation of capital.

The major site of farmers' investments—the construction of rental housing in the Rajdhani villages—posed a challenge to the planned city. Moreover, the bonanza enjoyed by many landowning families contrasted sharply with the predicament of landless households, which were in the majority. In the next chapter I examine the contradictory consequences of the urbanization of the rural settlements that were slated to be absorbed into Amaravati.

Notes

1. I discuss the negotiations between farmers and the government to increase the compensation package in chapter 5.
2. The LARR Act requires compensation for land acquired to be fixed at three times the current guidance value in most cases.
3. Under the land pooling procedure, farmers who consented to pool their land had to file Form 9.3, which came to be known as the "consent form." Landowners also had the option of filing "objection" Form 9.2. By early 2017, CRDA had received consent forms for 34,383 acres and agreement forms (9.14) for 33,036 acres. Over 17,000 objection forms were submitted, of which 7,859 were "resolved" and 9,237 were "rejected on merits." Of these, 1,052 were under appeal (APCRDA n.d.: 19–20, 30).
4. As a "forward caste" landowning community, Kamma men and (especially) women traditionally eschew physical work in the fields as a sign of their superior standing. Men may go to the fields to supervise their workers, but Kamma women—even those belonging to marginal landowning or landless households—never perform agricultural labor or any other outdoor work—reflecting the wider cultural significance of women's work in India as a marker of caste status. In Andhra, Dalit women carry out a large proportion of the agricultural labor. In this comment, Krishna Rao is suggesting that lower caste farmers are better off because they can use family labor on their farms.

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5. This refers to the *paleru* or farm servant system—a long-term patronage relationship between cultivators and agricultural labor families that earlier was customary in Andhra. This arrangement has disappeared in most areas, in part because Dalit agricultural laborers prefer the freedom of daily wage work rather than being at the beck and call of the landlord, but also because farmers increasingly abrogated their obligations to their permanent farm servants.
6. Such talk about "lazy" and irresponsible agricultural workers is not new. These narratives reflect the class and caste hierarchies and tensions that mark the relationship between cultivators and agricultural workers as well as a general devaluation of manual labor.
7. Levien (2015) argues that large farmers are better positioned to capitalize on speculative land markets compared to small and marginal farmers. Stories of sudden wealth and equally sudden descent into poverty because money was "wasted" circulate in similar sites across India. However, in Andhra most farmers are educated, politically savvy, and closely networked within their community across rural and urban spaces, hence even small landholders were able to profit from the Amaravati land boom. Of course, even in the Rajdhani villages there were stories about farmers who squandered their new wealth by making unwise investments, as I discuss below.
8. Although responses to the Amaravati project varied widely, its acceptance by many farmers is echoed in Wittekind's (2024) study of the New Yangon City project in Myanmar, as well as Levien's work on the Mahindra World City project in Rajasthan—both of which employed land pooling schemes. The offer of urban plots in exchange for agricultural land does not guarantee farmers' consent, which depends greatly on local contexts and their imaginations of their own futures (Cross 2014: 57), but it does offer a strong incentive and pathway to complete the shift to urban life.
9. Joint development (JD) agreements are common in real estate projects in Indian cities. An owner contributes land as their share of a venture while the developer invests the funds and manages the development, and the finished product or profits are shared according to the agreed equity split (50:50, 60:40, and so on).
10. One acre of land has 100 cents.

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— Chapter 4 —

URBANIZING THE RURAL



The Amaravati master plan encompassed twenty-nine rural and semi-urban villages, absorbing them into the new city while destroying their main economic base—agriculture. Apart from a few villages where farmers strongly opposed land pooling and continued cultivating their land, the Rajdhani landscape became a virtual wasteland almost overnight, as land went fallow and most people were thrown out of work.

What does it mean for a settlement to be stripped of its primary means of production and absorbed into a city yet to be built? Unlike the gradual urbanization of villages on the edges of expanding metropolises, in Amaravati the transition was abrupt and dramatic. The project entailed not only the separation of farmers from their land but also their incorporation into the promised future as property owners in the new city, creating expectations of prosperity. But most residents of the Rajdhani villages did not possess land and so did not stand to benefit from land pooling. Moreover, the demise of agriculture rendered landless families surplus to the designs of the master plan. Despite the government's promises that the new city would generate lucrative new employment and business opportunities, most households were left without regular incomes. A key problem for the state, then, was governing and sustaining this "surplus population."

Drawing on the narratives and experiences of Amaravati residents belonging to a range of social locations, this chapter portrays the atmosphere of expectation, apprehension, and anger that pervaded the capital zone between 2015 and 2019, tracking the changing responses of residents as the contours of the project slowly became

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clear. The first section outlines CRDA's plans to bring "development" to the Rajdhani villages and integrate them into the new city. Section 2 describes the transformation of the villages beyond and against the master plan, as LP farmers constructed buildings and new enterprises emerged. The third section explores the dislocations caused by the cessation of cultivation in the Amaravati villages, especially for landless households. Section 4 highlights the government's strategies to manage this disruption through social welfare schemes, while the fifth section examines the skill training programs devised by CRDA to address the issue of unemployment.

The Village Reimagined

The plan to build a glittering new city amidst an agrarian landscape marked the existing villages as the province of the past, the domain of the "backward" or non-modern, while situating the city as the future—a "spatialization of time" (Datta 2024) that exemplifies the linear temporality of urban planning (Abram 2014).

The twenty-nine Rajdhani villages (twenty-five revenue villages), clearly incompatible with the detailed, top-down master plan for the new city, posed a problem for CRDA and its consultants. According to the planning documents the existing settlements are to be conserved, but few details are provided on what might become of the villages—with their small house plots, narrow lanes, open drains, and often crumbling houses—as the city grows around them. When I asked "Subba Rao," a senior CRDA official, about this issue, he replied:

> The villages are the major planning challenge we are facing because they have no infrastructure. There are twenty-five settlements in the capital zone with a population of four to five thousand each. We are planning to upgrade the infrastructure in the villages and connect them with the new residential layouts.

Subba Rao explained their plan to designate a few settlements as heritage villages where "traditional skills" can be portrayed: "In the future, tourists would come to visit the heritage villages; otherwise, there will be only steel-and-glass buildings, why would anyone come to see those?" When I asked about the traditional skills they would promote, he responded, "We would have to develop them!" "Local temples can also become tourist attractions," he averred. The Seed Capital report also mentions that villages could be treated as "special

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character places" by "conserving some of [their] traditional characteristics" (APCRDA 2015c). Here the local and indigenous are framed as relics of the "backward" past (Moser 2015: 33), to be preserved to represent a bygone way of life.

Clearly acknowledging that the new city is meant for middle-class and affluent residents rather than the current inhabitants, a CRDA official explained:

> The standards of the immigrant population and the Amaravati people are different. The existing population should be brought to that level, they should have the same facilities. The area is undergoing transformation from agriculture to urban. We need to upgrade the infrastructure for education—the existing schools should match standards of private schools. In this model, people will be made part of the development.

The question of the villages was particularly troublesome for the Seed Capital plan. The site encompasses three "small" villages—Lingayapalem, Uddandrayanipalem ("UDpalem"), and Mandadam (and their associated agricultural lands)— incorrectly called "informal settlements" in the Seed Development Masterplan Report. The plan notes that these villages "occupy only 29.08 ha of land with an existing population of about 4,157 people" (APCRDA 2015c). Because all the land is reserved for the controlled development of commercial and public facilities, according to the report, landowners of these villages would have to accept compensation plots outside the Seed Capital area (in contrast to landowners of other villages; see chapter 5). While CRDA officials claimed that these villages would not be touched and the report also states that the settlements are protected in the land use plan (to be preserved as "vibrant green hubs"), several residents believed that their villages would eventually be demolished to make way for the prestigious Seed Capital project.

The Social Development Unit (SDU) of CRDA was responsible for modernizing the villages by improving their "social infrastructure," apart from helping their inhabitants find alternative livelihoods. Subba Rao talked about the pilot "upgradation" projects they had launched in two villages:

> The aim is to improve social infrastructure. For these projects, we create a plan and show it to the residents, who then give their suggestions. We did our own survey of the villages and devised localized solutions. We will provide water treatment plants, waste-to-energy plants, and so on. Stakeholder meetings with the consultants are going on.

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A CRDA consultant explained: "The villages are not in sync with the planned capital—there is aesthetic discord. So, we are undertaking village beautification." Subba Rao claimed that funds had already been provided to improve village infrastructure such as roads and drainage. But Anand expressed doubts about the "integration" plans:

> We can't touch the villages. The only integration they have done is with respect to roads. The villages are well connected, with roads going around them. They have made an alternative route around villages to reach the Secretariat, but usually people cut through the narrow lanes of the villages. We see the same in Delhi and other places. We can't do anything about this [incremental absorption of villages rather than planned integration].

Another CRDA official opined that the villages would modernize and be absorbed into the city gradually and organically, rather than getting upgraded or preserved through deliberate planning and investment. "The regeneration of villages will start after some time. If you see Mumbai, it was once ninety-six villages—later they got redeveloped. Today they are low-rise residential areas." In contrast, Krishna Rao—the affluent LP farmer—thought that the villages would eventually end up as slums within the city, as has occurred in large cities such as Hyderabad and Bengaluru:

> The roads are not clear, there is no proper drainage—you can't stay in these places. They are not planned. In ten years, there will be no services. Village roads cannot be widened. CRDA has no plan for this. But they can't force people to move out, so they will become slums.

In contrast, Venkateswara Rao believed that the villages would be developed by CRDA and would eventually get connected with the new residential layouts. He appreciated the efforts of the planning authority:

> CRDA is doing good work—they are putting in greenery, clean drinking water facilities, and proper drainage. The idea is to create a liveable city, to promote an urban lifestyle, following the world-class concept. They are providing the same facilities for all twenty-nine villages.

He spoke enthusiastically about the work that was planned for his village, which had been chosen for a pilot project:

> CRDA is doing the infrastructure for the new layouts as well as the villages. We are happy because there is money coming in. For example, we are getting 50 lakhs for a water tank, 50 lakhs for drainage, 50 lakhs for a new RCC

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> [reinforced cement concrete] road that will connect the layout to the village. There will be a water purification plant for drinking water, and all houses will have piped water. There will be ducts under the roads to run electrical wires. The tender process for all these works is going on. Already some of the work is completed, like the new water tank. And they have undertaken beautification of the village tank. Overall, the progress is super!

Indeed, when we visited Venkateswara Rao's village in 2018, the village tank that had been used for water buffalo was fenced off and a walking track lined with saplings built around it, on the model of many gated parks in Indian cities. This "beautification" project conveyed the erasure of an agrarian economy by a middle-class imaginary of a world-class city (Figure 4.1).

The Amaravati master plan clearly envisions the city as an elite and middle class space, while the existing villages may be left as reservoirs of surplus population that supply low-wage labor. Both planners and residents offered contrasting predictions about the fate of the villages: they would eventually get redeveloped as people sell their houses and move out, or else they will turn into informal settlements ("slums") within the city. LP farmers are expected to move to new homes in the residential layouts where their compensation plots are allotted, or they may shift to nearby towns where they have purchased apartments—selling or renting out their old village houses. This exodus of landowning families would mean that the villages would be inhabited mainly by the 70 percent of the population that is landless (mostly BCs and Dalits), who would cling to their homes because they own no other property and have nowhere else to go.

Auto-Urbanization

While CRDA officials emphasized their plans to integrate the Rajdhani villages with the new city, their planned redevelopment was already being undercut by processes of "auto-construction" (Caldeira 2017). As discussed in the previous chapter, numerous multi-storied houses and small apartment buildings sprang up in the villages as farmers invested the proceeds from land sales in the construction of rental housing, radically altering the rural landscape. This mode of urbanization was evident especially in Thullur—a large village and headquarters of Thullur development block—and in centrally located villages such as Mandadam (Figure 4.2).

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Figure 4.1. Village tank turned into fenced "park" with walking track. Photograph by Carol Upadhya.

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Figure 4.2. Multi-story building under construction in a Rajdhani village. Photograph by Carol Upadhya.

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Most of these new constructions contravened building codes put in place by CRDA to limit unplanned development, as three- or four-story buildings came up even on lanes too narrow for cars to enter. In contrast to CRDA's plans to "integrate" the Amaravati villages with the new city, they were showing signs of unbridled urbanization beyond the control of the planning authority. For example, Ashok had obtained permission from CRDA to construct a "G+2" (ground floor plus two) building, but he added an additional floor—illustrating the ease with which building bye-laws and zoning regulations could be ignored. The erection of multi-story buildings on small plots created mazes of thin, vertical structures located very close together, with little setback and poor access—much like the auto-constructed neighborhoods typical of most Indian cities and regional towns.

CRDA did attempt to intervene in this haphazard process of urban development. In 2016 they initiated a "Farmers First" scheme to "teach" LP farmers how to manage their compensation plots and take advantage of the new economic opportunities created by Rajdhani. A CRDA official explained:

> Here the farmers are partners in development. We want farmers to take up construction and other entrepreneurial activities. So, we are training them in four domains—construction management, legal aspects, landscape work, and planning permissions. In fact, of the forty-four farmers who were trained in the first batch, fourteen have already registered a firm together.

He continued:

> We need to give exposure to the farmers, so they learn about the potential economic activities here. Some have built rental housing, but the biggest opportunity will be in the service sector. We want to support them to start service businesses, such as in transport, health, or food processing. These are all industries that will come here, so we want to fill the knowledge gap … The idea is to push them to shift to the urban economy—they are only accustomed to agriculture.

But the Rajdhani villages were already witnessing a minor economic boom, with new small businesses—mobile phone repair shops, construction supply shops, modest restaurants, and especially real estate agencies—cropping up along the main roads of well-connected villages such as Mandadam and Thullur (Figure 4.3). An interlocutor remarked: "Earlier people wanted to do many things [like start their own enterprises], but they couldn't because they were in debt. Now that they have sold part of their land, they are pursuing their interests." Economic activity in Rajdhani also created new opportunities for skilled workers and small contractors, mainly on private

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Figure 4.3. A new shop for construction materials in Thullur. Photograph by Carol Upadhya.

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construction projects rather than the big Rajdhani project sites. For instance, we encountered a former construction worker who had set up a small plastering contracting business employing three or four workers.

However, most of these enterprises were risky investments, dependent on the fortunes of the Amaravati project. For instance, an urban-style small hotel with a restaurant, bar, and very modest rooms for let was established by a Vijayawada businessman to cater to the constant traffic of people visiting the Secretariat or High Court (indeed, we often ate lunch there while touring the Rajdhani villages). Although the restaurant was well located and usually quite full on working days, it was mostly empty on holidays. Ramakrishna remarked:

> If meals cost 170 rupees, who is going to eat there? How many of the people residing here have that purchasing capacity? Whatever they are earning, it is only through the bar attached to the hotel. Even then it is a loss-making business.

When I visited Amaravati in November 2019 following the change of government, the restaurant had shut down because the number of visitors to Rajdhani had sharply reduced.

The discussion in this section points to hazy and conflicting visions of the future of the Amaravati villages, among farmers who pooled their land as well as CRDA officials and other observers. There was no clear plan for the old settlements as the city develops, especially for the many residents who could not afford to renovate their houses or move elsewhere. The building of a "greenfield" project inevitably comes up against the realities of the rural landscape, which may be erased or absorbed—incrementally or violently—as the city takes shape through processes that usually exceed the designs and expectations of the planners.

Life in Suspension

"Instead of taking from the rich and giving to the poor, in Rajdhani they are taking away from the poor and giving to the rich."

The forced abandonment of agriculture in most Amaravati villages from 2016 transformed the landscape from a lush agrarian environment into a vast stretch of fallowed fields, interspersed with a few construction sites and half-finished roads to nowhere. The sudden demise of cultivation created enormous stress and disruption for

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landless and other less privileged residents of Rajdhani. As noted in the first chapter, a majority of households in the Amaravati villages owned no land although most depended on agricultural wage labor, tenant farming, or other agriculture-related occupations for their incomes. These livelihood options disappeared when cultivation was suspended.

When we asked agricultural workers and other landless or marginalized residents about the impact of Rajdhani on them, most responded with a version of these statements: "Only those who own land are benefitting from the capital." "Even if you had just half an acre, you could profit." An auto-rickshaw driver put it succinctly: "With the coming of Amaravati, the poor are staying poor while the rich are becoming *crorepatis* [millionaires]."

Landless households belonging to SC (Scheduled Caste), ST (Scheduled Tribe), and BC communities, many of which relied upon on agricultural wage labor, struggled the most. They expressed dismay and anger at the sudden loss of work and could not conceive of any benefits they might get from Rajdhani, despite the tall promises made by the government about a bright future. Agricultural laborers reported a sharp loss of income, driving them deeper into debt. "Before Rajdhani" they were able to work for as many days as they needed, year round and close to their homes, they said, but now they were forced to travel outside the capital zone to search for scarce work.[1] They also noted that before Rajdhani all members of their households could find work, but now women agricultural laborers were commuting sporadically to distant villages while there was less work available for men. Consequently, their household incomes had declined. Moreover, young men said that because their parents and wives were not getting enough work, the burden of providing for the family had fallen on them. Several interviewees mentioned that they used to save some money from their wages, "but now we just get by," sometimes by eating only twice a day. Educated youth from lower caste or landless households harbored some hope that Rajdhani might create new employment opportunities for them, but most were pessimistic about their futures.

The caste basis of the project was highlighted by several interlocutors, who pointed out that powerful and rich Chowdharys (the common caste name for Kammas) own most of the land and control the state government and so stand to profit from the project, while everyone else must be content with the small benefits given by the state to compensate for the loss of income. Despite these challenges, Dalits and other landless workers expressed no desire or intention

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to migrate out of Rajdhani on a long-term basis in search of employment. They are deeply embedded in their communities and hoped to forge new livelihoods in Rajdhani, however inadequate they may be.

Male agricultural workers were unable to find alternative employment in construction or other jobs linked to the Amaravati project, as had been promised by the government. We encountered several men working on small construction sites or in casual manual labor jobs in Vijayawada or other nearby towns. But several interlocutors pointed out that it is difficult for agricultural laborers to suddenly shift to construction jobs: "All our life we worked in agriculture, we can't do the heavy lifting involved in construction labor." When we asked a middle-aged worker why he could not acquire these skills, he responded, "The time is over now, skills can only be learned when you are young." According to a labor activist, "Agricultural workers consider construction work to be beneath their dignity. Also, it has a different rhythm, so they cannot adjust to work on construction sites."

Several interlocutors asserted that only workers who do *chetipani* (literally, "hand work," or skilled manual labor)—that is, who have learned skills such as masonry, carpentry, or painting—were finding some employment. The Amaravati project had set off a construction boom in surrounding areas, creating demand for these skills. Young men who had been educated up to 8th or 10th grade and had been trained as electricians, plumbers, or painters were able to find work on small construction sites, but local workers were not hired on the big Rajdhani construction projects (for which construction companies were bringing in large gangs of contract workers from other states). Local people complained about this competition from workers from other parts of India, who were willing to work for lower wages and longer hours, driving down their own wages.

Women agricultural workers were either staying at home, foregoing their accustomed wages, or traveling outside the capital zone for daily wage labor in the fields of neighboring villages. They reported that both their working hours and travel time had increased, as had accidents due to commuting in dangerously overcrowded auto-rickshaws. Although their wages were the same as before, they found it risky to travel to distant villages and work for unknown employers, hence they were working fewer days in a month. Women also spoke about "other kinds of risks" they faced working in unfamiliar places and the difficulties of leaving their children at home for the whole day.[2] A few women we interviewed had found employment as domestic helpers in the homes of rich farmers, but they do not prefer

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such jobs. According to a labor activist, "The wages are much lower [for domestic work] than they can earn in working in the fields, and they have to suffer the abuses of the employers as well."

Speaking about the dire situation of landless families, a CPI-M (Communist Party of India-Marxist) activist explained:

> There used to be work in banana plantations for 800 to 1,000 rupees per day, but now men are earning only 300 to 400 rupees. Now that there are no crops, they are migrating to other districts, or to Tadekonda or Old Amaravati [neighboring towns]. Wages have come down in those places because there is now too much supply of labor. The government has not provided any jobs to displaced workers, except to a few women employed as cleaners in the Secretariat. After CPI-M conducted a *dharna* [sit-in protest] on this issue at the CRDA office, sitting with empty plates, they provided some work in their plant nurseries [growing plants used in beautifying the capital zone], but they were a failure and closed down.

Everyone we spoke with emphasized that the monthly landless "pension" of 2,500 rupees per household, meant to compensate for the loss of employment, was grossly insufficient— "hardly enough for five to ten days."

The following excerpts from interviews with landless workers illustrate their predicament: "Rajdhani is only for people with land." "What is there for people like us? People with resources are doing well, but daily wage laborers like us have lost all work." "Earlier people from outside used to come here for work, but now people from here are going out." "One should take from the rich and give to the poor, but here they are taking away from the poor and giving to the rich."

A second major category of village residents dislocated by the Amaravati project were tenant farmers—most belonging to Dalit or OBC communities—who leased agricultural land mainly from Kamma landlords. Former tenants spoke about the difficulties they faced after cultivation was prohibited, due not only to the loss of agricultural income but also of other forms of support they used to receive from their landlords. For example, the landlords used to advance money to allow them to purchase inputs for cultivation. But now they had no feeling of obligation toward their former tenants, they complained, because there is no land to farm. These responses suggest that Kamma landowners had abrogated the bonds of patronage that had somewhat tempered the exploitative landlord–tenant relationship: "Now they behave like they have no relation or responsibility to other people in the village." When we asked why they could not take land on lease in villages outside Rajdhani, they pointed out that tenancy

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agreements depend on longstanding social relations with landowning families, which are usually possible only within the same village. Moreover, unfamiliar landlords were unlikely to advance money to tenants. "Now we have to look outside for work," but agricultural work was difficult to find, they said, especially for men.[3]

"Prakash," a CPI-M labor activist, pointed out that tenant farmers did not receive any compensation for the loss of livelihood, apart from the 2,500 rupees "landless pension," although they might have been farming the same land for many years. Prakash, who also works as a tailor, used to cultivate cotton and maize on five acres of leased land, for which he paid 15,000 rupees per acre to the Kamma owner. "Now that I cannot farm, I am somehow running my household on tailoring work, but my income has definitely gone down."

During a visit to an Eruka (ST) colony, Uday found that most of the men were working as construction workers, doing "cement work" or unskilled labor for 350 to 500 rupees per day. According to one, every household in their community used to earn their livelihood by leasing two or three acres of land to farm, but now they were able to find informal daily wage work for only two or three days in the week. When asked why they were not taking land on lease in other places, they responded that they had been paying 17,000 rupees an acre as the lease amount, but in other villages the asking rate was 30,000. "How can I pay so much and save any money?"

Prakash and other labor activists were trying to organize workers in the Rajdhani villages around these issues, for instance demanding that the landless pension be increased regularly: "Just as the government is increasing the annuity to landowners on a yearly basis, the monthly pension should also be enhanced annually to account for inflation." Second, they requested the government to ensure that children of displaced workers are given priority in any new jobs that are created.

A major issue in the Rajdhani villages was that of educated youth unemployment, a situation that was especially frustrating for young men from agricultural labor and Dalit households. They aspired for urban formal sector employment, but they felt left behind because they could not find "good jobs". We met many such young men who had obtained college or even postgraduate degrees but were working as security guards, clerks in small local businesses, or even as construction workers. According to them, only those with degrees from "good" (and expensive) private colleges, and with other skills such as fluency in English, could find decent jobs with good salaries. Many young men in this category were preparing to take (highly

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competitive) entrance exams for government jobs, such as in the police or railway services, while earning money doing menial jobs in the villages. A Dalit leader noted:

> Not a single educated youngster from our community has been given a job. Only Kammas got jobs. Upper caste people demanded jobs and got them, while we are just waiting. My younger son has two MA degrees, but he is still unemployed.

This situation is not specific to Amaravati, of course, but reflects the larger problem of educated unemployment in India, where aspirants for white-collar and government jobs far outnumber their availability. But the context of Rajdhani made the gap more glaring to Dalit youth. They could see youngsters from landed Kamma families roaring around the villages on their new motorcycles, purchased with the proceeds from land sales, or going off to Australia for higher studies, while they stagnated at home with "useless degrees" (Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2004). A Dalit parent rued that they had sent their sons to college instead of ensuring that they learned vocational skills. He had pushed his children to pursue higher education he said, but now the family was struggling because they are unemployed, while parents who "taught their children to work" (in skilled manual jobs) were comparatively better off.

The sharp contrast between the embrace by many Kamma farmers of the dream of Rajdhani, and the disaffection, alienation, and sometimes resistance of most other residents, underscores the re-entrenchment of inequalities of caste and class by the Amaravati project. Given the close links between the ruling Telugu Desam Party the Kamma community, and provincial capital, it is not surprising that the state government pushed ahead with the Amaravati plan even at the cost of destabilizing so many families. To quell discontent, the state formulated various "social development" initiatives and welfare schemes aimed at ameliorating the dislocation and marginalization of the non-propertied classes.

Managing a "Surplus Population"

As outlined above, farmers who pooled their land were paid an annuity of 30,000 rupees per acre for dry land and 50,000 rupees for irrigated land, for ten years, to compensate for the loss of agricultural income. This annual "lease" payment was enhanced by 10 percent every year. In contrast, the compensation for landless households

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was a paltry "pension" of 2,500 rupees per month *per household*, also for ten years, but without any provision for yearly enhancement. This payment, intended to tide over workers while they searched for alternative employment, was clearly inadequate to compensate for the loss of livelihoods they had experienced. Other benefits promised by the government to landless households included interest-free loans to fund self-employment activities, increased work opportunities under the national employment guarantee scheme, and free education and medical facilities.

The contrast between the annuities given to landowning families (in addition to the reconstituted plots they were allotted) and the compensation given to landless families vividly illustrates the inequalities that were embedded in the land pooling system and the project itself. This sharply unequal compensation reveals the state's differential valuation of the contribution of landed cultivators and agricultural workers (or tenant farmers) to the agrarian economy and reflects their very uneven social standing and political influence. The divergent treatment of landed and landless residents of Rajdhani stemmed not only from their unequal class positions, but also from their locations within an entrenched caste system that has long structured social power and the economy of the region (chapter 1). This distinction was amplified by the differing consequences of Rajdhani for landed and landless households, evoking deep resentment amongst those who were rendered "surplus" by the urban development paradigm embodied in the Amaravati plan.

By "surplus" here I refer to those who are marginalized because of expulsion from their land or the destruction of their livelihoods by "development," in this case represented by the Amaravati project—rather than "surplus population" as it has been used in Marxist theorizations of postcolonial capitalism. The surplus population of Rajdhani cannot be considered outside the realm of capital or relegated to the "need economy" (Bhattacharya, Kesar, and Mehra 2023; Sanyal 2007), but is a product of the dialectic of devaluation and revaluation that marks certain groups or forms of labor as "superfluous":

> Thinking "surplus populations" in this way means attending to not only the various ways superfluity acts to forge new pathways of accumulation but also how these pathways often come to form impediments and points of excess that resist capital's logic. (Cowan, Campbell, and Kalb 2023: 15)

To stave off political unrest, such surplus populations become prime objects and subjects of state welfarist programs and a politics of (re) distribution (Doshi 2018; Ferguson 2015; Li 2017).

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Those who were rendered "superfluous" and devalued by the Amaravati project were not simply abandoned by the state. Instead, the government formulated detailed plans for their sustenance and "uplift," even as basic issues of livelihood, decent income, and equality were sidelined. These interventions were informed by a mix of social development and welfarist policy thinking, as the state devised programs to help displaced workers develop skills and assets to enable them to earn money while also providing direct economic support.

The Social Development Unit (SDU) of CRDA was the agency charged with implementing these various welfare programs. It was made responsible for the "development" of all households in the Amaravati villages by ensuring that they were covered by relevant schemes, undertaking village development activities, and offering skill training and other programs to relieve unemployment. The SDU was also in charge of the disbursal of annuity payments to farmers who pooled their land and "landless pensions" to eligible households.

At the inception of the project, SDU carried out a socio-economic survey of all households in the Amaravati villages to document their key characteristics, identify their needs, and to create lists of families that could be counted as Amaravati residents (and therefore eligible for CRDA welfare schemes). The survey (which was outsourced to an IT company) covered thirty-six thousand households and collected data on 132 different parameters, which was used to target beneficiaries for various welfare schemes. The record of each household was linked to the Aadhaar (UID or Unique Identification) number of the household head as well as other databases, such as records from the Revenue Department (land records) and the public distribution system (PDS or ration scheme).[4]

Among other functions, this database was used to create a list of households eligible to receive the landless family pension.[5] Criteria for this compensation (apart from landlessness) included BPL (Below Poverty Line) status (as defined by the state and evidenced by a BPL card) and residence in a Rajdhani village as of 8 December 2014. The socio-economic survey found that 10,800 households owned land while 26,000 (70 percent) were landless.[6] The database of Amaravati households was supposed to be continuously updated by CRDA village "facilitators," who were tasked with collecting information about changes in the status of households (births, deaths, migration, employment, and so on) and recording new activities such as applications for various welfare schemes. In 2017, the officer in charge of data management for the Social Development Unit spoke enthusiastically about how digitalization had streamlined the distribution of benefits

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and development activities in the CRDA villages. He outlined their plan to create "family livelihood action plans" based on the socio-economic survey data. "The requirements of each household will be captured digitally. We are training the facilitators in this work."

Like most social welfare schemes in India today, digital technologies were deeply woven into SDU's systems. Andhra Pradesh had moved quickly on this front even during Naidu's earlier tenure as Chief Minister, and from 2014 the government intensified these efforts with the creation of an extensive database, designed as a tool for development planning, covering all residents of the state under the "Smart AP Initiative." However, a close look at the CRDA household survey and SDU's efforts to enroll residents in various welfare schemes raises questions about the efficacy of digitalization in welfare delivery. For example, in 2019 an SDU officer told us that SDU's mandate had shifted from disbursing payments to enhancing social development based on HDI [Human Development Index] indicators such as health, education, and sanitation: "Digital literacy is one parameter in that index. We want to make Amaravati a 100 percent cashless economy. But for such things to happen, the standards of education need to be improved." He acknowledged:

> … digital literacy in this area is low, so we can't expect them to be carrying out everything on their mobile phones. The problem is that we get to interact with only higher segments [of society]. But we need to focus on the bottom of the pyramid for our work.[7]

CRDA's ambition to micro-manage the well-being and "development" of each household contrasts glaringly with the issues faced by residents outlined above, which may not be easily addressed by the proposed interventions. However, social welfare measures may have had unintended consequences. For example, during a conversation with the Mandal Parishid (block-level elected body) president, she spoke enthusiastically about the schemes that were being implemented through women's self-help groups (SHGs), such as disbursing loans for self-employment activities (up to 70,000 rupees per head). When we asked what beneficiaries were using the loans for, she laughingly admitted: "They don't really start enterprises with the money, instead they buy gold or spend on some family functions. But yes, some are starting small businesses."

A Dalit leader complained that the government had not fulfilled any of its promises to the poor:

> No development is happening here. No one here has gotten jobs in the capital. I am not saying this just because I am with YSRCP. Babu [Chandrababu

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> Naidu] promised 5 lakh houses for the poor, but not a single house has been built. Only party loyalists are getting benefits from all this.

However, by late 2018 the government was concentrating its efforts on a low-income housing program, which became the major activity of the Social Development Unit. The scheme tapped the central government's housing program, PMAY (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana), under which state and central governments would contribute part of the cost (1.5 lakh rupees each per house), with the balance to be paid by the beneficiary (through a bank loan). Under the scheme, apartments of three sizes were offered, in the price range of 6 to 7.5 lakh rupees. CRDA selected eight locations across the capital zone for the construction of low-income apartment blocks and allotted the units through a lottery system. To be eligible, an applicant should have resided in an Amaravati village since December 2014, have an annual income of below 3 lakhs (the official poverty line), and should not own their own home.

According to Prakash, the CPI-M activist, landless families had been promised house sites (on which they could build independent homes), but CRDA later changed the plan to apartment blocks to align with the PMAY scheme.[8] Although potential beneficiaries preferred house sites, the low-income housing scheme evinced a good response: in the first phase, eight thousand applications were submitted, of which around six thousand were found eligible and five thousand houses were allotted. When we visited the SDU office in Thullur in February 2019, we found much hectic activity as officers were busy implementing this scheme—not surprisingly, since the election was just around the corner and the state government wanted to show progress on welfare schemes for the poor.

Construction of the low-income apartment blocks was underway when Naidu's government fell in April 2019. However, this was one of the few projects in Amaravati that the succeeding YSRCP government did not abandon. By 2022 the process of allotment was complete and all the buildings were almost ready for occupation. But because basic infrastructure in the planned city was not yet built, it was unclear how the beneficiaries were expected to move into the new homes. Some three hundred people had dropped out of the scheme, according to SDU officers, since the buildings were poorly connected and lacked basic services. A tour of Amaravati in November 2022 revealed these nearly finished four-story structures looming in the distance, accessible only by unfinished roads, surrounded by weed-covered land with no other buildings in sight (Figure 4.4). Beneficiaries were expected

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Figure 4.4. Low-income housing complex in Rajdhani. Photograph by Carol Upadhya.

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to move into these desolate and unserviced buildings far away from their villages, where they at least had some accommodation in small houses in familiar neighborhoods. In February 2025, the buildings were still unoccupied.

Developing the Youth

"Babu thinks he is civilizing a jungle."

Skill development programs were a major focus of the Social Development Unit's activities. The CRDA skill training center at Nowluru (Figure 4.5) offered free training to Rajdhani village residents in skills such as sewing and beauty services (aimed at women), computer operating and accounting, as well as construction skills such as masonry, electrical work, and painting (mainly for men, but some also offered to women). "Mohan," the manager of the center, explained that they had conducted a survey to assess the needs of unemployed youth in the Rajdhani villages and designed courses based on their qualifications and "skill gaps." Their assessment showed that the communication skills and soft skills of local youth were poor compared to "city people," so they focused on imparting those skills as well. The aim was to reorient rural workers to the future urban service economy. The head of SDU spoke enthusiastically about the opportunities that Rajdhani would create:

> We can shift agricultural workers to semi-skilled service work. They will get jobs here, in malls, call centers, accounting, or health care, at 10,000 to 12,000 rupees a month. We have more than two thousand people in these villages with at least 10th standard education.[9]

However, skill training officers complained about the difficulties they faced recruiting youth for their programs: "We are running skill training courses, but people are not joining. They don't want to travel—they want a training center in their own village." "People are not coming for construction training. L&T offered to pay them 200 rupees a day during training, but they are reluctant to come forward." "Here unskilled construction workers are earning 600 rupees a day and masons get 1,000. But the younger generation is not interested in construction work. We offered construction training at Bangalore, but they didn't want to go." However, CRDA officials acknowledged that there was little construction work available for local people in capital city projects. "Only outside labor is being

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Figure 4.5. Skill training center at Nowluru. Photograph by Carol Upadhya.

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used for the Temporary Secretariat and other buildings, because it is faster to recruit such workers. Also, they are using a special type of construction technology."

Mohan's view of youth from agricultural labor households was rather negative:

> The children of agricultural laborers go for construction work or sand mining where they can earn more than what these educated kids can get. They get 1,500 a day for sand mining work, 700 for masonry, or 500 rupees as helpers in the construction sector. If they work for one day they can spend the next three or four days not working. They are only thinking of today. They don't think about tomorrow.

Such complaints about the fecklessness of Rajdhani youth encompassed less educated workers from landless households, who were targeted for training in construction skills and low-end services, as well as more highly educated youth who aspired for "office jobs" in banks, IT companies, and the like. A common refrain of government officials was that families in the Amaravati villages had become rich from selling land, so their children were not interested in working except in well-paid jobs: "Now spending money is the only occupation of the youth. They are happily spending their parents' money!" Mohan claimed that they had ten thousand marketing positions available, but no one was interested. "They are all college graduates, but they are not qualified for the jobs they are expecting."

The Mandal Parishid president, who belonged to a "*zamindari*" Kamma family, echoed the same patronizing views of local youth who "don't want to work":

> These youth don't take the jobs offered by CRDA because they are not satisfied with the salary. They already have B.Tech. [engineering] and other higher degrees, so they are expecting jobs in software or in CRDA or the Secretariat. They only want to work in an air-conditioned office and won't work for less than 10,000 to 15,000 rupees. Employers want people with the right qualifications and experience, but these people expect to just get hired and start working without gaining that experience … Anyway, the government never promised jobs. We only said that we will provide training and arrange interviews. Getting a job is their responsibility. We are asking youth to take whatever job that comes their way and get some experience first. But they say that we already have the skills for software jobs, so why go for training?

Indeed, many young people felt that they were over-qualified for the kinds of jobs on offer. A Dalit leader said:

> At a job *mela* [recruitment fairs where employers set up stalls to invite job applications] they were offering office jobs at 7,000 or 8,000 rupees per month.

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> A computer operator at CRDA gets 12,000. What is the point in studying for higher degrees if they are giving the same jobs one can do with lower qualifications? They push us into any job like a herd of buffaloes. I have a postgraduate degree in pharmacy—why should I do a 10th standard job?

However, the issue was not just one of mismatched expectations. CRDA officials attempting to recruit youth for skill training often failed to recognize the practical problems they faced. Mohan acknowledged that youth from interior villages found it difficult to attend their courses:

> They commute to Vijayawada to earn their livelihoods, which costs them 3,000 to 4,000 rupees a month. Even if they are trained, the salaries are not that high. If they spend this much only on travel, perhaps one can understand their disinterest in skill training.

Moreover, several young men who had joined CRDA skill training courses complained that the government had not offered them jobs as promised. They had even organized *dharnas* (sit-in protests) and met with state ministers to complain about this lapse:

> CRDA is doing nothing for the villages. They have been talking about skill development for four years, but nothing has happened. Some people were taken to Hyderabad for training, but they were not given offer letters. When they went to protest, they were thrown out.

One day, while Uday was talking with a group of young men in Thullur, an announcement came over the village's public address system asking people to apply for a skill training program. Pointing out that for them, training did not lead to jobs, one said: "You go and see even if ten people turn up there. People will go once or twice, but after that, who will believe in it?"

CRDA officials accepted that their placement record was poor:

> We conducted eighteen job *melas* this year alone [2019] and 1,800 youth attended, of which only 163 took up jobs. And even for those, we need to keep checking whether they are still in the job.

However, they blamed this problem on trainees who refused to accept job placements outside Rajdhani: "We had an employer willing to recruit six hundred youth at 15,000 rupees per month, but only twenty-six candidates came forward. These young men only want jobs here, in the capital city. They are not interested in going to faraway places." This was a common refrain of skill training officers—that youth in the Rajdhani villages are "not willing to move out" or take risks but expect to get high-paying jobs "next to their own house."[10]

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These aspirations reflected the promises that had been made by Naidu about the benefits that would flow from Amaravati. Mohan squarely blamed the government for creating the impression that good jobs would come to the villages:

> The expectations that have been created are so high that now they have started boomeranging. The leaders create these grandiose illusions, but here we have to face the consequences. If the same sort of training and jobs were provided in other places like Prakasam District, young people would be more than happy to come.

People expect "some miracle to happen in the new capital city and everyone will get high-paying jobs. They want at least 25,000 rupees per month as starting salary." To illustrate the problem of managing these expectations, he gave an example:

> Recently we organized a course in accountancy. Five of the trainees, all commerce graduates, were hired by a bank as credit card salespeople with a salary of 13,000 rupees a month. They were posted in nearby villages, which is what they wanted. However, all of them left their jobs within a month. They were expecting much higher pay and comfortable desk jobs, not outdoor sales jobs. The expectations among youth here are very high.

In addition, salaries available in nearby towns such as Vijayawada were too low to attract educated youth from Rajdhani. A salesperson in a cellphone showroom would earn 7,000 rupees per month, said Mohan, but "they see that masons earn 750 per day, so they think this is too little."

CRDA officials deflected blame for this situation on young people who were not willing to invest time in training. They argued that although many rural youth have college degrees, they lack the skills needed for the kinds of jobs they desire. Although they had developed training programs to help them acquire those extra skills, when offered work opportunities in cities most were unwilling to take them up: "They are thinking that now we are comfortable, we are earning 300 rupees per day—this is the extent of their thinking. So, our task is to change their mind set."

However, it was precisely the location of these jobs that made it difficult for Rajdhani youth to accept them. Most offers were for positions in distant cities such as Bengaluru and Hyderabad, where they could not afford to live on the salaries offered—12,000 to 15,000 rupees per month. Although this income might be sufficient for them to survive on their own, it was not enough to also save some money to send home to their families—defeating the purpose of working

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outside. Several youth argued that only people with financial backing from their parents (for example, who belong to landed Kamma families) could afford to live in cities on the paltry salaries they would get.

A young college graduate who was employed as a security guard in Thullur had completed a CRDA skill development program but could not get a suitable job: "They said we will have to go to Hyderabad or Vishakapatnam, but they pay only 10,000. How can I live on that with my family? It is better to work here for 8,000, *kastam* or *nastam* [even if it is difficult or causes a loss]." Another young Dalit man, also working as a security guard, echoed this view:

> Here I am getting 9,000 rupees a month. If I go to Bangalore, I may get 15,000, but I will have to rent a room which will cost at least 4,000, and then 5,000 for food—how much will I have left? Rather than struggling there, if I stay back here with my family and continue in this job, I can look for better opportunities. But it will take some time for new companies to come here.

He continued, poignantly capturing the predicament of educated young people in Rajdhani belonging to poor or landless families:

> This is what an ordinary person does to live—like in summer he moves from one shady spot to another because he can't continue for long standing in the heat. People who have some kind of property can stay at one place under an umbrella, but people like me walk along the road.

A Dalit activist described the desolate situation this way:

> During the elections they said, "*Babu vaste job vastadi*" ["If Babu comes, jobs will come," referring to a TDP election promise]. But many young people are disillusioned now, *bada paduthunnaru* [they are feeling hurt, sad]. CRDA has set up skill training camps, telling them they should learn skills. Don't they have skills? Will they provide jobs after skill training? The government is not even providing loans so that people can buy auto-rickshaws or sound systems [for self-employment]. They should first ask us what we can do and then give us loans based on that. My nephew completed B.Tech. in 2014 and is feeling despondent because there are no jobs. Now he has bought two buffaloes and is living on the income from dairying.

During a discussion with several Dalit youth in Thullur, they cited the same election promise, querying, "But where are the jobs?" When asked what they will do, they responded: "We have to wait, wait, wait. Chandrababu Naidu is saying industries will come, we will have to wait, but how will our families live? So, we have to do any kind of work."

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Another Dalit leader was very acerbic about the government's failures on this front:

> *Babu thinks he is civilizing a jungle*, but we are already much better off. He promised one job per household. They blame us, saying that we offer you jobs and you don't take them. But I have a master's degree, how can I be a driver? There will be no job satisfaction—one needs self-respect also … Earlier we could pluck many things from the trees and eat—now there are no trees. And prices have gone up because of Rajdhani. How can we work for the same wage as before? How will I afford a house here at these prices?

Much of CRDA's skill training efforts were focused on generating employment for young men, but they also offered training to women in skills that could lead to self-employment. Reinforcing patriarchal expectations, most courses were for skills such as sewing that would allow women to work at home, taking on small orders from their neighbors, as indicated by the following remarks of an SDU officer:

> For women we started beautician courses. They can set up shop in the villages where they could cater to 200 to 300 households. We just completed the first batch of beautician training, and of the thirty trainees four decided to start their own beauty salons. We also give them startup kits. One woman has started her center already, and three are looking for bank loans.

CRDA was also supposed to provide sewing machines to women who complete the sewing course, to enable them to become self-employed. However, a group discussion with women at a training center in the rather remote village of Ananthawaram suggested that learning to make clothes may not meet their needs. The women gathered there, all Dalits, appeared to be quite poor and dispirited. They used to earn as much as 500 rupees a day performing agricultural labor during harvest season, but with the demise of cultivation they now had to travel 30 kilometers in auto-rickshaws to other villages for a daily wage of 200 rupees. During the two-month sewing course, they were not given an honorarium by CRDA to compensate for the loss of income even though they were not able to go out for agricultural work.

Another type of training provided for Dalit women and men was linked to the solid waste management project, for which CRDA had received funding from the central government's Smart Cities Mission. "Rajesh," a top SDU official, described this ambitious plan to modernize the Rajdhani villages and provide employment to some workers:

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> We have recruited around five hundred sanitation workers across all the Rajdhani villages. The wet waste will be sent to vermicomposting plants. We are also looking at producing diesel from plastic—we will do waste separation and collection, then send dry and wet waste to different places, and so on. All these things are in the planning stage. We are using the sanitation workers as change agents.

The sanitation workers were to be trained in these new waste management techniques, and modern equipment, such as vehicles and composters, was purchased.

Although the planned waste management system seemed to be an improvement on existing methods, a group discussion with newly recruited sanitation workers in one village in 2019 revealed several cracks in the plan. The supervisor, a Kamma, worked for the Hyderabad-based company that was contracted to implement the sanitation project, while all the workers were local Dalits. Men were given the task of collecting waste door-to-door in a specialized tipper auto-rickshaw, while the women were employed to sweep the roads twice a day. However, they told us that not all households had started segregating their waste and the composters had not yet arrived, so they were simply depositing the unseparated waste outside the village, in the old garbage dump.

These sanitation workers were paid 10,000 rupees a month during the training period, but they hoped that their jobs would be made permanent and the salary would increase. Their main complaint was the lack of protective gear: "Because of this work we get all kinds of diseases. If we get sick and need to go to the hospital, who will pay? As CRDA employees, we should have access to health care." According to them, village panchayats are supposed to support sanitation work from their funds, but their village panchayat claimed they have no money to buy equipment: "Earlier the panchayat looked after all this—there was one cleaner for the whole village!"[11]

In November 2022, we found that the Smart Cities sanitation project had been abandoned: brand-new garbage trucks and other equipment purchased with central government funds were lying idle and rusting outside the CRDA office in Thullur, and we were told that the suppliers' bills had not been paid (Figure 4.6).

The sanitation workers hired for the project told us that they used to work as agricultural laborers, but "after Rajdhani" they had been surviving mainly on the 2,500 rupees landless pension, plus 2,000 rupees from an old age pension scheme availed by eligible household members. The women were aware that they could apply for loans from DWACA (Development of Women and Children in Rural

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Figure 4.6. Solid waste management equipment abandoned outside Thullur CRDA office. Photograph by Carol Upadhya.

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Areas, a successful poverty alleviation program in Andhra Pradesh) to start self-employment activities, but "now we can't do things like rearing cattle, and there is no other business we can do." Instead, they take informal loans from farmers at a rate of 2 to 3 percent per month to survive:

> Nothing has changed for us after Rajdhani. The only change is this job. But we need to borrow money weekly because our salary comes only once every two months. The farmers are building houses and giving them on rent, some have purchased lands outside—they are doing well!

When we asked if they found the training useful, the women laughed and responded sarcastically, "What is there to train? We sweep our houses every day!"

* * *

The Amaravati project aimed to remake an agrarian landscape into an ultra-modern city, integrating villages and their inhabitants into an imagined future designed by the state and regional elite. The model of development represented by the master plan presumes that rural communities can be seamlessly modernized through rational planning and by transforming residents into propertied citizens with clear stakes in the new city. But the unleashing of financial value from land initiated "informal" processes of urbanization in the villages, posing a challenge to this vision as local landholders pursued their own development agendas.

The disruptions induced by the Amaravati project also undermined the authorized vision of a "people's capital" by exposing existing inequalities and producing new forms of marginalization. The land pooling scheme that converted farmers into urban property owners by definition excluded everyone else from equal citizenship in Rajdhani. These marginalized groups had little political voice, despite efforts by Dalit and labor leaders to sensitize the government and CRDA about their problems. Instead, most Amaravati residents were repositioned as clients of a welfarist developmental state that was unwilling or unable to address the core issues of their dislocation.

In the next chapter, I explore other faultlines that fractured the smooth transition from rural to urban, as conflicts within the landowning class crystallized in the form of distinct political blocs largely defined by caste.

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Notes

1. People in the Amaravati villages frequently speak about the changes they had experienced by marking the two periods with the phrases "before Rajdhani" and "after Rajdhani."
2. When working in the fields in their own or neighboring villages, women agricultural laborers often go home at midday to cook lunch, rest, and look after their children. Such breaks are not possible when they go to work in distant villages.
3. Agricultural labor is very gendered: in Andhra and in India generally. It is mostly women who perform labor-intensive tasks such as planting, weeding, and harvesting by hand, while men are hired for heavier work or tasks involving machinery such as preparing the fields for sowing and spraying crops with pesticides. Hence work opportunities are more regular for women, but they are paid less than men.
4. The Aadhaar program, which provides every individual resident in India with a unique identification number linked to their biometric data, cellphone number, and other information, has become the lynchpin for welfare delivery based on direct benefit transfers in India—with mixed results (Chaudhuri 2022).
5. Initially, most landless pensions were being disbursed to men, but after receiving complaints the government began issuing payments to women of the household.
6. However, these figures fluctuated over time as re-surveys were carried out. In January 2019, the APCRDA website showed 21,500 households receiving landless pensions (with names and other details listed and publicly available on the site). See https://crda.ap.gov.in/apcrdav2/views/PensionServices.aspx.
7. Here it seemed that he was about to say "higher castes," but swallowed the term and instead said "segments"—a slip that reveals the caste bias that pervades governance as well as everyday life. It is odd that a social development officer—trained to handle poverty alleviation and welfare programmes— said that he was accustomed only to interacting with "higher segments."
8. The provision of housing for low-income families in multi-story buildings parallels the trend in slum redevelopment projects in Indian cities, a policy that is intensely disliked by most residents of urban informal settlements (Doshi 2018; Upadhya and Rao 2023).
9. This narrative reflects the thrust of India's Skill India policy, which encourages young people to close their "skill gaps" through short-term courses that focus on low-end urban service sector jobs, rather than providing in-depth vocational training leading to more sustainable and well-paid employment (Upadhya and RoyChowdhury 2024).
10. This expectation perhaps reflects a more general attitudinal shift amongst rural youth, from the earlier widespread desire to migrate to cities to "post-agrarian aspirations" (Lyall, Colloredo-Mansfeld, and Quick 2020) that envision a comfortable urban life closer to home.
11. This sanitation project is a prime example of what may happen when public services managed by local government institutions (in this case, village panchayats) are centralized and outsourced to private companies, as is often mandated by central government funding programs such as the Smart Cities Mission. Workers carry out the same tasks for similar wages, the villages are not any cleaner, but there are profits to be made by contracting companies. Moreover, from our conversation with sanitation workers, it was difficult to imagine them becoming "change agents" in the villages. They appeared to be as marginalized as traditional village sweepers, and as Dalits they were unlikely to have any influence on the behavior of upper caste households in terms of their handling of waste or any other practice.

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— Chapter 5 —

Unsettled Lands



Land pooling for the Amaravati project was initiated in early January 2015, and by the deadline of 28 February 2015 the state had received "consent forms" for 28,000 acres. This figure gradually rose over the following months as the government made concerted efforts to persuade farmers to cooperate. By the end of 2017, the extent of pooled land had increased to around 34,000 acres (or 89 per cent of the targeted land), while owners of around 4,000 acres still refused to part with their land. A CRDA official called the pooling of 34,000 acres a "world record," claiming that the process had been mostly completed within two months because of farmers' "trust" in Chandrababu Naidu.

The speed and ease with which the state managed to acquire most of the targeted land, in contrast to the strong resistance to land acquisition seen in many other projects, was striking, if not unprecedented. What accounts for the relative smoothness with which land pooling was implemented in Amaravati? Several observers highlighted the coercive measures taken by the state, especially the forced cessation of cultivation and the threat of compulsory land acquisition for those who refused to cooperate. However, the fact that a large proportion of the required land was signed over within two months, and with relatively little protest, suggests that many farmers participated in the imagination of development embodied in the master plan, or at least were persuaded by the promise of future wealth that land pooling seemed to offer. Indeed, extensive discussions with farmers across capital region villages between 2015 and 2019 indicated that many came to view the project as a prime opportunity for accumulation—a shift that was driven in no small measure by the booming

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land market (chapter 3). As discussed above, the land market and the land pooling scheme were closely entangled.

However, land pooling was not a frictionless process. As a "voluntary" scheme, it became an arena of intense political maneuvering and negotiation between landholders and the state. It also generated a new politics around land and development that was deeply marked by pre-existing alignments of caste and party. As noted earlier, the assiduous efforts by CRDA and the state government to persuade farmers to give up their land by bringing them on board as partners in the project created a new lobby or political bloc known as LP farmers or "capital area farmers." The Amaravati story illustrates the argument that infrastructure projects may "assemble collectives, constitute political subjects, and generate social aspirations," producing new publics that coalesce around a desire for the promised future (Appel, Anand, and Gupta 2018: 23). But land pooling also provoked strong protest, especially in Reddy-dominated villages but also by several big Kamma landowners. The opposition bloc came to be called "LA farmers" because those who refused to pool their land were issued land acquisition (LA) notifications. The third important political grouping that emerged, cutting across the LA/LP divide, consisted of Dalit holders of assigned lands, whose inferior claims to land marginalized them in the land pooling process as well as the land market. Contestations around the status of Scheduled Caste (SC) assigned lands in the land pooling scheme and in the future city became a major political issue that pitted Dalit landowners against the state as well as the dominant constituency of Kamma LP farmers.

In this chapter I delve into the tangled politics—of caste, party, state, and land—that punctuated the land pooling process. The first section traces the consolidation of LP farmers as a political constituency, as they constantly negotiated with the state to protect their interests. Sections 2 and 3 turn to the opposition, landholders who refused to participate in pooling and questioned the legitimacy of the Amaravati project itself. The discussion follows the conflicts between LA farmers and LP farmers, and between opponents of the project and the state, highlighting the political and legal strategies deployed by different sides in support of their causes.

Sections 4 and 5 narrate Dalits' experiences of marginalization and dispossession by the state and the landowning class and recount the political strategies they developed to contest these injustices. The discussion delves into the complicated assigned lands issue that starkly revealed the continued structuring of land rights by caste. These

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sections explore the conflicted afterlives of colonial categories that became embedded in the land administration system, allowing the state and predatory investors to separate Dalits from their increasingly valuable lands.

Staking Claims

Unlike many cases of land acquisition for large infrastructure projects in India, farmers in Amaravati were not displaced or simply dispossessed of their land. Instead, because of the land pooling scheme, they remained in place and retained a stake in the project and the land on which it was to be built. As outlined in chapter 3, many landholders began to imagine a future untethered from agriculture, and they developed investment strategies to manage risk and ensure their families' future economic stability as they parted with their land. These strategies were premised on their strong conviction, or hope, that the new city would materialize as planned. But LP farmers did not simply place their fate in the hands of the state. They organized to ensure that the project would be a success and enable them to extract maximum returns from the "sacrifice" of their land.

Because of their investments in the new city, LP farmers came to view themselves as important partners in the project and closely tracked its progress: the construction of key infrastructure, the process of plot allotment, the groundwork for the new layouts. They formed associations to represent their interests and intervened in government decisions through negotiations or political pressure. Their main concern was that Rajdhani should materialize as planned, because only then would their compensation plots attain significant value in the real estate market.

As indicated in previous chapters, the decisions of landholders about whether to participate in land pooling was largely a collective process: they consulted with one another to understand the terms of the scheme, arranged numerous meetings to formulate their response, and created networks for information sharing and strategic planning through WhatsApp chat groups and similar technologies. LP farmers organized themselves as a political bloc not just in response to their designation by the state as stakeholders, but also by drawing on a long history of caste-based social organization, mutual aid, and an ethos of "giving" that shape the cultural memory and subjective identity of Kammas as a community (Roohi 2023). Perhaps even more than other caste groups, Kammas are invested

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in sustaining solidarity and collective action as a way of promoting the social mobility of members and enhancing the political power of the *kulam* (caste or community). Amaravati LP farmers drew on this strong caste identity and their social networks to organize themselves politically as property owners and residents of the future city.

The constituency of LP farmers began to crystallize soon after the announcement of the land pooling scheme (LPS), as they negotiated with the state for a "better package." The government initially offered a compensation formula of 1,000 sq. yd. of residential plot plus 100 sq. yd. of commercial property per acre of dry (*metta*) land, and 1,000 sq. yd. residential plus 300 sq. yd. commercial plot for irrigated (*jareebu*) land.[1] Farmers in upland villages who held *metta* lands were among the first to respond—most were happy to give up their land in exchange for reconstituted plots because of the historically low value of their lands. However, the scheme was much less attractive to owners of *jareebu* lands. As discussed in chapter 3, many Kamma farmers in the more prosperous villages near the river initially opposed land pooling, which they believed would deprive them of valuable and productive land without offering sufficient compensation. But these landowners quickly organized themselves to negotiate with the government (including directly with the Chief Minister) for enhanced compensation, and the government responded by increasing the LP "package" twice. The formula that was finally accepted was "1,000+450," that is, 1000 sq. yd. residential plus 450 sq. yd. commercial plots for multi-cropped, irrigated land and "1,000+200" for dry land.

The land pooling scheme had created space for political maneuvering, and Amaravati landowners were emboldened by their success in bargaining for a higher package to push for other concessions. The government affirmed the role of LP farmers as "partners" by soliciting their help in convincing others to pool their land. For instance, CRDA set up village committees whose main role was to persuade and help other farmers to participate in land pooling. The members of these committees were almost exclusively Kammas and TDP supporters. Because of such maneuvers, LP farmers expected to be consulted by CRDA at every step, and they intervened frequently in the planning and development of the project with varying degrees of success.

CRDA emerged as the nodal agency tasked with negotiating with LP farmers to gain their cooperation at various stages of the project. Farmers would frequently visit the CRDA offices in Vijayawada or Thullur, carrying fat files of land documents to present their problems

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to officials or to request exemptions from particular procedures or rules. If lower-level officers could not address their concerns, they would directly approach the powerful CRDA Commissioner (who, not surprisingly, was always a Kamma during this period when TDP was in power, and so was regarded as "our man"). At times they would bypass CRDA and appeal directly to key ministers in the state government, such as P. Narayana (Minister for Municipal Administration and Urban Development), who had authority over APCRDA. LP farmer leaders dropped the names of important bureaucrats and political leaders with ease, demonstrating their access to the state. Farmers cultivated relationships with individual officers or politicians in part because there were no formal political bodies to represent them after both the village panchayats and the CRDA committees were suspended. Consequently, LP farmers created other forms of political representation and asserted themselves as a significant lobby, without whose cooperation the project could not be implemented.

However, LP farmers had to constantly regroup and maneuver to assert themselves and demand that their voices be heard as the project unfolded. Ashok, who was a member of the CRDA committee in his village, complained that after most of the land had been pooled, the government was no longer consulting them:

> We don't even know who gets what contracts, and we have no authority to monitor the development work happening in our village. Unless we have such authority, how can we make sure that good quality work is happening? The contractors and officials can collaborate and sabotage the quality, right? … Naidu and his government are good, but lower level officials are ignoring us. We already protested about this problem. We confronted the Assistant Engineer about some road work that had not been done. But these officers lack motivation. I'm afraid that if small contracts go on like this, what will happen when they undertake large infrastructure work?

Because infrastructure development in the villages was now the responsibility of CRDA, superseding the earlier authority of the panchayats, Ashok felt that local leaders were being ignored by CRDA and the state government:

> Now we don't have any role. We don't even know who is responsible for village development work now. We met Minister Narayana yesterday to get the streetlights fixed. During the land pooling time, Narayana and other big TDP people kept on touring the villages and meeting with us, now they are not to be seen. CRDA people also don't come.

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Ashok, like several other LP farmers, clearly took his position as a stakeholder seriously, and he was angry that the government stopped engaging with them once the land was acquired. "We want a partnership with the government," Ashok declared. These narratives reflect the deep sense of ownership of the Amaravati project nurtured by many LP farmers, which justified and motivated their constant monitoring of, and engagement with, the building of the new city—interventions that I discuss in more detail in chapter 6.

LP farmers' expressions of confidence in the project, and in Naidu's ability to pull it off, contrasted sharply with the voices of the opponents—the protesting "LA farmers" and others who developed a strong critique of this vision of development.

Development Disrupted

"They can't just make a plan in the sky and then put it on the ground!"

When a team of planners from Singapore visited the new capital site for the first time in December 2014, a silent "black flag" protest was planned along the route of their tour through the area. In response, the government canceled the ground visit and arranged an aerial survey by helicopter instead. I joined the protestors gathered near the YSR statue at Undavalli.[2] A young resident of the village who was standing next to me watching the helicopter flying overhead remarked, "They can't just make a plan in the sky and then put it on the ground!"—succinctly capturing the fundamental problem of top-down planning for Amaravati. The protestors were visibly angry, explaining that they were opposed to land pooling because they would lose their very valuable land, "their life and source of security," for inadequate compensation. "But when we object, we are accused of doing so only for political reasons." They heaped insults on Chandrababu Naidu, accusing him of "doing real estate business" with their land.

Much of the opposition to land pooling came from farmers of Undavalli and Penumaka, villages located close to Vijayawada, where the price of land and property was already very high even before Rajdhani. This discrepancy was a major reason that many farmers in these villages refused to hand over their land, believing they could do better by selling it in the open market. As opposing landowners in these urbanizing villages frequently said, "We are already developed!" "Rohith," a real estate agent, confirmed this claim:

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> Even before the 2014 elections, land prices in Undavalli village went as high as 11 crores per acre, in anticipation that the capital will be located around Vijayawada. The announcement of the capital site brought down the price of their lands. But in Penumaka and Undavalli they are opposing land pooling primarily because of caste.

Undavalli and Penumaka are known as "Reddy villages" that support the opposition YSR Congress Party, and their refusal to participate in land pooling was widely attributed to the "caste factor" and political opposition to the ruling Telugu Desam Party. While these elements certainly played an important role, other reasons also drove their resistance. Most farmers in Undavalli and Penumaka are smallholders who were earning substantial incomes growing commercial horticultural crops, with three to four harvests a year, and they were not willing to give up their lucrative livelihoods for the land pooling package that was offered. Similarly, farmers in another village, Nidamarru (Reddys as well as OBCs), opposed land pooling, partly due to their political alignment with YSRCP but mainly because they owned profitable floriculture farms supported by a lift irrigation scheme—investments and incomes that would be lost if they surrendered their land.[3] A farmer in Nidamarru noted: "Here the land is more fertile—lease goes up to 1 lakh per acre, so land is more valuable. For us, pooling the land for the annuity we would get [50,000 rupees per acre per year] didn't make sense."

Apart from Reddy farmers and a few large landowners who objected to the project on environmental grounds (chapter 2), in every Kamma village there were one or two "big" families that refused to pool their land even as most of their neighbors participated. Their stated reasons varied: they did not want to give up their ancestral land or farming as a way of life, or they viewed land pooling as illegal and contrary to their rights under the land acquisition law. In several cases, their refusal seemed to stem more from intra-village rivalry between large landowners. However, several interlocutors suggested other reasons for this resistance. According to rumor, two of the most visible leaders of the opposition held much of their land in *benami* [false names], which meant that they would not receive the compensation from pooling their land. Other landowners were accused of playing a double game—selling some of their land at high prices while holding onto the rest. For most of these affluent Kamma resistors, opposition to land pooling was not about preserving the agrarian environment or their ancestral property for sentimental reasons, rather it was a strategy to maximize their returns from land pooling. Even Krishna Rao, one of the first big Kamma farmers to

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hand over his land, held back one acre to use as a bargaining chip in his negotiations with the government about a disputed plot.

The opposition of several leading Kamma farmers led to a major rift between them and LP farmer leaders, who viewed them as obstructing progress and jeopardizing their futures. Venkateswara Rao was visibly upset when speaking about these tactics, complaining:

> All those big Kammas who didn't give their land, it is all about greed … I am losing patience with these people. They are always disturbing things. If they go on like this, we will be left with nothing—no new roads or anything.

Ashok was also very angry with the protestors: "We have all given our land and depend on the capital being built to see some return. So why should these people raise objections and spoil our chances?" When asked why a landlord in his village had not given his land, he said that he was "expecting a better package."

Several large farmers appeared to believe that they would receive higher compensation if they waited for their land to be acquired under the 2013 land acquisition law, which mandates compensation at three times the current market value. But it was precisely for this reason that the government did not increase the guidance value of land in the CRDA villages despite soaring land prices. Kamma leaders of the LA group were planning to approach the courts to petition for a rate revision.

The opposition movement that emerged was heterogenous, a loose coalition of small farmers belonging to various non-Kamma castes (especially Reddys), a few large Kamma landholders, and state-level activists, broadly supported by the YSR Congress Party and coordinated by several Vijayawada-based lawyers who owned land in Rajdhani. Even within this coalition, the stated reasons for refusing to give up their land varied, from objections to the terms of land pooling or the location of the compensation plots to a simple desire to continue farming. Despite these differences, the protestors developed a comprehensive critical analysis of the Amaravati project, citing environmental destruction, loss of productive agriculture and livelihoods, lack of transparency, corruption and land-grabbing by Kamma politicians, and a claimed illegal status of most government notifications and procedures.

In addition to this critique, the resistors alleged that land pooling was not truly voluntary, citing the coercive measures the state had employed to force owners to give up their land. According to a lawyer aiding the opposition, the Guntur District Deputy Collector

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(a top official in the Revenue Department, the body responsible for most of the administrative work of land pooling) had "deceived uneducated villagers" by (falsely) threatening that their land would be acquired under the LARR (Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement) Act 2013, at lower compensation, if they refused to participate:

> There has been continuous monitoring by the Revenue Department, creating an atmosphere of fear. They have set up a Revenue office in each village to handle the land pooling process. These officers were told to threaten people with the LA Act, forcing them to agree to land pooling. They have practically cheated us!

The protestors also pointed to a crop-burning incident that took place in December 2014. Although the police filed cases against opposition party activists (who were never prosecuted), it was widely believed that TDP workers had destroyed standing crops to frighten people into giving up their land. These episodes were used by the government to justify heavy police presence in the Amaravati villages during the early stage of land pooling, creating an atmosphere of "intimidation" (Ramachandraiah 2016), a scenario that I witnessed in 2016. The lawyer explained: "This incident brought in the police, who marched through the villages. Special Forces were also put in the villages. They are continually patrolling there, creating fear among the people." The crop-burning episode was also used to impose Section 144 of the criminal code, under which the police can ban the public assembly of more than four persons. "They don't even allow the villagers to air their views. This is a very painful situation—they don't allow us to walk, to talk," said an opposition leader from Undavalli. He continued:

> If we speak one word [against the government] they haul us to the police station, creating panic among the people. And the media are not saying anything because they are managed by the government. They are only writing positive things about Amaravati. They are painting agitators as if they are against development.

Despite pressure from the state, the movement against land pooling gathered strength. The struggle was pursued mainly in the legal arena: numerous court cases were filed against LA notifications and other actions taken by the government, with the support of YSRCP and activist lawyers from Vijayawada and Guntur. The protestors seized every opportunity to challenge the state and publicize their

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cause, especially by attending meetings organized by CRDA and other stakeholders. They used the state government's application for loans from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank as a platform to raise objections and attempt to stall the project. When inspection teams came to conduct the required social impact and environmental impact assessments, opponents attended the meetings in strength to voice their objections. Opposition leaders prepared talking points and distributed copies to residents of the Rajdhani villages, outlining the issues they should raise and encouraging them to tell their own stories.

A consultation meeting organized at Thullur in August 2017 to share with the public the draft ESMF (Environmental and Social Management Framework) and RPF (Resettlement Policy Framework) reports submitted to the World Bank attracted around two hundred people. Following a lengthy PowerPoint presentation by a senior CRDA official detailing various aspects of the project and the land pooling scheme, local participants were invited to ask questions. An opposition leader—a lawyer from Vijayawada who owns land in a Rajdhani village—gave a rather lengthy speech, excerpted here:

> We are not against the capital. But there is no clarity on anything. The government is not giving importance to farmers. There is not even a single farmer on the committee which is sitting before us … You World Bank people come from outside. You have no understanding of the topography or environment here. We have been giving representations and complaints, without any result. Such meetings keep on happening without any output. Our objections were never even recorded. You manipulate minutes as you like … We are just asking you to follow the law of the land. We are asking you to take lands as per the Land Acquisition Act 2013.

At these meetings, opposition leaders raised numerous technical, legal, and social justice issues, illustrating how deeply they had examined the provisions and procedures of the APCRDA Act and the land pooling scheme. Although less visible, representatives of landless laborers and other marginalized groups were also present, but they brought up very different points. The Secretary of the Agricultural Workers Union intervened at one meeting:

> We are only talking about the problems of landed people here. There are people with holdings as small as 0.2 acres to people with large holdings to the tune of 100 acres. But together they constitute just 30 percent of the total population. What about the remaining 70 percent? They are dependent on the lands of the 30 percent … The pension for landless families should be at least

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> 9,000 rupees a month, but the government is giving just 2,500. Social justice should be for everyone, not just for people with more than ten acres of land!

LP farmers attended the public meetings to show support for the government, although they also used the opportunity to voice complaints about the functioning of CRDA:

> CRDA has been carrying out work systematically, and public consultations like this are a prime example of their sincerity. However, small issues are eating away time in these meetings, and we don't get time to discuss the development of Amaravati. The most important issue is the handing over of the developed plots. We want fully developed plots to be given to us, and we demand that the development and user charges should be removed.

In response to representations submitted by protesting farmers, in September 2017 a World Bank inspection team visited several villages to hear people's complaints. In these meetings as well, opposition leaders from Vijayawada (all of whom own land in capital region villages) tended to dominate the proceedings, reiterating their list of legal and environmental objections. However, the interventions by local people indicated the extent of distrust and apprehension in the Rajdhani villages. The following excerpts from participants' remarks at a meeting at Undavalli reflect their resistance, although their uniformity suggests that they had been briefed by opposition leaders:

> I don't know any other work except agriculture. We grow bananas, turmeric, and flowers. Water here is available at a depth of 20 feet. This village is near Vijayawada, which is also the market for our produce. Naidu is saying he will give 50,000 per year as lease. From my one acre I earn much more than that. Now we are left in the lurch. We don't know what to do now.

> I have four acres of land. I grow all types of crops, earning 50,000 rupees per month. Naidu is saying he will give 50,000 per annum! I am educating my children with these four acres. If the World Bank decides not to fund the project, our land will be safe with us. If the World Bank decides otherwise, I too will be landless.

We heard similar narratives at a meeting at Yerrabalem:

> My entire family is dependent on agriculture, including my sons. They are forcing us to give away our land. Should we be happy that Rajdhani is here, or should we be worried that we are clueless about our future? We get 1 lakh per acre per crop, so for three crops a year we earn 3 lakhs. What will we get after this? They are threatening that if we don't give our land for pooling, the land will be taken away through acquisition.

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> They are giving away our lands to private players such as colleges and hospitals. Now they have 33,000 acres. Why do you need more land? I would like to ask the government for what specific purpose they are taking my land.

Prakash, an activist of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M),[4] articulated a broader critique of the land pooling scheme:

> The question we are raising is, why should only large landowners benefit from all this? A capital city should benefit the entire state, but the government is only interested in benefiting big companies, foreign companies, multinationals. Why should Rajdhani benefit Singapore companies? It should benefit the agricultural laborer as well as the farmer who owns the land. We have no problem if landowners have gotten rich because land values have gone up. But if it is only they who are benefiting without taking care of others, it is a problem.

Although several large Kamma landowners and affluent lawyers were the most visible faces of the anti-land pooling movement, local leaders emerged in the protesting villages who helped farmers file objections or petitions and liaised with other opposition leaders across the capital zone in organizing demonstrations. In the next section, I describe the interventions and views of two such leaders.

Lands of Gold

"Bangaram lanti bhoomulu andi." ("These lands are like gold.")

We first met "Narasimha Reddy" in December 2014, just after the announcement of land pooling, and we tried to talk to him on each field visit to get updates about the struggle. A retired teacher and farmer in Nidamarru, he had emerged as a local leader of the opposition movement who was clearly respected and worked hard to support local farmers in their struggle against the government. Nidamarru is a "YSRCP village" populated mainly by Reddy, Kapu, and Dalit small cultivators and agricultural workers.

During our first conversation, Narasimha Reddy articulated the same arguments against the master plan and land pooling scheme that we had heard from other activists and LA farmers. But as in Penumaka and Undavalli, opposition to land pooling in Nidamarru was linked to the specifics of agriculture in the village as much as to party or caste affiliations. Showing us maps to illustrate his points, Reddy described the agrarian economy and their reasons for opposing land acquisition:

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> In Nidamarru, 90 percent of the people are not willing to give their land to the government, either by pooling or land acquisition. [Why?] Because this is a multi-crop area, cultivation is profitable for them. The cost of leasing one acre of land here is 1 lakh. But the government is offering 30,000 rupees per year as the lease amount.

He continued:

> Anyway, why does the government need so much land? We don't know why he is asking for 1 lakh acres. Nowhere has a capital been built in such a large area. No one has explained the actual scheme or what they are planning. [Has any official or leader come to explain it to you?] No, no one has come. Only the RDO [Revenue Divisional Officer] and tehsildar [head taluk officer] came to ask if we are willing to give our land to the government for the capital. When we said no, they said they would convey our views to the government.

This conversation took place in the home of Lakshmi, the floriculture farmer we met in chapter 3. Lakshmi is an unusual figure in this region—a woman cultivator who directly manages her farm (although her husband, son, and daughter also work alongside her). She had inherited her father's small landholding, and through hard work over the years managed to increase their holding to twenty-five acres. Lakshmi explained that Nidamarru and neighboring villages are agriculturally rich because the red soil in the area is suitable for growing flowers. Once planted, jasmine bushes yield flowers for forty years, which fetch a good price in the market. Yields had been especially good after a lift irrigation scheme was installed about ten years earlier. It was because of this lucrative floriculture that farmers of Nidamarru were not willing to part with their land:

> *Bangaram lanti bhoomulu andi, a daridrodi kallu paddayi. Vadu vachaka sarigga varsham kuda padatleedu* [These lands are like gold, but that wastrel [referring to the CM] has cast his eyes on them. Ever since he came to power the rains have not fallen properly].[5]

Lakshmi contended that the government was grabbing land by "sending their *benamis* to purchase our lands, who then give them for pooling." In 2016, according to Narasimha Reddy, 1,300 acres of the total 2,200 acres of agricultural land in Nidamarru had been pooled, but only 200 acres by the original owners—1,100 acres had been purchased by outsiders and then pooled. Before the announcement of Rajdhani, the price of land in Nidamarru was 2.5 to 3 crore per acre, but it had now fallen to just 1.3 crore. "Some people have sold their land even at this low price. In the last six months about twenty acres have been sold here." When asked how they will fight against the

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government, Reddy said that they were prepared to go to court, but they could not do so until they received land acquisition notifications. Their MLA, who belonged to YSRCP, had promised to support them. "We have circulated a petition and taken the signatures of the people. The panchayat and gram sabha passed official resolutions against land pooling, which we have submitted to the government." [Are people here worried?] "Yes, they feel tension because they don't know what will happen in the future. Most people here are settled in cultivation, they can only work on the land, they do not know any other work."

After this discussion, Lakshmi took us to see her farm. She proudly showed us around her jasmine and marigold fields, where several women were at work, plucking flowers. Lakshmi explained that most field laborers come from nearby villages by auto-rickshaw and earn 200 rupees per day (300 for men). She showed us the lift irrigation scheme and open wells from which they draw water for the fields. According to Lakshmi, flowers fetch 300 to 400 rupees per kilo in the market, and because different varieties bloom at different times, the land provides income—and employment for the workers, she pointed out—throughout the year.

As we were walking back to the car we came across another floriculture farmer from a neighboring village, who confirmed that "90 percent of the people in the area" were unwilling to give their land. "If they take the land, the future of our children will be lost. The government does not think about the people." He suggested that even in villages that had supposedly agreed to land pooling, not everyone had assented. "Those people who said they will give their land are all party [TDP] people." He pointed out that the 7 crore rupees spent by the government on the lift irrigation scheme would be wasted. "Plus, laborers are earning well here, 200 to 300 rupees per day or 9,000 to 10,000 rupees per month. All those jobs will go, but the government is not bothered about their livelihoods."

Lakshmi was at the forefront of the fight against land pooling in Nidamarru. Whenever we met, she expressed her strong attachment to farming as a way of life and to her land, highlighting the injustice of the state's efforts to take it away: "How much we struggled to get even this much land. If you don't have land, no one respects you. Without land I would have no *parapati* [social status/prestige]." On another occasion she remarked: "My daughter also works in the fields. Such hard work should be respected. She goes early in the morning, comes back in the evening. Everyone has their own way of earning, why take my land?"

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But the "tension" caused by the struggle over land pooling took a toll on Lakshmi's health. When we visited her in late 2016, she had leased out most of her land because she could no longer manage farming herself. But she still refused to give up her land, critiquing the logic of the scheme:

> When we keep the land for ourselves, we own all the 100 cents of each acre and from that we earn 100,000 rupees as lease. With pooling we will be owners of only 30 cents [of each acre of land given] and get only 30,000 rupees per year as lease amount. How is that remunerative in any sense?

By 2018, 1,600 acres of the agricultural land in Nidamarru had been pooled, leaving only 600 acres in the hands of protesting farmers. This denouement, despite the tough resistance that was mounted, illustrates the tactics deployed by the state to chip away at their resistance—deputing TDP supporters to buy land at high prices or threatening farmers with compulsory acquisition. Narasimha Reddy said that many smallholders in Nidamarru had finally sold their land out of "fear" or to avoid getting embroiled in lengthy legal proceedings against land acquisition.

Still, Narasimha Reddy, Lakshmi, and others continued to oppose the project. The strength of their commitment was evident during a meeting of the Social Impact Assessment (SIA) Expert Committee that was held at Nidamarru in January 2018. The panchayat compound was packed when the committee members arrived. They were barely able to open the proceedings before they were challenged by Narasimha Reddy and others, who raised a range of procedural and other issues—questioning their locus standi, highlighting their failure to share the draft SIA report in Telugu, pointing out uncorrected errors in the draft report and their lack of familiarity with the guidelines for social impact assessment, and so on. Because the committee members were unable to answer basic questions thrown at them, the meeting descended into chaos and was canceled. The committee was virtually chased out of the village by the angry farmers, promising to return only when they had gathered the information demanded.

Although the state constantly threatened that they would invoke the LARR law to acquire land from owners who refused to cooperate, they delayed taking this step in villages where opposition was strongest, such as Nidamarru and Undavalli. But to signal that they were serious, the government issued LA notifications in villages where the resistance was more fragmented.[6] However, farmers who received "19.1" notifications immediately filed petitions contesting the acquisition of their land and obtained stay orders from the court.[7] With

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farmers' cases against LA notifications pending in the High Court, the government could not proceed with land acquisition. In 2017, the High Court issued an order declaring the notifications invalid. Although the government order to acquire 4,300 acres of land had been issued in 2016, by 2019 the state had succeeded in acquiring only 180 acres through this route (Samdani 2024).

The opposition's strategies effectively prevented the government from completing the assembly of land for Rajdhani using the land acquisition law. Yet, because of the various strategies described above, the quantum of land pooled increased steadily, leaving a small minority of committed opponents to continue the fight. By 2019, 34,281 acres of the targeted 38,581 acres had been pooled. With the change of government in 2019, the status of the 4,120 acres of land that had been notified for acquisition but not yet acquired was uncertain, mired in a tangle of conflicting government orders, legal challenges, and court orders—a situation that allowed the remaining protestors to continue tilling their land without interference.

Prakash explained the gradual acquiescence to land pooling in this way:

> Because the ruling party and Kammas are dominant in most villages, they did not let others speak up. The government used the police to intimidate people, they targeted people who were opposed to pooling. Also, they mounted a misinformation campaign, saying that if you don't give the land now, you will get less compensation through land acquisition. The government acted like a private landlord and used all means necessary to get the land. Some people gave because they liked the project, some because it was inevitable, some people out of confusion, some people out of some hope. But we can't say that everyone gave willingly. Like that, village by village, group by group, had different responses, so they got disaggregated. This is why there has been no organized movement against the project.

Although the agitation continued and LA farmers obtained some relief from the courts, CRDA officials were sanguine about the situation, believing that everyone would eventually give up their land one way or another. According to Subba Rao, a key CRDA bureaucrat, apart from two or three strongly opposed villages, there were only a few farmers in each village who were still holding out in 2018. Echoing a standard coercive practice of land brokers—forcing recalcitrant owners to sell their land by buying up surrounding plots and cutting off their road access (Gidwani and Upadhya 2023)—he forecasted:

> The capital city will take fifteen to twenty years to take shape, so people will fall in line … Even if a few small plots are not pooled, we can temporarily

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> reroute our roads and then acquire their lands at a later stage … Those who are left with land between two roads will finally give up since no one would buy that land.

Indeed, CRDA went ahead with the project on the presumption that all the land had been acquired, as indicated by complaints about the allotment of compensation plots on land that had not been handed over to the government (raising doubts about their legal status; see chapter 6).[8]

The fight by Reddy, Kapu, and OBC farmers to hold onto their land was one element of the opposition to the Amaravati project that emerged. Another major struggle developed around assigned lands held by Dalits, which I discuss in the next section.

The Caste of Land

Caste affiliation provided the social connections, cultural capital, and political leverage that Kamma farmers wielded in their negotiations with the government aimed at maximizing their gains from Rajdhani. In contrast, Dalits—both landless and landholders—were systematically marginalized by the land pooling process as well as the Amaravati project itself. However, small and marginal Dalit landowners did not simply accept their exclusion from negotiations around land pooling; instead, they mobilized to protect their rights and claim equality in the new city. A Dalit leader in UDpalem asserted:

> The government is taking care of the interests of their caste people but discriminating against Dalits. They are calling it *praja rajadhani* [people's capital], but in *praja rajadhani* don't Dalits have a right to live? The same crops grow on both our lands, but because we are Dalits they want to oppress us.

In this section, I describe the embedding of caste in the land governance system and the ways in which it produced discrimination against SC landholders in the land pooling process. The struggle around SC assigned lands reveals the crafting of a specifically Dalit critique of the Amaravati project, based on their experiences of dispossession by the state and Kamma landlords.[9]

In Andhra, the distinction between regular *patta* (freehold) land and land granted to landless and marginalized groups for cultivation was established under the colonial land revenue system of Madras Presidency (Viswanath 2014; see chapter 1). This caste-linked

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differentiation of land rights was reproduced in post-independence land distribution programs that provide only limited titles to beneficiaries. Known as "assigned lands," these include "government lands" (often common lands that had long been in use by poor groups but claimed by the post-independence state) granted to households in designated categories (such as SC, ST, and the landless poor) for cultivation. Crucially, land assignment programs provide conditional title or rights to cultivation, not rights to alienate or inherit the land. This distinction in land titling created two categories of citizens: marginalized or subaltern groups and the "general population" (Jonnalagadda, Stock, and Misquitta 2021: 462). Thus, assigned land is a caste-marked category of property that stands in stark contrast to property rights in *patta* land, mostly enjoyed by dominant caste or non-Dalit cultivators.

In Andhra Pradesh, most land held by Dalits is assigned land (Ramachandraiah and Venkateswarlu 2014). Beneficiaries receive D-Form *pattas* or "*DK pattas*" (this stands for *darakastu* land or "wasteland"), which recognize the holder as the cultivator but do not confer ownership. For this reason, assigned land is legally defined as government land that can be simply resumed by the state, without compensation, when required for some "public purpose" (Oskarsson 2013). Assigned land is heritable but not transferable or alienable, in contrast to the full property rights of *patta* land (generally enjoyed by non-Dalit cultivators).

Reflecting this embedded bureaucratic categorization, compensation under the Amaravati land pooling scheme distinguished not only between the productivity of land (*jareebu* versus *metta*) but also the legal status of the holding—especially *patta* versus assigned lands. The struggle that erupted around assigned lands sharply revealed how the inscription of caste in land governance, by marking Dalit land as an inferior form of property, facilitates their dispossession.

The first controversy concerned the question of compensation for assigned lands. Because assigned lands are technically government lands, initially they were left out of the land pooling scheme entirely. The state planned to simply reclaim these lands even though they had been under cultivation by the assignees for decades. However, politically aware Dalits in several Rajdhani villages quickly protested this injustice. "Santosh," a Dalit leader affiliated with the YSRCP, explained their objections:

> We have not asked anyone not to give their land, we are not saying they should not construct the capital here. We are just asking for compensation.

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> Who will not be happy if land which is now selling at 1 or 2 lakhs an acre shoots up to 50 or 60 lakhs? Why can't we be treated equally?

After contesting this exclusion for two years, activists succeeded in having assigned lands included in the land pooling scheme. But the package for this "inferior" form of property was less than that for regular *patta* lands. A CRDA official explained that because assigned lands are granted only for cultivation and are non-alienable, they are in a different category from lands with "*pakka pattas*" (freehold title) and transferable rights. In fact, the LP scheme distinguished among *six* categories of assigned land, each with a different compensation package depending on when the land was granted, whether it had been sold or not, and who had current possession. Only land that had been assigned prior to 1954 was given the same compensation as *patta* lands, while land granted after that date (most of the assigned lands in the Amaravati villages fell into this category) was accorded 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, were given the regular *patta* package—pointing to clear discrimination against Scheduled Caste beneficiaries of land distribution schemes.

Another injustice mentioned by several Dalit interlocutors was that even after pooling their land, they were not receiving the "lease" of 30,000 or 50,000 rupees per annum that was being paid to *patta* landholders. CRDA officials 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 hence was eligible only for the "encroached land" package (which does not include annuity). Although it appeared that it was the administrative status of assigned lands that created these problems, the caste basis of the differential treatment of assigned lands is clear from other issues faced by Dalits. For example, several assigned land holders had applied for the monthly landless pension after they were told that their land would be resumed by the government, but these applications were then cited by CRDA to claim that they were not landholders. A leader of the anti-land pooling movement explained: "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 you own no land." Conversely, those who applied for land pooling were not eligible to receive the landless pension because they had declared that they own land, trapping them in a "legal limbo" (Kolstø 2017: 55).

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Importantly, assigned lands were brought into the land pooling scheme only *after* much of this land had been sold by the original assignees. This was the second major issue that arose—the widespread alienation of assigned lands through illicit sales, as local Kamma landlords and politically connected outsiders purchased such lands just before or after the declaration of Rajdhani. As a result, most Dalit farmers could not participate in land pooling, nor could they capitalize on the speculative land market to the same extent as *patta* holders (because assigned lands fetch lower prices). Santosh explained this difference: "Upper caste people [Kammas] in our village sold a quarter of an acre for 50 to 60 lakhs, but even if we sell one acre it would not fetch 50 lakhs, as our lands are assigned lands."

Although reliable figures on the extent of alienation of assigned lands are not available, according to several observers many Dalits sold their land early in the land pooling process at low prices (but higher than they would have fetched earlier). "Narayana," a CPI-M activist, estimated that 80 percent of the approximately two thousand acres of assigned lands in the capital region had been alienated in this way. Assigned land holders were persuaded to sell their land (illegally) because of circulating rumors that the government was going to take their land without compensation:

> When someone came and offered to buy the land for 10 lakhs, we agreed. This was a big amount for us. We were working for 500 rupees a day. So, people sold. Now the land is very expensive, it is selling for more than 1 crore an acre. These people came to purchase assigned land because they were sure they would be given a decent package. They planned to pool the land and then sell the compensation plots for a lot of money. These big people had inside information. They thought they would get favorable orders from "our government." [But why did you agree to sell?] To avoid all the tension, plus it seemed like a lot of money.

At first, I found it difficult to understand why Dalits would dispose of their land at low prices in a boom situation, but the reasons gradually became clear from multiple conversations with Dalits and other interlocutors in the Amaravati villages. First, ruling party politicians and government officials had informed assigned land holders that their land would be resumed by the state, leading to panic selling before land pooling began in the hope of extracting at least some value from their holdings before they were taken away. Second, even after assigned lands were included in the LP scheme, Dalits continued to sell their land because the package was inadequate and they believed they could do better in the market. Third, it was

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easier to sell rather than to navigate the bureaucratic maze of the land pooling scheme—especially since their land documents were often missing or unclear, making it difficult to prove their claims. Finally, due to legal restrictions on the transfer of assigned land, their holdings were purchased mainly by local landowners through informal deals, at prices well below market value. Kammas who purchased assigned lands enjoyed the political and bureaucratic connections (and money) to get the paperwork sorted out with the Revenue Department. A government investigation into the alienation of assigned lands, launched by the YSRCP government in 2019, supported allegations that many of the buyers were TDP politicians and rumors about the manipulation of land records by government officials at their behest.[11]

According to Narayana, buyers were willing to risk purchasing assigned lands because the deals were made through "agreement," a type of transaction in which only a small portion of the total price is given up front and the balance is paid after the land is registered in the buyer's name.[12] Further, buyers did not mind "gambling" on assigned lands because land deals always involve some black money, which is difficult to invest or launder. To discourage such transactions, the government issued an order stipulating that the plot certificate would be given only in the name of the original assignee, even though the land may have been sold to another person who then entered into the pooling agreement. Later, another order (GO 41) was promulgated stating that compensation would be given to the *current* owner of an assigned land parcel—even though the transfer of assigned land is prohibited by law. This move, widely seen as a mechanism to "grab" Dalit lands, substantiated claims of government favoritism toward Kamma *patta* landholders. The order was reversed by the YSRCP government in December 2019, which directed that compensation plots would be allotted only to the original assigned land holders (*The New Indian Express*, 20 December 2019).

Santosh pointed out that in contrast to the concessions given to Kamma buyers, the state discriminated against Dalits who bought assigned land:

> When I purchased an assigned land plot, I was served a notice saying that the transaction was illegal and the land would 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! Around a thousand acres of assigned lands have passed from SC farmers to upper caste farmers.

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Caste segmented the land market not only in the case of assigned lands, but also for *patta* lands owned by Dalits. Narayana related his 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 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 were able to acquire more land in the capital area villages, while many Dalits with small and marginal holdings lost their lands.

Unstable Land and Fuzzy Property

"TDP is Chowdharys, Chowdharys are TDP, and Capital is Chowdharys!"

The agitation around the treatment of assigned lands under the land pooling scheme was initiated mainly by Dalits from the riverbank village of "UDpalem" (Uddandarayunipalem), who cultivate what are called *lanka* [island] lands. These fields, which are situated on sandy soil on the banks of the Krishna River as well as on islands in the river, became the subject of acrimonious dispute between Dalits and the state because of their prime location. The government was determined to gain control over the scenic riverfront area, which was targeted for the development of recreational and tourism facilities as well as the Seed Capital. But the fate of the Dalit settlements on the riverbanks and islands was unclear.

Lanka lands have been cultivated by Dalits since the colonial period, but because they were settled informally, they do not appear on village revenue maps. *Lanka* land farmers told us about how their grandfathers or great-grandfathers had brought the land under cultivation, giving them a sense of entitlement, although their legal titles are murky. *Lanka* lands are technically assigned lands, carrying DK *pattas*—the same papers that are given for regular assigned lands—but their complex administrative history created particularly thorny issues for the Amaravati project. Moreover, the physical area of *lanka* plots expands and shrinks with the ebb and flow of the river, giving rise to numerous disputes over the years about boundaries and cultivation rights.

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The shifting border between water and land in this riverine landscape also muddied efforts to include *lanka* lands in the land pooling scheme, reflecting the wider problem of a land records system that assumes that topography is fixed, as narrated by the president of the Rayapudi Cooperative Society:

> When the land was divided in 1972, 143 families were given *DK pattas*. Although each family got a *patta* for 67 cents, part of the *lanka* got eroded and land formed at another place. These are called *pedda* [big] *lanka* and *chinna* [small] *lanka*, respectively. The newly formed land was surveyed and distributed among us, so each family has about 35 cents in *pedda lanka* and 55 cents in *chinna lanka*, so 90 cents in total. [Did you receive *pattas* for the additional land?] No, we just started cultivating it. But the Revenue officials now claim that the 55 cents in the *chinna lanka* is illegally occupied land because we don't have papers for it, so we will get only 250 square yards as compensation for that land. We are saying that the *chinna lanka* land was formed from the erosion of *pedda lanka* and so it is part of the original DK *patta* land. Even if they don't give us plots against the 90 cents, they should give us compensation for what is written in the *patta*.

The government delayed the pooling process for *lanka* lands because (they claimed) they could not identify the actual holders of the plots. To ascertain the boundaries and rightful holders of each plot, the Joint Collector conducted several rounds of a "social enumeration survey," but each one yielded different lists and information. Finally, the Revenue Department identified around two thousand acres of *lanka* land as eligible for land pooling and issued LP notifications to the holders. But by that time, many Dalit farmers had sold their lands, fearing that the government would take them back without compensation.

These conflicts around the delineation and ownership of very small parcels of land farmed by poor Dalits point to the immense value (political and financial) that land had acquired in prime locations of the planned city. Although Rayapudi *lanka* farmers deployed political and legal tactics to challenge the appropriation of their land without compensation, leading to lengthy negotiations with the Revenue Department, their experiences of dealing with the state were permeated by caste prejudice. A resident of Rayapudi Pedda Lanka 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 Chowdharys, Chowdharys are TDP, and Capital is Chowdharys!

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The story of the Rayapudi *lanka* lands illustrates the contradictions that may arise when land, embedded in complex histories of land tenure but governed by rigid categories and procedures of the land administration system, suddenly acquires new value as a prime location for a real estate venture. *Lanka* farmers sought to navigate this turbulence, and resist the constant pressure from the state to vacate their lands, through legal strategies to substantiate their claims to land and by invoking their rights as citizens as well as Dalits.

While many Rayapudi farmers ended up selling their lands, the more politically savvy *lanka* cultivators of UDpalem put up a concerted struggle, demanding that *lanka* assigned lands should be given the same package as *jareebu patta* lands. A Dalit leader in UDpalem challenged the casteist logic of land categorization itself, pointing to the floor tiles at his feet as illustration: "My land is separated from *patta* land by just a *bandh* [embankment], yet the government is giving us a different package. Our lands are even more fertile than registration [*patta*] lands." In mounting their resistance, UDpalem *lanka* farmers wielded the language of justice and equal citizenship in their representations at public meetings and to the courts and government authorities.

The *lanka* lands issue, and the problem of assigned lands more broadly, illustrate the observation that

> … despite capital's best attempts to batter down obstacles to its expansion and enforce purely financial logics in land … large scale urban development initiatives have been frequently stalled, rerouted and compromised by localised bureaucratic work[,] a diversity of land tenures embedded in plural institutional arrangements, [and] stubborn histories of settlement, disaggregated records. (Jonnalagadda and Cowan 2024: 8)

In this case, however, the obstacle was not only bureaucratic. While the Revenue Department justified the differential treatment of assigned land by referring to administrative categories and rules, Dalits framed it as an issue of caste discrimination by Kamma landlords and the Kamma-dominated government:

> 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 Thullur. In fact, they don't even let us talk at these meetings!

Santosh described his humiliating treatment when a group of assigned land holders attended the plot allotment lottery (see chapter 6) in their village:

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> When the distribution of plots was taking place here, we went to the meeting to share our problems. The police asked us who we are, and when we told them we are UDpalem 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. Because of these humiliations, there is no scope for SC farmers to give their lands happily.

The complexity and "fuzziness" of land documents (Pati 2019), and the potential for land records to be manipulated at the behest of powerful actors, facilitated this caste-based land grab. This in turn evoked strong protests by Dalits, drawing on a political consciousness forged through a long history of caste-based oppression. This mobilization—to press for an equal compensation package for their lands, to recoup land that had been sold through trickery or coercion, and more broadly to be recognized as equal citizens of the new city—points to the potential of subaltern politics to disrupt the best-laid plans of state and capital. The assigned lands issue also 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: 460). A subaltern politics of property rights engenders negotiations between state and citizen on the terrain of the law (Roy 2017). In this case, the solidification of the support of land pooling farmers for the Amaravati project augmented the power of the state in its battle against protesting upper caste and Dalit farmers.

But as the struggle around assigned lands shows, Kamma domination was not unassailable. Laying bare the inequalities in the land pooling scheme, a wave of caste-based political activism around compensation under the land pooling scheme was converted directly and sharply into an issue of caste oppression and social justice. In response to Dalit protests on several fronts, Kamma landowners organized to defend their privileged position, lobbying the state and the ruling party to resist Dalit demands, or (surreptitiously) manipulating land records to strengthen their own advantages. Yet, the demise of the project after the YSR Congress Party came to power in April 2019, the prosecution of cases of land-grabbing by the new government, and the cancellation of plots allotted to people who had purchased assigned lands, all point to the limits of their power.

It is noteworthy that a local leader who was an important face of the assigned lands struggle in UDpalem was nominated by the YSR Congress Party to contest a seat in the 2019 election and won, becoming a Member of Parliament. Although the Rajdhani issue may not

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have been a major reason for the defeat of the Telugu Desam Party in that election, the ascent of the YSRCP owed much to the activism of capital region Dalits, who articulated the contours of caste power in Coastal Andhra, rooted in control over land—which they understood would only become more deeply entrenched with the building of a "world-class city."

* * *

In this chapter, I have tried to unravel the complex politics that crystallized around the land pooling scheme, as landholders mobilized both for and against the Amaravati project and subaltern groups contested their marginalization by the project. These struggles were deeply shaped by caste loyalties, rivalries, and inequalities; agrarian ecologies; and by regional party politics and their strategies of accumulation. The discussion shows that a caste-structured system of control over agrarian land may be so deeply entwined with hierarchies of class and social power that it cannot simply be erased, even as land is transformed into urban property. Instead, these inequities and forms of caste power get reproduced in the city-under-construction, in new and old ways.

Conflicts between different groups of landowners, and between them and the state, also stemmed from the assetization of land—an "inherently political" process as noted by Swyngedouw and Ward (2022: 51):

> The socially-embedded, inherently political nature of this engenders struggle over the process of abstraction itself: who will suffer the risks and who will reap the rewards? Landowners have to engage with the state at a variety of scales … and confront intense social contestations. Because the socio-legal embedding of land is a necessary corollary for it to function as circulating fictitious capital, the process of treating it as an asset is intrinsically political.

In the next chapter, I examine further the technologies and consequences of land assetization in Amaravati.

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Notes

1. The land pooling formula provides for a total area of developed plots, measured in square yards, to be allotted against each acre of land pooled. In this case, both residential and commercial plots form part of the compensation package, hence in popular speech the formula is referred to as "1,000+300," "1,000+450," and so on. An owner who pools her land must select several plots of different sizes to make up the total area of urban land to which she is entitled. The system of allocating the compensation plots is described in the next chapter.
2. "YSR" refers to Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy of the Congress Party, former Chief Minister of undivided Andhra Pradesh, an icon of Reddys and many BC and SC communities. YSR was the father of Y. S. Jaganmohan Reddy, who started the breakaway YSR Congress Party—the main opposition party in Andhra Pradesh between 2014 and 2019.
3. On the mobilization against land pooling in these villages, see Ramachandraiah (2015, 2016) and Kolstø (2017, 2019).
4. The local unit of the CPI-M has long been active in organizing agricultural laborers and has strong networks amongst Dalits and workers in the capital area villages.
5. This remark refers to a popular belief that the rains failed during Chandrababu Naidu's first tenure as Chief Minister.
6. According to Jenkins (2019: 142–43), the AP state government was aided by legal experts paid for by business interests to help devise a strategy for completing the assembly of the targeted land. During the period when the LARRA Amendment Ordinance (introduced by the Modi government in December 2014 to dilute several provisions of the Right of Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition Rehabilitation & Resettlement Act, 2013) was in effect, the government issued an order that exempted the project from the stringent procedures laid down in the Act.
7. This is shorthand for the first notification issued to a landowner under section 19(1) of the LARRA Act, 2013, notifying the owner of the government's intention to acquire the land. The owner then has time to file an objection.
8. Just before the 2024 election, the YSRCP government withdrew the LA notifications on 625 acres of land, ostensibly to address this issue. The government had earlier tried to cancel the plots allotted to LP farmers on lands that were under LA notification and give them plots elsewhere, but the affected beneficiaries filed a case challenging this decision, which was struck down by the AP High Court in February 2024 (Apparasu 2024a).
9. This struggle is discussed in detail in Upadhya (2021).
10. The package for lands assigned after 1954 was 800+100 sq. yd. for dry land and 800+200 for wet or semi-urban land. The other categories of assigned land include "eligible encroachers on non-objectionable government land" (500+50 and 500+100 for wet/dry land), and encroachers on "objectionable" government lands (250+nil sq. yd. plots for both types of land). For both categories of "encroachers" annuity is not payable (APCRDA 2017a). In addition, 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. of returnable plots.
11. Top TDP politicians and ministers, including Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu and Minister P. Narayana, were accused of "grabbing" 1,400 acres of assigned lands worth 4,400 crores in villages such as Velagapudi, Rayapudi, and UDpalem through *benami* transactions, and then instigating the promulgation of GO No. 41 which granted benefits to assigned lands under the LPS (Sambasiva 2023). A charge sheet was filed against Naidu and Narayana in March 2024.

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12. Sale of land by "agreement" (referring to the sale agreement) is a common practice across India. In such transactions, the two parties execute a legal contract agreeing that the land will be sold at a particular price. A portion of the price is paid upon signing the agreement (usually 10 to 50 percent) and the land documents are handed over to the buyer. The balance amount is paid when the sale is finalized. If for some reason the registration of the sale is blocked, the buyer will lose only the advance payment. In such cases, the landholder gains as he keeps the advance money as well as the land. But Dalits mostly lost out by selling through agreement: since they did not receive the full price at once, they were unable to make the kinds of large investments that Kamma farmers could. Because of such land deals, many Dalits in the Amaravati villages were temporarily flush with cash, which in many cases disappeared just as suddenly. According to our interlocutors, many Dalits "wasted" the money received from selling land on consumer goods or marriages. More often, they used the money to clear debts.

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— Chapter 6 —

ASSETIZING THE FUTURE



In previous chapters, I have tracked the ways in which land pooling and the speculative land market stripped land of its productive affordances and social meanings, converting it into primarily a source of financial value in the form of compensation plots that represent farmers' stake in the future city. In this chapter, I trace subsequent stages in this transformation by examining the conversion of rights in agrarian land into a new form of property structured by a very different legal and economic framework—abstract financial assets. As land was converted into "reconstituted plots" by the land pooling scheme, agriculturalists were also reconstituted as propertied urban citizens. I examine the changing character of the Amaravati plots as the project unfolded, as bearers of future financial value and embodiments of the imagined urban future. The chapter explores the tensions and dissonances that reshaped the Amaravati master plan as LP farmers recalibrated their expectations in response to changing conditions, while also attempting to assert control over the development of the new townships.

The chapter focuses on land pooling farmers' engagement with the making of the new city through the medium of the compensation plots, highlighting their collective efforts to forge an urban future. Their commitment to the Amaravati project hinged not just on their confidence in Chandrababu Naidu's leadership but especially on their position as stakeholders in the project. They had a vested interest in its success, upon which the future market value of their compensation plots depended. LP farmer leaders gained visibility and influence as they intervened in the making of the new residential layouts and pressed CRDA for changes to the land pooling scheme and the master plan.

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The first section explores the ways in which LP farmers consolidated their social power as stakeholders in the project, keeping close watch over its progress at every stage. Section 2 describes the allocation of compensation plots through a lottery system, foregrounding allegations that it had been manipulated by wealthy Kammas to reproduce the caste-structured spatial layout of villages in the future city. The third section follows the interventions of LP farmers in the development of the residential layouts to ensure the future value of their new assets. Section 4 details the mechanisms through which land was converted into abstract financial assets, while section 5 describes the dematerialization of land through digitization. The sixth section focuses on the dynamics of the online market that emerged for the Amaravati plots and its significance as index of the progress of the project. Section 7 elaborates on the rematerialization of these assets and the technical difficulties that plagued the mapping of the plots on the ground. The final section explores the transformation of LP farmers into propertied urban citizens and the social significance of the Amaravati plots as links to both the agrarian past and the urban future.

Plotting Development

In the foregoing chapters, I followed the process of land pooling up to the stage of "consent," when farmers began to file forms stating that they agreed to pool their land after negotiating an acceptable compensation package. The next step was the selection and allocation of the compensation plots.

Participants in the land pooling scheme were entitled to a total area of residential and commercial plots based on the amount and type of land surrendered, as described above. They had to select plots of different sizes in each category to make up the total area to which they were entitled. For instance, under the *jareebu* package, a landholder who surrendered five acres of irrigated land was entitled to 10,000 sq. yd. of residential plots and 2,250 sq. yd. of commercial property (according to the compensation formula of "1,000+450"). To make up the 10,000 sq. yd. of residential property, she could select five plots of 1,000 sq. yd. and ten plots of 500 sq. yd. each, and one plot of 1,250 and a second of 1,000 sq. yd. of commercial property, or any other combination of plot sizes available. (Any additional area left over after choosing plots was given in the form of a transferable development rights [TDR] bond that could be sold anywhere in the state.)

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The process of plot selection began in April 2016, when APCRDA distributed a brochure detailing the many different sizes of plots available, ranging from 100 to 4,000 square yards, along with a form to be filled in with one's selections. Most owners opted for smaller residential plots of between 400 and 1,000 sq. yd., the most popular sizes being 500 to 600 sq. yd., because they believed that larger plots would take longer to develop. Only large landowners selected the biggest residential plots of 4,000 sq. yd., which also carry a higher FSI (floor space index, which determines how many floors or units can be constructed). For the commercial plots, most LP farmers chose larger sizes, which they anticipated would attract higher prices in the market, because they planned to sell the plots rather than develop them. For example, Ramakrishna, who was entitled to 10,000 sq. yd. of residential property, selected one large plot of 4,800 sq. yd., two 1,200 sq. yd. plots, with the remainder as a range of smaller plots. Krishna Rao followed the same strategy, choosing a mix of small and large plots. Both believed that small plots would be in the most demand and so could be sold easily when they needed cash, hence they provide "liquidity" or "flexibility," while larger plots represented their future inhabitation of the new city.

After submitting the plot selection form to the Assistant Collector in charge of land pooling in their village, the owner was issued temporary plot certificates, which stated only the type and size of compensation plot to which they are entitled. LP farmers could not be allotted specific plots until the next stage of the process—layout design—was completed.

Only after most landowners had made their selections could CRDA draw up the detailed plans for the residential layouts and commercial areas where the compensation plots would be located. The Detailed Master Plan had to accommodate the number of plots of different types and sizes selected by participants within the overall design of the master plan. The planners thus were faced with the complex task of designing layouts across the entire capital zone that reflected the plot choices submitted—a difficult technical and logistical exercise that also became a key point of contention between CRDA and the land pooling farmers. Ultimately, twenty-four layouts for the compensation plots were created, located across almost the entire capital zone.

As discussed in the previous chapter, before agreeing to pool their land, Rajdhani farmers had negotiated with the state government for a better compensation package and other concessions. LP farmers became even more active as the project progressed, as they objected

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to various decisions taken by CRDA or approached key politicians or bureaucrats to request changes to the plan. Their involvement became particularly intense during the phase of layout design: when CRDA circulated the draft plans to invite comments, numerous objections and petitions were submitted, forcing the planners to revise the Detailed Master Plan several times. For example, under the original plan, farmers could be allotted compensation plots anywhere within the capital zone. But LP farmers strongly objected to this provision, insisting that they be given plots only in their own villages (i.e., in layouts formed on agricultural land under the jurisdiction of their villages). After much back and forth, CRDA was forced to accept this demand, with a few exceptions—making the micro-level planning process even more complicated. Still, not all participants were allotted plots in their own villages, especially in Lingayapalem where the entire area was earmarked for the new Government Complex, leaving no returnable land. Krishna Rao remarked: "We protested the allotment of plots in other villages. But finally, we had to compromise. This system is nothing but an agreement between the people and the government."

Another demand raised by LP farmers, which severely disrupted the micro-planning process, was that all plots should conform to the rules of *Vaastu*. When the layout plans for each village were displayed for public comment, many objections were raised on this count, forcing the planners to make alterations to the dimensions, orientation, or location of plots to ensure they were "*Vaastu* compliant." Chandrababu Naidu had even promised that all plots would be east-facing (a key principle of *Vaastu*)—a demand that clearly could not be met. The Singapore consultants complained bitterly about this episode because they were forced to redesign detailed plans that had already been finalized, significantly delaying the work.

After undertaking several changes in response to LP farmers' objections, CRDA finally issued the Detailed Master Plan, which included the designs for the residential layouts. The next step was to allocate the plots to the participants based on the selections they had submitted.

Wheels of Fortune

To ensure that the distribution of compensation plots was fair and impartial, CRDA developed a computerized lottery system to allocate specific plots to the LP farmers. The lotteries were held in each

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village, one after the other, with great ceremony, attended by land pooling participants, top CRDA officials, and politicians—including the Chief Minister at the first lottery (Figure 6.1). At each event, a distinguished guest or a selected LP farmer was invited to press the button that initiated the random allotment of plots. The computer program then generated a list of land pooling participants in the village and the plot numbers allotted to them, which was displayed on a large screen. The first farmer on the list would be invited onto the stage to receive printouts of his plot certificates. Participants subsequently received their digital plot certificates on their mobile phones.

During the first round of lotteries conducted in June 2016, approximately 56,000 plots were allocated—33,000 residential and 23,000 commercial plots. Later, additional rounds were held to cover the remaining land pooling participants, bringing the total number of plots allotted to nearly 65,000 (as of January 2024).[1]

Each reconstituted plot was represented by a code number corresponding to a rectangle on the sketch map of the relevant layout plan, which were uploaded to the CRDA website and prominently displayed in the villages (Figure 6.2). When asked about their plots, farmers would bring out copies of the layout maps they had received along with their plot certificates, pointing out their properties on the map. From these documents, allottees could roughly determine the locations of their plots, but the rectangles on the maps did not correspond to clearly identifiable pieces of land on the ground. Until the land survey and the physical demarcation of plots were completed, they remained dematerialized and abstract assets.

Despite CRDA's efforts to design the layouts in accordance with LP farmers' requests and to distribute the plots in a transparent manner, many farmers submitted objections about their allotments, especially with regard to the *Vaastu* issue. Most of these complaints concerned what are called "road hit" plots (located on a T-junction), which are considered inauspicious. Venkateswara Rao explained that fifty farmers in one village had been given road-hit plots. While the CRDA had resolved forty of these cases, the rest were pending: "There are too many of these cases. I will fight with the [CRDA] Commissioner about this. The Commissioner is angry with me since I keep going to him with grievances, showing him all the data, and he has no answer." LP farmers had formed a "committee" to raise such issues collectively with CRDA, but many farmers soon lost interest. "It is very difficult to bring farmers together," he rued. "But CRDA people are afraid of me because I go straight to the Commissioner when there is an issue.

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Figure 6.1. Temporary stage set up for plot distribution lottery in Yerrabalem village. Photograph by Carol Upadhya.

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Figure 6.2. Plan of residential layout displayed in a village. Photograph by Carol Upadhya.

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He calls me every ten days," he claimed. However, he admitted that CRDA was "fighting most of our demands."

Most objections raised by LP farmers were motivated by their desire to ensure that their compensation plots were of the size promised. But rumors about interference in the design of layouts and manipulation of the lottery system (especially by large landowners and outside investors who had purchased land in Amaravati) swirled through the Rajdhani villages during this period. For instance, the lottery system should have ensured random allotment of plots to LP farmers within the layouts created for their villages. This would mean that members of the same community or kinship group would not necessarily receive adjacent plots (in contrast to the typical layout of the old villages, which tend to be spatially segregated by caste). But opponents of land pooling as well as Dalit leaders alleged that the lottery system had been rigged by wealthy Kammas, in collusion with CRDA officials, allowing them to corner the best plots and also to reproduce the caste-structured layout of villages in the future city.

Explaining how this manipulation was carried out, Santosh said that Kammas had objected to the inclusion of SC farmers in the first round of the lottery, asking the Commissioner, "How can they get a plot adjacent to us? How can they live alongside us?" He had complained to a top CRDA official about this systematic discrimination against Dalits, but was told, "Kammas are not even agreeing to include your lands in the land pooling system, what can I do?" (referring to the controversy around assigned lands discussed in chapter 5). Another Dalit leader pointed out that only farmers who had pooled *jareebu* lands were included in the first lottery, while assigned land holders (mainly Dalits) were covered in the second round. In practice, this meant that the plots allotted to these two groups were situated in different layouts. Even in late 2017, many SC farmers who had pooled their land had not been allotted plots. Santosh invited us to verify this claim by examining the list of plot allocations available on the CRDA website: "Take any two villages, download the list of land pooling farmers and the list of plot allottees, and compare them by caste and party. Then you will know what is happening." "From day one there has been discrimination," he alleged.

Affluent LP farmers influenced the process of plot allocation in other ways as well. For example, several big Kamma landowners asked CRDA to create a new type of layout consisting only of "villa plots." These villa plots, which were not given in the original plot matrix, are much larger than the largest residential plots offered in the land pooling brochure. Moreover, they were allocated in newly

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created, exclusive "villa layouts" that include only villa plots, unlike all the other residential layouts that offer a range of plot sizes to accommodate different types of houses (as well as commercial properties). Because of their large size, only owners who had pooled substantial amounts of land (that is, mainly Kammas) could opt for villa plots. Ramakrishna explained that several LP farmers wanted to construct large bungalows on more spacious plots in dedicated layouts, so they had asked the planners to design this new category of residential colony.[2]

Presumably faced with political pressure to accede to this demand, CRDA clubbed four to five villages into clusters and carved out one villa development per cluster. They even held a special lottery to allot these plots, from which most LP participants (who had smaller holdings and hence could not select such large plots) were excluded. Several Dalit interlocutors argued that the villa plot scheme was a strategy devised by Kammas to create caste-exclusive neighborhoods in the future city. Clearly, these layouts were also class exclusive since only the largest landowning households could opt for villa plots.

Concretizing the Future

From 2016 to 2018, CRDA pursued infrastructure projects across Rajdhani, such as trunk roads and flood control works, and initiated the construction of government buildings. However, the areas designated for housing layouts were largely left untouched. LP farmers understood the need to prioritize basic infrastructure, but they were worried about the lack of progress on the layouts where their compensation plots were located. Thus, the main agenda of the LP farmers' lobby, once they had been allotted plots, was to put pressure on CRDA to complete the ground surveys and develop the residential layouts as swiftly as possible. Venkateswara Rao explained that 50 to 80 lakh rupees had to be spent on each layout to create the necessary infrastructure (land leveling, construction of roads and drainage, installation of electrical and water connections, and so on), before houses could be constructed. The government had issued tenders inviting bids for this work, but progress was very slow. Krishna Rao counseled patience, noting that the cost of preparing each layout would be about 50 lakhs: "This is like part of our compensation. They have done land leveling, they are planning sewage treatment plants, proper drainage and flood control works in the capital region. These are all benefits of the project for us."

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Venkateswara Rao's village was selected to create a model residential layout. To ensure that the CRDA engineers and contractors carried out the work "properly," he carefully supervised the measurement and marking of the plots and the construction of internal roads and other infrastructure. At one point, suspecting that the road contractor was "cheating" on the composition of the concrete mixture, he even sent a sample to a laboratory in Guntur for testing. When the material was found to be substandard, he demanded that the contractor be replaced. Venkateswara Rao explained that unless stakeholders like him monitor the work to ensure that the infrastructure is of high quality, their plots would not attract a good price: "The road should stand till 2050 to attract buyers." Laughing, he said that he had been forced to learn all about road-building standards and drainage systems so that he could check the work of the contractors!

However, apart from a couple of demonstration layouts where CRDA had initiated some work, little progress had been made even by early 2019. Although the deep fiscal deficit faced by the state government was an important reason for this delay, the interventions of LP farmers themselves played a part. For example, in Nelapadu the ground survey had to be repeated because of objections about noncompliance with *Vaastu*.

Despite the close involvement of LP farmers in the land pooling process, the design of the residential layouts, and other aspects of the Amaravati project, CRDA officials were skeptical of the farmers' capacity to handle their new properties judiciously. Explaining the "Farmers First" scheme (described in chapter 4), a senior CRDA bureaucrat said:

> Earlier they [farmers] used to have a bigger chunk of land. Now they also have land, but the character of the land has changed. Earlier they might have had one acre, now they have smaller plots, maybe 1,250 square meters. And they will have residential as well as commercial plots. Some farmers may have entrepreneurial qualities, but many don't. So, it's our responsibility to train them and give them support. We will help farmers understand how real estate works, how their plots can be integrated, how they might bring commercial plots together to get better bargaining power, and so on. We will give them basic information. Without land there is no Amaravati, and without farmers' participation, there is no project Amaravati. So, we need to provide all kinds of support to them.

Several farmers were skeptical about the scheme, suspecting that its real aim was to allow builders to capture land in the new city. The scheme included a proposal (formulated by the consultancy

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firm McKinsey) to permit the amalgamation of smaller plots to form larger ones (which is otherwise prohibited in the land pooling rules), so that owners could enter into development agreements with builders. The reasoning was that most compensation plots are too small to be attractive to real estate developers, while the owners lacked the knowledge and capital needed to develop the plots on their own:

> We will bring developers on board, so there is interaction between them and the farmers. We [CRDA] will only be facilitators; we will not enter into any commercial deal. We want to ensure that farmers don't get a raw deal. We will link them to bankers and outside investors so they can develop their reconstituted plots.

To take this proposal forward, CRDA organized a meeting between the local chapter of CREDAI (the association of real estate developers) and LP farmers at a Vijayawada hotel. Although a builder confirmed that they might be interested in making development agreements with farmers to construct on consolidated plots, most were in no hurry to make such deals: "First they need to build the infrastructure—roads, schools, and so on." As a CREDAI representative said: "Builders don't yet know what will be there, whether the plots will be north- or east-facing, and so on … The plots are there on paper, but unless they see them with their own eyes, they won't believe it." Further, as a real estate agent pointed out, if developers wanted to undertake projects in the capital region, they can approach the CRDA directly with a proposal and request allocation of land: "There is no need for them to deal with multiple farmers to amalgamate plots." Further, farmers were demanding an equity ratio of 50:50 for such joint development agreements, while developers expected a 60:40 share (in their favor) because there was not yet any infrastructure. In addition, FSI (floor space index) restrictions precluded the construction of multi-story buildings in most layouts where plots had been allotted, making such deals even less attractive to developers.

Several LP farmers such as Venkateswara Rao opposed the plan for other reasons. He argued that the master plan was well designed to foster the "rational growth" of the capital area, with mixed development within each township (a commercial zone, residential areas, public amenities, and so on). Also, FSI norms had been fixed for each plot size so that the city develops horizontally rather than vertically in most areas. He argued that if developers were allowed to come in through this route, all the development would be concentrated around the core capital area (most likely to attract customers), while

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interior areas would be left behind. These remarks illustrate LP farmers' grasp of the logic of the master plan, which distributes residential, commercial and other land uses evenly across the different zones. They clearly understood that the plan would get disrupted if real estate developers were allowed to take over. "If small plots are consolidated into bigger ones, then the whole integrated township concept will be lost, and all kinds of investors will come in."

Venkateswara Rao voiced another significant objection to this plan: he argued that builders would use cheap materials, resulting in poor-quality construction that would put off potential buyers. Many large landholders in the Amaravati villages owned apartments or other properties in Vijayawada, Hyderabad, or other cities, hence they were familiar with the reputed cost-cutting and unethical practices of many builders. "Once a site is given to a developer, the value goes down," Venkateswara Rao argued, observing that "there are only two fields where people have made good money—real estate and construction!" He had no faith in developers and insisted that he could undertake the construction work on his plots himself. "I want to become a quality builder. There is so much second-rate construction going on, we will see a lot of houses falling down in the next ten years!"

These narratives illustrate the extent to which LP farmers took their role as stakeholders seriously, as they expected to be involved in the development of the residential layouts and responsible for building their own high-quality homes. This engagement, and the depth of knowledge they displayed, stood in sharp contrast to government officials' view of them as unenterprising farmers who needed to be "helped" through this transition. But LP farmers' investment in the development of Amaravati stemmed not only from financial interest; they were also invested in their transformation into urban citizens through property ownership in the new city.

Although the compensation plots were the core of LP farmers' connection with the future city, they did not materialize quite as they had imagined. What they received during the plot allotment process were certificates for plots of land that had not yet been created (similar to promissory notes), rather than titles to concrete pieces of property. The intangible character of these assets was somewhat at odds with the future they anticipated, which was anchored concretely in the imagined city and the homes they planned to build in the new townships. In the next section, I map the steps through which land in Amaravati was transformed into digital tokens or dematerialized, abstract financial assets.

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Liquefying Land

"Fields are now obsolete. They are history. What we have now are plots."

The process of disembedding land from its (often byzantine) social and political moorings to allow it to circulate as a financial asset, or even repurposing land to serve a promised urban future, is never smooth or linear. In this case, land was reconstituted and assetized through land pooling using bureaucratic, legal, as well as digital technologies. Agricultural land was not simply converted into another type of commodity (urban real estate). Instead, the legal and administrative framework that established rights for different types of holders in various categories of land was completely erased and replaced by a new form of property.

During the land pooling process, the holdings surrendered by farmers were amalgamated and the boundaries that had delineated different agricultural plots, inscribed in the land records of the Revenue Department, were erased. Agrarian land, hitherto governed by a bureaucratic system fashioned under colonial rule as well as by structures of caste and kinship, was redefined as urban property, stripping it of its social appurtenances, material affordances, and established legal rights. Land pooling flattened agricultural fields, common lands, and other longstanding features of the rural landscape, reconfiguring land as vacant and malleable space (albeit with certain troublesome geographical and physical features, as discussed in chapter 2) that could be carved up and reordered according to the master plan. This transformation entailed a fundamental conceptual shift: during an interview with a senior CRDA official, when we referred to land as "fields" he immediately corrected us, saying: "Fields are now obsolete. They are history. What we have now are plots." To explicate this transformation, in this section I describe in some detail how property rights in agricultural land were reconstituted by the land pooling process.

As noted earlier, the first step in the land pooling scheme is the submission of Form 9.3, the "consent form," by the landowner, indicating her intention to pool a particular plot of land. After the Revenue Department has examined the relevant documents and approved the application, the owner signs Form 9.14—an agreement with APCRDA to surrender the land. The agreement states that the owner is transferring their rights to the Authority to facilitate the amalgamation of land and to allow CRDA to develop the land and convert it into reconstituted plots, which will be allotted to the owner according to the compensation formula.

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Once a participant has been allotted plots through the lottery system, as described above, they are responsible for registering the properties with the Sub-Registrar's office (the authority under the Revenue Department that records property and land sales), which then issues property titles conferring ownership. Registration is a legal process that is mandated for any transaction in immoveable property in India; it confirms change of ownership and provides final documentation of the sale deed and title (and also yields revenue for the government in the form of stamp duty). After a plot is registered, the original land records are removed from the files of the Revenue Department (which governs only agricultural and other land in rural areas), the old property documents (*khata* or *patta*) are nullified, and new property records are created.

Although the land pooling process seems straightforward, LP farmers encountered several obstacles and ambiguities. First, they needed to have their *pattas* and other land-related documents verified before they could submit the pooling application. Because of the large volume of paperwork involved in this process, several Acting Deputy Collectors were appointed by the Guntur District Revenue Department and temporary offices were set up in almost every Rajdhani village. The verification procedure could be cumbersome and costly if, for instance, the land records had not been updated after the death of a parent (a process known as mutation), or the property was encumbered with legal disputes around ownership or boundaries. Land records in India are notoriously plagued with such issues, which have hindered attempts at rationalizing and digitizing them. In Amaravati, the messiness of land records was even more serious in the case of Dalit assigned lands, as discussed in chapter 5. However, dominant caste LP farmers enjoyed more leverage with the state, deploying their political and caste connections to "get their work done," compared to most citizens who are forced to navigate a tangled bureaucratic field in the pursuit of document correction or verification (Hasan 2024).

While these issues created complications for owners intending to pool their land, here I am concerned with a different aspect of land pooling: the conveyance of agricultural land out of one bureaucratic system and into another, during which process it passes through a state of legal limbo—at least temporarily. Until an allottee completes the registration process, she possesses only an allotment certificate and the land pooling agreement papers—not a title. Only after registering the plot does the owner receive documents that are considered definitive proof of full and alienable ownership. Thus, registration of

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the reconstituted plot is the step that transforms an LP farmer into a property owner in the future city.

Despite the importance of this step, most LP farmers did not register their plots after allotment. Instead, most beneficiaries took this step only when they were planning to sell a plot, because registration is necessary to create a clear title that can be transacted in the market.[3] Since most farmers were holding their plots rather than offering them in the market, most Amaravati plots remained unregistered for several years. In addition, several allottees decided to delay registration until the physical plotting of the layouts was completed, or if they were involved in a dispute with CRDA about their plots. According to Krishna Rao, many farmers did not want to register the plots until they could see some progress on the development of the layouts:

> The government must first spend money on development. What if we register and then they don't do anything? So, for now, the plots are in suspension. The layouts should be developed first. All the infrastructure work should be completed properly. This is a process—first they will lay the big roads, then the smaller internal roads, then mark the plots on the ground. They need to interlink everything … it will take time.

This hesitation to register their compensation plots reflects a degree of uncertainty about the urban transition that was underway, which indeed became mired in several legal, administrative, and political tangles that I discuss below.

The bureaucratic procedures of converting agrarian land (administered and legitimated by the rules of the Revenue Department) into urban plots governed by a different set of property laws and urban development regulations, based on the authority and decisions of a parastatal agency (CRDA), on its face seems clear and legally sound (albeit complex). But given the legal and administrative complications and ambiguities inherent in the governance of agricultural land, and the difficulties of implementing a land pooling scheme on such a large scale, it is not surprising that this process was plagued with conflicts and confusion.

One set of problems arose from the fact that CRDA undertook the design of the Detailed Master Plan and the allotment of plots before all the targeted land had been pooled or acquired. Several farmers, concerned about the legal status of their new properties, complained that they had been allotted plots on land over which the CRDA had no rights. Others pointed out that their plots were located on existing roads or on land that had been acquired for a planned highway. But the most contentious issue arose from the allotment of plots on

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what had been assigned lands (see chapter 5). At first, the Revenue Department did not allow allottees to register these plots because of their uncertain legal status. Subsequently, the state government passed an order permitting the registration of such plots. The issue of assigned lands that had illegally changed hands, and the status of the "owners" who had pooled the land, led to a tangle of legal conflicts around these plots that ballooned into a major political issue.

To sum up, land pooling entailed the erasure of existing property rights, inscribed in the vast and convoluted field of documents and regulations that constitute the land revenue bureaucracy (Hull 2012), and their replacement by a distinct form of property represented by the plot certificates. But the social and economic adhesions that clung to agrarian land could not be easily stripped away, as these examples suggest. Land pooling not only extracted land from the hands of farmers and divested it of its social and economic appurtenances, it also transformed landholdings—with their clear spatial dimensions and tangible attributes of soil, water, and productivity—into intangible financial assets, snapping their connections with the agrarian landscape and reinserting them into the imagined future city.

Through this process, land was not only assetized, in that the reconstituted plots became financial assets that gain value only through circulation; it underwent a process of "real abstraction" in which the

> qualitative, concrete, and specific attributes present in land are stripped down to quantitative, homogenizing, and generalizable market metrics. This abstraction is real in the sense of representing concrete socio-technical practices and in having its own material effects. (Swyngedouw and Ward 2022: 51)

These assets were also speculative, in that their monetary value was to be realized through sale in the market or development into properties (yielding rent) at some (indeterminate) point in the future.

The Amaravati plots were abstractions in another sense as well, in that they were thoroughly dematerialized. Unlike most forms of assetized real estate, the urban plots produced by land pooling did not have a material existence at the time of allotment, or even when they were sold. The plots were not just fictitious commodities in Polanyi's ([1944] 2001) sense: they were truly "fictitious" in that land was replaced by digitized plot certificates that did not correspond to a defined piece of land on the ground. As detailed below, the plot certificates issued to LP farmers did not map onto discrete spatial coordinates or identifiable pieces of land on the ground, because the land surveys and ground marking to create the physical plots had

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not been carried out. The plots existed only in digital form (and as paper certificates), represented by allotment numbers corresponding to rectangles or squares on the sketch maps of layouts, linked to codes in the CRDA database corresponding to allottees. The plot certificates were thus intangible financial assets that could be smoothly and virtually transacted without constraints of space or sociality. These assets attracted sharp demand from investors as they began to circulate through online property markets.

Digitalization and Assetization

I first met Sudhir in September 2016, after coming across his website offering Amaravati plots for sale. A software engineer, he had lived and worked in the USA for eight years before returning to India in 2009 and joining an American software company in Hyderabad. When the Amaravati project was announced, he resigned from his job and relocated to his hometown of Vijayawada. Enthusiastic about the prospects for development in the region, he "started roaming around Amaravati" to learn about the land market. "We never thought that people would be interested in buying land that was slated to be acquired. But there was demand because of Chandrababu—people believed in him because they had seen what he had accomplished in Hyderabad." Recognizing the potential market for the Amaravati plots, Sudhir started a novel real estate business. His company created a website to facilitate transactions in the reconstituted plots, using data available on the CRDA website and Google Maps. The website featured maps of the planned layouts with embedded information about the plots available and prevailing prices. By clicking on a cell, one could see the details of the plot, its expected or estimated price, and its current ownership status. This property portal was unusual in India, where real estate markets remain largely informal, mediated by local brokers.

As noted above, the most striking attribute of this new property market is that the plots on offer did not yet have a physical existence or even clear spatial coordinates on the ground. What was being sold was the *promise* of a plot of a certain size and shape and in a particular layout, which would materialize at some point in the future. The location of a plot was indicated roughly on the schematic map of the layout, but a potential buyer would not be able to identify the property on the ground because the boundaries of most layouts or of the individual plots had not been physically surveyed and marked, nor

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had roads and other internal infrastructure been created. Instead, an investor wishing to see her plot would find only a stretch of uneven, fallow land, sprouting weeds on which a few buffaloes or goats might be grazing.

Although the Amaravati plots were abstract financial assets rather than rights to physical pieces of land, their anticipated future value generated heavy demand in the market. As Swyngedouw and Ward (2022: 51) argue, today "land circulates on financial markets as real abstractions (in the form of digital or paper entitlements) with its treatment as a financial asset conflicting with other actual or possible use-values for the land …."

However, many LP farmers were uncomfortable with the inchoate nature of their compensation plots. Venkateswara Rao, talking about the online "slot booking" system that had been created for farmers to make appointments at the Sub-Registrar's office to register their plots, observed:

> Before registering, owners would like to check out their plots physically, to see the land and the location, but that isn't possible yet because physical plotting has not been completed in most places. I think they started online booking so that people would just go straight to the office without doing all that, so they could avoid dealing with people asking questions about their plots!

This comment points to tension between the conversion of agricultural land into an immaterial, fictitious asset through land pooling, and LP farmers' imagination of the plots as tangible properties that would allow them to forge new lives in the yet-to-be-built city. In the minds of many farmers, the plots retained some of the values and meanings invested in agricultural land and it was difficult for them to conceive of them as purely abstract assets.

This land transformation in Amaravati reflects larger processes unfolding across India, as the increasing deployment of digital technologies facilitates the monetization and assetization of land. Several programs have been launched to digitize land records and resurvey land and properties using satellite-based spatial mapping technologies, with the aim of creating more transparent land records and providing clear titles to owners, even as the uncertainties of property regimes on the ground trouble attempts to render land "calculable and commodifiable" (Cowan 2021: 456). The ultimate objective of these efforts is to produce or confirm individual property rights, making them more easily transactable or available as collateral for bank loans.

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Figure 6.3. Promotional poster for Mana Amaravati app. Photograph by Carol Upadhya.

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Digitalization was central to the conversion of land into financial assets in Amaravati. A key piece of technology that fostered assetization was the Mana Amaravati ("Our Amaravati") app, launched in mid-2018 (Figure 6.3). The app provides access to a range of data on the Amaravati project uploaded by CRDA: total area of land pooled, details of plot allotment, disbursal of annuities and pensions, and so on. Users can access lists of landowners in each village who pooled their land and details of the compensation plots allotted. The app also enabled the circulation of Amaravati plots by supporting direct online trading.

Digitalization thus enabled the emergence of an online market for the Amaravati plots, accelerating the process of assetization, as the plot certificates held the potential to produce substantial value through circulation (cf. Wittekind and Faxon 2023). As Birch and Ward (2024: 15) observe, "technological devices and techniques have 'fundamentally changed the way economic circulation is managed' [Fields 2018]," allowing "previously 'lumpy' and incommensurate revenue streams … to be smoothed out and so transformed into a liquid investment class for institutional investors."

In Amaravati, agrarian land—embedded in a thick social and political substratum and striated by multiple, overlapping claims and affordances—was utterly transformed and even evaporated into a purely abstract and immaterial form, rendering land into fungible units that could circulate seamlessly in virtual real estate markets. Because of the small size of most Amaravati plots, they did not attract large institutional investors (who could apply directly to CRDA for land allocation), but their circulation on an online market populated mainly by small investors represents a noteworthy shift in Indian property markets.

A senior CRDA official explained that the Mana Amaravati app was launched to "bring sellers and buyers together. You can see the plots available there, what is the rate, who to contact—you can directly talk to the farmer. We are trying to eliminate the middlemen." However, digitization did not fully replace existing modalities through which land and property markets operate in Andhra (as across India), which depend on interpersonal relations and social networks based on connections of caste, kinship, or village. Although their objective was to cut out intermediaries and enhance transparency in the market, an official admitted that the app was still not widely used:

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> Most people are still using the services of brokers in the traditional manner to sell plots. This is because the broker is the crucial person for bringing together prospective buyers and sellers, for negotiating the price and for handling all the paperwork. But some brokers use this application for their work.

Nonetheless, the Mana Amaravati app became an essential tool for LP farmers, several of whom demonstrated its functions to me on their smartphones, easily pulling up maps and lists of allottees. Venkateswara Rao seemed to be very impressed by this technology, demonstrating how to click on a plot to find its coordinates, the name of the owner, and other details. The app perhaps helped to concretize the future for farmers who had given up their land in exchange for these inchoate and risky assets. Images of the new layouts and plots, capital region maps, and digital property records were now easily accessible online, replacing the dusty and crumbling files that previously guarded one's land rights.

The close engagement of LP farmers with these digital technologies also helped to erase older meanings of land and disseminate the idea that real estate was now a financial asset like stocks and bonds. The prices that digitized Amaravati plots commanded in the market were determined by several factors, but features such as location, potential for development, or the surrounding landscape were barely relevant. The market for Amaravati plots, in turn, closely tracked the progress (or anticipated progress) of the new capital project.

Circulating Futures

As discussed above, a market for the reconstituted plots emerged soon after they were allotted (Figure 6.4). Although the planned layouts were still little more than fallow agricultural fields, unmarked and not even leveled, prices shot up to as much as 40,000 rupees (575 US dollars) per square yard at the peak in 2019. These rates for undeveloped land were higher than those found in most cities and regional towns of Andhra.

As prices rose, many LP farmers sold one or several of their plots to realize quick gains. Many of the buyers were "outside investors," especially NRIs who were enthusiastic about owning property (and perhaps even living) in the future city. But ordinary middle-class people from Vijayawada and other towns of the state, as well as Andhra natives living in other regions of India, also bought small plots in the expectation that prices would escalate as the city

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Figure 6.4. Advertisement for "New Singapore Amaravati Real Estate" brokers. Photograph by Carol Upadhya.

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Figure 6.5. Potential investors identifying plots on a layout plan. Photograph by Carol Upadhya.

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developed (Figure 6.5). Several investors even sold properties in Vijayawada to raise cash to invest in Amaravati, according to Sudhir. Large developers and local builders began to purchase the larger commercial plots or propose joint development arrangements to owners, hoping to start real estate projects in Amaravati.

Two key demands put forth by the LP farmer lobby suggest that their main interest was to realize substantial returns from land pooling through the sale of the compensation plots. First, they asked the government to waive stamp duty (tax on property transactions) on the first sale of a plot. The government conceded this demand, issuing an order that this tax (normally 7.5 percent of the sale value) would not be charged if the plot is sold within five years of allotment, provided the land had been pooled prior to June 2014 (keeping speculators and recent investors out of the purview of this exemption). The second request was that the sale of Amaravati plots should be exempt from capital gains tax, a demand to which the government also agreed.

However, the market was dull at first because not many LP farmers were offering plots for sale. When we first met him in 2016, Sudhir complained: "There is demand but no supply." "If a thousand people want to buy, only 100 to 200 are ready to sell." He claimed to have about a hundred customers interested in purchasing plots in the size range of 120 to 220 sq. yd. and who were willing to spend 30 lakhs. "It doesn't matter to them where the plots are—most don't even know where in the capital region plots are available." But some investors cared about location:

> Right now, the most demand is for plots at Lingayapalem, where the proposed business district is to come up … Everyone thought that UDpalem would be the center of the capital, but now we know it is Rayapudi, so demand for plots at Rayapudi has gone up.

"Srinivas," a prominent Vijayawada builder, believed that the market was sluggish because many potential buyers had already purchased land in the capital area before land pooling took place. Moreover, because land prices were already very high in Rajdhani, it would be a "waste" to purchase plots whose value was unlikely to rise further. Pointing to the speculative nature of this market, he remarked: "Already the going rate is 20,000 to 30,000 rupees per square yard, or 2 crore per acre. So how can you make money by buying now?" In contrast, Sudhir was upbeat about the market, which needed only an "initial jump" to take off. He believed that demand would grow as government employees began moving to the new capital region. When asked about the riskiness of these investments, he explained:

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> In Vijayawada the price of land is around 80,000 rupees per square yard, while in Lingayapalem it is 17,000. Where else would one invest? There is no alternative—people who want to invest 20 to 30 lakhs have few avenues. People here don't invest in financial markets. Compared to the low interest rates on bank deposits, a decent investment in real estate would give 24 percent return per annum.

But he conceded that "there is a risk to any property investment."

The government was concerned about managing this market so that prices did not balloon through speculation or slump due to oversupply. A CRDA official pointed out that fifteen thousand acres of land was being returned to the farmers in the form of reconstituted plots, and if all the plots were to come into the market at the same time, it would collapse:

> It's a good thing that farmers have the holding capacity—it's good for farmers and good for the real estate market. We are advising farmers not to sell their plots because this is where all the new houses in the city will have to be built. CRDA doesn't have any additional land for residential development. Value addition will take place only when farmers hold onto their plots and develop them.

To control the market, the government initially delayed the registration of plots. Although there were informal ways in which the Amaravati plots could be sold without registration, most buyers were interested only in plots with all the required paperwork completed.

After registration of plots was opened in September 2017 the market picked up, with plots selling at 10,000 to 25,000 rupees per square yard. "People from all over are interested in investing here—there are buyers from Vijayawada but also from outside," said Sudhir. But he could not cater to the demand: "Not even 10 percent of the plots are for sale. Only those who need money right now are selling." Sudhir believed that farmers were holding their plots because they expected the rates to rise. Another reason was that farmers did not know how to invest the large sums of money the plots would yield: "If they sell a plot they will have to invest the money elsewhere, but it's only in the capital region that prices are decent Also, now everyone is buying in white instead of using cash." A CRDA official corroborated this view:

> Most farmers are not in a hurry to sell or develop their plots because they want to keep them for their children. Land values are rising and so they will wait to do something with their plots. Also, most farmers have already sold some land. A ten-acre guy would have sold two to three acres, so they don't need money.

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By mid-2017, only 100 out of the 63,000 plots allotted had been registered, which suggests that few plots had changed hands. But Srinivas (the Vijayawada builder) was optimistic about the Amaravati real estate market. "Plots are selling at 25,000 rupees per square yard, equivalent to Vijayawada prices, which equals 2.5 crore per acre." When I asked if the value of Amaravati plots might go down, he replied:

> Like anything else, it's a risk. If the central government doesn't give funds for infrastructure, what can we do? But it cannot go backwards now. Transactions are happening in Amaravati. Prices will go up. People are buying for themselves, and industries are buying plots and holding them.

In January 2018, I found that the price of plots had increased by 20 to 30 percent due to continued restricted supply coupled with heavy demand—reaching 30,000 rupees per square yard for commercial and 25,000 for residential plots in central locations:

> Amaravati is the only place today in Andhra Pradesh where the price of land has been constantly spiraling upwards … The land market in Amaravati is a sellers' market. In a month we receive 200 to 300 queries for plots. Of these, around 30 percent are from NRIs, and the remaining come from other places. Of the non-NRIs, 50 to 60 percent are from Krishna and Guntur Districts, Vijayawada, and other nearby places, and the remaining from Hyderabad and other cities.

Thus, although the Amaravati project failed to attract substantial foreign capital investments, other transnational flows (from NRIs) buoyed the market for plots.

I asked Sudhir's colleague Rohith why people would be interested in buying land in a city not yet built. He explained with an analogy: "If there is a rumor going around that salt will be in short supply, people will purchase and hoard salt. By the same logic, people are investing in plots while they are still available." Their customers were looking for plots in the core capital and seed capital areas, which are likely to have higher valuations in the future. Moreover, "Vijayawada is already very congested. Eventually people will have to come here." He continued:

> Chandrababu Naidu has the vision to develop the capital city. People are buying in Rajdhani just because of Naidu, who is iconic for them … This will be a modern city. Real estate in Guntur will go down and already the market in Vijayawada is dull.

By early 2019 the market had finally taken off, with prices shooting up to 45,000 rupees per square yard in central areas such as Rayapudi.

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In February 2019, around 5,300 plots had been sold according to official figures, or 10 percent of the total. But Rohith estimated that the actual number of sales was even higher—he believed that about one-fourth of all plots had changed hands. He also confirmed that many NRIs were still buying:

> They are investing money they earned abroad, and it's all in white. Demand is good and prices have gone up. People think that if the current government continues, the land prices may go up further, so it's better to buy now.

New Sub-Registrar offices were opened across the capital region to manage the demand for registering the sale of plots.[4]

Not surprisingly, a major topic of conversation in the Rajdhani villages between 2017 and 2019 concerned the prevailing rates for the Amaravati plots, especially as they surpassed property prices in many urban areas of the state. To my questions about the market, my interlocutors would reel off the current rates for plots in different villages, figures on how many plots had been sold, and so on. To LP farmers, the fact that many "outside investors" were purchasing plots was proof of public confidence in the Amaravati project, creating an atmosphere of optimism. A rise in plot prices indicated that the city was developing as planned, while stagnating or falling values were a sign that the project was in trouble. For those who pooled their land, the market for plots, like the progress of infrastructure development, became a key indicator of their own future possibilities. The lively market for Amaravati plots reinforced their commitment to Rajdhani while deepening the contradictions of their position as holders of abstract financial assets.

However, LP farmers were aware of the uncertainties of this market, which is why their main concern was that the new layouts should be quickly completed. Equally important, they believed that the plots would not remain in digital form forever: once the land surveys and physical demarcation of the layouts were finished, their properties would also attain a physical existence like any other kind of real estate, solidifying their value.

Rematerializing Assets

The planned rematerialization of the reconstituted plots as concrete pieces of property did not proceed smoothly. The processes of land survey and physical marking of the reconstituted plots on the ground, known as "peg-marking," were hampered by technical

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problems and disputes between CRDA and plot owners. These difficulties stemmed in part from CRDA's decision to use remote sensing to determine the exact geographical coordinates of each plot, instead of the manual survey methods usually employed. In this section, I describe the survey process in some detail to highlight the frictions between the digital technology utilized in mapping the new properties and the social adhesions and materialities that continue to mark agricultural land.

At the start of the planning process, CRDA prepared maps of all the capital region villages by overlaying satellite images with cadastral maps obtained from the Revenue Department, creating base maps that were used to create the Detailed Amaravati Master Plan—including the residential layouts. To physically demarcate the layouts and the returnable plots within them, the plans had to be "relayed" onto the ground using DGPS (Differential Global Positioning System) machines with a satellite link. "Murthy," a senior official in CRDA's land survey department, explained that the Survey of India had established six benchmark points in the capital city area. The coordinates of these points are fed into the rover machine used by the field operator conducting the land survey to generate "very precise DGPS [Differential Global Positioning System] coordinates" of selected points for every plot. Based on these coordinates, the surveyors install 4x4-inch stones or "pegs" to mark the boundaries of the plots (Figure 6.6). The coordinates of the plots were made available on the Mana Amaravati app and the CRDA website.

However, the processes of ground survey and peg-marking were delayed by several issues. First, peg-marking cannot be carried out until the land is cleared and leveled, and this work was hindered in most villages by disputes over land acquisition, financial constraints, and other problems. Second, pending objections to the plot allocation process and other issues raised by LP farmers had to be resolved before the survey could proceed. The third and perhaps most important obstacle was that the switch from manual survey methods to a remote sensing system created discrepancies in the size of the allocated plots, which were immediately noticed by the plot owners. Numerous objections were filed by LP farmers claiming that the coordinates of the physical plots did not correspond to what was given in the plot certificates, in terms of size, shape, or location. This conflict illustrates how land's "stubborn materialities" may confound purportedly accurate and transparent digital technologies (Sippel 2023).

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Figure 6.6. Residential layout under construction. Photograph by Carol Upadhya.

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The most frequent complaint by plot owners was that the size of the physical plots marked during the ground survey did not match what they had been allotted. Sudhir explained: "For instance, you have chosen a 600 sq. yd. plot, but what you get after peg-marking is 590 sq. yd. In Nelapadu, farmers noticed the deviation in plot size and raised a fuss." According to Venkateswara Rao, the explanation given by CRDA for these discrepancies was that the number of decimal places used in the measurements differs across different records and systems, producing variations in the areas of plots. Murthy explained that the dimensions of the plots in the app were rounded off to the nearest value at two decimal points, whereas the actual coordinates have many more digits. "This is why farmers believe they are getting smaller plots than what they were allocated," he said, but "what matters is only the DGPS coordinates and nothing else." "A machine can never make errors, but man can!" he confidently declared. According to Murthy, this variation could also be caused by the way the holes for planting the boundary stones are dug, which should be exactly one foot in diameter with the peg placed in the center. "If the peg is off center, inaccuracies may occur." Further, he suggested that farmers may be using a tape measure incorrectly to determine the dimensions of the plot based on the stones, producing what they mistakenly believe to be errors. Murthy staunchly defended the GPS system as the most reliable way to convert the immaterial plots into material pieces of property.

In addition, Murthy pointed out that the plot selection brochure did not provide for every possible dimension or shape of plot:

> While preparing the layouts on the ground, it is not possible for CRDA to guarantee farmers that they will be allotted plots of their choice of measurements. The area of the plot will be the same as that selected, but the length and breadth measurements may vary. This is because of the complexity of creating layouts with all the plot sizes requested.

Yet LP farmers expected to receive plots of the exact dimensions they had selected.

Another obstacle faced by the CRDA survey department was that the maps produced by the GPS system had to be correlated with the cadastral maps linked to existing land records—a difficult proposition given the age and complexity of the land records, the numerous disputes around land titles and the boundaries of plots, and the use of divergent systems of measurement. A major technical problem, according to Murthy, was to resolve discrepancies between survey documents and on-ground measurements in the extent of land in a

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particular holding (identified by survey number). In addition, they often encountered a mismatch between survey numbers in the land records and those in the survey reports due to errors in the documentation. These existing ambiguities and inconsistencies could not be simply erased or sidestepped by the new GPS-based survey, but had to be untangled and resolved before the plots and layouts could be finalized on the ground.

Reconstituting Citizenship

The conversion of agricultural land into urban plots created an uncertain future for families that pooled their land, which they gradually learned to navigate both by negotiating with the state and engaging with the new property market. LP farmers delved into the technicalities of land development, financial management, and taxation, devising careful strategies to manage their (now often large) portfolios of property, cash, and other forms of wealth that had ballooned from selling land during the boom period.

An important element of these financial strategies were decisions about selling or holding onto their plots. Many LP farmers sold one or two plots early to realize some financial value from land pooling, while keeping the rest in anticipation of higher prices in future. A CRDA official observed that the "NRI factor" enabled LP farmers to strategize in this way. According to him, many Kamma LP farmers are "financially sound" because their children are working abroad, so they were not in a hurry to realize the value of their plots. Also, he believed that their "NRI sons" had advised them to hold onto the plots. "Farmers here are well informed about the real estate market. In fact, they are more knowledgeable than many of us."

Although many landholders sold several of their compensation plots when the market was at its peak, most retained one or two prime sites for their own use. When asked what they planned to do with those plots, they talked about constructing modern houses in these well-designed layouts, where they would enjoy the kinds of urban amenities that villages lack such as parks and wide roads with proper drainage. While several LP farmers anticipated moving out of their villages to live in their new homes in Amaravati, others said that these properties were intended "for their children to enjoy" because the city would take many years to develop.

The current and expected market rates for the Amaravati plots were at the center of LP farmers' narratives about development,

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yet their value for them was not only financial. Most of my interlocutors spoke about the compensation plots as family property in a new form, which (like their agrarian land) would provide economic security for their children. Agricultural land passed down from their forefathers (which is regarded under Hindu family law as "ancestral property" that belongs to all legal heirs) had been transformed into another form of property, yet it retained some of its former affective and cultural value. As assets that preserve and transmit a family's social status, the compensation plots were invested with similar significance, representing the continuation of their families and their ties to their ancestral villages into the future, even as they were reconstituted as urban properties.

The market value of the reconstituted plots, as well as the visible pace of infrastructure development, came to serve as key signifiers of an imagined urban future. Although the narratives of LP farmers point to expectations of a comfortable and prosperous future, building on value that was generated from their land through sale and pooling, they acknowledged that it would take many years for these developments to materialize and that their children were more likely to benefit from these properties than themselves. The affective charge that land held even after this transformation was evident in the emotion with which several farmers spoke about their property after the market crashed in 2019 (chapter 7).

Thus, in Amaravati we see a convergence of "modern" urban middle-class propertied citizenship (Donner 2022) with an older, agrarian form of social identity grounded in land and caste. The value of land for agricultural households, as the core of their social existence that ties them to the past and allows their reproduction into the future, was transferred to the reconstituted plots (cf. Verdery 2003). Although most plots would eventually be sold, the wealth gained from these transactions would also form part of the family's store of wealth, held in trust for future generations. Thus, the embedding of caste power and accumulated wealth in land was reproduced through land pooling, even as its forms and meanings were altered.

* * *

In this chapter, I outlined the technologies and procedures through which agricultural land was converted into abstract financial assets that could circulate online in a global market. The Amaravati plots are financial assets in the sense that their value was based on the anticipation of future income streams (or higher market values). They are also speculative assets because their future value depended entirely

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on the realization of the promised future that is Amaravati—a future that became increasingly uncertain as time went on. These fictive properties moved into transnational circuits of exchange, impelled by a new urban imaginary, their prices escalating sharply as they became objects of speculation by various investors from the region and far beyond.

This transformation points to the new pathways of accumulation that are created by land-intensive mega-projects such as Amaravati, as property rights in agrarian land are converted into digitized assets that can produce substantial value only through circulation, and which can do so despite the absence of concrete physical attributes and spatial correlates on the ground. Yet, as discussed above, many LP farmers still imagined the reconstituted plots as solid properties that would secure the future of their families. Although the meanings of the new plots drew on an older caste logic of property and status, they also stood for the future—a new form of property encapsulated in a different regime of value.

For LP farmers and other investors, the Amaravati plots were bearers of financial value as well as the anticipated urban future, as their market price fluctuated with the fortunes of the project. But the speculative nature of the reconstituted plots became starkly visible following the 2019 election, when the YSRCP government virtually abandoned the Amaravati project, leading to the collapse of the market. This development made it abundantly clear that the inherent risks of the project had been transferred mainly to those who had pooled their land, who now faced radical uncertainty about the future.

However, LP farmers' work of producing and claiming property over the five years of the land pooling process had forged a new form of citizenship and reconfigured their relationship with the state. Their sense of ownership and investment in the future city fostered collective mobilization around Rajdhani as a symbol of regional pride as well as the future development of the state. After the collapse of the project, the political bloc of LP farmers converted their collective commitment to the project into the Save Amaravati movement, as I elaborate in the next chapter.

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Notes

1. Data on allotment of plots is available on the APCRDA website: https://crda.ap.gov.in/apcrdav2/UserInterface/Registrations/Dashboard/Dashboard.aspx.
2. For most residential plots in Amaravati, planning norms limit construction to single-story houses, or at most two floors on the larger plots, while on the larger villa plots construction up to four floors is permitted.
3. The APCRDA Act stipulates that the reconstituted plots are alienable, an essential feature of freehold property.
4. In June 2024, the official figure for plot registrations was 43,669 out of the 64,764 plots allotted, or about two-thirds of the total. See: https://crda.ap.gov.in/apcrdav2/views/Dashboard/Dashboard.aspx#plotregidata.

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— Chapter 7 —

Saving Amaravati



In the elections that were held in Andhra Pradesh in April 2019, the Telugu Desam Party was soundly defeated by the YSR Congress Party, led by Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, which came to power with a huge majority on the back of its promises of "*Navaratna*"— "nine jewels" or social welfare schemes. Almost from the start, "Jagan" made it clear that he had no plans to complete Chandrababu Naidu's "dream city." Almost all infrastructure work was halted or slowed, and investment agreements were canceled. As construction work stalled, Rajdhani was transformed into a desolate landscape, transected by unfinished roads and dotted with the skeletons of half-constructed buildings (Figure 7.1)—representing the "ruins of an anticipated future" (Appel, Anand, and Gupta 2018: 27). However, this denouement galvanized LP farmers, who had the most to lose from the abandonment of the Amaravati project.

In this chapter, I follow the fate of Rajdhani from 2019 to 2024, focusing on the "Save Amaravati" movement that challenged the new government's decisions and agitated for the revival of the project. The first section describes the responses of LP farmers and other stakeholders to the abandonment of the project, leading to the crystallization of the movement, which is discussed in section 2. The third section explores the legal strategies that were pursued by LP farmers, which hinged on their rights as propertied citizens and the claim that the state had made an inviolable contract with them. Section 4 turns to the public forms of protest deployed by the movement, especially the two "*Maha Padayatras*" (grand protest marches, literally "journey by foot") organized to garner political support for their cause, and their invocation of religious imagery. The fifth section explores the

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Figure 7.1. Unfinished apartment buildings in Amaravati. Photograph by Carol Upadhya.

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leading role of women in the Save Amaravati movement, impelled by their sense of responsibility to their families and future generations. The final section brings the Amaravati story up to the state election of 2024 that returned Chandrababu Naidu to power and reflects on the wider political implications of the battle for Amaravati.

The Future in Ruins

"Everything is going backwards now."

Following the change of government in Andhra Pradesh in April 2019, the state administration, Legislative Assembly, and the High Court continued to function from the temporary buildings that had been erected in Amaravati.[1] But most other projects—key infrastructure such as roads and pipelines and the residential complexes for government officials—were halted or delayed. The government cited the poor financial condition of the state exchequer for its inability to continue work on several large projects that were already underway. Most damaging to the prospect that Rajdhani would ever be completed, loans that had been expected from the World Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank were withdrawn in July 2019. In November 2019, the Singapore consortium that had agreed to build the flagship Startup Area of the new capital also pulled out (chapter 2).

Signaling its clear intention to drastically scale down the Amaravati plan, the state government announced its decision to promote "decentralized development" in the state by distributing government functions across three sites (and three regions of the state), instead of concentrating all branches in one place. The "three capitals" bill, introduced in the Legislative Assembly in January 2020, proposed to locate the executive branch in Visakhapatnam (in the northern coastal region of the state), the legislature at Amaravati, and the High Court in Kurnool (in the Rayalaseema region). Another bill to disband APCRDA was tabled at the same time.[2] Both bills were passed by the state legislature and signed into law in July 2020. The "three capitals plan" and the decision to wind up CRDA triggered widespread protests by TDP supporters and farmers who had pooled their land. Protest marches to the Legislative Assembly and other demonstrations met with severe police repression and the arrest of many protestors (Nagaraju 2020).

When I returned to Andhra Pradesh for the first time after the election, in November 2019, my interlocutors amongst the LP farmers

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were deeply dejected and angry about this turn of events. But they had already started organizing to challenge the government's plans, especially by filing petitions in the Andhra Pradesh High Court. Venkateswara Rao, the former village head and leader of an Amaravati farmers' organization, lamented:

> They are supposed to make a world-class city. All investments have come in because of this. NRIs and others have all invested looking at the infrastructure that will come. On that promise we had given our lands for pooling on a low package. Now who will come here?

Uncertainty about the future of Amaravati led to the collapse of the property market. Demand for Amaravati plots had dried up and prices nosedived after the election, erasing most of the value that the reconstituted plots had gained. Venkateswara Rao complained: "Over the last six months, only one or two plots were sold in this village. And the price went down from 40,000 to 20,000 per square yard. Real estate brokers too are suffering. No one expected this situation to arise." Moreover, most of the rental apartments built in the Rajdhani villages were now empty, as Ramakrishna explained: "Nothing is happening here, all work on the capital project has stopped, engineers have all been transferred out. Small contractors have also left. So, five hundred houses are lying vacant."

Several interlocutors spoke about the big companies that had backed out from planned projects, citing their lack of trust in "Jagan" (as he is popularly known): "Things are very bad. There has been only backward movement. All companies are leaving—Adani, L&T, Reliance, Ascendas, have all gone back. Farmers are now thinking, why did I give up my land?" Venkateswara Rao elaborated on the larger economic impact of these decisions:

> All the big [construction] companies, like L&T and SPCL, have lost out because of this and will never undertake any work in Andhra Pradesh now. Even the Adani group has left. A lot of foreign investment was supposed to come in, from NRIs to big companies, now everything is going to Hyderabad. This fall in revenue will affect all the districts, not only this place. People are investing elsewhere, so land prices and revenues are increasing there and crashing here.

LP farmers were also very bitter about how they were being treated by the new government, taking it as a personal insult stemming from caste rivalry:

> The government is not giving appointments to capital area farmers when we request a meeting. We have given our land, now we have to run around to be

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> heard. No company that was working in Amaravati is being heard. Even the L&T top guy said you cannot get answers from the government. A Bangalore businessman said that now there is only "terrorism" in AP.

According to Venkateswara Rao, the government was also refusing to clear contractors' bills: "NGO [Non-Gazetted Officer] Quarters, Class IV Employees Quarters, MLA Quarters—all these projects are 70 percent finished, but contractors have not been paid for their work." This allegation was confirmed by Ashok, who had a CRDA contract worth 60 lakhs to carry out road work in his village but had not been paid: "If we had known Chandrababu would lose the election, we would not have taken up this work. I borrowed money to execute the contract, now I have to pay interest on that loan."

Illustrating the adverse financial impact of these developments on LP farmers, Ashok explained his own predicament:

> I sold land to construct this house and pay off my debts. There is no money left from that land. I was living on rental income, but now there is no income except the annuity from the government. Right now, I am not in debt, but going forward how will I run the show? There is no other source of income now.

Krishna Rao too was very downcast:

> Our property is now valueless. Our problem now is how to get money—for children's education, health care, and so on. How can we protect our ambitions? Here rich and poor are the same in this respect—both are suffering. There is no income, no way to raise money. People need to understand this.

Ramakrishna observed:

> ADCL used to chase the contractors to get the work done. Now after this government has come, things have literally died. Till today Jagan has not uttered the word "Amaravati." He refuses to use the word. The state has gone backwards by fifteen years.

These narratives suggest that for LP farmers, the linear temporality of infrastructure had been reversed and time was now going "backward" because of the new government's policies.

LP farmers attributed these decisions to Jagan's hatred for Kammas and the TDP. Venkateswara Rao asserted that the three capitals plan was not about fostering equitable development in the state but was driven by Jagan's desire for "revenge" against them: "Most lands in those areas [chosen under the three capitals plan] belong to Reddys. Jagan wants to create a loss for Kammas and benefit Reddys." Krishna Rao remarked: "Jagan has enmity toward Chandrababu and

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our caste. He wants to get rid of the TDP entirely." To emphasize the venality of Jagan and the YSRCP, LP farmers regaled us with stories of corruption and scandal, detailing the various government decisions that had created economic havoc in the state such as the sand mining issue.[3] In commenting on the harm he was doing to the state, my Kamma interlocutors frequently attributed Jagan's actions to his "factionalist mindset":[4]

> People who were planning to invest are backing out now, not only from the capital but also from the rest of the state. This fellow [Jagan] is not letting anyone come and do anything. [Why doesn't he want investments to come to the state?] This is the factionalist mentality. Also, he always asks for bribes.

Similar views of YSRCP and Jagan were voiced by Vijayawada businesspeople and urban middle-class and elite Kammas, who universally viewed the government's moves as motivated by "revenge" against them. When I met Sudhir, the Vijayawada real estate broker, in November 2019 he was a picture of gloom. He told me that farmers wanted to sell their plots but there were no buyers. "Unless the government commits to developing the layouts as planned, nothing will happen. Plus, there are rumors that they will shift the capital. So, everything is in limbo." Since the market for Amaravati plots had "died," Sudhir had started dealing in Vijayawada properties. He continued:

> Everything has come to a standstill because of this government's policies. He is a sadistic man, this is nothing but revenge … He doesn't want to touch anything that is associated with Naidu, that is why the Singapore project was not allowed to go ahead. Even apartment prices in Vijayawada are down 20 to 30 percent. NRIs are not buying now. Everyone is losing trust. Now no one will have faith in government, because whatever one government does can just be undone by the next one. They are screwing up badly … This could have been a well-planned city.

Sudhir claimed that "one lakh" people had "gone back" to Hyderabad, Vizag, and other places after the election, depressing the rental market. "Those who came to do real estate business have also left. Many had come from Hyderabad to do projects. But Hyderabad is now booming—it's the only place where something is happening." Echoing the views of Kamma LP farmers, he continued: "Jagan is killing Amaravati and everything else. Everything has stopped moving … Naidu knew how to rotate the wheel and spin money out of it." Sudhir was very bitter: "My only wish now is that he [Jagan] will go to jail—gets what he deserves."[5]

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Rama Rao, the marketing manager of a Hyderabad-based real estate company that initiated a large mixed-use project on the Vijayawada–Guntur highway, also spoke about the collapse of the property market in the vicinity of Rajdhani after the election. Many customers who had booked apartments were now asking for their money back:

> Buyers have bought apartments here because of Amaravati. With Amaravati uncertain, why should they invest here? We are trying to assure them that things will get better in due course. But we have also delayed the work because of the sand issue—we had no choice!

Because of this situation, his company was "going slow" on all their ventures in Andhra Pradesh and focusing instead on projects in Hyderabad. According to Rama Rao, the general feeling in the business community was that the YSRCP government would not provide a supportive environment for investment in Andhra. "After this, no entrepreneur will start a project here. When they invest, it's for the long term regardless of who is in the government. Governments may change but they are still responsible for earlier deals."

Local businesspeople also castigated the YSRCP government for its focus on implementing the promised welfare schemes, directing government funds to support the poor while failing to pursue policies that would attract investors to the state. The following remarks by the president of a real estate association in Vijayawada illustrate a key ideological difference between the YSR Congress Party's traditional focus on social welfare and redistribution (Elliott 2011) and the TDP's neoliberal commitment to fostering economic development through capital investment:

> It is wrong to link politics with development. Jagan's strategy is to just give freebies so people will elect him … But you have to do something for the state, you can't do only welfare schemes. Businesspeople will go away to other states to start their ventures … Amaravati is centrally located … this could become an educational hub, then people would migrate here, NRIs would send money and buy flats. But with no activity and the threat of moving the capital out from here, the real estate market has fallen … This state will become another Bihar.

This atmosphere of anger and dismay congealed into the Save Amaravati movement, which was supported not only by farmers who had pooled their land and people who had invested in Rajdhani, but also by the local business community, provincial capital, the Andhra diaspora, and the regional urban middle classes.

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Mobilizing the Capital

The strong support of LP farmers, the business community, and others for Rajdhani and their feelings of betrayal by the new government were leveraged into political mobilization in the form of the Save Amaravati movement. They formed associations to raise funds for the cause and organized public protests, representing their movement as a fight for "farmers' rights." Their main contention was that the government was legally and morally bound to honor its agreement with farmers who had "sacrificed" their land for the future of the state. Public statements by movement leaders and the language of their court filings clearly conveyed LP farmers' sense of ownership of the project, invoked their rights as property owners, and framed the decisions of the state government as unethical and illegal.

In November 2019, Ramakrishna explained the ways in which they were organizing collectively to fight against the government's decisions. They had formed an association of LP farmers and asked members to contribute money in proportion to the amount of land they had pooled. They planned to use these funds to file legal cases against the government, hiring top-notch lawyers to handle them. He also mentioned that several Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) politicians (formerly with TDP) were supporting their cause. Gesturing to their strong political connections, he revealed:

> We also met Venkaiah Naidu.[6] He assured us indirectly that he will do what he can at his level and advised us to continue with our work here. We will meet [Prime Minister] Modi and [Home Minister] Amit Shah by the end of the month. We will tell Modi, "You laid the foundation stone for this capital so you can't just let it die!" We will explain that the government requested us to give our land and we agreed, and that we have an agreement that the government should honor. If they say there is no money, our response will be that the state has so much land, they should monetize it to develop this place. If this doesn't work, we will approach the courts. We have legal agreements with the government!

Although the Save Amaravati movement was framed as a "farmers' movement," its objectives and ideology were very different from the highly visible farmers' protests that were taking place in north India around the same time (2020–21), paralyzing Delhi as hundreds of thousands of farmers blocked roads into the city. The Delhi blockade was to protest three new "farm laws" introduced by the central government that aimed to liberalize agricultural markets and facilitate the corporatization of agriculture. Farmers from Punjab,

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Haryana, and other rich agricultural regions believed that these laws would undermine their livelihoods and the viability of agriculture, leading to a massive agitation. This protest, which continued for over a year, finally forced Narendra Modi's government to repeal the controversial laws (Baviskar and Levien 2021).

When I asked Krishna Rao his opinion of the farmers' movement in Delhi, he responded: "They [farmers from Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh] are against corporates coming into agriculture, but here in Andhra we welcome them!"[7] This remark encapsulates key differences between farmers in most regions of India and those of Coastal Andhra, illustrating the latter's relative openness to the corporatization of agriculture and other "neoliberal" policies—an attitude that even extended to surrendering their land for a greenfield city project. Before pooling his land, Krishna Rao had been a dedicated banana grower, deeply involved in propagating organic farming and running a farmers' marketing organization for organic produce. With the advent of Rajdhani, he gave up his farm and became a leader of the LP farmers and later of the Save Amaravati movement.

Although Save Amaravati contrasted diametrically with other farmers' movements that have crystallized in India over several decades, in that it aimed not to sustain agriculture and agrarian livelihoods but to realize the financial value of their land, it projected itself as a movement of farmers. To signify their agrarian identity, protestors sported green headgear and scarves and carried green flags during marches and demonstrations. Highlighting the sacrifice of their agricultural land for the good of the state, they argued that the government was obliged to uphold its commitment to them under the land pooling scheme, which they framed as a contract that could not be simply abrogated because the government had changed hands (as in the narratives of the businessmen cited above). These assertions reflect the reconfiguration of their relationship with the state as a contractual and transactional one based on property ownership. The "farmers' movement" of Amaravati thus stemmed from a very different orientation to land and cultivators' (often reluctant) acceptance of a post-agrarian future.

The Save Amaravati movement was spearheaded mainly by two organizations, Rajadhani Rythu Parirakshana Samithi (RRPS, Rajdhani Farmers Protection Society), whose members were mainly land pooling farmers, and the Amaravati Joint Action Committee (JAC), representing the business community and led by real estate developers from Vijayawada and Hyderabad (elements of provincial capital that had much to lose from the demise of the project).

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These two associations coordinated in organizing events and raising funds, which were spent mainly on legal interventions. RRPS collected 8,000 rupees per acre of land pooled from their members, but they also received substantial (but mostly anonymous) donations from various investors and supporters—especially affluent Kamma businesspeople and NRIs.

The composition of the movement revealed the diverse business and political interests that were invested in the Amaravati project, as funds flowed into the organizations' coffers from across India and abroad and top lawyers from Delhi and Hyderabad offered their services free of charge. Krishna Rao, a leader of RRPS, said in January 2022: "JAC is all businesspeople, while our group consists of farmers. But there is no conflict between us. We are doing everything collectively, like organizing the padayatra, because everyone is suffering. Otherwise, we couldn't have gotten this far." They had raised nearly 6 crore rupees to cover the legal expenses for the many court cases they had filed, which included many donations from NRI relatives of the farmers. Krishna Rao stressed that donations and expenditure by the organization were completely transparent:

> Everything is done only through bank transactions or check payment—even large donations—otherwise we will be harassed [by the state]. From outside also, NRIs and others have donated through bank transfers—they have given one crore in total. Also, people from outside who bought land here have donated money.

The protestors registered two separate organizations as eligible to receive donations, to ensure that if the activities of one were to be blocked by the government the other could still function.

To my query about how they went about fundraising, Krishna Rao gestured to the social capital of caste and their ties to place that facilitated the collective mobilization of LP farmers: "We are all from these villages, we all know each other. It is through mutual understanding." They had created WhatsApp groups to spread the word and set up "committees" in every village to run the campaign:

> Every village has a finance committee, a legal committee, a food committee, and so on, for the movement. We have formed a very good network. We put up protest camps especially at well-connected villages on the main road like Krishnayapalem, Mandadam, Thullur, and Velagapudi.

He acknowledged that residents of Penumaka, Undavalli, and Nidamarru had stayed out of the movement, explaining that these are "Reddy villages under the grip of their MLA, Ramakrishna

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Reddy" (who belonged to the YSRCP and represented Mangalagiri constituency). Even Reddy farmers of those villages who had pooled their land were not coming to the protests because they were afraid of being harassed, according to Krishna Rao. But large Kamma landowners who had refused to pool their land had joined the movement "because they hate Jagan."

When I asked if they were receiving funds from the TDP, Krishna Rao stressed that Save Amaravati should not be seen as a "party movement," although the party was behind them:

> We are supported internally by TDP, but not outwardly. In fact, all parties are supporting the movement, but from outside. Without their help, we couldn't have done it. You need some knowledge and experience to organize such movements, to catch the minds of the people. I believe most people have sympathy for us. They think, why is this fellow [Jagan] doing this? But out of fear they might not say anything. I think we will have good days in the near future.

On the Terrain of the Law

Like many social movements, Save Amaravati combined public demonstrations of protest with appeals to the courts and the law—reflecting the increasing "judicialization" of popular politics across the world. Protest movements by subaltern groups often deploy both modes of struggle in tandem, reorienting their strategies in response to political currents.[8] But the Save Amaravati movement—in many ways the inverse of a subaltern struggle—advanced its cause mainly on the terrain of the law.[9] The campaign organized public protests along with media campaigns to create wider awareness about their struggle as a way of putting pressure on the government, but it concentrated its efforts in the courts.

LP farmers filed numerous petitions in the Andhra Pradesh High Court, challenging the legislation that had been passed to sidetrack the Amaravati project and contesting government decisions that diluted the master plan. The central argument of these legal cases was that by accepting their land, the government had made binding legal agreements with farmers that could not be nullified. They asserted that the state had formed an irrevocable contract with the farmers who had pooled their land, one that must be honored and enforced by the court regardless of any laws or policy decisions promulgated by the new government. Importantly, the lawsuits argued that the agreements between LP farmers and the government could only be

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fulfilled if the Amaravati project is completed *exactly* as outlined in the master plan, rather than in some modified form (as proposed in the three capitals plan, for instance). Through these legal representations, LP farmers asserted their standing not only as rights-bearing citizens and property owners, but also as parties to a contract with the state.

With the flurry of petitions submitted to the High Court, the project soon became "entangled in a legal quagmire" (Sudhir 2022b). The court decided to club and hear all sixty-three petitions filed on the Amaravati issue together. A division bench of the High Court, which took up the matter in August 2020, ordered that the "status quo" be maintained while the cases were being heard, "effectively stopping the government's three-capitals plan in its tracks" (Sudhir 2022b). Various delays in hearing the cases ensued.[10] While the petitions were pending in the High Court, in November 2021 the YSRCP government suddenly repealed the two laws under contention to avoid strictures by the court. The Chief Minister told the Assembly that his government would soon introduce a more comprehensive bill to replace the two disputed bills. But the court cases went ahead, and the petitions were finally placed before a three-judge bench headed by Chief Justice Prashant Kumar Mishra. As in other social movements that have turned to the law for redress, much of the struggle involved a politics of "waiting" (Nielsen 2018: chapter 3) as the cases wound their way through the entrails of the judicial system.

LP farmers expressed immense faith in the judiciary and its capacity to redress the harms inflicted upon them by the YSRCP government—like other social movements that have (sometimes successfully) invoked the law in their struggles against the entrenched privileges of dominant groups or the state (Nielsen and Nilsen 2015; Nilsen, Nielsen, and Vaidya 2022). But as a movement representing property-owning rather than marginalized or dispossessed groups, the legal strategy of Save Amaravati invoked legal principles and rights that reinforced their dominant status even as they claimed to speak for all the people of Rajdhani (and the state).

When I visited the Rajdhani villages in January 2022 after a long hiatus (due to the Covid-19 lockdowns in India), my interlocutors still expressed confidence that the court would eventually rule in their favor. A senior farmer declared, "The law will save us." Their belief in justice was embodied in a newly created goddess, "*Nyayadevata* [Goddess of Justice]," whose idol was worshiped along with traditional deities at shrines set up in the protest camps.

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Ultimately, their faith in the judiciary was borne out. On 3 March 2022, in a major blow to the state government, the High Court ruled in favor of the farmers. The court directed the government to implement the Amaravati project in accordance with the master plan and reaffirmed an earlier ruling rejecting the "three capitals" plan. The judgment stated that the government could not just abandon the project after over 33,000 acres had been given by farmers and 15,000 crore rupees had been spent on the development of the city. The Chief Justice further ordered that Amaravati should be developed as the capital of the state, as planned under the original APCRDA Act, and directed the government to complete the required work within six months.[11]

Although the Amaravati farmers celebrated this important legal victory, the state government claimed that it did not have sufficient funds to comply with the order and continued to stall work on the project on various pretenses. In response, the protestors threatened to take the government to court again in civil cases to claim "damages" for the harm caused to them by the non-implementation of the project. They waited for six months—the time allowed by the High Court to complete the project—and then filed a contempt case against the government, to which it responded that it was impossible to complete the work within six months. "With elections coming in eighteen months, they are just stalling," remarked Venkateswara Rao.

On 17 September 2022, over six months after the High Court issued its decision, the state government approached the Supreme Court on the matter, filing a Special Leave Petition (SLP) challenging the High Court's order upholding Amaravati as the sole capital of Andhra Pradesh. The petition claimed that the order undermined the government's legislative competence to change the state's capital. The High Court order was stayed, pending examination of pertinent legal questions by a bench of the Supreme Court. Meanwhile, the Chief Minister announced that Visakhapatnam would become the new state capital, stirring up additional political controversies around the issue. The case remained unresolved when the Telugu Desam Party returned to power in June 2024 and Chandrababu Naidu declared his determination to develop Amaravati as the sole capital of the state, finally putting Jagan's "three capitals" idea to rest.

My interactions with LP farmers and their leaders during this period consisted mainly of long conversations about the various court cases: they provided details about what group of farmers had

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filed which case, the legal technicalities of each petition, the lawyers hired to argue the cases, and so on. Although none of these LP farmers were trained in law, they displayed a deep understanding of the various acts and ordinances pertaining to their claims—knowledge that they had absorbed during the land pooling process and later through their close involvement in the Save Amaravati movement. They closely followed the progress of the cases in court, keeping tabs on the proceedings and visiting the High Court whenever their petitions came up for hearing. The presence of (mostly elderly) men from across the Amaravati villages, dressed in traditional formal attire of rural elites—crisp white dhotis and long shirts embellished with green *kanduvaa* (scarves or shawls) draped on their shoulders—sitting patiently in the court galleries during hearings (although many could not follow the proceedings, which were conducted mainly in English), presented a striking image of their commitment to the struggle and their strong belief in the judicial process.

Sacralizing the Struggle

While advancing its cause in the courts, the Save Amaravati movement also engaged in direct mobilization—establishing protest camps in most CRDA villages, organizing rallies, and saturating news outlets and social media with their messages (Figure 7.2). These public demonstrations drew on longstanding forms of political performance in India more often associated with subaltern and mass movements. Despite their efforts to garner public support for their cause, the protestors had to battle the widespread impression that the movement only stood for the interests of property owners in the twenty-nine Amaravati villages and that they were not really oppressed farmers. In response, their main message to the wider public was that the Amaravati project was for the development of the whole state. Venkateswara Rao was resentful about the lack of support for their cause by people residing in other districts:

> Everyone is saying that only you people have benefited. But see, if I own four units [of land], I have given three to the state. Although that one unit is worth one crore, I have donated 3 crores to the people of Andhra Pradesh. So, the government has a duty to use that land and develop it for the people. How can you say only I am benefiting?

Despite their efforts at popular mobilization, the Save Amaravati movement did not gain traction at first beyond the affected Amaravati

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Figure 7.2. Protest camp in a Rajdhani village, with Buddha statue (symbol of Amaravati) in front. Photograph by Carol Upadhya.

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villages, nor did it receive much media attention outside Andhra Pradesh. In addition, public protests were curtailed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the successive severe lockdowns in India from March 2020. But the movement gradually gathered steam, especially because of two large padayatras that were taken out across the state, in 2021 and 2022, to draw attention to their cause in other districts. In their staging, these public demonstrations drew upon a long tradition of protest performance in Andhra Pradesh and across India.[12]

On 1 November 2021, the first Save Amaravati Maha Padayatra ("Court to Temple") was launched—a 45-day journey by the protestors, mostly on foot, from the (temporary) High Court in Amaravati to the famous Tirumala temple in Tirupati. Aggrieved farmers and their supporters walked south from Guntur District through the districts of Prakasam, Nellore, and Chittoor. As they moved from village to village, supporters joined the march and local people provided food and supplies. The protestors raised slogans such as "Save Amaravati, Save Andhra Pradesh" and "Save Amaravati, Save Development." Ramakrishna claimed that some five to six thousand people participated each day in the yatra, which cost the organizers 7 lakh rupees per day. "Throughout the padayatra, we had teams of lawyers and doctors with us to provide help. Also, we had private security because ladies were there." An ambulance with a doctor and fleet of vehicles carrying supplies and support staff, including a cook, accompanied the marchers, paid for by JAC. They stopped at villages overnight, staying at marriage halls and choultries (rest houses for pilgrims, usually near temples). According to Krishna Rao, the padayatra had a "good impact" because it spread awareness about their cause to other areas. "Everyone was volunteering and donating funds for this … after giving us sympathy and lunch, they would donate money or something else."

Ashok related his experiences on the padayatra and the positive response they received from local people on their way to Tirupati:

> We would talk with people while walking through the villages. People were not aware that we didn't get money as compensation for our land. We explained to them that for one acre we would get 25 cents back, while 75 cents is your gain, it is for the state … YSRCP cadres tried to stop us since they were afraid of people's response. But the local people used to feed us every day.

Then he spoke with emotion about an old man who had caught hold of his hand, saying, "I know how you feel, as a farmer, what it is to give away your land." "Even today when I think of this, I cry," said Ashok with tears in his eyes.

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The messaging of the padayatras linked Rajdhani to the promise of development for the state. The lavish Amaravati project had promised to restore regional pride to the people of truncated Andhra Pradesh, but the TDP was defeated in 2019 largely because it was seen as neglecting the overall development of the state and the welfare of the poor. Consequently, the Save Amaravati campaign focused on spreading the message that Amaravati farmers had sacrificed their land for the good of the whole state and not for their own benefit.

The first padayatra was completed without too much interference by the state, but the YSRCP government tried to suppress the second one. While the first march went south to Tirupati from Amaravati, the second was planned to cover the districts to the north, over a period of sixty days. This route was more fraught politically since the Chief Minister had declared that Visakhapatnam as the state capital. This padayatra, organized under the slogan "Build Amaravati, Save Andhra Pradesh," was to pass through Krishna, West and East Godavari, and Visakhapatnam Districts, ending at the Arasavilli Sun Temple in Srikakulum District. At first, the government did not grant permission for the march, but the organizers obtained a court order allowing it to go ahead. However, the permit stipulated that only six hundred people could participate in the march each day, a restriction that the police used to stop the protestors (who could not easily control how many people joined the padayatra as it proceeded). The padayatra began on 12 September 2022, but after the protestors were violently confronted by YSRCP supporters at Ramachandrapuram in East Godavari District in October, they abandoned it. According to Ashok, the local MLA instigated his followers to throw water bottles, sandals, and stones at them. "We were just doing a peaceful protest and did not get provoked when they started throwing stones." But instead of protecting them, the police stopped the padayatra until a court order on the case could be issued.

The padayatras were saturated with religious symbolism and themes—from the chariots of Lord Venkateswara carried in both processions to the choice of temples as their destinations—evoking Hindu traditions of pilgrimage and the processions of gods and goddesses that are taken out from temples on festival days. For the second padayatra, participants offered prayers at the newly constructed temple of Lord Venkateswara at Venkatapalem before setting out on the journey (Sudhir 2022a). Like the foundation stone ceremony conducted during the inauguration of the new capital, religious and regional sentiments were closely entangled in the fight for Amaravati as a symbol of the new state.

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A Women's Movement

"If anything happens in the family, it is the woman who must solve it."

Women were very visible in the Save Amaravati movement, as they have been in other social movements in India—especially in struggles over land and forests (Nielsen 2018: chapter 5; Nielsen and Waldrop 2014). A gendered division of labor marked the movement: it was mainly men who attended the court hearings and wrangled with government officials, while women were at the forefront of public protests as well as media engagement. This public involvement earned women protestors vulgar insults from political opponents, to which they responded with defiance. To the common accusation that the movement was putting women at the front of public protests to mitigate state violence, "Nirmala"—a prominent activist from Mandadam—retorted, "It is because they were filing cases against women that we have come to the forefront!"

A long conversation with two women leaders of the movement, "Parvathi" and "Deepthi," at a protest camp provides insights into the affective charge that Amaravati held for smallholders who had given up their land. Parvathi recounted:

> At first we were not interested in giving up our lands, which are supposed to go to our children. But the government explained that it's about the future of the state and that others will also benefit. They told us that once the capital comes, our kids need not go outside for education or jobs. So, when they offered the land pooling deal, we thought it would be okay and agreed. At that time [during land pooling], there was a wide consensus on having the capital here. But now we neither have a chair to sit on nor an umbrella to stand under [quoting a Telugu aphorism].

Parvathi said that she needed to raise money to fund her son's education in the US, but "our property is now useless" because banks were not sanctioning loans against the compensation plots.

According to Deepthi, women were involved in the Amaravati movement from its inception:

> When the government announced the three capitals decision, men had come out on the road to protest. But then we [women] started discussing amongst ourselves that this movement is for our children's future, so we also joined the protests. The first campaign was for ninety-six days. When we started it, government people never approached us to discuss our grievances. Even our MLA did not come to meet us despite being a woman herself. We made representations to ministers and MLAs, but their behavior towards us was appalling. Ministers, who are supposed to be working for the people, turned

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> on us. This government has been aggressive towards us from the beginning. They claimed that the movement is instigated by real estate people, not farmers. They even said that the protestors are all paid actors!

Deepthi spoke about her first encounter with the police during a protest march that women had taken out to a local temple. The police had imposed "Section 144" (of the Indian Penal Code), which prohibits the public assembly of four or more people without government permission. Showing us photos of what happened that day, she recalled that the police had placed barricades on the road to stop the procession and then carried out a "lathi charge" (a crowd control tactic typically used by police in India to break up demonstrations using batons or long sticks, or *lathi*), injuring several women. Later they launched a "*Chalo* Assembly" call (march to the Assembly), taking a different route to avoid being stopped on the main roads, but when they reached their destination they again faced a lathi charge.

Other women present in the camp that day chimed in to elaborate on these stories, talking about all the women who had been arrested and taken to the police station or had cases filed against them: "We can't even count how many!" Women's narratives about their confrontations with the police were circulated widely on social media, illustrated with photos and symbols of the movement, to marshal support for the cause. Several spoke about how they had been ignorant of the law and police procedures before joining the movement, highlighting how new and frightening these experiences were for them. "We never had any encounters with the police till now. We had only seen all these things in the movies, now we are experiencing them ourselves. But we have given our lands, we have to protest!" Even during the Covid-19 lockdown they came out on the roads to protest, they declared, because (like the pandemic) "this is also a matter of life and death."

Referring to normative restrictions on the movement of women belonging to upper-caste and landowning families in public spaces, Nirmala declared: "One thousand women from all the twenty-nine villages participated, especially from Thullur. Participation from these villages [near the river] has been a bit less because women are not used to coming out of their homes."[13] Nirmala described her own transformation from a "typical Kamma housewife" into an activist now accustomed to speaking out and being in public: "I never used to go out much, but now I go outside a lot for the protests." She continued: "I learned things only after getting into the movement—before that, I only knew how to milk buffaloes!"

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According to movement leaders, many people joined the public demonstrations during the first phase of the agitation, but the number later dwindled because of various kinds of pressure exerted by the government to quell the protest. For example, the police stalled passport verification procedures for their children (preventing them from traveling abroad), government pensions were stopped, and they were threatened that pending land pooling cases would be decided against them. Moreover, by the time the "three capitals" bill was passed in the Assembly in March 2020, public protests had been prohibited due to the Covid-19 lockdown.

Women who were arrested or roughed up by the police lodged complaints against them, alleging that false cases had been filed to suppress the agitation. In response to media reports about police brutality against women protestors, the AP High Court issued a directive to the administration to allow peaceful demonstrations. The National Commission for Women even sent a team to Amaravati to investigate complaints of police brutality against women.

Nirmala explained how she got involved in the movement: "We gave our land for the capital, but then nothing was done. So we had a strong feeling of injustice." They were small farmers owning four acres of *metta* land, of which they pooled three acres after selling one acre for 2.3 crore rupees. Initially they were very reluctant to give up their land, she said, but finally they realized there was little choice since "everyone else" was participating in pooling. Nirmala's husband was very upset by this because of his love for farming: "For two years, he kept cursing Naidu. Now he keeps growing different plants around the house to satisfy his urge to cultivate land." Indeed, on both occasions when we visited her home, Nirmala talked with us on the verandah while her husband pottered around the garden, tending to his plants and contributing little to the conversation.

Nirmala participated in both padayatras, returning each week briefly to her village to check on the welfare of her (somewhat older) husband, who could not join the protests because of his bad knees. Alluding to how women had to balance their gendered domestic responsibilities with movement activities, she remarked, "Somehow he managed his food while I was away." Women drew on longstanding social relations of kinship and neighborhood to create networks of mutual support throughout the period of the agitation.

Nirmala also recounted the various ways in which the police harassed them during the padayatras, such as restricting the number of participants or filing cases against them on flimsy grounds. Twenty cases were pending against her—nine in Nellore District from the

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first padayatra and eleven in Thullur, Mangalagiri, and other nearby places. The JAC had created a fund to cover the legal expenses of the protestors. However, Nirmala took this pressure in her stride, recalling in glowing terms the roaring reception they received in villages across the state. She quoted a Telugu saying, "Happiness is not when your child is born but when he becomes a success":

> I did not understand what we were doing or how important it was until we went on the padayatra and people responded so positively and supported us. Many people gifted us a blouse piece with *kumkum–haldi* [cloth for a sari blouse with auspicious vermilion and turmeric, a traditional way of honoring women guests] along the way.

We talked about the attacks leveled against them on social media by YSRCP cadres, which especially targeted Kamma women with negative remarks and insinuations about their moral character. Nirmala also mentioned social media messages claiming that the agitators are all "rich people who are just doing real estate business," citing their expensive watches and cell phones as evidence. She responded to these accusations angrily:

> Yes, we have some money—these are *jareebu* lands. But that doesn't mean we are only doing real estate business. We never did any business. We have invested in land and we sell land only if we need money. In agriculture we always wait for the next crop for money to come in, to perform a marriage or for other needs. Now there is no next crop, so we need other means to live.

Nirmala was bitter that even their own neighbors had posted critical messages:

> This person's family is with YSRCP. In fact, it was his sons [who are US-based NRIs] who circulated comments on social media against us, like pointing out that someone was wearing an Apple Watch. Initially we felt bad about this, but then we decided not to care. After all, why should we look like farmers? This is 2022! We have so much modern technology, our children are in the US and other places. Why do they assume we should always look like farmers?[14]

A theme that runs strongly through the narratives of these women activists is that of the family—especially their responsibilities as women and mothers to protect the family's inheritance for future generations. Nirmala explained:

> If there is any problem in the family, it is the woman who must solve it. This is the same at a bigger scale—we must solve this problem. Tomorrow our kids may ask, why have you given up our land? There is also the question of life and livelihood, how to secure the future of our children and others' children.

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For women from small landholding families, land was the core of their family's security and their children's future. Having sacrificed their land for Rajdhani, they were prepared to put aside gendered norms of respectability to fight for the capital city and the future value of their new properties.

Rajdhani Resurrected

In January 2022, the Amaravati project was still in limbo as the legal cases wound their way through the courts and the state government continued to stall development work in Rajdhani, while periodically affirming its decision to shift the capital to Visakhapatnam. Ramakrishna complained: "There has been no development at all. He [Jagan] wants this place to become a forest. See the land behind the Secretariat. There is nothing there. It is like a jungle!" Because the Secretariat buildings were temporary structures, proper drainage had not been created, he explained, and now they were discharging sewage directly into the Krishna River: "You should see the condition there in the rainy season!" He continued:

> There is no rule of law, no administration in this state—only looting! No development in the villages, not even *kacha* [unpaved] roads. In Chandrababu's time, every road was made *pakka* [paved with asphalt]. Just go around and see the condition of this place!

The upper floor of Ramakrishna's house, which had been leased by a construction company executive, was now vacant, although his old house was now rented to government employees. Most of the apartments that had been constructed in the Rajdhani villages were empty, he said: "Almost all houses here are locked now." The property market had crashed even further—the price of residential plots in Mandadam had dropped from 36,000 to 13,000 rupees per square yard. Heaping insults on the Chief Minister, he declared:

> Jagan is a psycho, he is vengeful. When he came here, people washed their houses and the roads with turmeric [to purify them]. He won't forget this. He is resentful of the people here and so won't develop the capital. But this was our mistake. Other sections also took this to heart.[15]

When I returned in November 2022, most of my interlocutors seemed to be emboldened by the High Court decisions in their favor and hopeful that the situation would soon change in their favor. Krishna Rao pointed out that the value of the Amaravati plots had

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risen following these judgments: "If favorable decisions come, land prices go up automatically. Investors think Amaravati is growing so they should hurry up and buy!" He noted that the government had recently allocated funds to complete construction of the MLA Quarters and several other projects. "But Jagan was forced to do that by the court. The High Court is constantly giving orders to the government on these things. The court is monitoring everything." When I asked Ashok if he believed the capital would remain here, he exclaimed: "One hundred percent it will come here. We are living only based on that hope!"

My Kamma interlocutors believed that across the state people were becoming dissatisfied with the YSRCP government, and they anticipated that Jagan would be defeated in the next election—a prediction that was validated in the 2024 election. The YSR Congress Party was defeated by a large margin, and the Telugu Desam Party came back to power in alliance with the BJP and the Jana Sena (a "Kapu party" led by film star Pawan Kalyan).[16] The return of the TDP, still led by Chandrababu Naidu, offered new hope to the farmers of Rajdhani that the project would be revived and their fortunes would change. Celebrating the victory, they publicly called off the Save Amaravati movement, ceremonially dismantling the protest camps. Hundreds of farmers lined the Seed Capital Road, strewn with flowers, to welcome Chandrababu Naidu back to the capital when he arrived for the swearing-in function on 12 June 2024 (Apparasu 2024b). During the ceremony, which was attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Naidu declared that Amaravati would be the sole capital of the state. In gratitude, Amaravati farmers embarked on yet another padayatra to the temple at Tirupati, this time to give thanks for TDP's victory and the imminent revival of the project (Raghavendra 2024).

* * *

What was the Save Amaravati movement all about? Fundamentally, LP farmers were fighting for their right (endowed by the state) to extract rent from the assets that had been created out of their agricultural land. Although couched in the language of justice and the future of the state, their protest was directed at a government that had failed to honor the contract that would sustain the financial value of their plots and protect their right to property.

The Save Amaravati movement replicated the strategies of popular movements in India, "hailing the state" (Mitchell 2023) through dramatic public demonstrations while also pursuing their cause

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primarily through legal strategies. LP farmers positioned themselves as victims of an autocratic and unjust state, but a comparison with Dalits' struggle for equal recognition of their land rights (discussed in chapter 5) reveals the class and caste basis of the movement. Not only was the unequal status of SC assigned lands inscribed in law, Dalits lacked the resources and networks that Kamma landowners could marshal to challenge the government:

> The weakness of Indian democracy flows, above all, from the many constraints on redistribution and recognition woven into its structure. These constraints are a product of a balance of power between social forces that was forged in and through the freedom struggle, and later inscribed in India's constitution in ways that entrenched the property rights of dominant groups and systematically deflected the claims of subaltern movements. (Nilsen et al. 2022: 30)

Subaltern struggles have extensively (and sometimes successfully) deployed the law *against* the entrenched privileges of dominant groups, but the Save Amaravati movement (representing propertied groups) invoked the right to property and contract law that reinforced their dominant status, while claiming to speak on behalf of all people of Rajdhani and the state. Although the movement condemned the injustices suffered by farmers who surrendered their land, the structural inequalities that are embedded in law and were reproduced through the Amaravati plan were completely invisibilized.

Notes

1. The subtitle of this section, The Future in Ruins, is borrowed from Gupta (2018).
2. These were the Andhra Pradesh Decentralisation and Inclusive Development of All Regions Bill, 2020, and the Andhra Pradesh Capital Region Development Authority (Repeal) Bill, 2020.
3. The YSRCP government scrapped the sand mining policy of the previous TDP government, which had made sand for construction available free of cost, bringing it under the control of a state government corporation ostensibly to extract tax revenue. The new government set the price of sand and contracted out sand mining to a private company, which led to a flourishing black market in sand. The resulting shortage of sand and high prices hit the construction industry badly, leading to corruption allegations against YSRCP politicians (Menon 2023).
4. Rayalaseema, the home base of former Chief Minister Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy and his son Jagan Mohan Reddy, is popularly characterized as marked by violent "factional" politics.

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5. This remark refers to the long-pending corruption cases against Jagan Mohan Reddy, filed by the Central Bureau of Investigation for his activities during the period when his father was Chief Minister.
6. Venkaiah Naidu, a Kamma, was a top BJP politician and Vice-President of India between 2017 and 2022.
7. The comfort of many Andhra farmers with the corporatization of agriculture reflects the long history of contract farming and commercial marketing arrangements with private companies in the state. Also, farmers' movements of the kind witnessed in other Green Revolution areas, such as western Maharashtra, western Uttar Pradesh, and Punjab (which also experienced extensive commercialization of agriculture), hardly took root in Andhra. The historical entanglements of agricultural land, finance, and trade, together with strong connections between rural and urban within land-owning communities and the more recent financialization of land, may explain the relative weakness of a militant "farmer" identity in this region (Balakrishnan 2019b: 151).
8. Partha Chatterjee (2004) identifies public protests through transgressive or extra-legal strategies, such as the *dharna* (non-violent sit-in) and *rasta roko* (blocking the road), with the "politics of the governed," contrasting them with the legal and rights-based strategies more often deployed by educated and elite groups. But as Mitchell (2023) shows, these performative forms of protest have a long and venerable genealogy in India, blurring the boundary between "political society" and "civil society." See Nielsen (2015, 2018) for a detailed account of the shifting strategies of the anti-land acquisition movement in Singur.
9. The confidence in the High Court expressed by LP farmers had much to do with the caste and political affiliation of several justices who heard their cases, from whom they expected favorable judgments. The sub-title of this section comes from Nair (2015).
10. The head of the appointed bench, Justice Maheshwari, was elevated to the Supreme Court in January 2021 before a verdict could be delivered. The case was then assigned to another bench, but the matter could not be heard immediately due to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. After being postponed twice, the hearing was finally posted for 15 November 2021, but before it could take place the head of the bench was transferred. These frequent reshufflings in the High Court delayed the disposal of the Amaravati cases by several years.
11. The court also ordered that an earlier stay order against shifting government offices from Amaravati to other parts of the state would remain in force. The summary of the twists and turns of the Amaravati court cases in this chapter is drawn mainly from Sudhir (2022b).
12. *Padayatra* is a form of protest that originated in Mahatma Gandhi's famous Salt March in 1930. *Padayatras* became a popular and effective mode of political mobilization in Andhra Pradesh, often deployed by political leaders during election campaigns to generate support—a trend that was perhaps inaugurated by Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy's 66-day *padayatra* across the state in 2003. Chandrababu Naidu led a 117-day march covering 2,000 kilometers in 2012–13, which was topped by Jagan Mohan Reddy's 341-day "Praja Sankalpa Yatra" (Public Opinion Campaign) over 3,648 kilometers between 2017 and 2019—claimed to be the longest such march ever undertaken in the country (Price 2011).
13. With urban migration and investment in education by many landowning Kamma families over the last several decades, many young Kamma women are highly educated and employed in white collar and professional occupations in Indian cities and abroad. Such public engagements are quite acceptable, or even desirable, in the

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community, but rural women continue to be restricted by gendered caste norms governing appropriate conduct and movement in public.

14. In the case of New Yangyon studied by Wittekind (2024), farmers demonstrating in favor of the new city were similarly branded as "not real farmers" by activists and other urban-based observers, who alleged that other forces were behind their willingness to give up their land for the project. Such comments reveal an anachronistic view of farmers as inherently non-modern and irrevocably attached to their rural land and way of life.
15. By "other sections" he meant other caste groups. It is not clear whether people actually cleaned their houses with turmeric water after Jagan took office, but this story suggests a desire to rid their homes of ritual pollution caused by contact with people of lower caste. Jagan Mohan Reddy belongs to the powerful "forward caste" Reddy community of Rayalaseema, and Kammas and Reddys are generally considered equal in the caste hierarchy, but he (and most of his family) are Christian—a religion that is associated with Dalits, who also largely supported YSRCP. Opponents of YSRCP (including Chandrababu Naidu at times) have invoked his religious identity to brand him as anti-Hindu, drawing on the Hindu majoritarian politics promoted by the BJP (Sudhir 2021).
16. There is no space here to delve into the reasons for the defeat of the YSR Congress Party in 2024. However, a perceived domination of the government by Reddys to the exclusion of all other groups, and the violence that was meted out to dissenters, were important factors that turned many people against Jagan (Gutta 2024). Another major election issue concerned the efforts by the YSRCP government to resurvey agricultural land in the state as a precursor to providing clear titles to landholders, leading to widespread apprehension that the government would use the survey as a mechanism to grab land (Menon 2024).

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Conclusion



After the Telugu Desam Party returned to power in Andhra Pradesh in 2024, Chandrababu Naidu declared that Amaravati would be the sole capital of the state and promised to restart the project on a war footing. Within a few months, he secured assurances of financial support from the central government and an 800 million dollar loan from the World Bank. P. Narayana was reinstated as Minister for Urban Development and given the responsibility of getting the project back on track. The state government announced plans to complete the pending infrastructure work within one year, although the estimated total cost of the project was likely to escalate from 51,000 to 65,000 crore rupees (Aravind 2025).

Thus, the story of Amaravati continues. Although the new capital will take years to materialize and its final shape is unknowable, the period covered in this book—from the 2014 decision to build a city from scratch to the re-election of the Telugu Desam Party in 2024—provides a sufficient timeframe to reflect on the broader implications of this ambitious dream to forge a brand-new city out of an agrarian landscape.

At one level, Amaravati provides yet another example of the violence of India's current development paradigm, which appropriates land from rural and urban communities with little regard for the disruption it causes to their lives or ways of living. Major infrastructure projects and greenfield cities such as this one delink land from rural economies, repurposing it not only as the ground on which to build, but more importantly as a source of finance through monetization. However, Amaravati is unique in India, at least in scale, in the extent to which farmers participated in their own "dispossession," as they

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facilitated the conveyance of their land out of agriculture and into an imagined urban future. In contrast to compulsory land acquisition, which may be understood as a modality of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 1982), land pooling replaces the agricultural land of cultivators with another form of property (reconstituted urban plots) that promises to generate more value in the future. This land transition was underwritten by the development imaginary that is encapsulated in the Amaravati master plan—a paradigm that widens the fractures of India's unequal society by elevating propertied citizens over everyone else even as it recasts them as subjects of speculative state planning, as became evident when the project was abandoned in 2019. This story also illustrates the opportunities for accumulation that are created for diverse actors by mega-projects that entangle urban planning with speculative land markets. In this case, the conversion of land into a purely financial asset attracted substantial investments in local property markets and produced new pathways for the multiplication of capital through circulation.

As has been seen in India's metro cities, neoliberal urbanization is driven less by state planning than by the search for new sites of accumulation by finance capital and property developers (Goldman 2023; Searle 2016). The Amaravati project was framed as an antidote to the "unplanned" character of Indian cities, whose chaos and illegibility trouble efforts to attract capital investments. Yet there is plenty of foreign and national capital flowing into Indian cities, especially in real estate and infrastructure projects. For these investors, the complexities of property rights and records, the permeability of the local state, and the informalities that mark urban governance facilitate rather than hinder accumulation (Roy 2009). Similarly, we have seen that the Amaravati project—fully under the control of the state through its parastatal planning agencies—did not simply develop according to the master plan or CRDA regulations. Instead, the plan was negotiated and reworked at every stage as it encountered resistance from the landscape and its inhabitants.

Moreover, the master plan and the financial model of the project are inextricably entwined with the informalities it is meant to erase. The contradiction at the heart of land pooling is its grounding in unruly land and property markets—sites of accumulation that are largely beyond the control of the state and upon which the political class depends for its resources, both for political funding and individual aggrandizement. This friction is also apparent in the processes of "auto-construction" that began to urbanize the Rajdhani

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villages, as farmers invested proceeds from land sales in the construction of rental properties.

A remarkable aspect of the monetization of land in Amaravati was the conversion of longstanding property rights in agricultural land into dematerialized, digitized assets that began to circulate on a transnational online market. This transition profoundly altered the values, meanings, and affordances of land, from a repository of wealth and social status that anchors rural households in place and time, into an abstract financial asset delinked from material affordances and emptied of cultural values. These divergent meanings collide as land moves into a new regime of value, and as landholders strategize to manage the inherent risks of making decisions about their land based on "fictional expectations" (Beckert 2016)—balancing the lure of money against the uncertainties of the planned city. LP farmers' intricate engagements with the state at every step of the land pooling process and in the planning and construction of the new capital, and their gradual acceptance of digital tokens as promises of future wealth, demonstrate that such transformations do not occur smoothly or automatically but are socially and politically negotiated. In such negotiations, political connections and social capital are brought into play as competing caste and class groups struggle to gain advantage vis-à-vis one another and the state.

The colonial land tenure system, established to extract surplus from peasant agriculture, created a graded system of property rights that supported a caste-based production system—one that was largely reproduced by the postcolonial developmental state. With the shift to a neoliberal approach to value extraction through land monetization, the state sought to pave over this socially embedded agrarian structure and establish a new property regime in Amaravati. But just as programs to digitize land records have been confounded by the complexities of land tenure and the complexities and opacity of land records themselves (Cowan 2021; Jonnalagadda and Cowan 2024), this was a conflict-ridden and messy process. Land pooling was designed to erase existing rights and replace them with a new form of property with clear title. But this property assumed an unfamiliar form—not a material plot of land or a house, but a certificate representing an abstract and intangible asset that may or may not materialize in the future as a concrete home or piece of real estate. Despite the obstacles encountered by CRDA in transforming these abstract assets into physical sites on the ground, their immaterial character did not dampen enthusiasm for Amaravati plots amongst potential investors. Instead, what caused the market to crash was

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the electoral defeat of the Telugu Desam Party in 2019 and the consequent abandonment of the Amaravati project—illustrating the speculative character of these properties as well as the plan.

Master planning is meant to create a governable spatial order and facilitate organized urban development in an opaque and ever shifting landscape. But as seen in similar projects around the world, even the best-laid plans may run aground on the social or physical realities of the landscape and its inhabitants. Apart from the agricultural land that was transferred to the planning authority by farmers, there remains within the capital zone land whose status is ambiguous or contested—land that was not pooled or acquired by the state, or that is encumbered by disputes or unclear title. Fields that continue to produce bananas or flowers are designated in the master plan for commercial development or as the site of a new institution, rendering their status unclear and conflicted. Other zones of illegibility and plasticity are also incorporated into the master plan, whose crisscrossing roads, commercial and residential zones, and government complexes are fixed in space, including prime areas along the Krishna River and *lanka* lands that shift with the ebb and flow of the river. Built on a watery landscape not yet fully stripped of its agrarian meanings and specific materialities, Amaravati is likely to remain a zone of value struggles for the foreseeable future.

While land assetization may generate spectacular financial value, it does so only for those who own or trade in property. In this case, land pooling reconfigured rural landholders as propertied urban citizens while excluding most households from this transition, re-embedding a caste-based agrarian structure in the future city. However, the controversy that erupted around the transfer of assigned lands demonstrates one way in which the colonial system of land governance, grounded in caste, may disrupt neoliberal projects of urbanization or financialization. Layered land rights, deeply entrenched in law and bureaucracy, could not be simply erased by land pooling. As land values soared and many assigned land holders were "persuaded" to sell out to powerful politicians or local landlords, longstanding Dalit claims to land were revitalized. The issue galvanized local Dalits to protest this new form of caste domination and call out the state for enabling dominant caste farmers to monopolize the benefits of the project.

Not surprisingly, given the way Andhra Pradesh's new capital city was planned by Chandrababu Naidu, the project became embroiled in other kinds of politics as well. The conflict around Rajdhani that played out between LP farmers and the YSRCP government between

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2019 and 2024 could be viewed as a struggle around contrasting visions of development and democracy. Naidu and LP farmers promoted a development paradigm based on (public-) private capital investment, accumulation through land assetization, and the inevitability of urbanization-led growth—a vision that was foregrounded by the Save Amaravati movement. Through their involvement in the project, LP farmers asserted themselves as primary partners whose views should be heard. While landowners were reconstituted as propertied subjects that stood in a changed relationship with both state and market, most Rajdhani residents were reduced to the status of voiceless clients of a welfare regime. In contrast, Jagan Mohan Reddy's YSR Congress Party forwarded a different notion of social justice and citizens' rights, representing itself as the champion of the marginalized and accusing Naidu of enriching TDP leaders and his "cronies" through land deals. The YSRCP government focused on expanding welfare schemes and "distributing" development across the state (through the three capitals plan), while (allegedly) enriching its supporters by handing out political positions, contracts, and illicitly earned wealth (Menon 2023). In this political rhetoric and the trading of corruption allegations between the two leaders, the continuing salience of regional and caste loyalties in Andhra Pradesh became starkly apparent.[1]

Popular struggles against land acquisition and other subaltern social movements in India have highlighted the injustices of the current development paradigm, especially the iniquitous processes of displacement and dispossession it has produced. But social movements have often challenged exclusion from the anticipated benefits of development (such as the state's failure to provide jobs for displaced people), rather than mounting a critique of an infrastructure or SEZ project itself. As my interlocutors on both sides of the struggle around Amaravati often said, "We are not against development, we are opposed to how the project is being done." In the Amaravati case, LP farmers who were incorporated into the planned city as partners were abruptly cast aside when the government changed—leading them launch an unaccustomed political mobilization against the state.

The Amaravati story also shows how the "promise of infrastructure" may collide with the growing imperative for states to expand welfare programs to support populations rendered "surplus" by the current growth agenda, even as the Indian state downplays the pattern of accelerating accumulation by the rich and growing inequalities of the last few decades. While the post-1990s contradictions of India's "growth story" have been extensively discussed, relatively

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less attention has been paid to understanding the widening regional disparities that have marked its contemporary political economy. In this book, I argue that the region provides the most generative scale for mapping the diverse entanglements, frictions, and contradictions of the current development paradigm, as transnational and national forces, actors, and movements impinge upon systems of agrarian production, caste-based social organization, political culture, and other elements of regional political economies. Provincial configurations of political power, modalities of accumulation, and the distribution of land and resources have been shaped not only by colonial histories and more recent global financial shifts, but also by distinctive "regional modernities" (Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003).

Thus, to understand the trajectory of the Amaravati project and the development politics that congealed around it, I have situated this story within the *longue durée* of Andhra's colonial and postcolonial history as well as the larger frame of post-reform development in India. Regional elites pursue their ambitions for development not only by appropriating models and imaginaries from beyond the region, but also by activating repositories of embedded cultural and social capital and drawing on historically embedded collective aspirations for the future. A focus on the region also foregrounds the role of caste and provincial capital in processes of accumulation in the context of urbanization, as deeply entrenched forms of control over land, linked to regional formations of political power, reshape India's cities and towns (Cowan 2022; Gururani 2020). The Amaravati story demonstrates several ways in which the state, provincial capital, and the political class may converge in generating and extracting value from land. State officials and politicians at various levels, local brokers and builders, urban elites, farmers' leaders, and many other actors mediated the strategies through which dominant caste landholders and other powerful actors consolidated their gains, while largely excluding Dalits and other marginalized groups from participation in the "development" promised by Rajdhani. The re-entrenchment of caste power in the Amaravati villages by land pooling was reinforced by the grounding of regional political power and capital in caste.

This study demonstrates the tenuousness and fragility of megaprojects in rural India, where the complexities of land tenure and governance, together with a political culture centered on caste and regional rivalries, often derail top-down planning. But it also reflects the possibilities for new political mobilizations around the desire for development. The incorporation of land pooling farmers as "stakeholders" in the Amaravati project, and the perseverance of the Save

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Amaravati protestors when it was threatened, demonstrate the capacity of social movements to call the state to account when promises are broken or popular aspirations thwarted. This case suggests that land pooling not only transformed agrarian land into a new kind of asset; it also produced new political subjects based on property ownership, the right to accumulation, and a development imaginary centered on a non-agrarian future.

The account of Rajdhani I offer in this book underscores not only the re-entrenchment of the unequal distribution of property by caste in the context of urbanization, or the stamp of agrarian forms of power and property on the prosecution of a mega-project. Instead, we have seen how this "world-city" plan was "provincialized" by long-persisting hierarchies and modes of accumulation based on control over land as well as caste *habitus*. The ways in which the Amaravati project unfolded, troubled by multiple contradictions and exclusions, reflect a dialectical process of "planned development" in which propertied agrarian actors and provincial capital, building on deeply rooted social structures of land and caste, do not simply engage with, or push back against, the designs of the state or national / transnational capital, but instead appropriate, remodel, and deploy neoliberal development models, along with novel modes of accumulation based on the assetization of land, in forging their own futures. The question that remains is, what kind of future will these processes produce? Will it prove to be sustainable and equitable, as promised by the master plan, or will it unravel into another tale of ruination, oppression, and deepening disparities?

Note

1. Religious affiliation soon entered this complex political fray as well, reflecting the growing strength of *hindutva* politics in India, pushed by the Bharatiya Janata Party and its sister organizations in the "Sangh Parivar" in pursuit of its ambition to expand its influence in Andhra Pradesh. Although TDP had supported the previous BJP-led government at the center (2014 to 2019), it broke the alliance in 2018 because the central government failed to grant Special Category Status for the state. In the 2024 elections, the TDP again formed an alliance with the BJP and Jana Sena, winning in the state and joining the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) as a partner in the coalition government at the center—signaling its growing closeness to the BJP. In 2024, both Chandrababu Naidu and his Deputy Chief Minister Pawan Kalyan (leader of Jana Sena) began playing the "Hindu card" to attack YSRCP and Jagan (Das 2024; Venu 2024).

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