# The Everyday Commoning Practices in Urbanising Localities

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Negotiating Rights to Inhabit Common Lands for Housing in Two Cities of South India

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a framework for understanding the everyday political dynamics of commoning initiated by residents to secure their claims to 'common land' in urbanising localities. This paper puts forward the proposition that a spatialised approach would serve to reveal the extent to which unique socio-political and geographical factors exert an influence upon the dynamics of collective actions (commoning). It examines the experience of households in two squatter settlements on the outskirts of two South Indian cities: Villupuram, a medium-sized town in the state of Tamil Nadu, and Bangalore, a large metropolis in the state of Karnataka. It demonstrates how common land could serve as a foundation for the inclusion of poor communities within the city. The two cases presented in this paper reflect a trend observed in Indian cities since the mid-1990s, whereby rural common lands in urbanised localities, previously allocated to poor households for housing, have been targeted for more profitable development, eventually justified by environmental arguments. Consequently, those in poverty are compelled to compete with more powerful actors in order to assert their right to the common land they occupy for the purpose of housing. The two case studies demonstrate the capacity of such communities to unite and engage in practical political actions to regularise their settlements and dwellings. We describe their engagement with multiple government institutions across the rural and urban continuum and illustrate the influence of contextual factors, including geographical and temporal factors, in shaping the unique and diverse trajectories of commoning.

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## INTRODUCTION

Securing safe and affordable land for housing remains a significant challenge for many households in Indian cities, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Scholars have advocated commoning as a way to broaden access to land for housing (Simonneau et al. 2019; Huron 2018, 2017, 2015; Volont and Dobson 2021; Baviskar and Gidwani 2011).

This paper explores commoning, defined as an "assemblage of social cooperations" (Shelby 2022; de Angelis 2017), by tracing how households in two South Indian squatter settlements in – Villupuram, a medium-sized town in the State of Tamil Nadu, and Bangalore, a metropolitan city in the State of Karnataka – collectively secured their rights to "rural common land" for housing in urbanising outskirts of the two cities. It aims to address a knowledge gap on the political dynamics of commoning for land in urbanising localities, particularly regarding the role of the State in the process.

The flexible interpretation of 'commons' and 'community' complicates the dynamics in urban contexts. Defining the community with legitimate claims to 'rural common land' is challenging as urbanising areas are inhabited by strangers from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. And also, increasingly, higher-income groups, invoking the "community" argument, often argue that squatters are encroachers, claiming that common lands should serve public purposes (Raman 2011; Benjamin 2011).

Furthermore, during the colonial period, the control of rural common lands, which had previously been managed by rural communities in India, was transferred to government agencies under the provisions of the Waste Lands (Claims) Act of 1863. Despite the colloquial term "common land," these lands are now under the control of various government agencies. Following the mid-1990s, rural common land previously allocated to landless households is now increasingly diverted to profitable urban projects, intensifying competition and contestation over land use (Balakrishnan, 2019; Benjamin et al., 2008).

We propose a spatialised approach to conceptualise commoning, which reveals how the unique socio-political and geographical contexts shape commoning practices and outcomes.In this paper, we build on the work of Benda-Beckmann et al. (2009) to illustrate the role of spatial factors, including land tenure, regional land laws, local politics, and residents' networks and knowledge of state procedures, in shaping commoning practices. Our approach allows us to capture the rural-urban continuum of commoning practices in urbanising localities and to understand how location-specific political and administrative constraints and opportunities shape residents' practices. Similar to the case observed by Volont and Dobson, (2021) in London, residents in the two squatter settlements came together to secure their interest in a shared resource (i.e rural common land). The threat of losing the rural common land they occupy to other powerful actors motivates squatters as a spatial community. It encourages them to act collectively to secure legal recognition of their rights by obtaining title deeds or patta.

The category of 'rural common land' is not homogeneous, as it is based on specific past or future needs. These include grazing commons (also known as 'meikkal' or 'gomala'), road commons (land reserved for future expansion of roads), and lake commons (also known as 'eri-poramboke'). The squatter settlement in Bangalore developed on gomala (grazing commons), whereas in Villupuram it occupied an eri-poramboke (lake commons). It is only possible to recognise squatters' rights to 'rural common land' in cases where the settlement in question is located on gomala land. In other instances, such as those pertaining to 'eri poramboke', it is necessary to undertake a reclassification before individual titles can be created for squatters. Nevertheless, although theoretically feasible, the issuance of legal titles on grazing commons was constrained by state legislation in Bangalore until 1999.

As a consequence of the existence of particular legal constraints, residents of Villupuram concentrated their efforts on the process of reclassifying their land, whereas those of Bangalore, with the backing of various local political organisations, lobbied for amendments to existing legislation with a view to enabling the issue of titles for individual plots (pattas) on 'gomala' land in urbanising localities. Furthermore, the administration in urbanising areas is undergoing a period of transition, with both rural and urban administrations influencing the process. In a pragmatic approach, residents made use of the opportunities presented by the different administrative contexts and other resources (spatial, political and social networks, and knowledge) available to them in order to secure their claims. They engaged with multiple government agencies, but the distinct strategies and outcomes observed in both locations were shaped by local political opportunities and residents' knowledge of state procedures. While lobbying, petitioning, and protests were common repertoires at both locations, differences in regional/local political opportunities, residents' knowledge of government procedures and networks with government agents shaped their roles and their use of other strategies such as the Right to Information.

A spatialised approach to commoning permits us to transcend the dichotomous categorisation of rural and urban commons, and to perceive commoning as an evolving continuum of collective practices, shaped

by particular geographical and political contexts. This perspective demonstrates how squatters establish urban land commons as political spaces by capitalising on the distinctive resources and opportunities at their disposal.

As a result of their sustained collective action, residents in both locations were able to obtain title documents with varying conditions attached. While the title or patta issued in Bangalore permits the sale of the property without restriction, those issued in Villupuram include resale restrictions. Notwithstanding these favourable outcomes, the land can be acquired by the State at any moment, thereby illustrating the fluid and ongoing nature of property rights. This ambiguity demonstrates the polysemic nature of commoning politics, which encompasses diverse strategies and shifting power relations as squatters negotiate their position within expanding cities.

In essence, the objective of commoning in both contexts is to safeguard the property rights of squatters in 'rural common land' through the acquisition of a patta, thereby facilitating a more equitable distribution of urban land to households adversely affected by profit-driven development. As urban areas continue to expand, former rural common lands become increasingly valuable as urban resources, and are claimed collectively by less powerful communities, such as squatters, who seek to assert their rights.

This paper is structured into four sections. The following section provides a detailed account of the two case studies, namely the two squatter settlements that were the focus of our investigation. It also outlines the qualitative methodology that was employed to address the research question that forms the basis of this study. The following section presents a review of the academic literature on common lands and urban commoning, with the objective of developing a theoretical framework on commoning for land rights, which will be applied to the field studies presented in this paper. The findings are then presented in three sections. The first section examines the role of various government institutions in the regularisation process, in the context of a rural-urban continuum shaping residents' claim to rural common land. The second section explores residents' practices in establishing and asserting their land claims. The third section analyses and synthesises the drivers and outcomes influencing the distribution of common land in favour of the residents.

## 1 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND INTRODUCTION TO THE TWO CASES

The two squatter settlements that were the focus of this study are Jakkur layout and Ponmudi Nagar in Villupuram. The former is referenced as Virupaksha Nagar in the property tax records of the Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), which is the Greater Bangalore Municipal Corporation. The Jakkur layout was selected as a case study for a comparative study of urban land commons for housing in the Global South, funded by the French Development Agency.

Given the focus of this paper, which is on practices of commoning, qualitative research methods were adopted. Fieldwork was conducted in Bangalore between July and December 2019, with a revisit in 2021. Fieldwork in Villupuram was more extensive, beginning in 2012, with periodic revisits in 2013, 2015 and 2023.

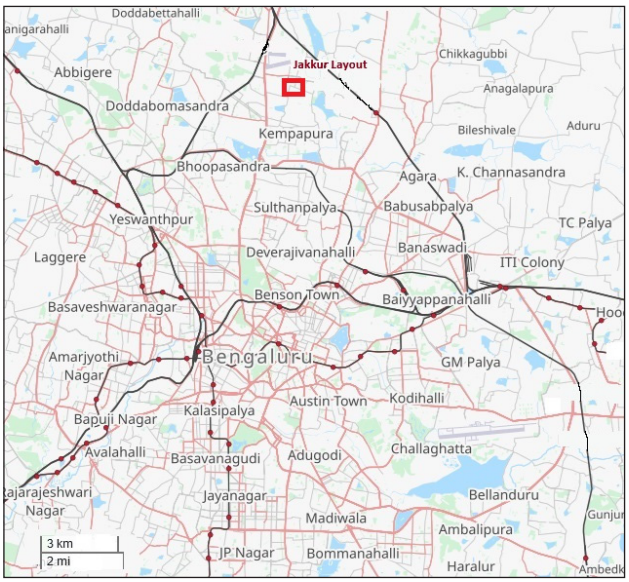
The fieldwork at Jakkur in Bangalore, which is discussed in this paper, is based on field research conducted jointly by the authors, together with Varun Patil, and by both authors along with Venkatasubramanian and Annbarbara Santhalingam in Villupuram.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents (men and women), panchayat officials, senior bureaucrats and field officers from the Land Revenue Administration Department, and planners in the municipality. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with local leaders of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti[1] (DSS), a non-party political organisation engaged in land struggles in surrounding wards, and real estate developers. At Villupuram, engagement was undertaken with the leaders of the Resident Welfare Association (RWA), officials of the Public Welfare Department and document writers. In contrast to the situation in Bangalore, the RWA's leaders have systematically documented their communications with government agencies (letter dated 10.6.1996; GO 6432/2007/ dated 19.7.2007). In addition to the interviews, the association's archives were also utilised.

The interviews and texts were subjected to analysis in order to construct a timeline (see Appendix 1) of the residents' struggle and to identify themes pertaining to the residents' actions, their engagement with government agencies, their utilisation of diverse legal and political instruments, and the resulting outcomes.

### CASE 1: JAKKUR LAYOUT (VIRUPAKSHA NAGAR), BANGALORE

The Bangalore settlement is situated in the Jakkur ward, on the periphery of the city's northwest region, in closer proximity to one of Bangalore's information technology parks (Map 1). A number of significant infrastructure and housing projects have been implemented in this area by parastatal agencies and prominent private land developers with operations spanning the entire country. These agencies have targeted and assembled land under individual private ownership, as well as rural common land.




**Map 1** Location of Jakkur Layout in Bangalore (Source: Open Street map, 2024).

The dynamics of commoning in Jakkur are situated within a broader context of contestations over 'rural common land' between actors with unequal power, namely, residents of squatter settlements and other actors in the neighbourhood, including a political representative. The settlement is situated on Jakkur village's common grazing land, which is referred to in the Kannada language as 'gomala'. Until 1970, the area of land, measuring approximately 15 acres, was used for grazing cattle. It was administered by the panchayat, or the rural local government. During the 1980s, the panchayat leased out small parcels of the land to villagers to support their livelihoods. Subsequently, the Land Revenue Administration assumed control of the land and subdivided it into three parts.

One portion of the subdivided land was allocated to a Central Government wood research institute, a second to private developers promoting middle-income and upper-middle-income residential complexes, and the third to a school trust. The remaining landlocked, L-shaped plot was developed as Virupaksha Nagar, with the area earmarked for a civic amenity trust and the construction of a Rajakaluve (a main storm drainage for the Bangalore Metropolitan Area) remaining unused. The settlement is now bounded by the Central Government wood research institute to the north, the school trust and a residential colony to the south, and access roads to the east and west.

The residents were able to ascertain that the origins of Virupaksha Nagar can be traced back to 1987, when a group of residents living on rental tenure in a nearby village occupied the land with the support of an elected representative. From 1987 to 2019, the settlement experienced a period of accelerated development, particularly after 1995. During the course of our fieldwork, it was observed that the majority of houses were constructed in close proximity to one another, along two main streets and two side streets. The majority of the houses were constructed with brick walls and an asbestos sheet roof. Nevertheless, a limited number of residences, situated in close proximity to the western access road, were constructed with reinforced cement concrete roofs and reached two or three storeys (Photo 1). Upon revisiting the settlement in 2020, it was observed that a number of houses had been purchased by households from the nearby Dalit residential colony. In 2019, the price of a plot of land measuring 10' × 20' (3 m × 6 m) with a semi-permanent roof was approximately Rs.15 lakhs. However, there was no discernible improvement in the second street, which was more likely to be evicted at that time. An analysis of Google Earth images from 2024 reveals significant consolidation even in the second street, with several houses having been upgraded with a reinforced cement concrete roof.

The residents of the settlement identified three distinct groups based on their respective household patterns of moving into the area. The initial cohort, who relocated in 1987 Appendix 1, originated from Jakkur itself and its neighbouring villages. Among them were households who were not included in a free housing scheme for Dalit households implemented in 1979. This housing colony was constructed under a grant housing scheme on Jakkur's common land. Those who did not receive an allotment occupied the L-shaped landlocked area with the support of a local branch of a regional political organisation, the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti.

The second group to relocate were those residing in rented accommodation in Jakkur and the surrounding villages. The third group comprised families who relocated to the settlement independently, with the assistance of the Jakkur Municipal Council and a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA).[2] Some of these households settled on a section of land adjacent to the Rajakaluve drains within the squatter settlement. The fourth group were migrants from Tamil Nadu State who were residing in various locations across Northwest Bangalore and other districts of Karnataka.

The settlers took up residence on their plots either collectively or individually, frequently with the assistance of local representatives from the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti. Consequently, upon moving into the squatter settlement, they had limited connections both within their own group and with other groups in the area.

The residents were from diverse linguistic, regional, and caste backgrounds. Women were employed as domestic servants, while men were engaged in construction work,

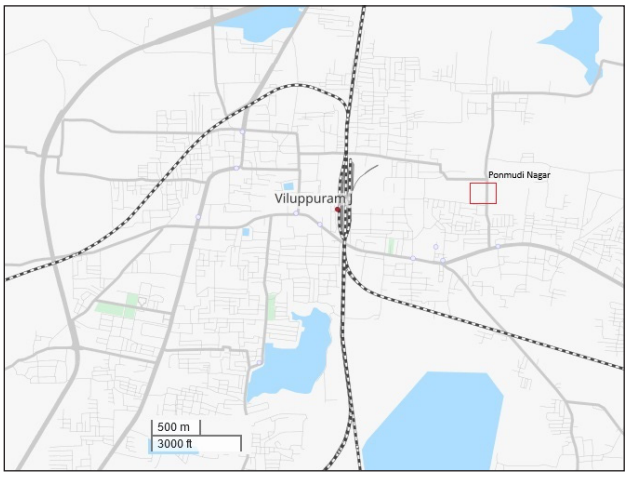
trading, self-employment (as tailors), and employment in a nearby SEZ-IT park. Their household incomes ranged from 10,000 INR per month to a maximum of 30,000 INR.

Local leaders have indicated that approximately 450 households were residing at the Jakkur layout. In 2020, approximately 350 households had been issued with pattas or title documents and property tax records by the Revenue Commissioner. A further 50 to 75 households held possession certificates, which confirmed occupancy but were not considered to be titles. According to the Assistant Commissioner of the Land Revenue Administration, there were also a few households who did not possess either a patta or an occupancy certificate.

## CASE 2: PONMUDI NAGAR, VILLUPURAM

Ponmudi Nagar is located on the periphery of Villupuram town, which serves as the district headquarters for the state of Tamil Nadu in southern India (see Map 2). The town is located 167 km from Chennai Metropolis, the capital of the state of Tamil Nadu, and has a population of 131,000 (Census, GOI, 2011). The settlement is located on the banks of two minor irrigation tanks, which are classified as lake commons or 'eri-poramboke'.

The genesis of Ponmudi Nagar can be traced back to the early 1960s, when a few landless residents occupied two Eramanthangal tank banks, which had previously been utilized for cattle grazing. At that time, the aforementioned common lands were under the control of two villages. Erumanthangal and Keezhperumbakkam. The original settlers, with the support of the panchayat leaders, occupied extensive tracts of land, which they subsequently subdivided and sold to migrants working as labourers in Villupuram town and to government officials posted in the surrounding villages. This resulted in the settlement of additional homeless families from the surrounding areas, which in turn facilitated the expansion of the neighbourhood around three housing clusters.




**Map 2** Location of Ponmudi Nagar in Viluppuram (Source: Open Street Map, 2024).

The fieldwork was conducted on two main clusters: one located on the side of the Erumanthangal tank and a row of houses along the main road on the other side. The settlement on the Eramanthangal bank is comprised of 135 houses, constructed along the main road and three parallel streets. The 85 houses situated on the opposite bank of the tank exhibited a linear growth pattern along the main road. During the course of our fieldwork, we estimated that there were approximately 220 households in the settlement. Of these, only 110 households residing on the Erumanthangal lakeside were recognised by the Revenue Department. The government issued them with conditional land titles, which restricted their ability to sell their land for a period of ten years.

The results of our household survey indicated that the residents belonged to a diverse range of caste backgrounds. The majority of residents were identified as belonging to the Mudaliar, Vanniyar and Nadar communities, as well as other historically disadvantaged scheduled castes. The residents were employed in the local public administration or were self-employed and engaged in wage labour in the city market. Others were employed in the construction industry. The degree of housing consolidation differed between the three clusters.

Upon revisiting the site in 2023, 11 years after our initial survey, we observed a significant consolidation of houses on the Eramanthangal lake's side (Photo 3). This was evidenced by the presence of the same families who had been present at the time of our initial survey. The settlement comprised residential buildings of one or two storeys, constructed on a number of plots of land. Some landowners had subdivided their plots to accommodate new families, while others had purchased neighbouring plots. A subsequent visit confirmed the stability of the settlement, which was underpinned by the official recognition of the right of current residents to settle on the common land and claim individual ownership of their plots. During our revisit, we were informed by the Residents' Welfare Association that they were still experiencing difficulties in securing titles for 85 households that had not yet been allocated pattas.

The value of land in the settlement increased at a rate of approximately 235% between 2001 and 2013, with an escalation of 200% in the latter period. This was in stark contrast to the inflation rate, which increased by only 35 per cent over the same period. The value of land in the settlement increased almost ten times faster than the inflation rate during the last period. However, we were informed that by 2023, land prices had stabilised and transactions remained limited. Despite the sharp rise in

property values, residents on modest, regular incomes had been able to stay in their homes and even improve them.

In contrast, in the other two settlements on the other side of the main road, the absence of secure titles to protect residents from eviction resulted in a lack of investment in the improvement of housing. Construction continued to utilise semi-permanent materials (tiled roofs) or temporary materials (thatched roofs and walls using palm leaves).

### TRAJECTORY OF COMMONING

The two timelines presented in Appendix 1 illustrate the trajectory of residents' engagement with government institutions in order to secure their titles.

In both locations, repeated attempts by various government agencies to evict squatters prompted residents to unite and take collective action to secure their claims.

The land in Jakkur was claimed by a local educational trust, which was headed by a senior politician. In 1994, the Revenue Department initiated eviction proceedings against the residents of Jakkur Layout in response to pressure from the trust. However, they returned to the same site after a period of time. Another attempt to evict them was made in 1996.

In Villupuram, the eri-poramboke land was allocated to a college trust, who had planned to construct accommodation for their staff. Consequently, they exerted pressure on the government to evict squatters and reclaim the land that had been allotted to them.

Following a lengthy and arduous struggle that spanned over more than a decade (1994–2013 in Jakkur and 1975–2009 in Ponmudi Nagar), the residents were finally able to secure titles and gain access to basic infrastructure. However, not all residents have secured their patta, and the contest continues.

The findings of this literature review, which will be discussed in the next section, provide a rationale for focusing on commoning as a political practice for land access in urbanising areas. They also identify a framework to position our findings within the broader discussion of the state's role.

## 2 FRAMEWORK FOR CONCEPTUALISING COMMONING FOR LAND CLAIMS

### WHY FOCUS ON COMMONING?

Elinor Ostrom's (1990) theory of common property resources (CPR) places particular emphasis on the management perspective. The CPR theory, which was developed in rural settings, posits that communities can effectively govern shared resources through the creation of rules and institutions. Nevertheless, the application of this theory to urban and urbanising localities reveals certain limitations, given the profound politicisation of land. In urbanising localities, diverse communities – comprising residents from differing socio-economic backgrounds, developers, and economic agents – compete to claim land (Borch & Kornberger, 2015; Stavrides, 2016; Huron, 2015). In contrast to rural contexts, urban residents initiating commoning may be strangers, united by their common interest (Stavrides, 2019). This gives rise to questions concerning the definition of the term 'community', and the legitimacy of their claims to common land.

While community land trusts (CLTs) and cooperatives exemplify urban commoning in some cities, such models are rare in the Indian context. In urban and urbanising contexts, commoning is not merely a matter of collective resource management; rather, it involves ongoing contestation, resistance and negotiation in order to secure and sustain claims.

The concept of viewing 'commons as political spaces' (Stavrides 2016) allows for an examination of the complex political dynamics of commoning. This perspective highlights how communities negotiate claims and respond to material constraints on land. Given that the use of and development of land are controlled by the state, it is important to consider the role of the state in shaping the dynamics of urban land commons (Shelby 2022; Noterman 2016).

In the Indian context, as 'rural common land' is often managed by various government agencies, requiring communities, such as squatters, to navigate legal and political challenges to assert and secure their claims. The state has the authority to reclassify "rural common land" for allotment to other uses. Consequently, "rural common land" can be conceptualised as a fluid and socially constructed category, shaped by ongoing social and political processes, rather than a fixed asset belonging to a predefined community.

The objective of this paper is to examine the manner in which residents engage with the state and other groups with an interest in the land in question, with a view to establishing and sustaining their claims to the rural common land they occupy. In line with De Angelis (2017), we define commoning as "an assemblage of diverse social actions" through which residents of these settlements established their rights. Given that rural common land in India is a legally defined category, the role of the state is of particular importance in the context of commoning dynamics. The allotment of rural common lands for urban development projects or for social, environmental or economic activities benefitting higher income groups by the state can have the effect of complicating the efforts of squatters.

### ROLE OF THE STATE IN COMMONING

The existing literature demonstrates the multifaceted role of the state in the practice of commoning. In her 2022 study, Shelby examines the state's involvement in urban commoning through a focus on a slum upgrading program in Thailand. The programme encouraged community involvement and collective land tenure. She posits that the state's role shifted from that of a facilitator to an active promoter, which transformed a grassroots movement into a passive recipient of state policy over time. Shelby (2022) distinguishes between active "commoning," where communities assume a leading role in resource management, and "being commoned," where the state is the primary driver of the agenda. The author suggests that even when the state incorporates the commons agenda, active commoning can still occur. By comparing the practices of two community institutions, Shelby (2022) demonstrates how, even within top-down frameworks, communities can actively engage in the management of shared resources within the policy framework.

In contrast, Volont and Dobson (2021) adopt a bottom-up approach to commoning in a low-income neighbourhood in West London. The study illuminates the political complexities of commoning through an examination of how the community deftly employed legal provisions and engaged in negotiations with local government to assert ownership of land in the neighbourhood and influence land use in accordance with local requirements. The authors posit that commoning politics frequently manifests as an ongoing, everyday struggle rather than as a discrete or disruptive occurrence. Furthermore, Volont and Dobson (2021) and Noterman (2016) emphasise that even when urban commoners operate within established normative property regimes, they retain the potential to resist and redefine these regimes. The study demonstrates that communities engaged in commoning urban land are primarily concerned with securing both collective and individual rights. This is achieved through negotiation with and, on occasion, resistance against state structures, with the aim of establishing these claims. The research findings suggest that the commoning process serves to foster unity and strengthen community bonds, as commoners actively learn to navigate legal mechanisms, such as adverse possession, in order to secure their claims.

### SPATIALIZING COMMONING TO CAPTURE DIVERSE TRAJECTORIES AND VARIED ROLE OF THE STATE AND RESIDENT PRACTICES

In alignment with the findings of previous studies (Volont and Dobson 2021; Shelby 2022), the role of the state is pivotal in the commoning process observed on the two terrains. However, the commoning dynamics were also influenced by the actions of multiple government agencies operating across rural and urban jurisdictions and at regional and local levels. Moreover, the specific government agencies involved and the actions of residents in each context differed due to variations in spatial (settlement location), legal (land tenure), and political contexts. Our findings also indicate a need to move beyond the concept of a "porous bureaucracy" (Benjamin and Patil, 2024), which is commonly used to explain squatters' interactions with the state in Indian cities. This concept emphasises how impoverished communities exploit networks and connections with lower- and mid-level bureaucrats, elected officials, and local expertise on bureaucratic procedures to exert influence over state decisions and negotiate rights.

However, while the porosity of state structures enabled residents in Villupuram to access information and co-create the information underpinning title documents, this was achieved through their engagement with different levels of the state (regional and local) as well as lower to higher-level bureaucrats. The particulars of the legal constraints in the two contexts constituted a considerable challenge, thereby necessitating the flexible utilisation of diverse resources, including opportunities within different welfare schemes and legal provisions. Furthermore, as evidenced by the Bangalore case, not all communities have equal access to or the capacity to influence within these networks. For example, in Bangalore, residents primarily relied on a political movement to navigate state rules, underscoring the varying capacities of communities to mobilise resources. Squatters at both locations pragmatically drew on whatever resources were available to them. Therefore, we argue for the "spatialisation" of the commoning process, as our cases reveal how factors such as settlement location, land's legal and administrative status, residents' knowledge, and local politics shape distinct trajectories for commoning.

## III) ROLE OF MULTIPLE INSTITUTIONS AND RURAL-URBAN CONTINUUM

The Department of Land Revenue Administration, a regional government agency, plays a pivotal role in the supervision of the land consolidation process in India. Its remit is the creation and management of land records throughout India. The Department was established during the colonial period and serves as the repository for land survey data, cadastral maps, and property records.

The department's powers, roles and responsibilities are distributed across the district, sub-district and village levels. At the district level, the department is headed by an officer from the Indian Administrative Service, the District

Collector, who is responsible for reporting to the minister, who is an elected member of the Legislative Assembly. In light of the political sensitivity surrounding land issues in both contexts, the ministerial portfolio is typically held by a senior leader of the ruling party. At the subdistrict level, the Tahsildar is responsible for managing a team of local bureaucrats. At the field level, the Revenue Officer is responsible for the supervision of the Village Administration Officer, an accountant, and surveyors.

The local and regional land bureaucracy is subject to the laws of the state, in particular the Land Revenue Administration Act. The history of the Act in Tamil Nadu can be traced back to 1876. Subsequently, the Act was amended in 1914 and supplemented by the Tamil Nadu Urban Land Tax Act in 1966. The history of the Karnataka Land Revenue Administration can be traced back to 1964. The Act was introduced following the formation of the state of Karnataka in 1956. Since its inception, the Act has undergone several amendments, including those in 2015, 2018, 2020 and 2023. It is important to note that the provisions of land laws differ from one state to another, which creates context-specific barriers to the generation of titles.

In order to obtain a title to a plot of land on common land, a squatter must submit an application to the District Collector, supported by a bundle of evidence regarding their identity and the length of their residence on the claimed site. The district office will only accept an application from a squatter and issue a receipt if it is willing to process it. The receipt of the application's acknowledgement was perceived by our informants as an indication of the administration's willingness to initiate the titling process.

In addition to the aforementioned responsibilities, sub-district and local officials are tasked with conducting land surveys, preparing cadastral maps, sketching maps, and maintaining two property registers on behalf of the district office. In this process, surveyors, village accountants and the revenue office play a pivotal role in the social and spatial surveys, which are of paramount importance for the demarcation of land boundaries and the making of entries in title documents.

Documents deemed acceptable by the land administration as proof of an applicant's identity and length of stay include, but are not limited to, a ration card, a caste certificate, an electoral card and receipts of infrastructure bills. These are issued by a variety of regional and local government bodies, including the Department of Food and Civil Services, the Election Commission of the Government of India, and rural local bodies or village panchayats.

Furthermore, the management of 'gomala' land and 'eri-poramboke' of small irrigation tanks is the responsibility of rural local governments or panchayats until such time as they are either taken over by the land administration and re-allocated to other users. The penalty receipts issued to squatters for their illegal occupation of land can be mobilised to claim land property under the legal principle of adverse possession. In order to establish proof of an 'undisturbed possession', the occupier should be able to demonstrate that they have collected the penalty receipts continuously for twelve years.

In certain instances, such as Ponmudi Nagar, the settlement had developed on eri-poramboke and salai (road) poramboke land. In such cases, the settlement land was managed by two village panchayats and the highway department. Furthermore, a portion of the eri-poramboke land was allocated to a college trust under the Ministry of Education. It was only after the requisite no-objection certificates (NOCs) had been issued by the relevant agencies that the land administration could issue titles. Furthermore, as the Public Works Department was responsible for water management across the state and subsequently awarded the contract to construct the college, it held both the land records and information regarding the government's plans, which was pivotal for the squatters in Villupuram in their negotiations with revenue officials.

From the outset of the residents' campaign to secure title to their land, the two settlements underwent a series of transitions in their administrative status, passing from the oversight of rural local governments to different levels of urban local governments. These transitions created both new opportunities and obstacles for the residents in their efforts to secure titles to the common land. To illustrate, the Jakkur ward was transferred from the rural local government to the town municipality in 2004 and subsequently to the Greater Bangalore Municipal Corporation in 2008. This transition from rural to urban administration has resulted in challenges to the regularisation of gomala land under urban jurisdiction, due to the absence of provisions in the Karnataka Land Revenue Administration Act 1964. Consequently, the titling process was disrupted, particularly between 2009 and 2013. Titles for squatters could only be issued after the relevant legislation was amended.

Similarly, Ponmudi Nagar was incorporated into the municipal corporation of Vilupuram in 2006. The regularisation of their land claims and development was influenced by a variety of legislative instruments, including the Regional Towns and Planning Acts and the Slum Areas (Improvement, Clearance and Redevelopment) Acts. These revealed a less favourable approach to the rights of the landless. Upon returning to the Villupuram site in 2022, it was observed that the Resident Welfare Association was assisting residents in utilising a provision within the Tamil Nadu Urban Local Bodies Act (1998) to pay vacant land tax


**Photo 1** Jakkur Layout Squatter Settlement, Bangalore in 2020. Photo Raman B.

on the vacant land surrounding each dwelling unit, thereby extending their rights.

This urban transition was accompanied by an increase in market pressures in Bangalore and the emergence of environmental politics around the protection of common resources, particularly water bodies. This strengthened resistance to the regularisation of squatter settlements on common lands.

## IV) PRAGMATIC POLITICS OF COMMONING FOR RIGHTS OVER COMMON LANDS

The residents engaged with the aforementioned government agencies for three principal purposes: firstly, to collect documents to prove their identity and length of residence on their land; secondly, to consolidate de facto claims through access to infrastructure; and thirdly, to secure title to their land, access to basic infrastructure and/or land-related information.

As observed by Volont and Dobson (2021), the politics of commoning in this context are characterised by everyday forms of action. In both contexts, residents engaged in a range of actions, including protests, repeated petitions to the land administration and other agencies, lobbying of government agencies through their elected representatives and/or their local allies. The actions undertaken by the residents had two principal objectives: firstly, to frustrate the state's efforts to evict them from their settlement; and secondly, to utilise existing legal and social welfare provisions in order to establish their right to ownership of their homes.

While the residents of the Jakkur Layout settlement engaged in negotiations through the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti, the residents of Ponmudi Nagar mobilised themselves and established a Residents' Association with the objective of presenting their demands to the state. Following the recognition of the land as habitable and the securing of titles, the role of the Residents Welfare Association in Villupuram diminished. Similarly, the involvement of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti in the Jakkur settlement declined, with its role limited to addressing specific requests from residents.

**Photo 2** Ponmudi Nagar 2011. Photo Denis E.

**Photo 3** Ponmudi Nagar 2023. Photo Denis E.

The manner in which residents engaged with different government agencies for the aforementioned purposes was not uniform. These discrepancies can be attributed to a combination of factors, including the influence of local politics, land tenure and resources available to residents, as well as their knowledge of how government institutions function.

## COLLECTION OF IDENTITY DOCUMENTS AND RESIDENCE RECORDS

In both locations, following repeated attempts to evict residents from their settlements, they collectively applied for a ration card and an electoral card, which were issued by the Ministry of Food and Civil Services and the Election Commission of India, respectively. Obtaining an electoral card is a relatively straightforward process; however, it is more challenging for squatters to secure a ration card.

It is a fundamental document that is required by various government agencies as proof of an applicant's identity and address. Moreover, the possession of a ration card is a prerequisite for the acquisition of age or caste certificates, which are indispensable for the eligibility to access a plethora of welfare schemes, including old age pensions, special grants for house construction or access to land, and metered electricity connections. Sriraman (2018) provides a comprehensive account of the challenges faced by squatters in India in obtaining address proof to apply for a ration card and a ration card to prove one's identity and address.

Upon applying for their ration cards, residents of Jakkur and Villupuram were situated within the purview of the rural local bodies. As a consequence of the lack of official recognition by the government, residents were confronted with considerable obstacles in obtaining proof of address or proof of residency, which are indispensable steps in claiming land under the legal principle of adverse possession.

In both locations, residents sought the assistance of their elected representatives, particularly the Member of the regional Legislative Assembly, in influencing the decision of the Department of Food and Civil Supplies. The residents of Jakkur sought the assistance of the leaders of the Dalit association in pressuring the local representative at the regional assembly and the local councillors to support their applications to the Food and Civil Supplies Office. The Dalit Sangharsh Samiti also played an instrumental role in facilitating their application to the Food and Civil Supplies Department, engaging in negotiations with officials at both the higher and field levels. As a consequence of the residents' persistent lobbying, they were finally issued with ration cards in 1995.

In contrast to Jakkur, the process of applying for ration cards in Ponmudi Nagar was more complex, in part due to the settlement's location. A number of residents, having previously been employed in the public sector, identified an opportunity to establish a public distribution outlet[3] within their settlement. The regulation of Food and Civil Supply services permits the establishment of a public distribution shop in the absence of an existing one within a 300-metre radius. A door-to-door survey was conducted by resident leaders with the objective of enumerating the number of households. According to a resident leader, the survey data was also instrumental in providing evidence of the number of households in the settlement when applying for titles.

The residents collectively submitted an application to the Food and Civil Supplies Department through their Resident Welfare Association, requesting the establishment of a Public Distribution System Shop. As a result of this initiative, each household was furnished with a ration card. The association then forwarded these applications through their elected representative at the regional assembly, who resided in the same town. His assistance was pivotal in influencing the Department of Food and Civil Supplies' decision. The shop was initially established at one of the local leaders' residences until the onset of the pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV). From the perspective of the leader, the establishment of the shop provided a means of ascertaining the number of households in the settlement and their respective identities. The shop was inaugurated in 1976, with individual household cards being issued that same year.

The B-Memo represents another crucial document utilised by squatters at both locations to substantiate their claim to land under the adverse possession legal principle. The document allows an occupant to assert ownership if they can demonstrate that they have possessed the property continuously for a period of twelve years. Penalty receipts for the illegal occupation of land are issued by a government agency that owns or administers the common land. The simplicity with which a squatter can obtain penalty receipts for twelve years without interruption is contingent upon the agency responsible for the administration of the area in question. It is relatively more straightforward for a squatter to petition the panchayat for the imposition of the fine on an annual basis. As the payment of the fine enables squatters to construct an evidence record, it is not uncommon for agencies responsible for the administration of common land to refrain from the collection of the penalty on an annual basis, with the intention of disrupting the chain of evidence.

A limited number of residents who had established themselves at Ponmudi Nagar prior to the 1970s lobbied the Panchayat to impose a penalty for encroachment and subsequently paid it. One of the settlers indicated that the penalty for encroachment on forest land was first imposed in 1966. The majority of residents arrived after this period, and thus, not all of them were able to utilise this route. Similarly, at Jakkur, a penalty has been levied by the panchayat since the mid-1990s. One of our informants, whose residence is situated in proximity to a storm water drain, was attempting to utilise the B-Memo route in order to consolidate their claims, as documented by Patil (2024). However, unlike their counterparts in Villupuram, not all residents were aware of this process.

## STRENGTHENING OF DE FACTO CLAIMS CONTINGENT UPON THE PROVISION OF BASIC INFRASTRUCTURE ACCESS AND FREE HOUSING SCHEME

As can be discerned from the timelines (Appendix 1), the process of creating titles to the housing plot is neither straightforward nor simple. In addition to the time and effort required for titling, residents at both locations have also taken steps to access basic infrastructure. Notably, obtaining metered electricity is a relatively straightforward process.

Then, the receipt for payment of the monthly electricity bill serves as a crucial proof of address and length of stay, as it is accepted as evidence of the de facto claims to land. One year after obtaining a ration card (i.e. 1996), residents of Jakkur were able to access an electrical connection through a rural electrification scheme. This was facilitated by the local councillor (panchayat leader) and the local Member of the Legislative Assembly. The scheme was extended to those residing in temporary structures, such as thatch-roofed dwellings.

In the same year (1996), the Panchayat extended the provision of public water taps, constructed stormwater drainages and paved the settlement's two main streets under the auspices of a rural development scheme. As a result of the aforementioned measures, residents began to invest in the upgrading of their houses, as they had previously been affected by flooding during the monsoon season. The construction of brick walls and an asbestos cement sheet roof enabled residents to apply for individual metered electricity connections. In 2000, residents of Jakkur applied for individual metered electricity connections with the support of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti and their district representative at the regional assembly. However, no progress was made until 2004, when the electricity board finally installed individual meters.

By 2004, the Jakkur ward had been incorporated into the Yelahanka town municipality, which resulted in the stalling of the titling process. The Dalit Sangharsh Samiti played a pivotal role in mobilising local residents to advocate for the provision of infrastructure services at the municipal level and to engage in protest actions at the regional level. In 2005, the Yelahanka municipality commenced the provision of piped water to the squatter settlement. Subsequently, between 2004 and 2006, the municipality extended other infrastructure facilities, including individual water supply, community toilets, and a storm water drainage system. The municipality extended water lines along one of the streets, with residents drawing a line near or inside their houses. The extension of infrastructure led residents to

invest further in the upgrading of their houses from a semi-permanent structure to a reinforced cement concrete one.

Prior to its incorporation into the municipality in 2007, the settlement of Villupuram was without a formalised water supply system. As a result, residents were obliged to undertake a journey of between three and five kilometres into Villupuram to obtain water. The Resident Association lobbied the elected representative to the regional government, which resulted in the establishment of two boreholes on one of the settlement's boundaries. In 2010, residents along the main street made an investment in the installation of piped water connections to their homes, which were connected to a municipal water line that was servicing adjacent areas (Photo 2). The Resident Association was instrumental in initiating the construction of a street drainage system, which was funded by a number of households. Furthermore, in 2009, an underground drainage system was established through a Member of Parliament scheme. However, this infrastructure was not extended to Ponmudi Nagar until the residents received their property titles (pattas) and the municipality formally included the settlement in its records.

## INFLUENCING GOVERNMENT DECISIONS ON TITLING

At Jakkur layout, the local branch of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti played a pivotal role in mobilising residents to engage in protests, lobbying and petitioning at both the regional and local levels. The strategy was to mobilise the population to exert pressure on political parties, particularly during election periods, to negotiate for legal reforms. At the local level, the organisation exerted pressure on field-level and district-level administrators to process the residents' applications and facilitate their access to the welfare schemes and documents issued by the state. Their efforts on the ground, in conjunction with their relationship with senior political party leaders, resulted in the amendments to section 94C of the regional Land Law, which was crucial to removing the legal barriers to titling the Jakkur layout land. The majority of interactions between residents and government agencies occurred through the Dalit association. While the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti's interactions at the field level and with senior bureaucrats were not readily apparent, the Resident Welfare Association at Villupuram had meticulously documented their actions.

In contrast, the actions and instruments employed by the residents of Ponmudi Nagar demonstrated a flexible utilisation of available opportunities across the administrative and political domains. Firstly, they employed the visit of the Governor, who is the State's head of government, to submit a petition and subsequently secured an order from his office to provide them with titles. Despite obtaining the order, the process of obtaining land titles was not straightforward. Despite the land administration's refusal to accept their applications and the absence of any acknowledgement order following the submission of their petition, the RWA persisted in their efforts to secure the district collector's attention. They continued to visit the district office and their elected representative (MLA) to lobby for action on the Ponmudi Nagar file. This involved a significant investment of time, with the Resident Welfare Association making sixteen attempts before their applications were accepted.

The process did not reach its conclusion at this point. In a procedure analogous to that described by Hull (2012) in the context of Pakistan, the Resident Associations drew upon a range of resources to trace the movement of the files and to take actions in order to advance the case. Moreover, the landowner and the college trust declined to issue a no-objection certificate. As a result, the process of creating titles for residents of Ponmudi Nagar was halted for approximately a decade. In order to overcome these and other obstacles, the inhabitants employed a range of strategies. For example, they invoked the Right to Information Act (2005) in order to obtain information regarding their file and to exert pressure on the Land Administration to act. Additionally, they lobbied their elected representatives to provide support at various stages, including obtaining a no-objection certificate from the landowners and influencing the Department of Land Revenue to create titles. Moreover, they utilised their personal networks with specific local field bureaucrats in the Public Welfare Department and the Revenue Administration to procure vital information regarding the land. This encompassed cadastre maps, survey numbers, and administrative orders concerning land conversion at the time of allotment to the college trust. The Resident Association's leaders participated in local surveys, finalised and fixed the boundaries, and ensured that residents' details were entered in the property registers.

Moreover, residents of Villupuram made use of specific events, such as public grievances redressal meetings, which are regularly organised by the Revenue Administration with the purpose of addressing public grievances. In addition to submitting their applications collectively at the Department, residents also presented their individual applications at the aforementioned meetings. The meetings are attended by the district collector and field bureaucrats and are designed to facilitate the expedient resolution of problems.

While residents at both locations enlisted the support of elected representatives in their engagement with government agencies, this was not the sole mechanism observed. Moreover, the relationship between the communities and their elected representatives cannot be

defined as a strictly hierarchical and exploitative form of patron-clientelistic politics (Chatterjee 2008). Furthermore, the negotiations conducted by these communities with the state through a movement organisation, such as the Dalit Sangarsh Samiti, do not align with the progressive politics conceptualised in the literature on social movements (Castells, 1984) or civil society (Chatterjee, 2008). As observed by Piliavsky (2014) and Bjorkman (2014), the concept of patron-clientelism is not merely a hierarchical or unidirectional phenomenon. Rather, it is a dynamic and reciprocal system.

The communities in the two research contexts pragmatically drew on the support of different political and bureaucratic actors, in addition to accessing diverse opportunities within welfare schemes and legislation. These opportunities were context-specific, and thus, in alignment with Bjorkman (2014), we posit that a community's engagement through patron-client ties or movement and their capacity to negotiate through such channels are shaped in each city by spatial, legal, and social complexities. In light of the above, we contend that an understanding of commoning as an 'assemblage of situated political practices' is essential.

From the preceding discussion, it can be surmised that while the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti mobilised Jakkur residents for various actions with the objective of seeking amendments to the law and ensuring their implementation at the local level, the commoning practices facilitated by the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti sought to extend the boundary of the law. In contrast, residents of Villupuram, who were compelled to rely on their own resources, sought to obtain titles through the existing legal and administrative frameworks. What factors account for the observed differences in residents' commoning practices?

## V) DIVERSE COMMONING PRACTICES AND OUTCOMES

The diversity of commoning practices for land rights over common lands observed across our two cases can be explained by two factors: firstly, the uniqueness of the threats faced in each site; and secondly, the difference of resources available to residents, including their influence on and connection to the local and regional politics.

### THREATS SHAPED BY LAND TENURE AND LOCATION OF SETTLEMENT

In general, the provisions of the Land Revenue Administration Act permit the creation of titles for houses on a specific type of common land, categorised as either Natham or Grama Natham (residential commons). The Jakkur squatter settlements are established on gomala land, while the Villupuram settlement is situated on eri-poramboke (lake commons) land. In order for individual titles to be created, these categories must be converted to natham. Furthermore, the titles granted to squatters on common land are grant land pattas, which can only be used by the holder for the purpose of housing and cannot be freely exchanged.

The conversion of disparate categories of common land to natham is a complex process. While the regularisation of occupancy and titling at Jakkur settlement was relatively straightforward in the case of 'gomala' land, this was not possible due to the provisions set out in the Karnataka Land Administration Act 1964. The Act, until 2001, explicitly prohibited the regularisation of constructed structures on common land, as outlined in section 94. A new section, section 94C, was added to the Act in 2000, which permitted the regularisation of built structures on common land within rural jurisdictions.

Moreover, the administrative jurisdiction of the settlement exerts an influence on the regularisation and titling processes. As a consequence of this amendment, the Department of Land Revenue invited applications for a free grant patta from squatters on public land. In 2001, the Department of Land Revenue issued temporary possession certificates, or 'temporary pattas', to 330 households in Jakkur. Such certificates are designated as 'temporary pattas' due to the fact that they do not afford any right to object to demolition or relocation.

The Land Revenue Administration's standard practice is to issue permanent pattas after a stipulated period, contingent on the pressure exerted by the residents. The precise duration of this period is unclear. As the Land Administration was in the process of preparing the permanent titles, this process was halted due to the annexation of Jakkur layout into the town municipality. The area in question has undergone three distinct administrative jurisdictions: from the rural panchayat until 2004, to Yelahanka city, and finally, in 2007, to the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike, which has been widely extended to incorporate hundreds of villages and towns surrounding it.

It should be noted, however, that the pattas created for rural occupiers of common land under section 94C are grant land pattas, which are conditional. Such entitlements may be revoked in accordance with Section 25 of the Karnataka Land Revenue Administration Act of 1964. Following the annexation of Jakkur layout to Yelahanka city and subsequently to the Greater Bangalore Municipal Corporation, the Act did not permit the regularisation of constructed structures on common land situated within the boundaries of an urban administrative jurisdiction.

In 2006, the Arkavathy housing layout was announced by the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA), which is responsible for land use planning. This announcement prompted concern from the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti and squatter residents, who feared that their granted land would also be acquired. Even if they had been issued with land pattas, section 25 of the Karnataka Land Revenue Administration Act of 1964 could be invoked to remove them, as the settlement on Jakkur 'gomala' land fell administratively under the category of a "built structure on occupied land in urban areas".

The incorporation of seven municipalities and rural panchayats into the Greater Bangalore Municipal Corporation has had the effect of limiting the rights of residents of squatter settlements on the outskirts. Moreover, the publication in 2006 of the Ramaswamy Joint Legislature Committee Report on the encroachment of lands in Bangalore Urban District, and the formation of a Task Force in 2011 to recover public land from encroachers, recommended the cancellation of irregular regularisations of occupation on public land and 'hakku patras' (land titles) issued to settlers on public land. These developments in the city resulted in a further postponement of the issue of permanent titles to occupants of the Jakkur settlement. A period of five years elapsed before 184 of them were granted title.

The amendment of legislation can only be achieved through the adoption of a resolution at the State Assembly. The role of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti's senior leaders was of great consequence in both 2011 and 2013, in their efforts to persuade the ruling regime to introduce legal amendments that would permit the regularisation of encroachment on government land. The bargaining power of these actors is derived from their ability to mobilise a significant electoral base among the local squatter population. Section 94C was introduced in 2001, following the election of the Indian National Congress party, led by S. M. Krishna, in 1999. Consequently, the Revenue Administration distributed 350 'hakku patras' to households, which were distributed by the Chief Minister (S. M. Krishna). Additionally, approximately 25,000 hakku patras were distributed at the event to squatter residents in the rural periphery of Bangalore, including those in Jakkur layout. Such pattas were issued in accordance with the provisions set forth in the Karnataka Land Revenue Administration Act of 1964. In 2008, a change of government occurred in Karnataka with the Bharatiya Janata Party assuming office. Rapidly it decided to discontinue the issuance of pattas for grant land. Consequently, residents of Jakkur experienced a setback. Following lengthy discussions between the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti and the incumbent governments, the Congress government, which returned to power in 2013, enacted a new amendment, section 94CC, which permitted the regularisation of constructed structures on common land within urban jurisdictions. The scheme was resumed in 2013 following protracted negotiations between the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti and the incumbent governments. The Congress government, which returned to power in 2013, enacted a new amendment, section 94CC, which permitted the regularisation of built structures on common land within urban jurisdictions. This resulted in the Land Revenue Administration once again issuing invitations to apply for land pattas to squatters on public land. In 2015, 184 residents of Jakkur settlements were granted land pattas. In the course of the interview, the Assistant Commissioner of Revenue Administration repeatedly referred to the 2005 patta as a "temporary" one and the 2015 one as a "permanent" one. Moreover, he corroborated that the permanent patta issued in 2015 can be traded, but in accordance with the 94CC amendment, it can only be utilized as a dwelling house and can be transferred after a ten-year period.

While the revenue department continues to process the remaining applications, a public interest litigation (PIL) filed in 2017 to repeal Section 94CC has been filed in the High Court and is now pending in the Supreme Court. This has the potential to jeopardise the occupancy rights of squatter settlements and halt the free grant scheme. According to a representative of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti, the issue of permanent pattas has been repeatedly postponed. In response to each stalling of the free grant scheme, the Dalit organisation organised protests, petitioned at the local level and lobbied leaders of political parties to change the law. It has been argued that lobbying, protests and petitions have their limits when the courts intervene to stop the regularisation process. The current threat, according to recent newspaper reports, is that the Supreme Court may strike down the 94CC provision of the Act.

Thus, the political dynamics of commoning in Jakkur Layout are shaped by the legal provisions of the Land Revenue Administration and the city-wide contestation for and against regularisation policies. The legal provisions of the Revenue Administration Act, particularly Sections 94C and 94CC, which allow for regularisation of occupation on government land, have been opposed since 1995 by a coalition of lawyers, Indian Administrative Service bureaucrats, civil society organisations, including the Bangalore Agenda Task Force[4] and the Public Affairs Committee. The formation of the Joint Legislative Committee under the chairmanship of AT Ramaswamy in 2006, the publication of the AT Ramaswamy Committee Report in 2007, the Task Force on Recovery of Government Land from 'Encroachers' in 2012 and the publication of the Land Governance Framework Report by a private university

with the support of the World Bank in 2014 are part of these efforts to remove legal avenues for regularising occupation on government land, which has affected settlements on Gomala land.

In contrast to the situation in Bangalore, in small towns like Villupuram there is relatively less resistance to regularising squatters' claims to common land. However, the location of Ponmudi nagar on eri-poramboke has been a significant obstacle to residents' efforts to regularise their settlement and obtain pattas. The conversion of eri-poramboke is further complicated by a number of laws and regulations designed to protect wetlands. The most important of these is the Tamil Nadu Protection of Tanks and Eviction of Encroachment Act of 2007. This was further complicated by a Supreme Court order in 2011, which asked state governments to remove encroachments on common land, particularly water ponds.

In addition, the Tamil Nadu government's allocation of the lake commons to a college trust has further threatened the claims of Ponmudi Nagar residents. The land in question was occupied by Ponmudi Nagar residents and was earmarked for the construction of a residential area for college staff. The College Trust has been reluctant to relinquish possession of the land and issue a no-objection certificate to regularise the settlement.

As a result, Ponmudi Nagar residents faced significant obstacles in their efforts to apply to the Revenue Department for title deeds to their plots or to obtain no-objection certificates from public landowners, as described above. While they sought the support of their member of the Legislative Assembly, a senior party leader and former minister, they also employed alternative strategies, as described earlier. By using their networks with field bureaucrats in various government agencies. It is noteworthy that in their petitions and letters to the district administration for the conversion of their land to the natham category, the people of Villupuram were able to cite the precedent of the administrative order that converted the eri poramboke to the college poramboke. The threat of land tenure and administrative complications were more limited in their impact.

### VARIED RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO RESIDENTS

Another important factor influencing residents' practices is the availability of resources within the community and their involvement in local politics. The majority of Jakkur residents are employed on a daily or weekly basis in construction, domestic work or self-employment (tailoring). The resources at their disposal – time and money – were limited. Despite their connections with local officials, including the revenue accountant in their ward, many Jakkur residents lacked significant influence. The Dalit organisation, however, was a prominent local organisation with considerable influence and clout within the government. It played a pivotal role at every stage of the process, from supporting the residents in occupying the land in Jakkur, to mobilising them for protests and forwarding their petitions to various government departments. The Dalit Sangharsh Samiti is a non-party political organisation that works to improve the socio-economic status of Dalits in the Indian state of Karnataka. It has strong links and influence with political parties in the peripheral municipalities of Bengaluru and at the regional level. It has a long history of mobilising Dalit households in the state and redistributing land, particularly common land, to landless or homeless households. It has also organised homeless households from different parts of Bangalore. In addition, it has facilitated squatters to occupy common land in Jakkur Layout and other parts of Bangalore (such as southwest Bangalore, as documented by Benjamin et al. 2008 and Patil 2024).

At the time of this fieldwork, a local leader of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti was gathering information on the availability of common land in north-west Bangalore. This information was to be used in a lobbying effort with the Deputy Chief Minister to secure the allotment of such land to squatters and homeless people in the area (see Patil 2024 for further details). Throughout the titling process, the Dalit organisation played an important role, with residents maintaining individual links with its leaders. Although its involvement in the settlement has diminished after titling, the organisation still exercises control over transactions within the settlement.

In contrast, the leaders of the Ponmudi Nagar Resident Welfare Association were retired government officials who had the time, knowledge and personal networks in various government departments. These connections enabled them to secure land-related information from the Public Works Department and the Revenue Department. In addition, from the beginning of the process, the leaders undertook a household census and kept records of the situation on the ground in addition to the official records. Their understanding of government procedures, coupled with their established connections with bureaucrats in the field, enabled them to actively influence the survey process, as previously described by Raman, Denis and Benjamin (2016).

## CONCLUSION

This paper presents an analysis of the diverse dynamics of commoning to secure the right to settle on common land for housing in Indian cities, focusing on the experiences of residents of two squatter settlements in urbanising

locations on the outskirts of a metropolitan city and a town. The paper traces the distinctive and diverse trajectories of urban commoning for land rights as shaped by spatial and temporal factors, including the location of the settlement, regional land laws, local and regional political interactions, and changes in land administration laws due to evolving political dynamics.

The two cases add to the discussion of the role of the state in securing claims to 'common land' in urbanising contexts. While confirming findings on the role of the state in other contexts, the observations discussed in this paper unravel the complex and intricate actions of multiple state agencies and the ways in which squatters pragmatically exploited opportunities in rural-urban administrative and political spaces and their resources, in particular their networks and knowledge of the workings of the state.

We show how rural commons provide an important avenue for poor households in urbanising localities to access land for housing. The two cases presented in this paper exemplify a widespread and pervasive phenomenon observed in many Indian cities, particularly in southern India: the occupation of rural common lands by squatters and dwellingless households, followed by the regularisation of their occupation and the acquisition of titles to their house sites.

With urbanisation, however, rural communal land is also sought after by a wide range of urban actors, each with different political and economic resources. Those who occupy the land without the necessary legal rights must compete with more powerful actors, including property developers, local politicians, and middle- and higher-income households, for the right to claim it. Furthermore, in recent times, decision-makers in government agencies, including planners, senior bureaucrats and politicians, have placed a high priority on evicting squatter settlements in order to reclaim common land for various urban development projects. Such actions are justified by reference to the rule of law, the green agenda and environmental protection.

The reclaimed land is then repurposed to build colleges, stadiums or profitable housing projects through public-private partnerships and/or to promote the green agenda. Despite the claim that such projects are intended to promote the 'urban commons', in practice they focus on the aestheticization of lakes and grazing areas in order to restrict access by squatters. This in turn increases the value of the property, with most of the benefits accruing to higher-income households.

From a social justice perspective, it is crucial to consider who benefits from these projects and how the values embedded in the land are distributed. It can be argued that the commoning of land rights in these contexts involves the redistribution of a highly politicised resource to groups (such as squatters) who are often dispossessed of the land they use for housing in urbanising localities, particularly in metropolises such as Bangalore.

Furthermore, the legitimacy of squatters' claims to common land in the Indian context reflects a continuity of historical practices and the provision of laws that favour the redistribution of rural common land to homeless/landless households from marginalised caste communities for their housing and/or livelihood. The concept of common lands has its historical roots in rural communally controlled lands that were brought under the administrative control of the state during the colonial era. As a result, the category of common land was introduced during the colonial period and does not correspond to local perceptions of land ownership.

In light of the above considerations, the incorporation of common lands into the city and the practice of squatters collectively claiming common lands, as outlined in this paper, exemplifies the principle of commoning as a means of promoting social and spatial justice in cities. This process leads to a more equitable distribution of urban land, especially to those from historically marginalised scheduled caste communities, thereby promoting a more inclusive Indian city. Common land provides a resource and leverage for disadvantaged and vulnerable urban citizens to secure their place in the city.

The findings of this study demonstrate the rural-urban continuum of commoning practices in urbanising localities. This illustrates the importance of moving beyond the dichotomous conceptualisation of land commons. This is because the process is influenced by multiple scales of government agencies operating at different scales and times, whose laws and administrative practices either constrain or provide opportunities for squatters to regularise their claims to common land. Furthermore, squatters have flexibly used opportunities in a variety of domains (legal, political and administrative systems) to secure their claims.

The squatters' political practices, which draw on their networks embedded in everyday relations and which are documented in this paper, show similarities to the forms of everyday politics described by Volont and Dobson (2021) in the London case. However, we suggest that these cannot be neatly categorised within the parameters of either quotidian politics (characterised by patronage and porous bureaucracy) or collective mobilisation and movement politics. Rather, residents' actions and the state's responses are shaped by reflexive processes that depend on the unique political opportunities and constraints present in each context and at each time, as well as on residents' ability to take advantage of opportunities.

Drawing on findings from two cases, we have illustrated how 'porous bureaucracy', a dominant concept in studies of

India, exemplifies one aspect of the diverse actions initiated by residents. While residents in both places relied on elected officials, either directly or through political mobilisation, these relationships require a nuanced understanding of patron-clientelism and movement politics.

The Bangalore case provides a vivid example of how squatters, mobilised at the regional level by the Dalit Sangarsh Samiti, targeted incremental changes in land administration laws. These actions resulted in the expansion of the boundaries of the law, thereby creating an opportunity for urban squatters, not only in the Jakkur settlement but throughout the region, to claim rural common land. However, a closer analysis of the relationship between Jakkur residents and local representatives of the Dalit organisation reveals a pattern of patron-clientelism.

In contrast, the residents of Villupuram, who relied primarily on their elected representative, combined with their connections in various institutions and their understanding of institutional processes, capitalised on the opportunities created by the revenue administration's past practices, legal provisions and opportunities in existing welfare schemes. Both contexts share a commonality in that squatters have exploited context-specific opportunities in multiple areas to overcome the obstacles they faced in securing their claims to the rural communal land they occupy.

Although residents in both settlements have consolidated their claims to the communal land they occupy through the compilation of a body of documentary evidence and the delivery of individual titles, the struggle is far from over. The political possibilities of maintaining their claims to 'rural communal land' are limited by the increasing pressure to close the legal loopholes that allow the state to redistribute rights by regularising squatters' occupation of communal land. This pressure is particularly evident from the perspective of corporate developers and their allies in government. Nevertheless, it is vital to expand the political space for commoning to ensure that urban resources are distributed fairly and equitably.

## NOTES

1 Dalit Sangharsh Samiti stands for Dalit Struggle Committee.

2 A Member of the Legislative Assembly is elected at the district level (one by district). He represents its constituency at the regional Legislative Assembly.

3 The PDS's shop supplies food and other basic necessities at subsidised price and, is also used to channel welfare schemes announced around major festivals.

4 Bangalore Agenda Task Force was a public-private partnership active from 1999 till 2004 under the direction of the Chief Minister of Karnataka. It was supported and headed by the CEO of Infosys company. Its purpose was to bring in business and civic leaders to define a development agenda for the city and suggest ways in which the city's infrastructure and service delivery might be upgraded and improved. It exposes the growing influence of the private sector leaders on the conduct of urban public affairs.

## ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix 1.** The Trajectory of Residents. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/ijc.1434.s1

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

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