

Property and politics in globalising Bangalore

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Bhuvaneshwari Raman and Solomon Benjamin, in their paper titled “Illegible Claims, Legal Titles, and the Worlding of Bangalore”, analyse how programmes for digitising land titles are mobilised to reshape power relations within the state and outside, in a struggle to shape property claims in Bangalore.

Policymakers argue that programmes for digitisation of land titles would contribute towards strengthening poorer groups’ claims to urban land. Interestingly, the official narrative on the impact of titling programmes in terms of enhancing accountability, efficiency and “transparency” [are questioned by the findings of several studies](#). Experiences of implementing titling programmes in different countries show that such programmes may destabilise poorer groups land claims. Why so? Drawing from [Jacques Ranciere’s conception of “policy” as “policing”](#), Bhuvaneshwari Raman and Solomon Benjamin suggest that it is important to understand titling programmes beyond their normative claims by focusing on the politics that is worked through them.



The authors draw on the “practice force field approach” to lay out how titling programmes intersect with politics to structure property in land and grasp the practices of power. Their article attempts to move the discussions on titling programmes beyond the policy, project and programmatic frameworks, and into the realm of property, to conceptualise contestations over land and territory in globalising cities.

Bangalore holds a particular place in India’s global aspirations with its Information Technologies (IT) and Bio Technology (BT) economies. However, this city, like other Indian ones, has a heterogeneous small-firm based economy dominated by silk, garment, mechanical production, and associated trade and services. Narratives on the city’s globalisation tend to hegemonise the role of IT and relegate small firm-based economies to being remnants of tradition and informality resulting from rapid urbanisation and fracture of the planning process. Such a view creates fear and insecurity—unless cities develop land settings and regulations to attract corporate capital, they will miss out on “economic development” and fall into an anarchic abyss. Policymakers, advised by international financial institutions, mobilise the new global imperialist ideas epitomised in Hernando de Soto’s work—the digitising of land titles for greater legibility as the centre of several other new laws and institutional frameworks. In the Indian context, corporate lobbying for such policy changes prompted a high power [meeting](#) between de Soto and the Government of India Ministers for Urban Development and Finance in 2010. The agenda for digitising titles has been at the centre stage of policy recommendations by multilateral organisations such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and other large donors.

Indian cities and towns, like other locations in the Global South, have been built around small-firm economies of commerce and manufacturing whose linkages now move internationally. Paradoxically, most of the cities’ economies

based around small-firm trade and manufacturing have evolved in non-master planned settlements, which are characterised by “illegible” titles. This then raises the question of whether the push for titling programmes is a way to ensure territory for big business to locate in the rapidly urbanising peripheries. Are policy prescriptions promoting a fear of “slums/ unplanned development with unclear titles” ways to deal with competing claims to territory that they would otherwise allocate to corporate groups?

Titling programmes and their associated institutional architecture, supposedly to create clear titles, in reality dis-embeds existing forms of claims to re-embed new ones. Claims to urban land are historically embedded in different layers of social and legal relationships. The heterogeneity of tenure forms, rather than tradition, reflects the plurality of socio-legal processes underpinning land claims. Thus, illegibility surrounding land claims reflects a political condition rather than a normative one. The pro-titling camp, cutting across ideological perspectives, imagine titling as a way to create an efficient market, or else, to ensure the enforcement of the “rule of law” for equitable resolution of competing claims. In effect, both are predicated on legibility, and miss out important political realms that necessitate “opacity”.

A read of colonial history reveals how cadastral surveys and titling programmes are used to reconfigure land claims to transform control over economy and politics. The digital titling programmes such as the one considered in this paper perform a similar politics. The lobbies for digitising land titles in Bangalore included corporate economies, large developers and venture capitalists. Why were they interested to push for clear titles? This is due to the difficulty they faced in consolidating large tracts of land for the development of malls, IT parks and high-end housing projects. The paper illustrates the nuanced dynamics of contestation around land through a focus on the practices of claiming land by competing groups in the city. These practices are influenced by caste and institutional politics.

Land is implicated in the financial strategies of different economies in several ways. First, land-based financing is a dominant strategy used by both small firm-based economies and large economies. Second, the connection to land and its local politics to establish de facto claims also shapes connections to other social groups and helps consolidate a political constituency that bridges workers and management. Third, the diversity of land and built property tenure forms opens up opportunities for small firm-based economies to plug into land-based financing circuits, which are made possible via de facto tenure forms, and not dependent on absolute titles. Fourth, flexibility of land development in settings developed outside the master planning framework allow for the evolution of diverse property tenure options.

The rationality of ‘land titling’ projects are shaped by a particular type of political economy to neutralise competing claims over location, forms of territorialisation, and regulation of land use. Given the connections between land tenure and economy, it is hardly surprising that a significant aspect of city and even provincial politics involving small firm economies relates to the regularisation of mixed land use, and to the conversion and regularisation of peripheral land. The competing groups mobilise different institutional and political circuits, which can be seen as competing force fields.

The “force-fields” that cohere around political lobbies for land regularisation compete with those that lobby for master planning attempting to provide relatively large plots with “clean” titles. Small firm economies’ interests for policies towards land regularisation and basic infrastructure provisioning collide with the demands from corporate economies for vast tracts of land. The authors’ [earlier ethnographic research](#) revealed large developers aiming to consolidate contiguous parcels being challenged by local groups occupying land with claims embedded mostly in local government land administration.

The latter can be viewed as a counter to big business embedded into higher end policy circuits. In seeking a more fluid and open-ended concept, Raman and Benjamin draw on [Bourdieu and Waquant’s](#) force field, which suggests that society is an ensemble of several semi-autonomous spheres or fields “within which people compete for scarce resources”. Power relations within a field and between fields not only structure human behaviour but also the opportunities to claim resources. In this milieu, interventions purportedly for creating ‘clear’ digital titles may serve as a tool to alter the relative power of different kinds of socio-political networks and, in effect, their members’ claims on

land. There are two ways by which the realignment of power relations and claims are effected via such projects: one is through reconfiguring the power relations within the state; the other is through reframing tenure forms which involve reduction of categories for recording tenure.

One example is the collapse of diverse types of common, customary and grand land into public land or *gomala* (un-surveyed) land. This is central to the politics of 'worlding' Bangalore. At the World Bank's Annual Conference for Economic Development held in New Delhi in 2004, the chief architect of Bhoomi attributed the programme's success to reducing more than 1,500 tenures across Karnataka to 256. Earlier, *gomala* land used to be granted to poorer groups among others, but today, these are increasingly acquired for allocation to IT parks and high-end real estate development. Since the late 1990s, elite civil society groups, including some posed as NGOs, the dominantly corporate-oriented English print and TV media, "reformist" high-level bureaucrats, and big business have come together to demand "reforms" in institutional procedures and policy frameworks. Their efforts, purportedly to cut down on "corruption" and "unplanned development", focus on curtailing administrative procedures, which provide space for a politics of regularisation to consolidate and facilitate development outside master planning.

Further, interpretation of 'legal' titles was reduced to a one type of record. Land occupants rely on different types of records to secure their claims. Transfer of rights or mutation, for example, can be registered, entered in revenue records, recorded in property books maintained by local government, or then entered on a stamp paper with village council members standing in as witnesses. Many such practices are further implicated in how village or city councils use these records to extend services and infrastructure, which in turn reinforces de facto land tenure. After the introduction of Bhoomi, many of these records were inadmissible in court as only digitised Record of Transfer Certificates (RTC) were considered as legal titles. Both forms of reduction have been regressive to less powerful groups like very small farmers.

The politics of structuring property in land are not just about issues of poorer groups pressuring street bureaucrats and politicians via local government institutional space, but also about elite groups lobbying higher levels of government to resist these pressures from below. For example, take the case of land occupied by squatters to be subdivided, of which part is rented and part sold. The mobilisation of political and bureaucratic alliances extends services and infrastructure, but also spurs land markets via more stable yet de facto tenure. At the same time, large developers and their allies lobby the state to declare a larger territory as an 'IT corridor' which could destabilise the squatter settlement previously described. A venture capitalist, although aware of the possibility of squatter occupation, operates on the assumption of being able to reclaim land from the squatters. Here, both the poor and elites are, in their own way, speculating on land and mobilising various parts of the state via different circuits to shape laws and regulations in their favour. Under such conditions of legal and institutional pluralism, contestations to claim territory manifest themselves as struggles to limit claims through defining the nature of law or which institutional process is prioritised.

Thus, titling programmes and other types of interventions may be seen as efforts to shape/reshape power relations in an ongoing struggle around property. This approach with its emphasis on relational forms of power, particular historicity, and influence of multiple and intertwined institutions, often purposely opaque, provides a way to understand the nuanced dynamics of contestations around land. It allows for a consideration of multiple rationalities rather than viewing "resistance" in an oppositional mode, which tends to form a mirror image of what is resisted.

For more information on this topic, including case studies and discussions on reframing tenure and the reconfiguration of power over administrative practices, see Bhuvanewari Raman and Solomon Benjamin, "Illegible Claims, Legal Titles, and the Worlding of Bangalore", Revue Tiers Monde, No. 206 (2011), p. 37-54.

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