

Social Inequality and Land Holding For Dalit in India

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Abstract

Land is the basis of all economic activity. It is the most important asset in an agrarian economy like India where majority of the population in rural areas are dependent on agriculture, labour and animal husbandry. This paper deals with an important form of discrimination in the countryside, the lack of access of Dalit (Scheduled Caste) and Adivasi (Scheduled Tribe) households to ownership and operational holdings of land in rural India. It includes a study of the impact of land reforms in India on land holding among Dalit and Adivasi households.

The working paper titled "Social inequality and land holding for dalit in India" discusses the different dimensions that have a bearing on the issue of inequality in land distribution in India. The SCs and STs who have been historically out of the main stream development initiatives, partly due to the still continuing socio cultural barriers and partly due to the inadequacy of the Government programmes in reaching this disadvantage group. However the paper argues that An Overview of land holding for dalit: Past and Present, Status of land for dalit in India, Historical view of Land Distribution Pattern and Economic Conditions of Dalits In this context, an attempt has been made in this paper to examine Dalits' access to land in India during pre and post independence periods. And it also an attempt to assess the impact of land reforms on land ownership by Dalits in India.

I. Introduction

Even after 69 years of independence, the largest number of total workers (56.5%) and 72.5% of the rural work force in India are engaged in agriculture (Ministry of Finance, 2007). Land is a major determinant in the economy, society and polity of the country. Ownership of land is not just about holding an asset. It is the veritable gateway to: a degree of financial security, social status, power and even a sense of identity. A number of studies bring out that, due to their inability to provide collaterals like land documents, many rural folk are denied loans by financial institutions to meet their immediate needs. No wonder, such persons become easy prey for the loan sharks.

It is in this context that, in recent times, the issue of ownership of land, especially by the Dalits (the hitherto deprived sections of society), has assumed special significance. The Constitution of India has, in its various Articles, spoken about the need to improve the lot of the downtrodden. Successive governments (even in British India) have passed a spate of legislations on land-related issues. Yet, landlessness continues to be a major issue, especially in rural India. It is pleasing to hear of slogans like 'land to the tiller', but what is the situation on the ground? Even when a person is shown on the records as the owner of a piece of land, the moot question is: is he always the one who is actually deriving full benefits from it? Have financial constraints and heavy indebtedness, etc., reduced him to the state of being a landless labourer on his 'own' land? Added to that is the spate of suicides by farmers, who are unable to sustain themselves on the uneconomic land-holdings.

Who are the major players who have tended to make a mockery of the noble intentions of the framers of our Constitution, or brazenly flouted the provisions contained in the legislations, by latching on to the loopholes in these? These 67 years of independence have seen a sea-change in the social fabric of our country. The hitherto deprived sections of society can no longer be expected to silently accept the injustices being committed on them as something 'divinely ordained. Today, they are more articulate. Hence, there is an urgent need to make a sincere endeavour to understand all the underlying issues and address these in a fair and equitable manner.

In India, around 87 per cent of the landholders among the SCs/STs belong to the category of small and marginal farmers (Agricultural Census, 2005-06). About 64 per cent of the SCs/STs are either workers or agricultural

labourers, and the percentage of agricultural labourers has increased from 57 per cent in 1961 to 78 per cent in 2001. Due to fragmentation of land ownership, the average size of operated land has declined from 1.19 hectares in 1975-76 to 0.8 hectares in 2005-06. In Andhra Pradesh, the SCs/STs, who constitute 16 per cent of the state's population, control only 7.5 per cent of the total operated land (Diwakar, 1999; Mungekar, 1999).

The above evidences bring out quite clearly the historical impact of the customary restrictions on the ownership of agricultural land. A large section of the SCs/STs do not have enough access to agricultural land and other capital assets even today, and therefore continue to depend on wage labour for earning the major portion of their household income (Throat, 1996). As per the estimates of the Tendulkar Committee, poverty among the SCs/STs in 2009-10 was 23.5 per cent in rural areas. Land is one of the basic and important factors that help enhance all economic activities, to come out of the poverty circle, and reduce vulnerability. Therefore, the Government of India has systematically endeavored to protect and promote the rights of the SCs and STs with regard to the control and use of land through land reforms. However, the reforms were not successful and the majority of the SCs and STs are still landless.

II. Historical view of Land Distribution Pattern and Economic Conditions of Dalits

In the four-tier India Hindu society, caste plays a very important role in the social equations. The upper strata in the caste hierarchy were enjoying all the economic, social and political luxuries, while the lower strata were denied opportunities to get even a measure of equality with the upper strata. In the traditional Hindu hierarchal society, Dalits, also known as Panchmas or Harijans, were socially, economically and politically suppressed people. The Dalits mostly subsisted by engaging in occupations like scavenging and leatherwork (G. Nanchariah, 1988, Anand Teltumbde 1997). Moreover, they were neither allowed to own land, nor take land on lease. This trend was continued till the British rule. During the British period significant changes took place in the socio- economic conditions of Dalits. For the first time in India, the right over land was restored to Dalits during the British period but for different reasons. A commission was appointed in 1891 by the Madras Presidency to study the conditions of the Pariahs (SCs or Dalits) and got the positive report to assign the lands to Dalits. The policy of assignment of land to Pariahs started from 1918 in every Ryotwari village. Land was assigned for these depressed groups not only for cultivation, but also for building houses, establishing schools and for forming small Pariah settlements. Land assigned for cultivation rose from 19,251 acres in 1920-21 to 3, 42,611 acres in 1931. On the other hand, significant changes occurred in the land revenue system and created new intermediaries, i.e., Zamindars, Ryotwars and Inamdars between the State and cultivators in British India through the Permanent Settlement Act 1793 (Dharma Kumar 1992, Satyanarayana, 1998).

In the Zamindari system, land was under the control of individuals, who never cultivated it, nor supervised cultivation. The Zamindars restricted themselves to collecting rent and paying taxes. Under the Ryotwari system, the tillers of the land enjoyed hereditary and transferable rights, and paid taxes to the government. The Inam lands, also known as Agraharams, Shrotriyams, were mostly granted to the Brahmins. The British colonial government also confirmed 'property rights' to the owners, through the Inam Settlement Act (1859-61). The intermediary landlords also belonged to the non-Brahmin upper castes and there was no chance for the depressed/ untouchable castes. Due to the concern of British rulers, a meager percentage of Dalits acquired the land, but the majority of them continued to be agricultural landless labourers. At the end of colonial period, there was significant unequal land distribution in India. It was observed that on the eve of independence, more than 40% of the area in the country was covered by intermediary tenures like Zamindars, Jagirdars and Inamdars and the rest was under the Ryotwari system. Thus, there was a large disparity in the ownership of land (Satyanarayana, 1998).

III. Status of land for dalit in India

Land is the basis of all economic activity. It is the most important asset in an agrarian economy like India where majority of the population in rural areas are dependent on agriculture, labour and animal husbandry. Land issues have thus attracted equal attention from policy makers and academicians. After independence, India engaged in a conscious process of nation building with stress on high productivity and equitable distribution of land. Land reforms with four important components - abolition of intermediaries, tenancy reforms, fixing ceiling on land holdings and consolidation of land holdings - were major policy interventions. It was a strategy of social change through the intervention of the state. However, reform implementation was radical and successful in some respects like abolition of intermediaries while ceiling on land holdings was imposed with a half-hearted approach leading to dismal failure in many states.

In rural societies, ownership of land is coterminous with social status. Its unequal distribution reflects prevailing social stratification and helps maintain the hierarchical structure of the society. While large landowners

invariably belong to the upper castes and the cultivators to the middle castes, agricultural workers are largely dalits and tribals. The denial of access to land, functions as a means of exclusion and a mechanism of bondage. Landlessness is at the core of dalit dependence on caste Hindus.

The landless, whose only remaining asset is their labour remain dependent on large land holders for their survival. When Dalits seek protection of the law against caste Hindu atrocities, retaliation comes in the form of denial of wage work on the lands of caste Hindus. This is often coupled with social boycott, which includes the stoppage of water supply to Dalit lands, non-supply of necessities of life and so on.

Fair distribution of land strikes at the roots of an unequal social order and skewed power relations. It frees the marginalized from the clutches of perpetual bondage, for want of a sustainable livelihood. Laws and regulations in India prohibit the alienation of Dalit lands, set ceilings on a single landowner's holdings, and allocate surplus government lands to be re-distributed to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). However, land ownership patterns remain skewed. Land reforms resulted in the creation of middle level peasant who belonged to all castes except the scheduled caste.

The 1999-2000 National Statistical survey (NSS) data illustrated that around 10 percent of the SC households were landless as compared to 13.34 percent in 1992 and 19.10 percent in 1982. Though landlessness was decreasing, the rate of decrease was marginal. On the other hand, 6.15 percent of the non SC/ST households were found to be landless in 1999- 2000, as compared to 10.53 in 1992. Landless and near-landless (households owning less than 0.40 hectares of land), the percentage was 79.20 for SCs, 52.90 for the non SC/STs in 1999-2000. As on September 30, 1996, of the 52.13 lakh acres distributed at all-India level, about 18.08 lakh acres were to SC, and 26.74 lakh acres were to non-SC/ST persons (according to report of National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes). 18.49 lakh of the beneficiaries were SC, and 25.53 lakh were non-SC/ST. The land distributed per beneficiary was 0.977 acre for SC/ ST which was less compared to 1.047 acres for non-SC/ST.

IV. CONCLUSION

The exclusion faced by Dalits in India in terms of access to basic economic resources remains a reality in contemporary India. In particular, the right of the Dalit masses to productive resources such as land has generally been left unattended, if not grossly violated, since access to land demands deep and radical changes in social structure.

The whole question of land rights of Dalits has gone into dilation through poor implementation or laws. The implementation of land reforms has been subverted by the absence of political will and bureaucratic commitment, loopholes in the law, tremendous manipulative power of the landed class, lack of organisation among the poor and unequal battle in the courts. Therefore the intended benefits to the poor in general and particularly the Dalit failed to materialize. From various studies and reports yet another reason for the failure of land reforms is the failure to update land records in all states in India. In addition to this tardy implementation of legal and legislative initiatives, Judicial delay in settling disputes, inadequacy of the laws and so on had contributed a lot in affirmation of Dalit land rights in India.

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