

Making of Amaravati

A Landscape of Speculation and Intimidation

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This paper examines Amaravati, the proposed greenfield capital of the bifurcated Andhra Pradesh state, against the backdrop of the rise of urban mega-projects across Asia, and the tendencies towards land speculation they have unleashed in Indian cities. It offers a critique of the land pooling mechanisms as they have played out on the ground in the affected villages. It argues that voluntary land pooling on such a large scale has been made possible through a coordinated use of coercive tactics and legal measures, including the land ordinance of the Government of India, which was re-promulgated three times and provided a credible fallback in the AP government's dealings with farmers. Land pooling also facilitated a regime of co-option with absentee landowners aligning, on caste lines, with the ruling party.

A particular urban type has emerged in Asia in the past two decades in the form of urban integrated mega-projects (UIMs) which extend over large areas. They are part of a trend towards “privatisation of urban and regional planning” and ascendance of private actors to the central role of urban planning, including the “visioning of urban futures” at a much larger scale (Shatkin 2011).

These projects are explicitly profit-oriented and commodified in nature, with the corporate sector playing a powerful role in their conceptualisation, planning, development and governance (Shatkin 2011: 77–78, 80). Mainstream global urbanism, explicitly or implicitly, relies on cities in North America and Western Europe as the norm and the megacities in Asia, Africa and Latin America are advised and incentivised to become shiny modern global cities. Most recently, Singapore, Hong Kong or Shanghai are presented as Asian exemplars of the global city norm. Projects inspired by such approach win legitimacy through seductive media images and ideological work backed by new forms of coercion (Sheppard et al 2013: 2–3).

Following the loss of Hyderabad after the bifurcation of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh (AP) in 2014, the Government of AP decided to locate a new capital, named Amaravati, the “people’s capital,” in an area spread over 25 villages and four hamlets in Thullur, Tadepally and Mangalagiri mandals in Guntur District on the right bank of the Krishna River. The Government of AP entered into an agreement with International Enterprise, Singapore to prepare a master plan and develop a “world-class capital city.” Amaravati thus becomes the “first outsourced capital city” in India (Rajappa 2015). This new city should actually be called, if at all, New Amaravati as the present Amaravati is a small town, 25 km away from the new capital, and dates back to the 2nd century BC. It was the capital of the Satavahanas, “the first great Andhra kings who ruled from the 2nd century BCE to the 3rd century CE, after the downfall of Maurya empire.”¹ By naming the new city Amaravati, the AP Chief Minister, N Chandrababu Naidu, has attempted to shore up the pride of the Andhras who are known to have been hurt with the loss of Hyderabad after bifurcation.²

Urban Mega-projects and Land Speculation

Goldman identifies two notable features of this historical conjuncture—phenomenal rise of a new transnational corporate sector (including information technology—IT) and the proliferation of interactions among Asian world cities (2011: 571). The emergence of such a global UIM model is due to, among

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others, “entrepreneurial turn in urban governance, the reorientation of urban politics towards a focus on capturing investment and growth” (Shatkin 2011: 81). Urban entrepreneurialism implies some level of inter-urban competition. As inter-urban competition becomes more potent, it will almost certainly operate as an “external coercive power” over individual cities (Harvey 1989: 10). Amaravati has been consistently projected to be a “world class” city, and being keenly followed by Singapore and international agencies/foreign governments for investments, and, therefore, the government has to facilitate the necessary administrative and legal changes.

Analysing Bangalore’s world-city projects, Goldman argues that, along with large-scale capital infusions from Dubai, Singapore, international financial institutions, etc, they also play a role in restructuring governance institutions for international capital (2011: 575).

Megacities in India have been taking up large infrastructure projects under public–private partnerships (PPPs) with an increasing role of private and international agencies in urban planning and management. Competition among some of India’s states is driving them to concentrate on their largest cities for large-scale infrastructure projects, through these PPPs and also special regulatory instruments (Kennedy 2007: 108). In the 1990s, India shifted to a “regime of dispossession” of land for private investments and to the commodification of land. With forceful acquisition of large parcels of land and allocating the same to private sector for real estate and land speculation, governments have been accused of land grabbing and becoming “land brokers for private capital” (Levien 2015: 147).

The highly subsidised land given to the private consortium to construct Bangalore airport was so extensive that 2.5 Heathrow airports (of London) could be built on it. This much land was not given to build runways to compete with the world’s largest airports, but to convert it into high-value real estate ventures (Goldman 2011). The land in India “is taking on new value internationally; it is being transformed from a resource for agricultural or industrial production into a financial resource increasingly available to international corporations and investors” (Searle 2014: 61). The Singapore companies working on the Amaravati master plan seem to have asked for 3,000 acres of land for the capital region (Sivaramakrishnan 2015).

Land speculation arises with “anticipated transformations of a certain area from one level to another level, for example, from rural to urban land use, from low serviced to high serviced area, from residential area to business centre and so on” (Nas 1991). The government itself can play the role of a speculator when it acquires land, develops it further, and auctions to private parties at high prices. As a consequence, the land values rise sharply in the entire region. Analysing Bangalore’s mega projects, Goldman observes that land speculation and active dispossession is the main business of its government today (2011: 557). In Hyderabad, the extent of land given to a private company to build the international airport has been huge (2,226 hectares), more or less the same as that of Bangalore airport.

One large infrastructure project, claimed by promoters as “the world’s biggest PPP,” and primarily based on land and real

estate, is the Hyderabad metro rail project that is currently under construction (Ramachandraiah 2009). Such projects represent a paradigm shift in India “from state-run infrastructure to infrastructure that is built and managed by private developers” (Goldman 2011: 3).

Genesis of New Amaravati

AP was bifurcated into a separate Telangana and the residual AP with effect from 2 June 2014, and ever since Hyderabad (located in the Telangana region) is the joint capital for up to 10 years, by which time AP should have its own capital city. The Government of India appointed an expert committee to study various alternatives regarding a new capital for AP (Report of the Expert Committee, 2014, also known as Sivaramakrishnan Committee). Its terms of reference included, among others, least dislocation of existing agriculture systems and minimum resettlement of people. The committee did not consider a single large capital city as a feasible option. It felt a greenfield city will also adversely affect the development prospects of other areas in AP “by sucking much private and speculative capital into the area,” and in case a greenfield city is to be built, locations should be identified where large parcels of government land are available (pp 9, 11, 26).

The Krishna, Guntur and West Godavari Districts comprise some of the best agricultural lands and this region is often referred to as the rice bowl of the country. This is a vibrant region which has positive internal dynamics of development and urbanisation (pp 11–12). The committee strongly suggested that the plan for urbanising this large area with “ring-road approach” and without an infrastructure or environment impact assessment should be revisited. A large workforce dependent on agriculture would be rendered unemployed, valuable agricultural land would be lost and it would lead to the disappearance of smallholdings and farmers. This would “benefit only land speculation and serge [sic] profit for the real estate operators” and will further add to the “honey pot” character similar to Hyderabad, and is undesirable for decentralised development (pp 11–13).

There was little public debate or consultation on locating the capital in this region despite claims that detailed consultations were held with experts of urban development and various public organisations before deciding on this location.³

Losing Hyderabad

The IT and IT-enabled services (ITES) sectors have been entirely concentrated in Hyderabad since 1990s and have contributed hugely to IT exports and employment generation. The direct employment provided in this sector is estimated at four lakh.⁴

Visakhapatnam, with about 1.7 million population, is the only major city in residual AP, and is located in the north coastal Andhra. The share of AP (sans Hyderabad) in IT exports is only 0.4% in India, and the state government seeks to raise this to 5% by 2020 (Surbana 2015a: 21).

Hyderabad has also been a major contributor of revenues to united AP. Of the revenue generated in 2012–13, Telangana (inclusive of Hyderabad) had a share of 69%, Rayalaseema 7%,

and coastal Andhra 24%, while the population shares stand at 42% for Telangana, 18% for Rayalaseema, and 40% for coastal Andhra. Telangana's share excluding Hyderabad and Rangareddy Districts is 15.43% (Rao 2013). The maximum number of special economic zones (SEZs) are also located around Hyderabad city. Many of these are small and are in the IT/ITES sectors with links to the real estate sector, which plays a major role in Hyderabad's economy (Government of India 2010: 313, 315).

The view that Hyderabad contributes an overwhelmingly high share to the state's revenue has also been contested. In the state's own tax revenue (SOTR), the share from the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) area was only 22.80% in 2012–13. With the allocation of the non-SOTR on population basis the share of GHMC works out to 17.22% in the state's revenue. The share of Telangana (excluding GHMC) in the SOTR was 34.17%. The share of Seemandhra (Rayalaseema and coastal Andhra) in the SOTR was 43.03% (Pingle 2013).⁵ Whatever it is, Hyderabad has been the prime city of the united AP and its importance in employment generation and economic growth cannot be ignored. One of the major issues for the people of the residual AP state in opposing bifurcation was their association with Hyderabad and a perceived loss of the opportunities in employment, business and a loss of revenue.

This article adopts the framework of urban mega-projects to understand the modalities used for promotion of such projects and acquisition of lands on a large scale. Amaravati capital city is a greenfield mega-project requiring thousands of acres of land. Apart from real estate speculation, a major thrust of this article is on the coercive methods adopted by the AP government in implementing the land pooling scheme (LPS). To analyse the twin strategies of speculation and intimidation/coercion, we have drawn heavily from print media reports, government orders, master plan documents, field visits, and interviews with local activists and farmers. For interviews, more reliance has been placed on the narrations of the persons who have been framed in false cases or harassed by the government agencies.

We have tried to show that, in order to contain the growing opposition to land pooling and coerce the farmers into submission, the Government of AP has strategically planned and used thousands of police to coincide with the legislative measures. We believe that the area along the riverbank villages was the most crucial part of the Amaravati project, and to acquire these lands, the government was prepared to go to any extent. We have also tried to argue that the Government of India has been complicit in these coercive strategies. After a brief discussion on the LPS, the paper focuses on urban mega-projects and land speculation which is relevant to the land issues and the Amaravati greenfield project.

Land Pooling Scheme

Pooling of privately held land parcels by a public agency is variously known as land pooling, land pooling and reconstitution (LPR) and land reconstitution. The public agency provides infrastructure and public facilities in the pooled land, often

keeps some land with it for future sale, and returns a portion of the land to the owners in proportion to their original share. The land value gain for the owner far exceeds the money value of the un-serviced land given to the public agency in rapidly urbanising areas. LPR is considered one of the viable solutions that “unlocks land for urban use in a politically acceptable manner” (Mathur 2013: 200).

Several states in India seem to have adopted land pooling methods for different types of projects over the years. Considering land acquisition as “the biggest hurdle” to various projects, the highways department of Tamil Nadu is known to have adopted the concept of land pooling. Under this, the government will not be required to pay any compensation and the landowners will have access to the newly developed infrastructure and the land value will increase tremendously (*Times of India* 2011). To avoid protests over farm land acquisition, the Punjab government is known to have agreed in principle to adopt land pooling in urban areas. The government wanted to return 60% of land acquired to the farmers after fully developing it as plots (*Hindu* 2007). In Gujarat, the early development of infrastructure (roads and water, sewer and electric systems, etc) is considered the most significant reason behind the landowner support for LPR. To make LPR financially sustainable, politically acceptable and legally defensible in regions experiencing rapid urbanisation and sharp increase in the price of serviced urban land, Gujarat's experience with the town planning scheme mechanism provides widely applicable insights (Mathur 2013).

The concept of land pooling acquires more significance especially after the new land acquisition act of 2013 in India. Growing opposition and protest movements to forced land acquisition in different parts of India over the years, especially in the decade of the 2000s, gave rise to the enactment of a new law on land acquisition. This new law, the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 (LARR Act 2013), has several mandatory provisions to make the land acquisition process more participatory and gave a certain level of protection against forcible takeover of lands. Some of the provisions are—to obtain the consent of landowners, conducting a social impact assessment, severe restrictions on acquiring irrigated multi-cropped lands, mandatory resettlement and rehabilitation, a higher compensation based on market value, etc (for more discussion on this, see Ramachandraiah and Venkateswarlu 2014). After this act was passed, there was a change of Government in India in 2014, with the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government being replaced by that of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

Industry lobbies and several state governments were demanding amendments of the new act of 2013 even before its implementation to make land acquisition easier (*Hindu* 2014).⁶ The new NDA government promulgated an ordinance on 31 December 2014 to amend/dilute several of the safeguards contained in the act of 2013 against forced land acquisition. Due to stiff political opposition, it was not passed in the Rajya

Sabha. But the Government of India re-promulgated the ordinance till 31 August 2015 and it has since been referred to a parliamentary standing committee. It was argued that the failure by the Government of India to push through the changes contained in the ordinance would delay the future projects by three to five years because of time-consuming procedures mandated by the 2013 law (Aiyar 2015).

The Government of AP adopted LPS as a policy for mobilising the land for the new capital city. The farmers are offered reconstituted residential and commercial plots and an annual payment for 10 years (Table 1). Farmers were told that the reconstituted plots will fetch them huge sums once the new capital city takes shape, and that this is better than the small amounts they would get as compensation if the lands were acquired legally. The LPS rules also contained several provisions like old age homes, NTR canteens for the poor (named after Nandamuri Taraka Ramarao, founder of Telugu Desam Party—TDP), a pension of ₹2,500 per month to landless families and tenant farmers for 10 years, free education, free healthcare, round-the-year implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)⁷ for agricultural labourers, and skill development centres for unemployed youth, etc. Many of these provisions are yet to be seen to be implemented.

Table 1: Compensation Package under Land Pooling Scheme

Land	Category	
	Dry	Jareebu*
(a) Patta		
Residential (sq yds)	1,000	1,000
Commercial (sq yds)	200	450
(b) Assigned lands**		
Residential (sq yds)	800	800
Commercial (sq yds)	100	200
(c) Yearly payment for 10 years (₹)	30,000	50,000
(d) Yearly increase (₹)	3,000	5,000
(e) One time additional payment for gardens like lime/sapota /guava/amlam and jasmine (malle) (₹)		1,00,000

* Multi-cropped fertile farmlands.

** Government lands given to the landless poor persons who directly engage in cultivation. Fruits and horticulture crop farmers were made eligible to get a loan waiver up to ₹1,50,000.

Source: GO Ms No 43 dated 9 March 2015, Municipal Administration & Urban Development Department, Government of AP.

A significant difference in application of the concept of land pooling in Amaravati with similar experiences in India is the scale: the AP government wanted to mobilise about 33,000 acres of fertile multi-cropped lands for a greenfield city. It is not an existing urban or peri-urban area when the benefits of high appreciation of values of the reconstituted plots could be quickly realised. While the LPS was supposed to be voluntary, the AP government has relied heavily on using police as an instrument of coercion and intimidation along with several tactics which have come to be locally known as the “mind game” which has, probably, few parallels in India in recent years. The large absentee landowners, who left agriculture and have been leasing out lands and belong to the upper-caste support base of the TDP in the Thullur area, were the early ones to come forward to join land pooling.

Strategy in Speculation

Amaravati is expected to become a megacity covering 217 sq km with the population expected to reach 4.5 million by 2035, and 13.5 million by 2050 in the capital region spread over 7,420 sq km.⁸

The master plan envisages Amaravati to be “the pioneer Smart City of India” with world class standards set forth by countries such as Singapore (Surbana 2015a: 30). The smart city narratives are now the new urban utopias in India (Datta 2015: 4). A glance through the draft master plans, especially its careful projection of highly seductive computer-generated images (Surbana 2015b), unrealistic projections of job creation, and high population growth (despite declining demographic trends in this region) to make it a megacity, in the backdrop of a huge real estate speculation, suggests that Amaravati represents a class of speculative cities (Ramachandraiah 2015).

The master plan proposes hotels, resorts and entertainment centres on the riverfront and islands and envisages the waterfront to have “an iconic image and skyline.” The riverfront also provides a setting for the chief minister’s obsession with tourism: the Japanese entrepreneurs like to “discuss business while playing golf,” and, to attract them, it is necessary to have “international airports and star hotels, with other world class tourism facilities, etc, in the vicinity of golf courses” (*Deccan Chronicle* 2015a). And, the master plan proposes a golf course on the riverfront.

Speculation, Resistance and Intimidation

The riverbank villages have highly fertile and multi-cropped lands, locally known as *Jareebu* lands. The area has a vibrant rural economy. With the water table at 15 to 20 feet, about 120 varieties of crops are known to be cultivated round the year. Commercially these lands are rated high compared to those in the non-riverbank villages. After the capital location was announced, the land values started rising steeply making land transactions a prominent activity from early November 2014. Within a month, the property dealers are known to have taken over 3,500 acres from farmers, involving more than ₹4,000 crore, “almost the entire amount paid in cash” (NAPM 2014).

Many land deals were not outright purchases but done by “agreement”—an advance purchase document for which the buyer pays only a percentage of the sale price up front. In this region there was already an active land market in “agreements” and other such instruments. The speculative nature of the LPS forces “even small and marginal farmers to become speculators—they had to make decisions about a future that they could hardly envision, much less control,” because as Carol Upadhyaya (2015: 5, 19) says

no one knows when they might receive their developed plots or how much they might be worth when they do. To make the scheme work, the state has to create hype about the proposed capital, foster belief in a particular future, and induce landowners to envision different futures—a gamble that is based purely on faith that the government will fulfil its promises and that the market will yield the desired results.

For the reconstituted plots to fetch high prices, a new city has to emerge first and take shape. In such an uncertain situation,

continuous rise in land values through speculation is the only mechanism by which the farmers could be convinced about the possibility of high returns in future. Or, they can make good now by selling lands. Added to this, the credibility of the chief minister has been low due to non-fulfilment of his election promise of waiver of farm loans after assuming power.⁹ Resistance to land pooling has been high in the riverbank villages. Nidamaru village panchayat passed a unanimous resolution on 4 November 2014 opposing land acquisition/pooling for the capital city.¹⁰ This resolution became official as its panchayat secretary affixed the seal. The gram sabha of this village also passed a unanimous resolution opposing land pooling.¹¹

Stung by such resolutions, which have potential to create serious legal hurdles and derail the entire land pooling process, the village panchayat secretaries were instructed not to give official status to such resolutions. When Rayapudi panchayat members moved a similar resolution, the village secretary refused to record it (*Times of India* 2014a). It is learnt that Penumaka panchayat also passed a resolution but it too became unofficial.¹²

Strategic Measures: The TDP organised an interactive meeting of the farmers with the chief minister at Hyderabad on 18 November 2014. The outcome was “disappointing” and his “promise of transforming farmers into industrialists did not go down well” (*Times of India* 2014b). A farmer from Krishnapalem recalled with shock and dismay that the chief minister’s attitude was highly authoritarian.¹³ He was basically bluffing when he said, “if you give lands, I will make each one of you a GMR.”¹⁴ On whether the Jareebu lands could be exempted, he said, in that case, “there is no point in setting up the capital there. I will locate it elsewhere.” Targeting the riverbank village farmers, he warned: “If you don’t give lands I know what to do with you.” This revealed how crucial the riverbank villages are in the scheme of the capital project.

Three measures strategically implemented together in the last days of December 2014 and early January 2015 provided the backdrop to intimidation and coercion of farmers. First, on the night of 28 December 2014 (after sunset onwards) some banana plantations were set on fire in six riverbank villages. Second, the government brought the AP Capital Region Development Authority Act (CRDA Act) into force on 30 December 2014, and the LPS Rules on 1 January 2015. The CRDA Act, 2014 gives the Capital Region Development Authority absolute power to acquire, sell, transfer, or alienate the land for the purpose of development or redevelopment to private parties.

Third, the land ordinance was promulgated by the Government of India. The farm-burning incident provided an alibi to arrest a number of youth who were active against land pooling.¹⁵ A young TDP supporter, Srinadh Chowdary Kondepati of Lingayapalem village, where the first incident of farm-burning took place, was picked up by police on the night of 29 December 2014. He has been active in opposing land pooling and also feeding news occasionally to the media due to his previous connections. He was among the first to inform the media about the burning of banana plantations. The owner of the burnt farm, a strong TDP supporter, was unperturbed which raised suspicion

that this could be the handiwork of the government and the ruling party, and Kondepati expressed this to the media.

Going by his harrowing experience, one can presume that his arrest was planned politically at a high level before the police was deployed in the villages. Under custody, he was constantly threatened to surrender his lands. Police even procured his call data. He was taken to different police stations for three days and later formally charged with inciting farmers against land pooling and sent to jail. When he was under detention, police also harassed his parents. “Because of what happened to me, many people were not coming forward to speak against land pooling. Government has terrorised the people.”¹⁶

The youth in other riverbank villages were detained and several of them were beaten up. They were asked to reveal some names of their friends who in turn were picked up later and put to the same treatment. When relatives of these youth went to Thullur police station pleading innocence of their wards, they were asked to sign affidavits (copies of which were not given to them). People were asked to come to police station several times, made to wait for long hours and sent off. This went on for several days. In this manner, a significant number of people in the villages were forced to make rounds to police stations. Police also procured mobile call data of some people and questioned some youth.

Eight battalions of police (that is, about 10,000 police personnel) descended on the villages. Police outposts were set up and prohibitory orders were imposed in all the villages. There were also police in civil dress in every village. Those belonging to the main opposition party, or to backward/Dalit communities were treated roughly. Police were rude with the villagers who are not used to such discourteous behaviour. The whole experience left a bad taste for many of them. For some days the government also deployed special police who were in jungle uniform, with back-bags, and guns. Even at 10 pm in the night, one could hear their marching sounds on cement roads in lanes and by-lanes of the villages as well as the sound of police sirens. Many of these villages, that were lively places with lots of social life at night, turned into ghost villages for several days as their residents remained locked inside their homes.¹⁷

A ‘Rhetoric of Urgency’

It is in this backdrop that the government tried to implement the “voluntary” LPS. The rules were not made available in the local language. Short deadlines were set to pressurise farmers for speedy surrender of lands even before their implications were understood by them. The government exhibited a “rhetoric of urgency” to “justify the speeding up of law-making, regulations and policies to enable a new city to quickly materialize” (Datta 2015: 5). The land ordinance was relentlessly used as a Damocles’ sword over the head of farmers by the ruling party leaders, real estate speculators, revenue officials, the police, etc. A threat of declaring the lands not given in land pooling as “green belts” was also widely circulated to blackmail them. The villagers were even warned through public address systems.

Land acquisition is fundamentally coercive. When a state notifies farmers that it seeks to acquire their land, “the potential

use of violence backs this intent.” If the farmers refuse to vacate their land, the threat of coercion becomes actual violence (Levien 2015: 150).

Resistance and Coercion: The experience of a woman small farmer, Sudharani Boyapati in Krishnayapalem, reflects the extent to which the AP government has gone to intimidate those who were opposed to giving lands.¹⁸ She is a postgraduate in education, belongs to the upper caste and her family has been a strong supporter of the TDP. A one-minute video clipping of her views (given to a Telugu television channel one month earlier) went viral on social media.¹⁹ Soon the police and revenue officials descended on her house. She was forced to meet the joint collector who explained the “merits of the chief minister and the vision of a developed Singapore.”

Within a few days, a second interview of hers was telecast by the same channel which also went viral on social media.²⁰ She asked for display of LPS rules prominently in Telugu. Visits by intelligence and police officers to her house and phone calls were intended to break her morale. Her caste people were very angry that she criticised the chief minister. She faced a hostile attitude from all around. Simultaneously, the police started enquiring in the village about her family, her character and children. “It affected my morale when relatives in the village convey that such queries were asked by the police.” Unable to bear with this any longer, her husband gave consent on Form 9.3; “It was the saddest day in my life.”

The government wanted to show to the outside world that she gave the lands voluntarily (though the land is in her husband’s name and he submitted the consent form). It was bent upon humiliating her, it seemed. The tahsildar came to her home (after she avoided him twice earlier) and recorded her statement in his mobile and sent it to higher-ups through WhatsApp. Later only she realised that she was cheated and humiliated when it appeared in the media.²¹ The government used it in the promotional video of Amaravati.²² Despite giving consent, they have refused to accept the compensation amount, and are still cultivating their land.

Two ministers were on full-time work (accompanied by realtors and followers) and would spend long hours late into the night in those villages where resistance was high. One minister admitted before the media: “Farmers voluntarily gave 33,000 acres. I was there for full two months, from morning 6 am to midnight. We have not forcibly taken lands. If any leader visits this area and talks negatively, the price of land will fall by ₹10 lakh per acre.”²³

Farmers in several riverbank villages started demanding withdrawal of their consent from March 2015 onwards (*Times of India* 2015a). A panicked CRDA started hurriedly releasing annuity amount to TDP supporter-farmers. Soon after disbursing the cheques, senior officials formally launched the land levelling works by removing bunds, or felling some plants.²⁴ It was in violation of the LPS rules, yet was done to keep the protests under check (*Times of India* 2015b). The government also threatened farmers, asking them to stop cultivation, and even attempted to disconnect electricity to agriculture. Hundreds of farmers approached the high court and got relief against such threats.²⁵

The farmers argued that several of them had filed objections to land pooling which should be examined and disposed of within 15 days by the competent authority. This was not done. Even by the middle of May 2015 the extent of land taken by the government was only about 15,000 acres (*Sakshi* 2015a). The total land pooled as on 20 August 2015 was 26,975 acres (Samdani 2015).

Grabbing Assigned Lands from the Poor: Assignment of government lands to landless poor who directly engage in cultivation has been in existence since 1954. A lot of lands assigned to the poor were found to have gone out of their possession in course of time. To prevent this, the AP Assigned Lands (Prohibition of Transfers) Act was enacted in 1977. Lands assigned shall be heritable but not alienable, which is punishable under this act. Transfer of such lands is also not possible under any other law (Ramachandraiah and Venkateswarlu 2014: 27). The compensation package under LPS has been less for assigned lands both for residential and commercial plots (Table 1). The annuity amount has also not been paid for the assigned land farmers in several villages.

There have been widespread allegations that the influential TDP leaders have been buying assigned lands illegally and getting them regularised. Lands worth crores of rupees are obtained for a pittance by force and blackmail (Ravi Kumar 2015). The assigned lands on islands and along the riverbank, locally known as *lanka bhoomulu*, estimated at about 2,000 acres, have not been covered so far under LPS despite the riverfront being a high priority zone for the Amaravati project. There seems to be a sinister strategy here. The poor are told that the government will take over their lands without any compensation since they have not been notified under LPS. Under such fear, wherever an assigned farmer gives away his land for some payment, the records are getting quickly changed in favour of the buyers, who are mostly the ruling party leaders (*Sakshi* 2015b).

The government’s intimidation of the farmers opposed to land pooling continues even after laying the foundation for Amaravati on 22 October 2015. On the same night, a 4.70 acre sugar cane farm was burnt in Malkapur village. The farm’s owner, Gadde Chandrasekhar Rao, a TDP supporter, has been opposing land pooling as he feels that it has no legal basis. His nephew, Nuthakki Suresh, was detained, tortured and coerced by police to admit that he set fire to the farm at the behest of his uncle. He was released only after the high court at Hyderabad intervened (*Deccan Chronicle* 2015b; *New Indian Express* 2015a). Chandrasekhar Rao feels that this incident was aimed at intimidating him and such others who have not joined land pooling.²⁶ A lush green banana plantation of 7.3 acres was bulldozed in Lingayapalem village in the core capital area on 8 December 2015. This farmer too did not join land pooling. He suffered a loss of nearly ₹24 lakh (*New Indian Express* 2015b).

Centre’s Role

Without the complicity of the Government of India it would have not been possible for the AP government to employ the intimidatory and coercive strategies on such a scale. This complicity may be noticed at three levels: first, the Government of

India has not formed an opinion on the Report of the Expert Committee constituted by it as per Section 6 of the AP Reorganisation Act, 2014 on the matter of the location of the capital of Andhra Pradesh. It cannot be a mute spectator when AP has totally ignored the committee's recommendations, though they are not mandatory. The validity of the CRDA Act, 2014 itself has been challenged as unconstitutional and contrary to the AP Reorganisation Act.²⁷

The introductory part/preamble of the CRDA Act takes note of Section 6, and, mentions, "in the meanwhile" which gives an impression that it is an ad hoc arrangement. But it is a full-fledged and self-contained act. It has also not received the assent of the President of India so far.

Second, it is widely believed that the land ordinance with several anti-farmer provisions was promulgated to coincide with the CRDA Act. It was argued that it was brought in as a "conspiracy" to enable the AP government to intimidate the farmers. In a democracy, "you don't re-promulgate an ordinance. This (Union) Government did it thrice" (Devasahayam's²⁸ view as cited in Subramanyam and Varma 2015). The AP government extended the land pooling deadline eight times (*Deccan Chronicle* 2015c) till the ordinance lapsed. Third, a petition has been filed before the National Green Tribunal (NGT), New Delhi raising several environmental concerns.²⁹ The NGT directed the state of AP "not to carry out any operations of the clearing of the land falling in the project area" without obtaining environmental clearance.³⁰ The AP government, however, violated the order by levelling land and destroying crops in some villages. Despite this, the Prime Minister of India laid the foundation for the new capital.

Conclusions

It is claimed that the LPS in Amaravati "is the largest and the most successful of its kind in India, and is a manifestation of the people's desire for a world-class capital."³¹ The coercive measures, the chief minister's several foreign tours and the much-publicised possibility of the foreign governments taking part in developing Amaravati have all played part in this "mind game" in the land pooling process. Along with the "regimes of dispossession," we could also notice a "regime of co-option" facilitated by the absentee landowners and landowning upper-caste support base of the ruling party. The steeply rising land values, the possibility of the reconstituted plots fetching high prices, the inevitability of takeover of lands with the threat of the land ordinance, the lure of the farmers becoming "stakeholders/partners" in a make-believe futuristic city have made this "regime of co-option" easier.

A network of politicians and real estate players/entrepreneurs has also emerged in this area whose main investment is in land and land speculation and could easily establish its linkages with transnational capital (Upadhyaya 2015). The official notification of the master plan in December 2015 has set in new uncertainties and tensions even among those who "willingly" gave their lands and "cooperated" with the government. In several villages, people boycotted the meetings organised by the CRDA officials to get "feedback" on the master plan.³² After the lands have been taken over, the villagers are noticing a total contrast to the promises made before and after. The very existence of several villages has come under threat. And, location of the reconstituted plots, the most important promise of the LPS, has still not been resolved.

NOTES

- 1 Source: http://guntur.nic.in/amaravati_temple.html, accessed on 27 November 2015.
- 2 "Every Telugu should feel proud of the new capital Amaravati;" which should be the "envy of every country in the world," which would be "unparalleled in the history of India," and with a "river-front extending to a stretch of 30 km on either side," and he would make it "the tourism capital of the world," Chandrababu Naidu speech at the *bhoomi puja* on 6 June 2015 (Nagaraja 2015).
- 3 GO Ms No 254, 30 December 2014, MA&UD Department, Government of AP.
- 4 <http://www.it.telangana.gov.in/investor-info/fact-sheet/>, accessed on 9 February 2016.
- 5 Percentage figures worked out by the author.
- 6 "New Land Acquisition Act makes land buy virtually impossible: Amitabh Kant, DIPP secretary" (http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/33853173.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst, accessed on 17 April 2014).
- 7 MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) of the Government of India intends to provide at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work (<http://www.nrega.ap.gov.in/Nregs/>). Works cannot be provided under this scheme throughout the year.
- 8 The Capital Region was later expanded to 8352.69 sqkm (GO Ms No 207 dated 22.09.2015,

Municipal Administration & Urban Development Department, Government of Andhra Pradesh.

- 9 TDP—Andhra Pradesh Manifesto, 2014: p 12 (available at <http://www.telugudesam.org/manifesto2014/andhra.html>).
- 10 Source: A copy of the official resolution in Telugu with the author. This panachayat is controlled by the main opposition party in the state.
- 11 Source: A copy of the official resolution in Telugu with the author.
- 12 Based on a discussion with an activist in Penumaka.
- 13 Discussion held with the farmer at Mangalagiri, 24 October 2015.
- 14 GMR is a major infra company from India (which hails from AP) whose worth is in billions of US dollars.
- 15 Discussion with several activists and farmers in these villages revealed that the farm-burning episode was enacted by the ruling party as a strategy to move police into the villages. This has some credence due to the fact that the culprits have not been identified and caught even after one year.
- 16 Based on a discussion with him at Vijayawada, 25 October 2015.
- 17 Discussions held on 20–21 October 2015 with an activist of the main opposition party in Undavalli, a Dalit activist in Penumaka and a farmers' leader in Rayapudi.
- 18 Based on a discussion with her on 21 October 2015 at Vijayawada.
- 19 She expressed her anger and resentment

against forcible takeover of multi-cropped lands. She breathed fire on AP chief minister and his two ministers who were camping in the villages and pressuring the farmers. In a few lines, she broke the myth of the so-called land pooling being voluntary and how the small farmers were against it. The earliest upload of the video clipping is dated 4 February 2015 on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_s_H-LbnAoM.

- 20 It may be noted that this channel belongs to the main opposition party in AP.
- 21 She said in the video that the JC provided several clarifications and that they gave their lands voluntarily and without anybody's pressure. One can clearly make out from her face that she was not happy, and it looked more like a forced confessional statement after undergoing severe harassment. In the promotional video the government and the TDP compared this clip with her earlier angry clip. It tried to show that the government is pro-people, it adopts a consultative approach and that it has dispelled the misgivings on the capital city project as evidenced in these two video clippings.
- 22 Video clip available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iidflPt-bjc> (as on 22 February 2016).
- 23 The minister was addressing the media on 26 October 2015 to criticise the opposition leader's visit to the burnt sugar cane farm in Malkapur (Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgKMZDSAS7k>, accessed on 26 October 2015).

- 24 Such events have been publicised with big headlines in the pro-government media.
- 25 Write Petition Nos 11716, 11745, 11750, 11754, 11767 and 11862 of 2015 in the High Court of Judicature at Hyderabad for the states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.
- 26 This author was in Vijayawada when he came to know about this incident. He reached the farm on 24 October 2015 where a protest meeting was also held. Interviewed Chandrasekhar Rao at the farm, Malkapur, Thullur mandal, Guntur District.
- 27 Writ Petition No 99 of 2015 currently pending in the High Court at Hyderabad.
- 28 Retired IAS officer and former Administrator-cum-Estate Officer of Chandigarh Capital Project.
- 29 Application No 171 of 2015, National Green Tribunal at New Delhi.
- 30 NGT Order dated 10 October 2015
- 31 <https://amaravati.gov.in/EBricks/Index.aspx> accessed on 27 November 2015.
- 32 The author was present in Malkapuram village where the meeting was boycotted on 21 January 2016.

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