



DALITS: SOCIO-ECONOMICAL AND LAND STATUS IN TELANGANA

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ABSTRACT

Land is a social status of every individual and it gives the symbol of self-respect and dignity. 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.¹

In India, the upper castes are holding huge amount of land from centuries onwards. In other hand, the communities of Dalits are working as a landless agricultural labourer even after 67 years of Indian independence. The large landowners invariably belong to the upper castes and the cultivators to the middle castes, agricultural workers are largely Dalits and Tribal's. 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.²

However, Dalits are demanding for their wage labour, after that the upper castes was committed atrocities against Dalits immediately. Subsequently, the Dalits life's security and social dignity leads to the questioning in our society. The landless, whose only remaining asset is their labour, remain dependent on large landholders 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.³

Dalits are denied for land rights and the government of India also fails to implement of proper land distribution for Dalits from centuries onwards. 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.⁴

The Land is major causes for Dalit atrocities. In rural India, the Dalits are exploited by the local land-lords. The economic dependency of Dalits leads to another factor for social oppression and suppression. Most Dalit victims of violence and discrimination are landless agricultural laborers. Dalits' lack of access to land makes them economically vulnerable and the dependency is often exploited by the landlords. Since the dominant castes depend on the economic subjugation and exploitation of Dalits and since Dalit land acquisition and ownership threatens this arrangement, land disputes often result in violence and abuse against the Dalit community especially the destruction of their homes and property. Typically, in such disputes Dalit women are made the targets of violence.⁵

Conceptual Framework: Dalits and Land

India is a caste based country and it is the only country in the world where such a system came into being and still exists. The Varna and caste system was sanctified by Hindu religion and by Vedic scriptures. This was the main reason for its consolidation. The notorious text, Manusmriti, codified the then prevailing social norms and consigned the shudras, atishudras and women to a thoroughly unequal and miserable existence. The distinctiveness of the caste system was that it was hereditary, compulsory and endogamous. The worst affected by the caste system and its social oppression have been the dalits, or atishudras, or scheduled castes. Albeit in a different way, the adivasis or scheduled tribes in India have also faced social oppression over the ages. The stories of Shambuka in the Ramayana and of Ekalavya in the Mahabharata are classic testimonies of the non-egalitarian nature of Hindu society in ancient India.⁶

All along with the curse of untouchability, the dalits had no right to have any property. They had to eat the foulest food, including leftovers thrown away by the higher varnas; they were not allowed to draw water from the common well; they were prohibited from entering temples; they were barred from the right to education and knowledge; they had to perform menial jobs for the higher castes; they were not allowed to use the common burial ground; they were not allowed to live in the main village inhabited by the upper varnas; and they were deprived of ownership rights to land and property, leading to the lack of access to all sources of economic mobility. Thus, dalits were subjected to both social exclusion and economic discrimination over the centuries. In one form or the other, this continues even today in most parts of the country.⁷

However, the Comrade B.T. Ranadive pointed out “the three powerful class interests, the imperialists, the landlords and bourgeois leadership were acting as the defenders of the caste system, by protecting the landlord and pre-capitalist land system”. It will be seen from here that the interests of the bourgeois class rested in maintaining the status quo. There has been no basic change in caste system after



nearly 60 years of independence after independence as the bourgeoisie compromised with landlordism fostered caste prejudices. After independence also, the basic structure of land relations, overhauling of which would have given a blow to untouchability and the caste system has not been changed.⁸

In this connection, the 19th and 20th centuries saw great social reformers like Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, Sri Narayan Guru, Jyothiba Phule, Periyar E. V. Ramaswamy Naickar and others. These social reform movements conducted many struggles against the caste system, caste oppression and untouchability in many ways. But, despite the struggles against caste oppression, the social reform movement did not address the crucial issue of radical land reforms. It got delinked from the anti-imperialist struggle. The Congress-led national movement on its part, failed to take up radical social reform measures as part of the freedom movement.⁹

The distribution of Land to Dalits is a good solution to stop atrocities and practicing of untouchability against Dalit in India. No one can deny that social justice can only be fully realized for dalits only once they can obtain land, assets, education, and power. The dalits' confidence and courage depends on the eradication of the grave injustices they have suffered through untouchability and atrocities.¹⁰ However, the land is not only economic development but also social dignity. Land is a resource with the potential to rebuild confidence and courage. Land is not only a mere economic resource, but it is also an instrument for the affirmation of personal dignity. The power of land has led to agreements that land even as small as a grain of sand requires freedom. Yet those who hold control over land, such as landlords, affluent farmers, and village heads often audaciously use their power to strengthen their caste at the cost of others. Caste discrimination has historically dictated the difference between those who profit from the land and those who labor on it.

The Landlessness is a pervasive feature of Dalit households in rural India. Landlessness is foundational to the existence of Dalits as a distinct social group in the rural areas; it forms the material basis for the domination and exploitation of Dalits in the non-economic spheres as well. The caste system thus contains elements of both social oppression and class exploitation. Caste discrimination has also acquired the status of an ideology. The conception and practice of caste as an ideology implies that a person is primarily perceived by another not on the basis of his or her capabilities, but on the basis of the caste that he or she is born into. In this context, it is no surprise that the efforts of upper caste groups to sustain "cultural differentiations" transgress into the non-cultural spheres, including the economic sphere. Thus, even Dalits who own land are subjected to discrimination and harassment by upper caste groups.¹¹

"In the past the peasants who had small pieces of land who couldn't eke out enough from it for their survival used to eat fruits from the nearby forests and used to collect leaves, flowers and dried tree branches and by selling these to others



supplemented their income. They also used to maintain a couple of cows or goats and were living happily in their villages depending on the village common grazing land. But H.M's government's conspiratorial bureaucracy have used their foreign intelligence and have newly established the great forest department and have incorporated all mountains, hills, valleys along with barren lands, and village common grazing lands in this department, thus making it impossible for goats or the poor peasants to find even breathing space in the forests."

-Jyothiba Phule in his Marathi book "Shetkaryacha Aasud" (Cultivator's Whipcord) 1882

Today, the land related atrocities are main cases against dalits in India. Caste discrimination and Dalit Rights over natural resources is one of the most complicated issues that the country is today faced with. As such this is not a new question; however the current format is a relatively newer one. There are specific reasons and compulsion for raising this question at this juncture of history as the betrayal of the betrayed continues for centuries unknown till today.¹²

The traditional Hindu caste system has been rejecting land ownership of Dalits. The upper caste land-lords cannot allow to owning lands for dalits for centuries. "The traditional order was not merely an ideological construct but an economic and political structure too. It articulated and encapsulated an entire system of production that existed over centuries with only minor alterations within its confines. The economical and political realities of inequalities were justified, defied and glorified through religious pronouncements based on the purity - pollution divide. Traditionally, ritualistic compulsion and coercive oppression ensured their compliance in providing virtually free labour for the upper caste land owners. The fact that they had been denied right over land or territory only compounded the matter by making them completely dependent upon the owners and controllers of the means of production and livelihood"¹³

Dalits are working as a landless agriculture labourers of their own lands for centuries. Particularly, the forest lands and waste lands also belongs to Tribes and dalits but these communities are away from the rights to land or own land. "Dalits were reduced as slaves and laboring class on their own land. Land and forest turned to be alien to the Dalits. Yet the cultural history speaks volumes about their closed relationship with nature and natural resources and its mutuality with human beings. There are traces of Buddha's Sanghas in several forestlands which was mostly inhabited by lower caste people. Many untouchable communities had been living in forest areas and forest fringes for hundreds of years as weavers, bamboo weavers/workers, yet they haven't been recognized as the original inhabitants in most of the cases"¹⁴

Dalits have no permanent rights over the land or territory and there are victims of land related exploitation and social oppression. "The fact that Dalits have been denied any permanent right over any land or territory has only compounded that matter by making them completely dependent upon the owners



and controllers of the means of production and livelihood. It is an undeniable fact that Dalits have suffered displacement from land through the ages. The land occupied by them has always been seized at the flimsiest excuse, forcibly or through economic strangling. The right to hold land - even homestead land - of these groups has always been tenuous at best".¹⁵

The majority of Dalits atrocities cases are related to land. The upper castes are continually attacking and physically harassing Dalit farmers leave their lands. The continuous process of expropriation of resources, particularly land, from these sections takes on a new dimension today. The pasture and fallow lands were developed by the labour of particularly the Dalit toilers in the hope that they would at last acquire a piece of land to call their own. However, once the land is developed and made cultivable, however, they are forced off it through various measures, covert and overt, legal and illegal, economic and extra-economic. Debts and mortgages, denial of other vital resources like water and agricultural implements and inputs, social boycotts, upper caste violence, rapes, mutilations and killings throw them off the land. Their labour invested in the development of land is expropriated, at best at a pittance.¹⁶

Who are Dalits?

The term 'Dalit' is often used only to imply people who were suffering from Untouchability. Formally they were also categorized as Pariah, Outcastes, Harijjan, Depressed Classes, Panchamas and Astisudras while now, legally, termed as scheduled Castes Dalits did not constitute a part of the *chaturvarna* scheme of social stratification because those belonging to the four varnas are regarded as above the pollution line. However, by implication those are not part of the *chaturvarna*, in other words those who are below the pollution line are the fifth varna hence called panchamas. Segregation was a natural corollary to are the widely shared belief in pollution and several terms such as Antya (added last or at the end), bahya (who lives or stays outside the village), Antyaja (born at the end) Antyavasin (those who live at the end) testify to the current practice. Perhaps all this meant to a consistent conscious perpetuation of the segregation. It created a definite barrier to free intermingling in the future. Some of those generic terms developed in to specific Caste-names, as in the case of the Nishada, who were the offspring of a Brahman father and a Sudra mother.

Root Causes of Untouchability:

"Untouchability means pollution by the touch of certain persons by reason of their birth in a particular caste or family. It leads to defilement, pollution and contamination. It is believed that the practice of untouchability is peculiar to the Hindu society. Untouchability as a social concept has become embodied in customs and as customs differ so does untouchability. The classes, which are commonly regarded, as untouchables are Chamars, Busadh, Dom, Halalkor, Hari, Mochi, Mushahar. Although they were outside the pole of Hindus society, which recognizes



only four classes namely, *Brahmanas*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras*, they were reckoned as part of the Hindu society for political purposes.¹⁸

The untouchables had different names in different parts of the country. They were called outcaste untouchables namely *Pariahs*, *Panchamas*, *Atishudras*, *Avarnas*, *Antyajaja*, *broken people*, *downtrodden*, and *Namashudras*. Their touch and even voice were deemed by the caste Hindus to be polluting. So they had to clear the way at the approach of a caste Hindu.¹⁸ Untouchability is one of the major problems of our country. It has its roots in the Indian society that is based on the caste system. The castes are further divided into sub-castes. The people of the lowest caste are treated untouchables. They do not belong to the fold of Hinduism. Nobody knows exactly about the origin of untouchability or the caste system itself. Some historians try to trace the origin of the caste system to the *Vedas*, the ancient religious books of the Hindus. The *PurusaSukta* in the *Rig Veda* describes the creation of four *Varnas* namely, the *Brahmin*, the *Kshatriya*, the *Vaishya* and the *Shudra*. Ambedkar was one of the most remarkable leaders who played a major role in Indian politics, especially for the upliftment of the downtrodden. He was a distinguished economist, a learned and a brilliant lawyer, an author, a great political leader and champion of human rights and dignity. From the *Rid Veda* on words in the name of the social hierarchy the SC's/ST's are still denied their basic rights.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was strongly opposed to caste discrimination. "He was brought up in the surrounding of an orthodox and rigid Hindu family that was divided on religious, casteist, communal, and regional lines. He complained that the Hindu society was just like a tower, which had several storeys without a ladder or an entrance. One was to die in the storey's in which one was born".¹⁹

Ambedkar, being an untouchable, suffered in his early life. Under the circumstances of such disabilities and maltreatment, Ambedkar cultivated a spirit of patience. All such insulting refusals and ill treatments engendered in him a burning hatred for Hinduism. The untouchables were prohibited to learn Sanskrit. Being an untouchable, Ambedkar also was compelled to take *Persian* as the second language in the high school, though he was interested in learning Sanskrit. Sanskrit was the key to the study of the *Vedas*. The *Vedas* were neither to be heard nor to be read by the *Shudras* and the untouchables. The teacher never touched the note books of the untouchable students. Some of them did not even ask them to recite poems or put any question to them for fear of being polluted. But at the same time, there was a Brahmin teacher in the high school who loved this boy very much and even dropped daily a part of his meal of boiled rice, bread, and vegetables into the hands of Ambedkar.²⁰ Students from the socially backward communities especially untouchables were segregated and made to sit separately from the other people in schools.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had experienced untouchability from his entire educational and social life. He was stated several social activities to remove and



eliminate the social evil of the untouchability. The burning of the *Manu Smriti* took place at Mahad on December 20th; 1927. The function was a part of the campaign for establishing the right to take water from the Cawdar tank. The burning of the *Manu Smriti* took place publicly and openly in a conference of untouchables. It was a deed of great daring. It was an attack on the very citadel of Hinduism. The *Manu Smriti*, that contains the Hindu codes, is insulting to persons of low castes. It deprived them of the rights of human beings and crushed their personality.

Importance of Dalits Land Rights:

The present study is focus on land and Dalits in Telangana Region which is the based on the land reforms and distribution of land for a social ground. At any rate, the Agricultural census forms part of a broader system of collection of agricultural statics. It is a large-scale statically operation for the collection and derivation of quantitative information about the structural aspects of agricultural in the state. An agricultural operational holding is the ultimate unit for taking decision for development of agriculture at micro level. It is for this reason that an operational holding is taken as the statically unit for data collection and for describing the structure of agriculture. Through Agricultural census it is endeavored to collect basic data on all the important aspects of agricultural Economy for all the operational holdings in the country. Aggregation of data is done at various levels of administrative units.²¹

The Indian society is caste based society based on four-fold Varna system. Even though, the auricular sector also very important issue in the development of Telangana region. The Periodic agricultural censuses are important, as they are the main source of information on basic characteristics of operational holdings such as land use and cropping patterns, irrigation status, tenancy particulars and the terms of leasing. This information is tabulated by different size classes and social groups including Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes which are needed for development planning, socio-economic policy formulation and establishment of national priorities. The census also provides the basic for the development of comprehensive integrated national system of agricultural statistics and has links with various components of the national statistical system. The whole project of Agricultural Census in the country is implemented in three distinct phases which are statistically link together but focus on different aspects of agricultural statistics. In Phase-I, a list of holdings with their area and social characteristics of the holders is prepared. In Phase-II, detailed data on agricultural characteristics holdings are collected from selected villages. In phase-III, data on input use pattern are collected from selected holdings in selected villages. Thus the whole operation of Agricultural Census in Andhra Pradesh is a combination of Census and Sample Survey, which reflects whole characteristics of Agricultural operational holding.²²

Land cultivated with the help of hired labour. Land owned and self operated should not include land leased out to others. Leased in: Area leased in is defined as



land taken on lease from others without any permanent right of possession for the lessee. Land may be leased in for:

- Fixed money
- Fixed produce
- Share of produce

Concluding Remarks:

In this connection, the Minimum Wages Act for agricultural workers must be stringently implemented throughout the country. A comprehensive bill for agricultural workers is another long-standing demand and it must be enacted without delay. Homestead land must be provided for Dalits agricultural workers. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act must be strictly implemented all over the country by involving the people, their mass organizations and the panchayati raj institutions. It should be extended to all districts and also to urban areas of the country. The public distribution system must be universalized to ensure food to all. Until this is done, BPL ration cards must be issued to all poor families, many of whom are from Dalits. The grain under the BPL scheme should be made available at Anthodia prices. Agricultural credit to peasants and agricultural workers must be made available at 4 % rate of interest. For Dalits and STs in both rural and urban areas, credit facilities should be expanded and the credit given at concessional interest rates.

However, the Special Component Plan should be properly implemented in all the states with proper allotment of funds according to the population of dalits. A National Commission should be set up to assess the real position of dalits including reservation. The state level commissions should be set up to oversee the implementation of all schemes connected with the SCs including reservation. Infrastructure development in the scheduled caste areas like road, water, health, culture and other needs has to be given proper importance. When allotting fund for infrastructure development, a separate allotment for scheduled caste areas should be provided. A comprehensive National Programme of Minor Irrigation for all irrigable but unirrigated lands of SCs and STs through wells, community wells, bore-wells, community bore-wells and tube-wells, bandheras, check-dams, lift, etc., should be immediately undertaken and implemented. All forms of untouchability must be rooted out of the country by strengthening the relevant laws, ensuring their strict implementation and most importantly, by launching a mass movement of the people.



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