

Indian land program shows tech's limits

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In this Dec. 5, 2012 photo, Gangarangamma, 65, walks through the land she and her husband farmed for decades which the records show is registered to the government, a sign the land remained in dispute, in village Karadigere Kaval, 85 kilometers (53 miles) from Bangalore, India. For years, Karnataka's land records were a quagmire of disputed, forged documents maintained by thousands of tyrannical bureaucrats who demanded bribes to do their jobs. In 2002, there were hopes that this was about to change. (AP Photo/Aijaz Rahi)

(AP)—For years, Karnataka's land records were a quagmire of disputed, forged documents maintained by thousands of tyrannical bureaucrats who demanded bribes to do their jobs. In 2002, hopes emerged that this

was about to change.

The southern state, home to India's technology hub in Bangalore, unveiled Bhoomi, a program that digitized Karnataka's 20 million handwritten land records. At the time, it was hailed as a landmark use of computers to cut through bureaucracy and corruption.

But a decade later, Karnataka remains plagued by land disputes that merely migrated from paper to the database, and even the program's creator says it could take 30 more years to sort it all out.

As the [Indian government](#) puts increasing faith in technology to help solve the nation's thorniest problems—including a complete tech-based overhaul of its [welfare system](#)—Bhoomi presents a cautionary tale: that technology, even at its most successful, can only be a part of the solution.

"(Officials) kind of look at technology to be a panacea for everything, which cannot be. The political will is the most important thing," said Rajeev Chawla, the government administrator who created Bhoomi.

For Yashoda Puttappa, Bhoomi merely marked another setback in her family's six-decade struggle to recover a plot of 1.6 hectares (four acres) she said was illegally taken from her grandfather in the 1940s as supposed repayment of a loan from a wealthy upper-caste neighbor. She feels that Bhoomi cemented the competing claim.

"In the computer, the name is of that man, the dominant caste, which is only going to make this harder," said Puttappa, a land rights activist.

Bhoomi is good, she said, for preventing future land disputes, by making it more difficult to forge documents, but it also gives a patina of [legitimacy](#) to old land grabs.

"Whatever we lost, we can't get back," she said.

In this country, a third the size of the U.S. and four times as populous, land supports hundreds of millions of small-scale farmers and is often the only inheritance they pass to their children.

It has also become a hugely profitable investment, as India's expanding cities grow desperate for new space for office complexes and housing developments.



In this Dec. 5, 2012 photo, a villager walks past a motorcycle with her cattle, in village Karadigere Kaval, where three dalits were killed in a battle over the land in 1980, 85 kilometers (53 miles) from Bangalore, India. For years, Karnataka's land records were a quagmire of disputed, forged documents maintained by thousands of tyrannical bureaucrats who demanded bribes to do their jobs. In 2002, there were hopes that this was about to change. (AP Photo/Aijaz Rahi)

But land ownership has long been controlled by corrupt bureaucrats beholden to powerful land mafias that dispossessed the downtrodden and spawned millions of disputes.

In Karnataka, 10,000 village accountants presided over piles of stapled, crossed-out, erased and rewritten documents that had been revised so often it was nearly impossible to trace back how land was transferred—or stolen.

Wealthy families routinely took land documents as collateral for usurious loans to the poor, Puttappa said. Upon default, they took the land, often illegally. Even if the loan was repaid, many would trick illiterate debtors into putting their thumbprints on sale documents they couldn't read, she said.

"You couldn't even fight in the courts, because you didn't have the records," Puttappa said.

Bhoomi, which means "land" in the local Kannada language, changed that. The land records were transferred to a database and the tattered paper documents declared invalid.



In this Dec. 10, 2012 photo, a man stands amid piles of documents of land records inside a room at the government registrar's office in Hoskote 30 Kilometers (19 miles) from Bangalore in southern Indian state of Karnataka. For years, Karnataka's land records were a quagmire of disputed, forged documents maintained by thousands of tyrannical bureaucrats who demanded bribes to do their jobs. In 2002, there were hopes that this was about to change. (AP Photo/Aijaz Rahi)

Farmers who used to wait days and pay [bribes](#) to village accountants to get a copy of their land records, crucial for bank loans, can now get an instant printout at 200 government kiosks across the state for 10 rupees, less than two U.S. cents. When they want to sell their land, they register at the kiosks, which put their requests in a first-come, first-serve queue that makes it far harder for officials to drag their feet in hopes of soliciting a bribe.

But even as the World Bank and others praised Bhoomi as a pioneer in e-governance, the project faced criticism.

In presenting Bhoomi with a U.N. public service award, Cabinet minister Jairam Ramesh criticized the program as "garbage in, garbage out," saying it should have cleaned up the records before digitizing them.

"We all knew it was garbage," Chawla said. "But if I tried to clean this garbage, it may take donkey's years for me, and by the time I cleaned it, more garbage would come into the system."

Instead, by putting safeguards in place to ensure the same piece of land is not sold to multiple buyers and by making the system of land sales more transparent, he hoped the garbage would slowly be squeezed out of the system as land was sold over the years.

But that could take decades, he acknowledges.

The land fight in Karadigere Kaval, a tiny village 85 kilometers (53 miles) from Bangalore, has raged since 1952, when the government gave a little under a hectare (two acres) apiece to hundreds of dalits—so downtrodden they have no caste.

It was rich earth—what they called "golden land"—where almost anything could grow. But repeated droughts forced many to move away. In the late 1970s, the government redistributed the land, giving the 90 remaining families 1.6 hectares (four acres) each, according to residents and a local land rights group.



In this Dec. 10, 2012 photo, a government official enter authorized land records in a computer at the government registrar's office in Hoskote 30 Kilometers (19 miles) from Bangalore in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. For years, Karnataka's land records were a quagmire of disputed, forged documents maintained by thousands of tyrannical bureaucrats who demanded bribes to do their jobs. In 2002, there were hopes that this was about to change. (AP Photo/Aijaz Rahi)

Upper-caste families insisted they had bought some of the land from migrating farmers and it was rightfully theirs. The two sides fought in the fields and in the courts.

Three dalits were killed in a battle over the land in 1980. Six years later, the upper castes won eviction notices against some dalits. The dalits convinced local officials not to serve the notices, and got a court to agree to preserve the status quo and leave them on the land. An upper caste farmer fenced off about 18 hectares (44 acres). The dalits rounded up hundreds of allies, ripped down the fence and sold off the barbed wire.

Finally, in 2002, a court ruled in favor of the dalit villagers, the residents said.

Yet when Gangarangamma, a 65-year-old widow who uses one name, went to the Bhoomi office to check her land record, it showed the four acres she and her husband had farmed for decades were registered to the government, a sign the land remained in dispute. She has repeatedly complained, she said.

"(Officials) all the time say this will be fixed, but we haven't got it," she said in exasperation. "All of my generation is dead, only three of us are left, I can't say with any confidence this will be resolved before I die."

G.N. Nagaraj, a state Communist Party leader, hailed Bhoomi as "wonderful software," but it was only of "very, very small, limited help." The land mafia can still pressure the officials entering the records into the computer to help them steal land, he said.

Chawla said Bhoomi was designed to prevent new disputes from entering the system, but he acknowledged it wasn't foolproof. Officials were still required to process land sales. They could be bribed and so could witnesses identifying sellers, he said.

Bhoomi's transparency did help Goutham Venki in his fight to get back land that had been taken long ago from his great grandfather by a powerful landlord.

He and about a dozen from his community of migrant stoneworkers looked up their dispossessed land at the Bhoomi office in 2004 and found it had been registered to a real estate developer, who had just bought it from the landlord.

Venki sued—and won. But he still had to borrow 120,000 rupees (about

\$220) at 60 percent interest from a loan shark to bribe [bureaucrats](#) to change the Bhoomi record back into his name.

A month later, the real estate developer appealed. And the decades' old land dispute drags on, like so many of Karnataka's land battles.

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