

[Commentary] The missing caste from commons: A reflection from a Telangana village

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Mongabay Series: Just Transitions

- *The process of de-commonisation of commons is inextricably linked to caste, write the authors of this commentary.*
- *Real-estate expansion into common lands operates from a strong nexus between local power elites and local administration both belonging to the upper castes.*
- *Social costs of industrialisation are pushed on to the villages, where the marginalised suffer the most.*
- *The views in this commentary are that of the authors.*

N. S. Jodha's pioneering work on Commons in 1986 alerted us to the poor's dependency on these resources. When the commons degrade, the poor suffers the most. However, we knew little about what happens when the resource is revived or conserved – who gets access to this and who gains from this? We also knew little then how the process of alienation happens beyond the so-called development projects shrinking the commons. Overall, the intricacies of caste and gender dimensions in the alienation process from commons continues to be an anecdotal narrative if not grossly missing. The caste dimension of power relations is intricate, leading to alienation on the one hand and grabbing and appropriation on the other. This can be seen in the Narva village in Telangana where our field study was conducted.

The village of Narva, prior to the creation of *mandals* (an administrative division) during 80s, was part of Chennur *taluk*. While being part of Chennur *taluk*, the revenue administration of Narva operated through the village Jaipur where the *panchayat samiti* (a rural local government body) was located and the *sarpanch* (head of the village government) resided. Village officers being designated as *Patwari*, *Police Patel*, *Mali Patel* also belonged to Jaipur village whereas village servants such as *Sunkari* and *Neeredu* were present even in the hamlets. The *Police Patel* had to deal with law and order, *Mali Patel* was responsible for collection of revenue and *tehsi* (tax), whereas *Sunkari*, served as an assistant to village officers and *Neeredu* was the irrigation overseer. Caste configuration of those who wielded positions of power in the village reveals that *Velama* and *Kapu* castes of the region were dominant. During a field trip to Narva, a village located right opposite Singareni Thermal Power Plant and adjacent to National Highway-63, in the Mancherial district of Telangana, the villagers assembled at the entrance of the village – a barren land to mourn the demise of their co-villager. As they gathered, discussions ensued with reference to an encroachment of culturable, uncultivated common land that fell on the route towards the cremation site. With the encroachment of this strip of land, villagers have to walk three times more in order to

reach the cremation site. The villagers relate to this land as *Mana Bhoomulu* (our lands) and *Mana thovva* (our routes). The official record affirms their position, which reveals that land under commons was privatised in a non-transparent manner.

Appropriation of the commons

The nature of appropriation of commons historically represented a quest for conversion of pastures, forest lands and cultivable/uncultivable lands into agricultural lands. The pursuit of expansion of agriculture was driven by both state as well as individual households. States aimed at extracting revenue while the individuals who cleared land for agriculture aimed for subsistence and livelihood.



Change in the land-use pattern near the entrance of Narva village, adjacent to NH-16. With the spike in prices for land, an upward expansion of real-estate ventures converting cultivable agrarian lands is happening at a rapid pace. Source: Google Earth.

Narva was an independent village, which organised its own agriculture through clearing of lands and transforming them into cultivable lands. Owing to the structure of power vested with local chiefs, *Doras* and *Patels*, the best lands suitable for cultivation *vampujaagalu* where water flows easily, were usurped from the villagers of Narva, and were recorded against dominant castes. The spatial distribution in terms of ownership of lands by Scheduled Castes of Narva signifies this fact. A majority of land owned by them is *aakasai/metta/* (sandy and loamy dry land), as against a major chunk of land adjacent to the village water tanks owned by dominant caste non-villagers. The current official record of land adjacent to *Narva Pedda Cheruvu*, a major tank, which irrigates about 88 acres of land reveals that the Scheduled Castes of Narva own only about 36% of the land, whereas a remaining 64% are owned by non-villager dominant castes.

The current appropriation of commons however, is driven by non-agrarian pursuits. A major phase of appropriation of commons for non-agricultural pursuits happened prior to 2018 when Narva was still a hamlet village under Mudikunta *Panchayat*. Encroachments of commons included uncultivated barren lands and lands designated to construct houses for houseless.

As narrated by villagers, when Narva was part of Mudikunta *Panchayat*, the *Sarpanch* of the village (a *Yadav* by caste) occupied the common lands and privatised the lands by transacting to a poultry breeding farm owned by a person who belongs to *Kapu* community. Similarly, the lands adjacent to the poultry farm which were reserved for construction of houses for homeless and were prohibited from transaction were also encroached by the dominant castes in power. As the villagers of Narva did not have access to the land records, they were kept in a state of ignorance. This was not the case with *sarpanch* and the *Kapu* member who had access to the Mandal revenue authorities at Jaipur and political leadership of that time, through which they converted de-jure status Commons into *de-facto* private property.

There are similar instances of lands owned by a Scheduled Caste households being encroached upon by people from dominant castes or with influence.

A power plant plan drives real estate

Real estate forecast at Narva has begun to boom immediately after the proposals to set up Singareni Thermal Power Plant during the year 2010 and the subsequent expansion of NH-63 from two-lane to four-lane. The first venture was set up in Narva and has encroached over an area of 8 acres having survey numbers 413 and 414, classified as Government Lands. This was further extended to another 8.175 acres of Government land having survey number 464. These survey numbers were meant for construction of houses for the homeless and were prohibited from transaction.

With the spike in prices for land, an upward expansion of real-estate ventures converting cultivable agrarian lands is happening at a rapid pace. In such processes of expansion, the canals which facilitate irrigation were diverted in order to convert the lands for non-agricultural purpose. Tanks known as *Narva Peda Cheruvu*, have *Mathadi-kaluva* or canals to irrigate the farthest-down fields. As the real-estate expansion began from the farthest-down fields and moved upwards, the *Mathadi-kaluva* in Narva was diverted. Real-estate ventures became a lucrative option for non-cultivating landowners who use to lease out land for agriculture. Now they sell the land for real-estate. Such process became problematic for cultivating owners and tenant cultivators. An upward expansion of real-estate towards the tank disturbs the regular channels of irrigation as large deposits of *moram* (red soil) poured on the agricultural lands for the purpose of leveling of the land for real-estate purpose. This results in market induced displacement for small owner cultivators to dispose of the land as water supply to their fields is disrupted with the canal disruption. The cultivating owners of Narva have a dissenting opinion on growing real-estate and encroachments, who fear the worst for market-induced displacement adversely affecting small-holders and tenant cultivators. Post creation of

Narva as an independent *panchayat*, the issues related to encroachment of lands allotted to landless Dalits were represented to the officials from the rank of Mandal Revenue officer to district collector, yielding little or no response.

In the village of Narva, as agriculture continues to be the major mode of subsistence, the expansion of real-estate at the cost of agriculture induced a reduction in the number of days of employment for the landless agricultural labourers and adversely affecting tenant cultivators with the reduced land available in lease market. As long as agriculture remained to be a major occupation of subsistence and a source of revenue for the state, initiatives were taken up to construct tanks, post which the prime lands adjacent to the tanks remained sites of dominance by the powerful. The rights of original tiller and clearers of lands were forfeited through forceful enclosure and occupation of those lands through use of power and under the pretext of non-payment of *Tehsil* tax. The changing context of a rapid expansion of real-estate resulted in conversion of commons and agricultural lands for non-agricultural pursuits, as against the earlier forms of appropriation majorly for agrarian pursuits.



A load of moram (red soil) being used to convert agrarian land to real-estate plots. Photo by Gummadi Sridevi.

The villagers of Narva, thus, bear the brunt of both direct effects of pollution with ash released from the chimney of the plant, as well the indirect effects of the power plant which resulted in expansion of real-estates, conversion of agricultural lands into non-agricultural lands and commons grabbing adversely impacting the livelihoods of the poor and marginalised. The villagers perceive indirect effect of the plant to have more pronounced adverse impact on their livelihoods as compared with the direct effects of the establishment of the plant.

The expansion of industrial units of both mining and thermal plants might become necessary to provide to the needs of the state, however, such an objective of serving the interests of the state should not be at the expense of the local residents who bear the brunt of pollution and loss of livelihoods. An uncompromising compensatory framework of offering livelihood opportunities becomes necessary for the dispossession inflicted on the local marginalised communities.

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With inputs from Matta Srinivas (University of Hyderabad), Shekhar K. (University of Hyderabad) and Pampa Mukherjee (University of Punjab).

Banner image: Representative image of a factory near a farm. Real-estate expansion into common lands operates from a strong nexus between local power elites and local administration both belonging to the upper castes, according to the authors of this commentary. [Photo](#) by Biswarup Ganguly/Wikimedia Commons.