

Deprived castes pushed out in race to grab land in peri-urban areas: Study

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Privileged groups in Bengaluru's peri-urban areas use their access to political power to appropriate land by dispossessing the Dalits, a study has found.

The study by the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) said the trend is a replication of the agrarian caste system where Dalits are kept in the margins.

In their paper titled 'Caste at the City's Edge: Land Struggles in Peri-urban Bengaluru', authors Carol Upadhy and Sachinkumar Rathod present the example of two villages in the city's south-eastern edge where members of an upper caste emerged as landholders over the years at the cost of the deprived castes.

"Many Dalit families at one time held small parcels of land, mostly land granted under various land distribution programmes," the study noted, adding that the Dalits' access to land was eroded over time while the hold of dominant castes strengthened.

One of the two villages 'G-halli' was brought under the BBMP's jurisdiction in 2007 and the revised masterplan 2015 designated the village as a 'yellow zone', making it easy for the conversion of agricultural land for non-agricultural activity.

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A large apartment complex came up on land sold by farmers of this village, apart from other construction activities.

In the other village 'H-pura', located in the 'green belt', two kinds of land grabbing was happening: the occupation of gomala or government lands and the illicit appropriation or purchase of Dalit lands.

"Dalit holdings were often grant lands, which legally cannot be sold or alienated but often change hands informally, leading to ambiguities of ownership," the study said.

The upper caste has appropriated land pledged by Dalits to borrow money. "Several respondents recounted cases where Dalits took loans from (upper caste) landlords to cover marriage or medical expenses and lost their land," the study added.

The new landlessness has virtually undone the land reforms, which in themselves were not very effective. Urbanisation has restructured the village economy so much that it eroded positive changes in equitable land distribution.

Better access to information and government offices has also helped caste landlords in getting sanction for illegal transactions. Politics plays a big role starting from creating illegal layouts to appease the vote bank, to strengthening relationships between upper caste realtors and the MLAs.

The study also recorded how members of the deprived communities often resort to illegalities of the upper caste realtors that they ironically protest against.

However, caste remains a "central axis" of land grabbing. The role of caste is beyond social inequalities and should be seen as a social structure of capital accumulation, the study noted.