



REACTIVE REGULATION: Rethinking Urban Growth and Governance through Property Relations

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In October 2020, Hyderabad, India, was hit by a cyclone off the Bay of Bengal, resulting in massive and unprecedented flooding in many parts of the city. In news media, expert commentators pointed out that the issue was not just the result of extreme weather but also of unplanned growth in the built form of the city (*Times of India* 2020). Such flooding events have gained frequency in recent years in the ostensibly arid city of Hyderabad, resulting in a growing discourse about the adverse environmental impacts of unplanned growth and real estate expansion (NDTV 2020; also see Ranganathan 2022), which have disrupted centuries-old networks of tanks and canals; decimated 2.5-billion-year-old rock formations; and resulted in the destruction of ecological commons. Although this article does not concern urban flooding per se, incidents like flooding offer a provocation to investigate how the city is known and governed and to imagine new methods to rethink and remake the city.

Unplanned growth is widely understood by both experts and ordinary residents as the result of a lack of governance or planning, thus eliciting technocratic prescriptions for more planning, more rationalization, more data-intensive solutions. Instead of responding to purported failures of governance with calls for more governance, I follow the political anthropology method of explaining the

accomplishment of rule, despite appearances of failure or lack (Ferguson 1994; Li 2007). While this has been productively conceptualized using the analytical term *governmentality* (Gupta 2012; Li 2007), I instead work with the emic term *governance*, which circulates widely in Hyderabad and other cities confronting similar issues. I understand urban governance as the process of rule. That is, the structured interaction between governmental agents and other societal actors in exercising power over space, time, and social relations either through discipline, force, or exception.¹ Understanding structures of governance leads to better explanations for processes of growth in Global South cities without emphasizing a lack.

This requires attention to the granular interactions that regulate the city. Regulation is a component of governance, and I define it as processes through which social relations are incorporated into the rules and representations of governance (following Hetherington 2020, 11). In what follows, I describe processes of *reactive regulation*, which cyclically reconcile relations on the ground with the representations of the state. This occurs through micro-political encounters with lower-level bureaucratic offices, and through the case of Hyderabad, I show that it has significant consequences for broader configurations of space, time, and social relations in the city.



Figure 1. A view of Hyderabad from the centrally located Ameerpet metro station.
Photo by Indivar Jonnalagadda, March 2020.

Hyderabad is India's sixth most populous urban agglomeration (see Figure 1). This urban agglomeration has a distinctive history as the capital of a wealthy princely state outside direct British rule, which evolved with relative autonomy from colonial urbanism (Beverley 2024). Today, Hyderabad is best known for being one of India's major IT hubs. The west of the city, rebranded in the 1990s as Cyberabad, has witnessed staggering urban expansion and has garnered global attention for its real estate growth. In rankings generated by Jones Lang LaSalle Inc., Hyderabad has recently ranked as high as first and second among emerging destinations for international real estate investment (Kelly, Hodgson, and McAuley 2019; Kelly and Davies 2020), along with Bengaluru, which has a similar property landscape (Ranganathan 2022). However, this astonishing expansion of Hyderabad real estate is coeval with the everyday landscape of the city, which most Hyderabadis reflexively describe as an unplanned sprawl, marked by uncertainty and anxiety about land ownership and the wanton destruction of the city's topography.

One afternoon in July 2018, I was speaking with Maheep Singh, a prominent urban planner and frequent consultant to the government in Hyderabad. Among the most respected planning professionals in the city, Singh is interviewed by most urban researchers in Hyderabad for his incisive understanding of urban governance. As we talked about unplanned growth in the city, Singh insisted: "Look, planners in Hyderabad are in a purely reactive role! We are only responding to things already happening on the ground." He argued that planners in Hyderabad aren't exercising regulatory influence over urban development. Instead, the bulk of work carried out by planners is designing layouts that developers manipulate from the outset to allow for future unregulated expansion. Or else, planners find employment in the vast enterprise of *regularizing* the many already existing unplanned developments in the city. Regularization exemplifies what Singh called "reactive" work. This process reconciles record with reality by forgiving violations of rules on payment of a penalty fee, without any physical changes to the built environment.

Regularization is not an exceptional process but a routine mode of governance, which I conceptualize as *reactive regulation*. In Hyderabad, I often heard bureaucrats at various levels defensively arguing that they were merely reacting to relations that had already materialized in the city. Further, I found that bureaucrats understood these relations almost exclusively through the frame of property relations. This property-centric approach defines the prevailing routines of governance, which occur through intimate negotiation and compromise

between the government and individual property owners at the micro-scale. This mode of governance emphasizes maintenance and the re-assertion of government authority over minute property exchanges, without concern for the aggregate effects of property expansion and development. The city for these bureaucrats is a *fait accompli* network of relations in which they only intervene after the fact through reactive regulation. As a result, the complex social, physical, and ecological dynamics of the city are tethered to property-centric governance.

If regulation is the incorporation of social relations into rule, as I defined above, then planning is one kind of regulation that entails the creation of rules at a macro-scale through which future social relations are shaped and ordered. But regularization is also a kind of regulation (see [Bhan 2016](#); [Bhide 2014](#); [Ghertner 2021](#)), in which the state reactively asserts its authority over *fait accompli* social relations at the micro-scale. I show that in Hyderabad, this micro-scale reactive regulation has replaced macro-scale planning, which has aggregately resulted in a city sprawl where lakes have become shopping malls, disaster-prone hillsides have become low-income housing, and villages have become financial districts.

This essay builds on foundational scholarship on the anthropology of state ([Gupta 2012](#); [Hetherington 2011](#); [Hull 2012](#); [Mathur 2016](#)) to conceptualize the space, time, and social relations of the city in terms of everyday bureaucratic epistemologies. Further, I examine divergent vectors of governance operating simultaneously. Albeit siloed into distinct departments, I reveal that these vectors intersect and have compounding effects through specific micro-negotiations around property. Instead of focusing on state ideologies as powerful by default, I follow [Christian Lund \(2020\)](#) in showing how the state assembles authority through governance. Adding to this anthropology of the state in an age of extended and extensive urbanization ([Cowan 2022](#); [Simone 2022](#)), I describe the networked and patchy processes of urban governance that occur by enlisting a range of actors including government officials, citizens, and intermediaries, to participate in knowing and regulating urban spaces. In doing so, I offer a conceptual framework that can be applied to illuminate both the political economy of land grab through a caste-state nexus ([Gururani 2024](#); [Ranganathan, Pike, and Doshi 2023](#)) and the politics of insurgent citizenship through which marginalized groups make significant claims to land ([Benjamin 2008](#); [Holston 2008](#); [Patil 2024](#)).

This enables a productive conversation with anthropological debates on city planning. There is rich scholarship on the ideologies, inadequacies, and failures of planning, both in the Global South ([Caldeira 2017](#); [Pérez 2020](#); [Roy 2009](#)) and

in the Global North (Abram 2014; Mack 2014). While Federico Pérez (2020) has brilliantly shown how planning operates “after the fact” and ignores larger social and political networks, I turn my attention to the role of other vectors of governance in constituting facts out of the social and political networks of the city. I particularly attend to the ways in which governance enlists the participation of a variety of societal actors (see Hasan 2024; Zimmer 2012). Shifting attention away from the overly privileged lens of planning, I illustrate the wider bureaucratic field through which competing claims to the city are translated into documents, records, and governable relations. I argue that these reactive and micro-political practices forestall the pursuit of macro goals like sustainability or justice, which are the normative objectives of planning in the Global South (following Bhan, Srinivas, and Watson 2018, 1).

In contrast to powerful policy discourses that call for more planning, more rationalization, and more data-intensive smart technologies, I practice and advocate for what Tess Lea (2021) has called “staying with the bureaucracy.” I argue that the urgent questions of urban futures can only be addressed through engagement with actually existing governance practices of knowing and making the city. Toward an anthropological rethinking of urban governance, I follow Alberto Corsín Jiménez’s (2017) approach of conceptualizing the city as a method of inquiring about social, political, and ecological being in space and time. In my fieldwork in Hyderabad among lower-level bureaucrats, I was constantly struck by their eagerness to discuss their own methods and knowledges. I stay with lower-level bureaucrats and their modes of “thinking the city” (see Knox 2020; Pérez 2020) to understand how the city emerges from below, and how reactive regulation shapes the agendas of various actors engaged in property-making and city-making.

In the five sections that follow, I demonstrate the processes and consequences of reactively regulating the city as property relations. In the following section, I show that bureaucrats see the city as *fait accompli* property relations that they must capture in their records. The two bureaucratic processes crucial to producing the bureaucratic rendering of the city as property are “property registration” and “property regularization.” They exist in circular relationship with each other, as I illustrate in the following two sections. The processes of registration constitute the facts of the city, which reveal many gaps in bureaucratic procedures. They produce irregular property landscapes where the government record does not match the ground reality, which sets the stage for a discussion of the widespread bureaucratic practice known as regularization. The

penultimate section describes what these bureaucratic practices and processes entail for thinking and governing the city at large, before I conclude with a final section discussing the importance of understanding and engaging with reactive regulation.

SEEING THE CITY FROM THE OFFICES OF THE STATE

In July 2015, I attended a conference organized by the World Bank called “Unlocking Land for Urban Growth” at the NALSAR University of Law in Hyderabad. Conference speakers and attendees included “urban planners, architects, lawyers, bureaucrats, social activists and academics interested in the field of urban growth and regeneration.”² The vision of the conference was a future where urban land would be “unlocked” from informal arrangements and red-tape-ridden land legislation, and would be delivered to an even further future where land could find its highest and best use as real estate. We were listening to a presentation by an urban planner on the Delhi Development Plan and its supposedly effective use of mapping technologies when a prominent social scientist, Gautam Bhan, raised a note of caution and quipped that “these maps have as much truth-value as an expressionist painting.” He added that the spaces represented in those maps have already been completely built up, contrary to the representations of the Development Plan.

Although Bhan’s point revealed a disconnect between planning and the facts of the city, his comment was met with a moment of awkward silence and then forgotten. The conference persisted in its faith in mapping technologies as the best techniques to achieve a future of planned urban growth. In a similar vein, planners, consultants from private firms, and high-level technocrats in Hyderabad routinely engage in discussions about planning innovations to make governance more efficient, without acknowledging the ground realities of the built environment. The websites and offices of these planners and consultants are replete with maps that overlook facts of occupancy, erase undesirable land-uses, and thus represent entirely unattainable visions of the future. These maps indeed manifest a largely aesthetic appeal like an expressionist painting, but they also denote a vision of state command over urban space (Crawford 2020)—a command often more ideological than real, especially in cities of the Global South where practices of planning exist in transversal relation to actually existing processes of city-making (Caldeira 2017; Pérez 2020; Roy 2009). Thus, the expressionistic nature of master plans and zoning maps compels an investigation of unplanned growth in Hyderabad through attention to other agents and processes altogether.

These are agents conspicuous by their absence and omission from conferences about land management and planned growth, namely, the officers in charge of actual land administration in cities like Hyderabad.

The Revenue Department is the seat of both land and civic administration in the districts that constitute Hyderabad City. Much of my fieldwork was conducted in the Revenue offices at the sub-district level known as a *tahsil*, which is headed by a *tahsildar*. *Tahsildar* offices are generally austere and small; with private rooms for the *tahsildar* and deputy *tahsildar*, cubicles for other employees, and a small “record room.” But these austere offices are nonetheless of great significance to public life in the city and are one of the major public interfaces to access the government (see [Jonnalagadda 2018](#)). People gather here to negotiate with low-level bureaucrats, sometimes attracting crowds comparable to a busy railway station. I conducted fieldwork at these offices for six months, throughout 2018 and 2019, to examine the techniques employed in maintaining the property records or cadastral records of the city. At the outset, I expected to find maps as in the offices of planners and consultants. Yet over visits to multiple offices across Hyderabad, I was proven wrong and found neither new nor old maps of the districts and sub-districts. Instead, I became intrigued by the routine absence of cadastral maps of the city or district.

Once during a visit to the *tahsildar* office at Asif Nagar in central Hyderabad, I came across a map on the wall of the *tahsildar*’s office room. It was printed from Google Maps, with the administrative boundaries of the Revenue sub-district outlined by hand with a marker. The *tahsildar* I was speaking to was known as an especially candid government officer. In fact, I was introduced to him by an activist interlocutor who said this *tahsildar* would give me straight answers to my questions. So, at some point during our meeting, I pointed to the map and asked: “Do you update new property titles into a cadastral map of the district?” He looked up at the map blankly, and after a pause, responded to my question in a baffled tone: “Map? No, we don’t update any map. There has not been a cadastral survey of the city since the 1970s We have those files and we use that as a base.”

The *tahsildar*’s response draws attention to what [Laura Bear \(2016\)](#) has called “timescapes of governance.” They are the different techniques of reckoning with the time and space of the city, each entailing different practices and ethics of governance (also see [Abram and Weszkalnys 2011](#); [Ghertner 2017](#); [Lindblad and Anand 2023](#)). *Tahsildars* and other officers are trained in working with the old survey map along with a relational knowledge of the present city

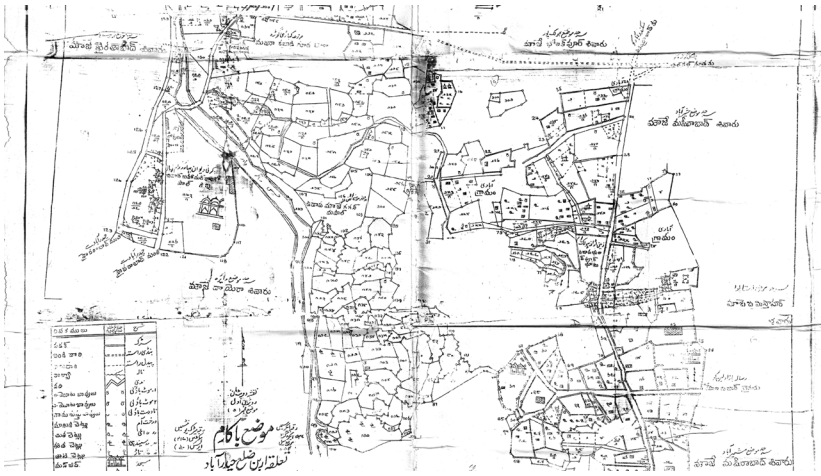


Figure 2. A portion of the survey map of Hyderabad from the 1970s. Photo by Indivar Jonnalagadda, October 2014.

landscape, a knowledge emerging from their own everyday functioning. In contrast to the planners whose master plans represent an abstract projection of space in terms of land-use twenty years in the future, the land administrators work with a representation of land ownership or property relations fifty years in the past (see Figure 2). Land administration and urban planning, thus, seem to operate as competing timescapes of governance. However, master plans themselves ironically use the outdated cadastral map for their baseline spatial information, creating a temporal dissonance. This dissonance between different vectors of governance is addressed through the frame of property relations in bureaucratic epistemologies of the city.

The desire for ordered cadastral records and the permanent conquest of land through technologies of property began as a colonial project (Bhattacharyya 2018). Historians have shown that in both colonial and princely Indian cities there were iterative and forceful efforts to establish order on cities using technologies of writing and documentation to wrangle and settle property relations (Beverley 2024; Bhattacharyya 2018). These efforts, however, were persistently challenged by fragmentary realities of possession and were further complicated by the invention of racially differentiated and divided regimes of property (Bhandar 2018). Thus the rule of property in South Asia has always been reactive to the politics of possession, and the idealized cadastral order has always been fragmented and striated. Those fragmented colonial representations and practices continue as the baseline for governing the fragmented city of today. By tethering

questions about the present and future growth of the city to deeply rooted historical approaches to governing the city as property, the temporal dissonance becomes further perpetuated.

Despite these historical difficulties, the ideology of cadastral order and top-down planning influences contemporary approaches to urban governance (Jonnalagadda and Cowan 2024). Further, the ideologies of property exercise this influence while continuing to remain incomplete and imperfect (Jonnalagadda and Cowan 2024). Thus, although there is an already built-up city that is unrepresented and unmapped (Bhan 2016; Roy 2002), this city of fait accompli relations is only treated as governable if it is incorporated into processes of rule geared toward ordering property. That is, through regularization.

Regularization entails the suspension of the state's rules, but it accomplishes the reassertion of the state's authority. However, regularization is never a conclusive settlement, and it does not prevent future irregularities from emerging. Instead, it propagates a chain of reactive regulation. The work of regulating urban space and time, then, occurs through a patchwork of institutions and interventions focused on capturing the fait accompli relations irrespective of their adherence or non-adherence to rules. Specifically, reactive regulation occurs across processes of registering property claims, maintaining property records, and periodically reconciling records with changing realities (respectively described in the following three sections).

The normative imaginations of neoliberal good governance, as espoused in the NALSAR-World Bank conference, for example, are premised on the eradication of these patchy forms of governance with the promise of abstract and high-tech substitutes. Rather than pursuing new abstracted techniques of governance, which are just as likely to achieve new forms of unmapping and deregulation (Cowan 2022; Lea 2021), there is a need to recognize how existing relational networks of governance mediate urban growth. They need to be looked at not just as obstructions but also as historical and political relations with the power to regulate and produce the city. The objective is not just a better understanding of processes of city-making but also alternative ways to conceptualize urgent, multiscale challenges that can go beyond the micro-politics of property. In the following two sections, I elaborate on how these micro-politics underpin wider networks of relations in the city.

REGISTRATION OF CLAIMS IN REAL TIME

During my research on property transactions in the city, I was constantly following interlocutors to the bustling offices of the Registration Department found across the city. In particular, I often found myself at the Registration office at Erragadda in north-central Hyderabad. Although the Revenue Department is the ultimate arbiter of land records, the Registration Department describe themselves as the “royal record keepers” of the state. They examine documented claims of ownership to verify the legitimacy of property transactions. Sometimes, however, their documents might not reveal a clear picture. In such situations, they will consider the facts on the ground, such as duration of possession and extent of construction, to make a judgment. This role of making decisive judgments places the Registration Department at the center of regulating property-making and, unwittingly, city-making as well.

The business of the office begins when the sub-registrar arrives in the office. I made it a habit to arrive before them. During early visits, I found that the flow of events had a puzzling consistency. There were no signs directing the flow, but everyone reliably followed the same chain of actions with hired brokers. The ones who came alone were conspicuous because of the way they stood at the door looking around in confusion. When they exited in desperation, right outside the offices, they would be greeted by a dozen promising shop fronts teeming with brokers who have both the codified and tacit know-how about getting things done (see [Banerji 2024](#); [Björkman 2021](#)).

In January and February 2020, I shadowed a broker named Rahul as he navigated through the Registration office with his clients. Brokers like Rahul now call themselves “consultants,” because most offices have signs plastered on the wall warning visitors that no brokers are allowed (see Figure 3), owing to their alleged corrupting influence (see [Björkman 2021](#)). Nonetheless, brokers are ubiquitous in government offices.

While most brokers were middle-aged, Rahul was under thirty years of age and had about five years of experience. He told me the Erragadda office is a “torturing” one, in terms of how difficult it is to negotiate with. But, in five years Rahul had learned a tremendous amount from grueling experiences and now had “perfect information” about how things work. He assiduously maintained this persona of an expert broker with me and with all his clients, rarely revealing personal details. One time I heard him speaking to a client in fluent Marathi and asked if that is his mother tongue. He said, “I am everything. Marathi, Hindi, Telugu, Kannada, Urdu,” and offered nothing beyond this cosmopolitan creed.

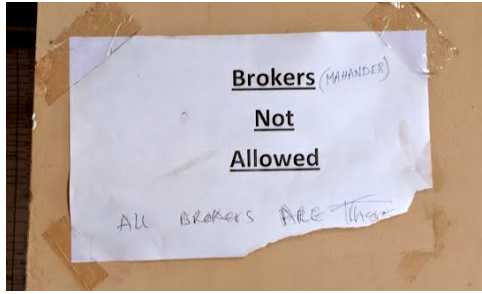


Figure 3. Typical sign in a government office.
Photo by Indivar Jonnalagadda, September 2019.

But these tactics made working with him especially interesting, as he was eager to draw attention to the performances of working with clients of different kinds.

Let me illustrate how the registration process routinely occurs with the participation of the sub-registrar, brokers, and the seller and buyer of a property in the city. In January 2020, Rahul was hired by an elite upper-caste man named Shastry who was buying a property from Rao. Rahul first drafted a “sale deed” for Shastry and Rao based on a template, to which he added the exact details of the property being transacted and the amount of the transaction between them. Alongside drafting the sale deed, Rahul checked that the seller, Rao, had all the necessary “link documents,” which prove a chain of registered transactions. Rao provided a stack of documents, most importantly a sale deed previously attested by the Registration Department, but no title deed. Although a title deed is the strongest document attesting property rights, link documents in cities rarely include a property title deed (more on this in the next section). Instead, the documentation and verification occur with almost exclusive reference to registered sale deeds.

On a busy weekday morning, Rahul and the buyer, Shastry, visited the sub-registrar’s office. The seller wasn’t present, but he would add his signature remotely using newly introduced technology. The link documents for the transaction were checked by an administrative assistant, with whom Rahul made constant small talk during the process of inspection. Once the inspection was completed, they were directed to the sub-registrar, the main authority. The sub-registrar checked their records to verify the information in the link documents, while Rahul maintained constant and polite chatter with him as well, mostly stating the details of the transaction. In this case, the sub-registrar briefly went into the record room through a curtain behind him, before returning to complete the process. The link documents from Rao were clear

and corroborated by the Registration Department's records. Shastry could now have a registered sale deed to attest his ownership of the property, pending the completion of the final step of paying a percentage of the transaction amount as "stamp duty" to the state.

Not all cases proved so straightforward, and I was kept at a careful distance from the details of Rahul's work on tougher cases. However, I observed that Rahul was gaining a reputation for being highly effective, or, in his words, "a very good consultant." He told me it was because he had "mastered the art" of compiling and presenting link documents. I followed that up by asking, "So tell me, what happens if the link documents are missing?" He laughed and said, "that will take you a year of experience and observation to understand. You'll just have to keep following me around."

That is something I was unable to do because the COVID-19 pandemic was quickly making its way toward us. But in the meantime, I posed the same question to the officers themselves too: What happens if the link documents are unclear?

If there is any missing information in this process, one sub-registrar told me, the officers would "use their best judgment." In some cases, if the judgment is hard to make, an official from the Registration Department will be sent to conduct fieldwork and verify that the seller has rightful possession of the property in question. The department therefore employs a range of tools to ground-truth property transactions that come to its offices. They accumulate and register information brought to their offices to produce a documented reality of the city. Other ethnographies have shed light on this kind of veridiction from uncertainty (Gandolfo 2013; Pérez 2016) and on how bureaucrats employ various "authoring technologies" (Cowan 2022, 193) to generate economically and politically productive benefits from uncertainty at a micro-scale (Gururani 2024; Pati 2022). But I found myself pushing further and asking officers what they think this process entailed for the city at large.

While the sub-registrar always appeared swamped with ongoing registration processes, the neighboring office of the higher-level district registrar found itself less frequented by the general public. I particularly enjoyed talking to the registrar at that time, because he shared a curiosity for the working of the state and would offer his own theories of governance in Hyderabad. One time as I pressed him on the imperfect land record in the city, he interpreted my comments as an accusation that land irregularity was caused by the Registration Department. In a defensive tone, he said: "The sub-registrar can only proceed based

on the information he has. We need the evidence to make the judgment.” After a pause and returning to his usual candor and composure, he added, “but actually, *in our line of work, there is no evidence. There are only claims.* After all, we do not have real-time data” (emphasis mine).

With these observations, the registrar illuminated for me a crucial dimension of the work he and his co-officers do. They do not just draft and document property transactions to constitute the reality of the city but fundamentally adjudicate which claims to land can be enshrined in the government’s record of properties. The registrar also plainly acknowledged that many of the urban property claims never even go through the government’s offices. In the same conversation as above, he said, “We can only deal with what comes to our desks. Unless the Revenue Department lets us know about a change in the record, how can we take it into account in our own work?” Thus sometimes the claims that do go through this office are false claims that they are not able to discern in the course of the registration process. Thus the work of registrars manages the “traffic between the legal and illegal” (Pati 2022, 35), and claim-by-claim it adjudicates and assembles the state’s representation of the city.

The registration officers, owing to the nature of their work, thus accept that at some level, property relations have to be conjured and consolidated out of uncertain claims. The graphic practices of the state (Hull 2012) do not simply recognize the ground reality as is, nor do they always meticulously establish the truth of ownership through juridical reasoning (Pérez 2016). Rather, they often expediently commit the most credible claims into the records of the state. As a result, the property record represents an unusual governmental technology: not one simply exercised from the top down to enable the legibility of populations, but, rather, one that requires people to come forward and participate in making themselves legible to the state. This entails that the city is assembled as property by various actors bringing their claims to the government, with the support of brokers like Rahul who know how to mobilize the right documents, connections, rhetorical strategies, and even bribes to facilitate the successful registration of claims.

Sub-registrars are the agents who ensure the assertion of the state in the process of property-making and city-making. They enact a reactive regulation that engages tactically with the urban landscape as they encounter it in their offices. Here I’m thinking with Kregg Hetherington (2020, 136) who argues that the work of regulation is “tactical”; that is, a constant local negotiation between government and governed that results in “ever so slightly changing the potential

futures” of property units, but also the city itself. This is where staying with the bureaucracy and their understandings of the urban in terms of uncertain claims and ground-truthing proves most useful. It reveals a landscape with a range of competing actors making the city through micro-negotiations, with little concern about the aggregate urban landscape.

In aggregate over time and space, these micro-political processes engage with *fait accompli* property relations that might be licit or illicit, and thus might technically be within the boundaries of a protected lake (see [Maringanti 2011](#); [Vidyapogu and Jonnalagadda 2023](#)), or might be protected land assigned to disadvantaged groups ([Jonnalagadda, Stock, and Misquitta 2021](#)). As a result, they create problems of irregularities (often, but not always, unwittingly) between the property records and the property claims, which in turn must be regularized by the Revenue Department.

REGULARIZATION IN A GLOBAL REAL ESTATE HUB

After the registration of a sale deed (described in the previous section), the creation of a title deed with the Revenue Department requires a process known as “mutation,” the ultimate stage of gaining state recognition for property. In everyday practice, most urban transactions rely entirely on registered sale deeds and do not bother with title deeds. The onerous process of mutation is perceived as lacking utility in the context of small parcels of urban land, which are bought, sold, and subdivided frequently. But this disconnect results in property claims staking ground and often being registered in violation of the Revenue Department’s records. These situations are construed as *irregularity* by the Revenue Department, and they initiate regularization proceedings to reconcile their records with the ground reality.

Processes of regularization have been implemented recurrently for decades in Hyderabad. So much so that people have come to expect them as a routine feature of governance ([Jonnalagadda, Stock, and Misquitta 2021](#)). This means that, contrary to enforcing rules as an *a priori* requirement, the role of regulation has become to negotiate with *fait accompli* rule transgressions, cyclically collecting fines, and legitimizing violations of planning rules. The nature of this process is evocatively captured by the Telugu term used for the process, *kramabaddhikarana*, which I translate as “correcting the order.” Thus the task of the Revenue Department, in their own discursive registers is reacting to the relations produced beyond the state’s control, and incorporating these irregularities into the records of the state, while also generating some revenue.

The emic category of *irregularity* strikingly contrasts with categories like *illegality* or *informality* or *illegibility*, which are already laden with teleological frames of privatization, rationalization, and abstraction. Instead, *irregularity* makes for a more ambivalent category that creates opportunities for a wide range of social and property relations to exist in the city.

When processes of regularization are announced, large crowds gather at the offices to negotiate their land claims and rights. In these situations, governance explicitly requires the interaction of government and governed. Although a governmentality lens is focused on how social relations are rendered technical and apolitical (Li 2007), in contrast, situations of reactive regulation are treated by all participants as simultaneously socio-political and technical. Thus processes like regularization interpellate people from all classes who vie to regularize their property claims. And depending on the outcomes and the socially situated perspective of the observer, regularization proceedings might be morally construed as either obscene corruption or as state welfare.³

Consider the regularization scheme announced through Government Order 59 in December 2014, which stated: “There is a need to regularize possession of government lands, which are having dwelling units and permanent structures and people are in occupation of these bits of land since a long time . . . such a step will be in public interest as it will bring clarity about title of land and promote planned development and improvement of services.”

In the name of bringing clarity about land title and promoting planned development, two government orders offered the opportunity to regularize landholding to a wide range of people through a two-pronged process in 2014. One prong, presented in Order 58, was oriented to households below the poverty line (BPL households), to whom the government was offering the opportunity to regularize up to 250 square yards of land, free of cost, but the property title they would get would be inalienable. The second prong, governed by Order 59, was oriented to those who are not poor. To these non-poor households, the government offered a clear property title if they paid a certain percentage of the current value of the land they irregularly held. The percentage was on a sliding scale depending on the extent of land, thus affording a lower cost for some, while on the other hand placing no upper limit on the extent of land that could be claimed.

These orders were not an exceptional event; rather, they marked a significant moment in a longer-term process of reactive regulation and governance. For instance, when Order 59 was first announced, within a single day, contestations against the order’s terms emerged, and they were based on prior regularization

schemes enacted in 2008 and 2002. In fact, there were still applications pending under these prior schemes, which had to be addressed and acknowledged in a separate Order 60, issued the following day. Further, these processes are never officially completed. In August 2019, I landed in Hyderabad to study land administration but lamented that the orders I was concerned with were now outdated. But to my surprise, in the very week I arrived, I found posters and newspaper articles beaming out the message that Order 59 had been re-opened for applications, and that people will have “another opportunity (*maro avakaasam*)” to benefit from the scheme. Regularization is an ever-present potential routinely materialized.

When a regularization scheme is available, there is an intensification of negotiation and contestation that bureaucrats, brokers, and activists in Hyderabad describe as “heat.” In both 2015 and 2019, this heat was palpable at the revenue offices where crowds of people flooded not just the office itself but also the photo-copy centers, public notaries, and brokers around the office.

As many scholars have shown, land in the city is occupied and claimed by people across classes (Benjamin 2008; Holston 2008; Patil 2024), albeit with different degrees of legitimacy (Bhan 2016). Thus, for Hyderabadis of all classes, the landscape of property is full of both promise and anxiety. On the one hand, schemes for regularization offer promises and pathways to stability, status, capital, and even citizenship, which have been long cherished aspirations.⁴ But regularization is not a guarantee of any of these things, unless all the relations and paperwork align just right for the bureaucratic stamp to be given. Thus it also evokes great anxiety about documentation (Hasan 2024; Hetherington 2011). In wrangling property and paperwork into legible formats for the state, with the help of brokers and mediators, sometimes even through bribery and forgery, new relations are conjured. These new relations will on the one hand be recorded by the state, but on the other, they open space for new irregularities between the record and reality.

These anxieties engender extensive speculative practices of property-making shaping the lives of people across classes in cities like Hyderabad (Goldman 2011; Ranganathan, Pike, and Doshi 2023). These speculative practices put pressure on the bureaucracy and produce what many brokers described to me as heated and energetic property landscapes. The process of regularization, which is intended to clarify and promote planning, instead creates chain reactions: intensified friction, leading to heated contestation around land, leading to new potentials for reactive regulation.

These further engender chains of discourse about regularization and property. Two days after the announcement of Order 59, Telugu-language TV news channels hosted debates about land regularization. In one discussion on NTV, a mix of civil society representatives and political spokespersons debated the merits of the scheme. The first speakers were political spokespersons who argued that there was no better solution for messy land records than regularization. The civil society representatives had a different perspective and retorted that the scheme represented a massive collusion among political elites to grab lands. They were furious that the government order did not place any upper limit on the extent of land that could be regularized. One of them said, “This scheme is basically telling us: Stop wasting your time making TV appearances and talking about issues. Go grab some land! You can make it your own.”⁵

This heat also becomes palpable in less mediated forms. One thing I found in common across tea shops in slum settlements, small talk on public transportation, and parlor conversations of the elite in Hyderabad, is discourse, debate, and gossip about property (see Figure 4). Property prices, new neighborhoods worth investing in, new developments, new clients, new brokers, and so on. After all Hyderabad, despite all this irregularity, is an internationally favored destination



Figure 4. An event organized by the Revenue Department to educate senior citizens about legal services for addressing property disputes.
Photo by Indivar Jonnalagadda, January 2020.

for real estate development (Kelly, Hodgson, and McAuley 2019; Kelly and Davies 2020). But the land situation means that a certain unreliability persists, and even renowned developers are not seen as safe from land irregularity. The biggest issue with regularization is that the city is a constantly changing set of relations, so every act of reconciling irregular records merely creates the baseline for future irregularities. Further, the incentive for developers to adhere to regulation is considered more onerous than the process of post facto regularizing. Thus people engaged in heated transactions remain tremendously anxious about property relations owing to the constantly morphing landscape of irregularity.

But this heat has another explanation. It is not the bureaucrats, but ruling political elites who control the frequency and rules of regularization. And it is also political elites (overlapping with businesspeople, media icons, and other elites) who benefit most from spectacular corruption around land in the region. The political economic atmosphere generated by this corruption narrative in the city evokes what Malini Ranganathan, David Pike, and Sapana Doshi (2023) have called a “gray ethics” of property-making among all classes. The heat of property then appears as a counter-politics that demands a corrective through recognition of their own ambiguous property claims. The agents of reactive regulation, or the officers of land administration, are the mediators through whom this politics is negotiated. Thus regularization is not just a tool of statecraft but also a popular demand.

Let us return to the evocative idea presented by my registrar interlocutor in the previous section: that from a bureaucratic perspective, there is no such thing as evidence of property ownership; there are only property claims, which are political claims. But the Revenue Department does not engage with these as broad collective claims; it translates them into granular individual claims. Governance becomes a matter of intimate and arbitrary engagement with individual property owners in a cyclical pattern, where reactive regulation begets further reactive regulation around property. Such dynamics mean that even macro-scale processes of urban growth—be it infrastructure expansion (Tassadiq 2022), real estate development (Searle 2016), environmental management (Anand 2023), or even the digitization of property governance itself (Hasan 2024)—must react with the micro-political friction of property.

GOVERNING THE CITY AS PROPERTY RELATIONS

So far, I have described a bureaucratic property epistemology of the city, which underpins reactive regulation. But how does this property epistemology

apprehend the city at large? This question requires an understanding of the documentary traces of property, which become the documentary traces of the city itself. The tahsildars who work mostly from their desks with reference to paper records, co-ordinate with village revenue officers and surveyors, who gather embodied knowledge about land in the city through fieldwork. In addition, the department also knows the city through the documents of the numerous people who come to their offices.

During my futile quest for maps in the Revenue Department, one staff member at the District Collector's Office told me, "We don't have to map it. We have divided the city into survey numbers. Now the city has grown and there are many land owners under each survey number, so we have files of all the title holders within each survey number." In lieu of the maps I wrongly expected to find, the Revenue Department's records are maintained as files and lists in hard copy. The land titles in the files include a "location sketch" representing the boundaries and dimensions of the plot of land, along with information about the owners of the neighboring plots in a schematic diagram. This mode of knowing the city has many ramifications for urban governance.

That the data of urban property relations was not mapped struck me for two reasons: First, the government itself claimed that regularization would prove a tool to translate irregular land claims into clear and governable units. For instance, in Order 59 quoted above, the regularization of property ownership was justified with the promise of "clarity about title of land" and "planned development." However, a documentary regime of lists and files located in specific offices means that coordination across departments remains a challenge, especially when the property landscape is extremely energetic and heated, as it is in Hyderabad. Second, it was striking because of the unexpected contrast with rural land records, which seem to be meticulously mapped using digital technologies.

Revenue Department officers have imbibed an encyclopedic and obsessive knowledge of the taxonomies of rural land categories (*Telangana Revenue 2019*), while lacking this kind of categorical and technical thickness when it comes to urban land. Contrary to my expectation of an urban bias in governance, I found that rural spaces are both taxonomically thicker and more definitively mapped. For instance, the Telangana Integrated Land Resource Management System (IL-RMS) provides comprehensive data about rural land ownership,⁶ but zero data exists on urban land ownership. The urban district of Hyderabad and some of the surrounding urban sub-districts around it remain completely unmapped in this state database.



Figure 5. An ironic mural inside the Ministry of Urban Development premises.
Photo by Indivar Jonnalagadda, March 2020.

Most Revenue Department officers I interacted with have worked in both rural and urban districts, and they would often express misgivings about the function of revenue departments in urban areas. “You should come and see our work in rural areas. There everything is organized and in control,” one tahsildar told me. Another noted that “the urban revenue department is a misnomer. We don’t even collect revenue here!” Thus, for officers in this crucial department of land and civic administration, it is rural space that proves normative and rational, while the urban is unruly. The normative framework of an unchanging and durable landscape of rural relations shapes how they engage with social and environmental relations in the unruly city (see Figure 5).

I learned over time that property relations are construed through the moral and normative lens of rural land-holdings tied to caste and traditional families. When asked about the divergence between thick rural data and thin urban lists, the answer offered by Revenue Department officers was deceptively simple: property subdivision. As the Secunderabad Revenue Division officer explained to me, constant property subdivisions through the fragmentation of estates and families created the complexity of urban governance. He suggested, “Take any Survey number in the city . . . Since [the time of the survey], it’s been broken up, redistributed, sold, etc. Say, in the 1970s at some point a record was created of these subdivisions with some numbers assigned to them; now we add a ‘/’ to those numbers and create sub-units.” Outside the patchy official record, in everyday practice, even those subunits have been subdivided with further placements of a “/” through both licit and illicit transfers. The Revenue Department is ever

alert to this “city otherwise” (Wilhelm-Solomon 2020) beyond its record, but its members see these unruly relations as beyond their everyday documentary capacities. The department is thus invested in recapturing these *fait accompli* relations through regularization, reasserting the government as the authority in property relations, and restoring order (through *kramabaddhikarana*) to the city.

At urban Revenue offices, I didn’t observe any conversations oriented to digitizing urban records, nor any interest in questions of unplanned urban growth. However, there was constant conversation about correcting, aligning, re-ordering, and regularizing the record in terms of individual property claims and rights. As other anthropologists have illuminated, information does not have an existence that is autonomous from the medium of documents (Hetherington 2011; Hull 2012). In everyday practice, space for urban revenue officers is not dynamically inscribed into an aggregative form like a map or a digital database. Thus, the city as a whole is not a legible aggregate object that can be acted on.

While the dynamic property landscape of the city elides digitization and conclusive settlement, the emptiness of the digitized map for urban land ownership is not a result of an absence of knowledge. Rather, it is a result of the plenitude of knowledge and a hypervigilance to changes in property relations. Representing the thickness of these urban relations would require greater cost, effort, and some technological ingenuity. Further, it would need to settle a deeply unsettled political landscape. So instead of attempting this digitization, a pragmatic thinness and uncertainty about urban property is constitutive of the documentary practices of everyday administration.

Because the city as an aggregate object exceeds the epistemic capacities of the Revenue Department, governance becomes a site-specific engagement with contingencies and claims defined primarily in terms of property units. This means that the uncertain property records continue to serve as the baseline for processes much beyond land administration, such as master planning, infrastructure development, slum governance, and so on. The low-level bureaucratic agencies that know the city in disjointed units also limit the governance of the city at large to a disjointed incrementalism. Incidentally, this procedural reliance on uncertainty proves tremendously productive of new social relations and is amenable to political manipulation (Beban 2021; Hetherington 2011; Jonnalagadda and Cowan 2024). As a result of this generative potential extending across classes, reactive regulation reinforces and reiterates a micro-politics of property, but it forestalls macro-policy shifts and interventions by rendering them infeasible or impractical.

CONCLUSION

In a book published shortly before his passing, [K.C. Sivaramakrishnan \(2014, xxiv\)](#), a hugely impactful urban policymaker in India, commented that “in India, the big city is a theme that continues to be shrouded by doubt and bewilderment.” His comment pertains not only to the difficulties of governance but also to bureaucratic and popular anxieties about urban spaces. Building up from micro-political encounters in bureaucratic offices, in this article I conceptualize the processual construction of how these bewildering spaces are known and governed. I show that unplanned growth at the city scale has resulted from numerous micro-political negotiations at smaller scales. This does not amount to saying that Indian cities are actually planned, contrary to their reputation. But in lieu of circular prescriptions for more planning and rationalization, an anthropological attention to the constitutive processes of governance should compel new methods of inquiry and intervention toward transformative macro-goals like social justice or sustainable development in megacities of the Global South.

Reactive regulation makes for a mode of urban governance with two crucial features. First, it does not engage with the city as an aggregation of social and environmental relations; instead it apprehends the city through individual property relations. Second, in lieu of enacting protocols that can direct urban growth, this mode of governance reacts to fait accompli relations on the ground. Thus, the goals of reactive regulation are local and contingent: managing the heat of property claims, registering fait accompli relations as best as possible, and ultimately asserting the state’s authority over city space.

This mode of governance most broadly serves the interests of political elites, but through a counter-political demand for recognition, it also serves a variety of other class interests. It does so unequally, however, without substantively resolving socioeconomic contradictions in the city. Thus, the kinds of property granted are differentiated and stratified by caste, class, and gender (see [Jonnalagadda, Stock, and Misquitta 2021](#); [Jonnalagadda and Cowan 2024](#)). However, beyond social stratification (which I address in [Jonnalagadda 2018](#); and [Jonnalagadda, Stock, and Misquitta 2021](#)), reactive regulation raises different concerns when situated in its larger spatial and environmental context. Through reactive regulation, property becomes the common-sense rendering of space, time, and social relations in the city. Ecological and geological understandings of urban environments are rendered ineffectual categories submerged under the property epistemology of governance. As are alternative cultural and political practices of city-making.



Figure 6. Announcement of a layout regularization scheme, with offices of planners in the background. Photo by Pullanna Vidyapogu, October 2020.

Returning to the scene of the October 2020 floods I opened with: even as Hyderabad was drowning in a deluge of unseasonal rains, the Telangana government was aggressively promoting a Layout Regularization Scheme enacted to forgive violations of planning rules by private properties (see Figure 6). To apply for layout regularization, one can simply engage with brokers (in this case, a qualified urban planner) and the bureaucracy to draft the paperwork to bring the fait accompli physical transgressions into the fold of governance. Once again, people flooded government offices to engage in micro-political and individualized claim-making. And thus, even aberrant weather events that multiply crises in the built environment consistently fail to push governmental and public discourses beyond the micro-politics of property.

Where do we go from here? Following [Corsín Jiménez \(2017\)](#), I advocate for thinking of the city through actually existing methods of knowing and making the city. In the edited volume *Life among Planners*, [Margaret Crawford \(2020\)](#) argues that urban planning needs an anthropological attunement to contingency and process, and [James Holston \(2020\)](#) suggests that the failure to plan for the future arises from the need to render the present inhabitable through a responsiveness to contingency. Applying such an anthropological attunement to urban governance, I have shown that urban growth and governance in cities like Hyderabad emanate from below. But this city from below is submerged in ideological projections like cadastral order and master plans, which remain chronically incomplete and exclusionary. Nonetheless, investments in these top-down

ideological projections continue to pressure urban governance in Hyderabad in the direction of more rationalization, to be achieved by eradicating the human interface and relationality of the bureaucracy. Such reforms are heavily promoted by the same political elites that already have the most control over technologies of property.

Can we imagine alternative opportunities within the existing modes of governance? Reactive regulation is defined by sociality and relationality, which gives bureaucrats the ability to responsively mediate claims emerging from diverse social strata. Albeit problematic and fragmented, this allows for a politics of regularization and property from below. A substantive dialogue between the abstract realm of planning and the concrete practices of land administration might reorient these relational processes away from a restrictive property epistemology toward constructive new frames for thinking about the relations between peoples, lands, and environments in the city.

ABSTRACT

As social and environmental crises multiply and compound each other in the urban Global South, I ethnographically illustrate the micro-scale, obscured, but constitutive modes of governance that shape megacities. Through an account of property record-keeping, registration, and regularization in the emerging global real estate hub of Hyderabad, India, I show how macro-scale urban transformations form an aggregate outcome of micro-political bureaucratic processes that enlist the participation of bureaucrats, city-dwellers, and intermediary brokers. I argue that in lieu of regulatory processes that direct actions toward future goals, governance takes the form of reactive regulation, wherein the objectives are to render the city as property and re-assert the state's authority. On the one hand, these constitute deeply political processes, ones that incrementally transform urban environments. On the other hand, these processes exclusively frame urban space, time, social relations, and ecology in reductive terms of property, forestalling transformations toward sustainability or social justice. [urban; property; governance; bureaucracy; planning; regularization; sustainability]

సారాంశం

ఈ వ్యాసంలో, అభివృద్ధి చెందుతున్న దేశాల్లోని మెగాసిటీలలో పరిపాలనకు సంబంధించే విశదమైన ప్రక్రియలను నేను వివరిస్తాను. పెద్ద ఎత్తు పట్టణ పరివర్తనలు ప్రభుత్వ అధికారులు, నగరవాసులు మరియు బ్రోకర్లచే నడపబడే విశదమైన బ్యూరోక్రాటిక్ ప్రక్రియల ఫలితమని నేను చూపిస్తాను. గ్లోబల్ రియల్ ఎస్టేట్ హబ్ లలో హైదరాబాద్ ఒకటి. నేను హైదరాబాద్ లో ఆస్తి రికార్డు-కీపింగ్, రిజిస్ట్రేషన్ మరియు క్రమబద్ధీకరణ ప్రక్రియలను ఇక్కడ వివరిస్తాను. పాలన అనేది, భవిష్యత్

లక్ష్యాల వైపు చర్యలను నిర్దేశించే నియంతృత్వ ప్రక్రియలకు బదులుగా, రియాక్టివ్ రెగ్యులేషన్ రూపాన్ని తీసుకుంటున్నది అని నేను వాదిస్తాను. పరియావరణంలో మరియు సమాజంలో సుస్థిర అభివృద్ధి సాధించడానికి బదులు, రియాక్టివ్ రెగ్యులేషన్ యొక్క లక్ష్యాలు నగరాన్ని ప్రైవేట్-ఆస్తిగా మార్చడానికి మరియు ప్రభుత్వ అధికారాన్ని విస్తరించడానికి పరిమితమయి ఉన్నాయి. [నగరాలు; ఆస్తి రికార్డులు; పాలన; ప్రభుత్వ అధికారులు; పట్టణ ప్రణాళిక; క్రమబద్ధీకరణ; స్థిరమైన అభివృద్ధి]

NOTES

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1. This definition combines frameworks from anthropologists of the state (Gupta 2012; Li 2007) and from prominent policy analysts (Baud and De Wit 2008; Sivaramakrishnan 2014).
2. “Annual Report—2015,” NALSAR University, 35 (<https://nalsar.ac.in/sites/default/files/ANNUAL%20REPORT-2015%20-FINAL-1.pdf>), last accessed January 2, 2025.
3. For more discussion on the rampant circulation of corruption talk, see Ranganathan, Pike, and Doshi 2023, as well as Sharma 2018. On the construal of regularization as state beneficence or toleration, see Rao 2013 and Zimmer 2012.
4. For discussions on the connections between property and citizenship, see Holston 2008, Lund 2020, and Campbell 2015.
5. “Discussion on Telangana Government Land Regularisation,” 2015, Live Show with KSR, NTV (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXnzThv-psc>), last accessed January 2, 2025.
6. Telangana Integrated Land Management System, <https://ilrms.telangana.gov.in/homePage?lang=en>, last accessed July 3, 2024.

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