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Studying the (Dalit) Land Movement in Maharashtra:
Contested Questions of Land and Labour in India

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Studying the (Dalit) Land Movement in Maharashtra: Contested Questions of Land and Labour in India

Awanish Kumar¹ and Silva Lieberherr²

1 Introduction

India's rural population continues to face a livelihood crisis owing to a combination of factors, both historical and current, that have increased the differentiation within rural society. In India, where more than half the working population depends on agriculture and the number of small and marginal farmers has been growing (Lerche 2013), the changes in agriculture – arguably due to neoliberal policies – are often labelled as an 'agrarian crisis'. In this paper, we will present some findings from our research in Maharashtra. Our focus is on the persisting livelihood crisis in Indian agriculture in the context of neoliberalism and the emerging social movement responses particularly from Dalits³ in a state of India. The following section of this paper discusses the livelihood crisis in all its facets, including land inequality and the notion of united peasantry against globalisation. The main argument that we highlight is the differentiated impact of the agrarian crisis on various classes and castes in India. In the third section, we focus on the state of Maharashtra and discuss the land movement led by Dalits. In the final section, we highlight some of the important conclusions of the paper.

2 Livelihood Crisis in Indian Agriculture

Some authors argue that the steeply falling agricultural profitability has hit all agrarian classes in India. A corollary of this argument is that the historical rise in the share of capitalist farming has been halted by neoliberal policies. But the big landholders could maintain or increase their wealth by resorting to rent extraction and moneylending. However, the sections of the peasantry who had no alternative outside agriculture were being pauperized. At the same time, the corporatization of agriculture has allowed trans-national capital to take control over peasant production (see e.g. Patnaik 2010, cited in Lerche 2013, 390; Lerche 2015; Reddy 2016).

In contrast, other authors claim that rural groups, regions and crops were very differently affected by the recent changes in agricultural policies. They argue that the rural elite of big landholders and capitalist farmers continue to have high returns on their investment in agriculture. It was mostly the small and marginal farmers who suffered from the old agrarian inequalities as well as the New Economic Policies (see e.g. Ramachandran 2011; Reddy 2016). Ramachandran (2011) criticises the conceptual and empirical confusion held by the former group of authors:

...in the post-1991 period, differentiation in the rural economy is no longer occurring, and has been replaced by 'immiserisation' of the peasantry. (...) In the first place, it [this formulation] represents a category confusion, since there is no reason why differentiation need be inconsistent with immiserisation. (ibid, 71)

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³The Indian caste system is characterised by four *varnas* and multitude of *jatis* (castes). The four varnas are the Brahmins (priestly class), Kshatriyas (warrior class), Vaishyas (trading class) and Shudras (service class). There is also a class who are outside the caste system and have been victims of "untouchability" from other caste groups. This ex-untouchable social group is now often known as Scheduled Castes or *Dalits*- the oppressed ones.

Contrary to the “immiserisation” thesis, he argued that the record of production and investment crisis of post-liberalisation agriculture is an exacerbation of older trends with new policy measures. Consequently, it is not an undifferentiated crisis across all regions, crops, classes, or years. With the commercialisation of agriculture, the differentiation of farmers gave way to a class of rich farmers (Le Mons Walker 2008; Mohanty 2005; Pandit 1979). These rich farmers have the highest levels of ownership of the means of production, while the poor farmers have hardly any or only very small plots of land and often, labour in and out at the same time. This inequality in villages is only increasing. To take a village in Vidarbha, a region in Central India, as an example, survey data shows that the top 5% of the village population owns 35% of wealth, while the bottom 50% own 10% (Ramachandran 2011). Nair and Banerjee (2012) have examined land distribution and found that it became more unequal between 1960 and 2002 and that particularly medium farmers were increasingly at risk of losing their land.

Ramachandran (2011) pointed out that several macro indicators should be analysed with regard to their different implications for different classes of farmers. Then, it would become obvious that agricultural development has been skewed towards the richer farmers. One indicator is that of electricity consumption in agriculture. Overall consumption rose since the New Economic Policies. Given that ownership of motor pumps in villages is skewed towards big landholders, it is mostly the rich that benefited. Another such indicator is the consumption of chemical fertilisers, which increased markedly but had very different implications on different groups of farmers. In order to sustain soil quality, it is necessary to stabilize the consumption of urea, phosphate and potash at a balance of about 4:2:1, with slight changes depending on soil type. In 1992, fertiliser prices were partially liberalized: the prices of phosphate and potash were decontrolled while urea remained under government control. This led to increases in the prices of potash and phosphate, while urea prices were still moderate. Despite efforts of the government to restore price parity, these different prices persisted. Through the period of the Green Revolution, this ratio was slowly but steadily approaching the balance of 4:2:1, but deteriorated quickly after 1992: nitrogenous fertilisers increased rapidly and phosphate as well as potash fertilisers fell relatively (Ramakumar 2014). Usually the rich farmers can afford to diversify their fertilizer mixture, while the poor rely solely on urea. This overuse of urea leads to a declining fertiliser response as well as a depletion of micronutrients from the soil – and eventually to a deterioration of soil fertility, affecting the lands of the poor. After 2009, this effect might even have accelerated because the prices of fertilizers skyrocketed – particularly those of phosphorus and potash fertilizers (ibid.).

Parthasarthy (2015) argued that there should be more studies on the relationship between the upwardly mobile farmers and developments in the agrarian sector. The rich farmers, he says, play a role in the processes of marketization and commodification. They have a tendency to seek rents and profits as ways of protecting their interest. By their constant lobbying for subsidies for export-oriented agriculture as well as for agro-processing industries together with their refusal to develop the skills base of labour and their opposition to food security,

...sections of the peasantry [the rich farmers, provincial elite] have a role in facilitating neo-liberal policies resulting in the marginalization of the peasantry [poorer farmers] and contributing to agrarian distress (ibid, 822).

These analyses of Ramachandran, Ramakumar and Parthasarthy show that it is misleading to talk about agriculture in crisis *in toto*. Rather, it is important to distinguish between different groups of farmers. One way of doing so is according to the size of landholdings. In the following sub-section, we will look closely at land inequality among different groups.

2.1 Land Inequality

Land, the most important means of production, still defines the different classes of agricultural households. The rich farmers generally own the most and best land in the villages. Their members are not involved in agricultural operations on the land. Rather, the land is leased out to tenants. The rich farmers may be from traditionally dominant castes as well as from the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). In any case, they are “entrenched in positions of social and political dominance” (Ramachandran 2011, 59). The medium, semi-medium and small farmers stand between the rich capitalist farmers and the landless workers and marginal farmers. They do most of the operations on their land themselves, while they are also subjugated to the markets.

Land is still the foundation of power, even if other businesses like money lending, agro-processing industries, dairy, trade, petrol pumps, sale and leasing of agricultural machinery or inputs are important sources of income and power as well. But these businesses too are concentrated in the hands of the rich farmers. It is often the (former) landlords that seek access to the institutions of state power, on a local level the *panchayati raj* institutions. This allows them to be the first to seize the opportunities of higher education or modern sector employment, which in turn further increases inequality (Ramachandran 2011).

The 2010–11 agricultural census shows that the number of small and marginal farms is increasing. **Table 1** depicts the shares of marginal and small landholdings in total landholdings and how it has developed from the 1980s onwards. The share of small and marginal farmers has grown and constitutes now more than 80% of all landholdings. **Table 2** shows the same trend as a percentage of the total area under cultivation, where the area cultivated by small and marginal farmers increased from 16% to 53%. While this development can be seen all over India, this marginalization is most pronounced in Karnataka, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Furthermore, the area per holding has been decreasing (Deshpande and Arora 2010).

One of the main reasons for this development is that over time, the rural population has increased tremendously. In 1951, the rural population of India was 298.6 million; in 2001 it reached 742.6 million. This means that in five decades the rural population increased by 444 million people. In this period, the number of cultivators has doubled, while the number of agricultural labourers has quadrupled. In contrast, the net area sown has increased only from about 119 million ha in 1951 to about 141 million ha in 2001; the gross cropped area increased in the same period from about 132 million ha to 186 million ha. This has put immense pressure on land resources: the net area sown per cultivator had declined from 1.70 ha in 1951 to just 1.11 ha in 2001 and from 4.35 ha to 1.32 ha per worker in the same period. Apart from the small landholding size, the number of parcels in each landholding is also increasing: there are an estimated 2.7 parcels in each of the small and marginal holdings due to on-going fragmentation (Sidhu 2010). This fragmentation of land is a consequence of the law of inheritance of ancestral property, the absence of a progressive tax on inherited land, and scarce non-farm employment (Niroula and Thapa 2005).

Land is inherited, owned and operated predominantly by men. The legal discrimination against women’s ownership rights to agricultural land has decreased or even disappeared. But many social norms continue to be barriers for women’s ownership of land. One example is that dowry is seen as the woman’s legitimate share of ancestral property and therefore land is given to the sons rather than daughters. In some cases, women have a desire to own land, but they do not want to demand their share in land because they do not want to risk a fight with their family members. As a result, women are still strongly discriminated against and only a minority of women inherits or owns land (Agarwal 1994, Kulkarni et al. 2008, Landesa 2013).

Table 1: Percentage of landholdings (in % of total landholdings) in India (based on GoI 2012)

	1980–81	1990–91	2000–01	2010–11
Large	2.4%	1.6%	1.0%	0.7%
Medium	9.1%	7.1%	5.5%	4.3%
Semi-medium	14.0%	13.1%	11.7%	10.0%
Small	18.1%	18.8%	18.9%	17.9%
Marginal	56.4%	59.4%	62.9%	67.0%

Table 2: Percentage of area operated under marginal and small holdings (in % of total operated area) in India (based on GoI 2012)

	1980–81	1990–91	2000–01	2010–11
Large	23.0%	17.3%	13.2%	10.9%
Medium	29.6%	27.0%	24.0%	21.2%
Semi-medium	21.2%	23.2%	24.0%	23.6%
Small	14.1%	17.4%	20.2%	22.1%
Marginal	12.0%	15.0%	18.7%	22.2%
Average landholding per household	4.5 acres	3.8 acres	3.3 acres	2.9 acres

Together, these trends show that the number of landholdings that are too small to provide sufficient income is increasing. Reddy and Mishra (2010b) argue that those households are only viable if they can earn at least 50% of their livelihood outside agriculture. While small farms are not necessarily inefficient, there are several structural factors that work against small and marginal farmers. One of these factors is that small and marginal farmers struggle to buy high-quality inputs such as high-yielding variety seeds. Another factor is that small and marginal farmers have much higher transaction costs and low bargaining power in the local markets (see e.g. Reddy and Mishra 2010b). Additionally, most farmers do not have any storage opportunities, are in urgent need of money or the trader is their moneylender at the same time. Therefore, they have to sell their produce immediately and cannot wait for the price to increase (Parasuraman and Rajaretnam 2011). Consequently, they end up paying more for their inputs and achieve lower prices for their yields.

2.2 Land, Labour and Dalits in India

In terms of land, India is a peculiar case because of the specific experiences of Dalits, Scheduled Tribes, and women in agrarian social relations. In India, the landless class of wage labourers was, and continues to be, tied to a specific social position in the caste hierarchy—ties that reveal the close relationship between questions of land and labour. A distinct class of landless agricultural labourers existed before the advent of colonial rule and the development of capitalist relations in agricultural production. This is the case to an extreme extent in India and the land question for Dalits continues to pose a challenge to Indian society and politics.

Certainly, landholding is not the only basis of income or wealth in rural India today. Non-agricultural income is an important part of people's total income, be it rural manufacturing, construction or remittances (Misra 2013). The importance of and access to non-agricultural income differs depending on many factors like education, wealth and/or caste (Lanjouw and Shariff 2004: 4443). Further, it also depends on the profitability of agriculture. In rain-fed areas for example, people are more dependent

on non-agricultural income than in irrigated areas. Still, even in those rain-fed regions, non-farm employment constitutes only up to half of the total household income, leaving the other half to agriculture (Bhakar and Singh 2013, 83-84). But even if the importance of agricultural income has decreased significantly and landholding does not solely determine peoples' income, agriculture still counts for a major part of people's incomes. Azam and Shariff (2011) conclude that "*farm income continues to be the most important source of income and income inequality in rural India*" (ibid, 5).

For labourers, agricultural labour sharply declines in importance for the landless and marginal peasants in the rural economy. The non-agricultural sector has registered rapid development, in terms of number of days of employment for manual workers in villages. However, in the absence of a thoroughgoing agrarian reform, non-agricultural sectors have often replicated forms of labour in the agrarian system. The sources of power for the erstwhile landlord class and the new capitalist farmer class are now more diverse.

2.3 United Peasantry Against Globalisation?

The agricultural sector has largely been market-led since liberalisation began in 1991; the state has withdrawn. Several giant multinational agri-businesses dominate the hybrid seed and pesticide markets. Indian sales of certified seeds almost tripled in the decade to 2010. At the time of writing, about half the seed sector was in private ownership, generating a turnover of approximately 1.5 billion USD. International seed companies Syngenta, Monsanto, Bayer, Dow and Advanta have cornered the cotton and maize hybrid seed markets, often through joint ventures with Indian companies. In fact, 95% of the highly profitable hybrid maize seed production is privately owned.

Despite the involvement of (global) corporate capital in agriculture, we argue that general argument that the primary contradiction is between global corporate capital and a unified and homogenous peasantry may not be plausible in the Indian context. We base this argument on the analysis of the inequality and exploitation innate in Indian rural society and the very different consequences for these different classes of farmers and labourers.

In the Indian context indeed, Nanda (2004: 250) argued that the notion of a united peasantry fighting against global corporate exploitation can have very real, dangerous consequences. Nanda argued that as a consequence of the indiscriminate use of the anti-imperialist card in the analysis of the agrarian situation, any critique of the indigenous became difficult, "authenticity and indigeness and not dispassionate efforts to reach the truth became the criteria of acceptance" (ibid, 259). This position, as hinted out earlier, risks glossing over differences of class, caste or gender. *Such (neo)-populist arguments regard farmers as undifferentiated and oppressed by the state, big business and foreign capital (Brass 1997: 204ff). The formation of this peasant unity is sought to fight against the "imperialist domination of our peasantry"* (see e.g. Patnaik 2006, cited in Lerche 2013, 390).

This line of argument also draws from the so-called agrarian myth that conceptualises a homogenous, wholesome peasantry consisting of small-scale, de-centralised owner-cultivators embedded in nature and the institution of family. On the one hand, the agrarian myth is based upon the farmers' economic identity, which is in turn based on small-scale farming in the village 'community', visions to which new social movements with Gandhian or postmodernist ideas have brought a progressive gloss. On the other hand, the agrarian myth also embraces the farmer's non-economic identity, which is mainly cultural or nationalist (Brass 2000: 15). Therefore, the agrarian myth is defended *by mutually reinforcing aspects of "peasant-ness", national identity and culture that downgrades class and essentialises the peasantry (Brass 1997, 206)*. Nanda argued that Hindu nationalists could capture these non-economic identities and,

...combine an appeal to the primordial identities of farmers as Hindus with a promise of greater emphasis on the economic interest of the rural sector in the name of promoting cultural authenticity (Nanda 2004, 250).

In this sense, such arguments *have acted as a bridge between the right and left*. Nanda (2004, 253) stressed the strategic importance of this mobilizing ideology of a “contemporized agrarian myth” which glosses over deep class and caste divisions. Rich farmers with surplus to sell need such an ideology of presenting an entire village ‘community’ as a victim of the state. Only in this way, they can obtain support of the majority of poorer farmers and landless workers to pressurize the state for subsidies and higher procurement prices.

3 Maharashtra: Land as a Non-Issue?

Our extensive fieldwork in Maharashtra has indicated two main points with regards to the meaning of land. The first case is a movement in Vidarbha, a region the Central Indian state of Maharashtra. Agriculturally, it is dominated mostly by cotton, lentils, wheat and soy. There were five very heterogeneous groups and individual actors that claimed to speak for the farmers and mobilized around the agrarian crisis and farmer suicides. Despite their differences, they perceived themselves and each other as parts of a broader movement. One quote reflects well how the many activists understand themselves:

The small, small activists throughout Vidarbha are there. I’m also one of them, a small, small, smallest of one, working in one remote place of Maharashtra.

Their constituencies are mostly male, landed but non-big farmers, often of dominant castes. Even if they are surely not the most oppressed of the rural society, they are still those that are affected by the ‘agrarian crisis’, those whose hopes and aspirations have been raised by the neoliberal New Economic Policies and who are now bitterly disappointed by them.

3.1 Peasant Movements for Prices Only!

The main demand that was common for all the peasant movement groups was a remunerative price for their agricultural output – and they demanded this from the government. The Green Revolution was accompanied by heavy state support for agriculture, which included the provision of rural credit or inputs as well as a Minimum Support Price. In the 1990s, the state support for agriculture of the earlier periods decreased tremendously as a result of the neoliberal New Economic Policies. The perception of farmers and statistical data shows that the prevalent price support in the form of the Minimum Support Price is often too low for many farmers to earn a profit. Additionally, moneylender cum traders, to whom many – particularly poor – sections of the peasantry are indebted, makes it difficult to realize even market or minimum support prices.

It might therefore not be surprising that the farmers’ and activists focus on prices. One small farmer said that “*for normal kisan (farmer), the dream is only prices*”. When looking closer, it is still surprising. The case for economic liberalisation contained in the country memorandum of the World Bank for India released in the year 1991 rested heavily on freeing up the agricultural sector. The basic arguments for liberalisation in agriculture can be summarised through the following points. Firstly, the pre-1991 economic policy was deemed to be anti-farmer insofar as it kept the terms of trade prevalent in the economy in favour of the industrial sector at the expense of agriculture. This occurred due to the various protective measures within the economy like input subsidies and output price support, which depressed agriculture prices and consequently created an economic structure based on distorted prices not in line with the cost of production and relative scarcity. This price argument (‘getting the prices right’) can be said to be the foundational basis of the neoclassical reorganisation of the underdeveloped economies the world over.

Secondly, various policy signals were devised to de-emphasise the role of public investments in agriculture, which again rested on the assumption that the public investments ‘crowded out’ private enterprise in agriculture. Thirdly, the possibility of an export-led agriculture growth was mooted during this time as a single panacea for the low-income, backward agriculture sector in India. An emphasis on exports would lead to diversification in cropping patterns, and a movement towards ‘high value agriculture’ would ensure the reversal of the terms of trade in favour of agriculture. Keeping these three main points in mind, it is quite surprising to note that a number of movement actors had internalised the neoliberal re-imagination of agriculture even if they have explicitly demanded state intervention.

Land on the contrary, is no longer an issue at all for the many political movements of non-big farmers on the ground. Most interviewees mentioned that the plots of farmers are becoming smaller. They agreed that farming could not be profitable for farmers with small plots even with a higher Minimum Support Price from the government, but that it can be profitable for farmers with larger landholdings. From this perspective, it is striking that land reforms are a non-issue for the small and marginal farmers. Even when we explicitly asked interviewees what they would think about land redistribution, most simply shrugged their shoulders. From another angle, farmers who own little land which is only for agricultural cultivation (rather than for selling on), whose land is non-irrigated and who do not have capital to invest in agricultural operations, find themselves with negative profits from their plots. Seen from this perspective, the absence of the demand for land reforms might not be that surprising. However, considering that the current agrarian scene is a differentiated one, comprising the older landlord class and its allies (consolidated into the capitalist farmer and rich peasant class) and the majority of the peasantry, including landless agricultural workers, it is still noteworthy that among the contemporary peasant movements in the region, the unequal distribution of land is a non-issue – even in the explicitly left-wing ones.

Rich farmers, on the contrary, talked a lot about land and demanded to abolish the land ceiling laws (fixing a ceiling to the amount of land one person can own). Agricultural land still has a significant value, even if land is no longer the sole, or even dominant source of income and economic activity for the class of landlords and big capitalist farmers. But with the appreciation of land values due to an increased demand for non-agricultural purposes, rich farmers still earn very high amounts in the land market by acquiring land, at times forcibly, from poorer farmers (Parthasarathy 2015: 822-823). In this line, some activists saw trends towards corporate farming. Jawandhia as well as activists of KAA and SSS reported that foreign companies had come to the region wanting land for agricultural plantations or contract farming. An activist stated that

“they have very good technology. So compared to them, our farming will be poor. Many kisans are in stress and sell their land to them”.

In 2015, land suddenly became the primary issue for all activists on the ground. In March 2015, the *Lok Sabha* adopted the Land Bill (i.e. the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (Amendment) Bill 2015). This bill severely cuts the rights of landowners when the government or private entities want to acquire land for industrial corridors or infrastructure projects, including public-private partnerships. Most strikingly, it exempts such projects from the necessary consent of 80 or 70% of landowners (Hindu 2015; Nielsen and Nilsen 2015). Even if, as the journalist Jaideep Hardikar said, it was often not even necessary to use direct coercion to make farmers sell their land because the economic coercion was enough, it is not surprising that the activists went up on the barricades to fight this bill. This shows the importance of land for rural wealth, or at least what stands between farmers and even more severe poverty (see Li Murray 2010).

3.2 Dalit Land Movement

The second point is that in the last few years, a number of socio-political movements for land or against land alienation have seen active and leading participation from Dalits and Scheduled Tribes. This is true for Maharashtra. The Marathwada region of Maharashtra has been witness to a land movement *of the Dalits, by the Dalits and for the Dalits* for over half a century. Though the first beginnings of the land movement can be traced back to the year 1953, it is unfortunate that a systematic and just history of the movement does not appear either in standard social science textbooks of social movements or Dalit movements. One of the authors of this paper has been engaged in documenting the struggles and theorizing the social movement of Dalits for land in Marathwada.

The state of Maharashtra, historically, has four separate socio-cultural regions, namely Western Maharashtra, Konkan, Marathwada and Vidarbha. The Marathwada region (also known as Aurangabad Division) includes the districts of Aurangabad, Nanded, Parbhani, Latur, Beed, Hingoli, Jalna and Osmanabad. The overall backwardness of Marathwada region is complicated by the fact that the local elites, the Marathas from the region, have been appropriated by the regional and provincial Maratha elites of Western Maharashtra. Marathwada variously serves as resource and labour reserve for Western Maharashtra. One instance should suffice to substantiate the claim and that is the phenomenon of mass migration of agricultural workers from the Marathwada region to villages of Western Maharashtra during the harvesting of sugarcane every year. Marathwada continues to perform this subsidiary role and this is one reason why the local elites do not find it necessary to even highlight the sustenance of extremely backward and feudal institutional forms and structures in the society and economy of the region.

Caste Feudalism

The specificity of Indian agrarian transition and the location of Dalits within it lie in the unique historical evolution of agrarian relations steeped in a society organised around the caste system (Byres 1981: 422). In India, Dalits constitute the largest section of the population of landless agricultural labourers, and perform core tasks in the labour process of agriculture. At the social and cultural levels too, Dalits are historically marginalised and 'excluded' from 'mainstream' perceptions and processes of development. While other caste groups have achieved relative mobility across agricultural and non-agricultural occupations, Dalits continue to be tied to manual labour. Even today, Dalits are not only relegated to manual labour in most sectors but also carry out particularly "onerous" labour tasks within rural labour markets (Ramachandran 1990). The basic socio-economic characteristics of Dalit labouring households like the number of days of agricultural and non-agricultural employment, asset ownership, incomes, etc. are determined by the overall agrarian structure, which has not seen any drastic change after independence (Ramachandran 1990). In addition, wherever Dalits have access to leased-in land, they often encounter difficult tenancy conditions and inter-linked markets, thus adversely affecting their profitability (Surjit 2011).

Patankar and Omvedt (1979) characterise the Indian agrarian system in history as having given rise to a peculiar form of "caste-feudalism," whereby different castes were not only tied to land but also to distinct occupations with an overarching ideology of caste to maintain hierarchy among the exploited classes. They also argue that many of the most rebellious movements emerged from the class of 'untouchable field servants' (for instance, Mahars in Maharashtra). Patankar and Omvedt (1979) also make an important distinction between the 'agricultural labourers' of current times and the 'untouchable field servants' of Indian caste feudalism for two reasons, (i) The current agrarian system has the erstwhile exploited classes (particularly middle castes) becoming landlords themselves, and (ii) the agricultural labour class now also has proletarianised members from other castes. They emphasise that 'untouchable field servants' were just that: field servants drawn from untouchable castes (in this respect, also see Omvedt 1981). These relations of production in agriculture and village society also impeded capitalist development in industry with the emerging working class in India divided among caste lines (Patankar and Omvedt 1979: 413).

The historical evolution of the Indian agrarian system along with institutions such as caste produces a unique form of social and economic inequality which is exemplified by almost absolute landlessness among Dalits in the country. This is not the end of the story; rather landlessness among Dalits seeks to control their labour and their mobility, both physical and social.

Land in Ambedkarite Thought

In his analysis, Ambedkar understood the individual as always embedded in the social and hence, his remedy for the problem of social and economic evils was ensuring social endosmosis and free intermingling of different groups and castes of people. The caste system, according to Ambedkar, perpetuates itself through the corporate bondage of one class of people over another, i.e., “untouchables” over the Hindu village society. This is most commonly achieved through land monopoly by dominant caste groups in the village and not allowing the “untouchables” to hold or transact in landed property. In a system like this, Ambedkar was very clear that social and economic reforms must precede political reforms, otherwise the same exploitative structure would continue in the garb of the independent nation state. Ambedkar was also deeply aware of the social and cultural premium on landholding in Indian society along with the fact of differentiation within the farming class. In fact, he believed that the term *shetkari*(agriculturalist) was an absolute misnomer as there was no single class of farmers in the agrarian system of India.

Ambedkar was very critical of the dominant discourse of land and agrarian reforms in the country for he believed that creating peasant proprietors in land without providing them adequate resources was pointless. In any case, the land and agrarian reforms agenda would never address the issues faced by the landless labourers. His eventual solution to the agrarian problem was collectivization of agriculture where the state would lease out land to families without a distinction based on caste so that “there will be no landlord, no tenant and no landless labourer” (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 397).

A typical Indian village resembled a contest between the “touchables” and the “untouchables”, physically and socially separate from each other. The economic power of the “touchables” was the central reason why they could exercise so much control over the beings and lives of the “untouchables”, force them to live in a ghetto and keep them dependent upon the main Hindu village. The economic emancipation of the “untouchables” was imperative for improving their social status and one of the primary ways of doing that was provision of land to them. Since peasant proprietorship was a reality after Independence, he argued for the distribution of grazing and other cultivable waste land to Dalits. He even suggested separate villages for Dalits on such land so that they can interact with the caste Hindu society on a relatively equal footing.

Two specific features of the Ambedkarite (Dalit) land question stand out for our purposes here. One, the Dalit land question is a social and economic question and in its practice must achieve the independence of the Scheduled Castes from the state of corporate bondage, by achieving economic independence from the exploiting castes. The land question, thus understood, is a demand for social and economic freedom of a class from another class. Two, the land question, in the Ambedkarite sense, is posed in a rights framework. The Dalits, by virtue of being and understood as a minority in the making of the Indian nation, had certain rights over the natural resources and political power of the country. These rights must be given under the constitution and state building efforts.

Post-Independence Scenario

The post independence scenario is one of status quo and limited dynamism on the back of green revolution while strengthening the caste-feudal basis of the agrarian system. The land reforms programme was an utter failure in terms of destroying the basis of feudal landlordism or redistributing land to the landless, mostly Dalits. The result is that even today more than 63 per cent of Dalits are

absolutely landless in Maharashtra. On the other hand, Marathas continue to dominate Maharashtrian society in social, cultural and economic realms. The most recent period after the 1990s has witnessed some fragmentation and factionalisation of the Marathas along with the rise of the Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Dalit politics, though Marathas continue to identify themselves as the ruling class of the state, symbolically from the state capital to every village.

The Marathwada region suffers from an additional baggage of history, that is the Nizam rule. Owing to the *jagirdari* system enmeshed in a variety of land tenure systems prevalent in Marathwada, sub-infeudation and land alienation from the peasantry ruled the day. The agrarian system was characterized by land concentration in a few hands, mostly upper castes. Unfortunately, the post-independence land reforms programme proved to be a failure to either to break the stranglehold of landlords over social and political life in Marathwada or redistribute land to the landless. It was in this context that the early Dalit land movement emerged in the region. As pointed out earlier, Ambedkar had already argued for the distribution of cultivable waste land to Dalits. The command over cultivable waste land and grazing land was meant to secure a source of livelihood for the Dalits. Further, it will remove the “economic dependence” of Dalits as a class/group over caste Hindus in the village. Ambedkar also hoped that the vast mass of such wasteland and other government land can be used to start separate settlements for the members of the Scheduled Castes. Separate settlements, according to Ambedkar, would eventually lead to the freedom of the Scheduled Castes from caste Hindu tyranny and oppression. The last few years of Ambedkar’s life were dedicated to discovering a new politics that might transform the lives of the Scheduled Caste groups. In this period, he made clear and militant demands for the capture of government land of all types by Dalits. The land movement of the 1950-60s was politically oriented and drew its basic understanding of the Dalit land question from Ambedkar. The movement covered a large part of Maharashtra and was led by the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Republican Party of India (RPI), though, by the mid-1960s the land movement was over with factionalism taking control of RPI.

In the background of the grazing struggles, another movement took shape in the late 1970s and that was the demand for renaming of the Marathwada University as Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University. The mere demand led to an unending saga of violence and brutality against Dalits, particularly Mahars/neo-Buddhists, since many of them had captured grazing land in the earlier period and dared to challenge the local caste Hindu hegemony. In the 1980s, a new phase of the Dalit land movement started which took forward the vision of the early phase- incorporating the demands for land, water and livelihoods from all sections of the society but focusing on protecting the rights of the Dalit *gairandharks* (grazing landholders). Under the leadership of Prakash Ambedkar, Bhumiheen Haqq Sanrakshan Samiti (Landless Rights Protection Committee) and later Bharip Bahujan Mahasangh worked to bring together various ideological groups such as communists, socialists and Ambedkarites and also social groups such as Dalits, Adivasis and OBCs.

The Dalit land movement has always understood land not simply as an economic asset but a source of dignity and identity. However, the dominant sections of the village often deem “common” land as their own property and “common property” owing to caste and its associated divisions is essentially alien to Indian villages. One thing is clear and that is the state and prejudiced local bureaucracy has successfully transformed the problem of land into a problem of bureaucratic documentation through successive Government Resolutions (GRs), while avoiding the passage of a law. One of the most significant GRs was the one passed in the year 1991 which proposed to regularize grazing land occupied by Dalits before 14 April 1990. This led to a process of bureaucratization and formed one important reason why NGOs could gain entry into the land movement.

The two contemporary organizations active now provide a new way of understanding social movements, particularly Dalit non-political movements. Ray and Katzenstein (2005) propose the “dual politics” framework to understand contemporary social movements:

According to the “dual politics” theory, the common and most distinctive characteristic of social movements in India is that they always focused on the twofold objectives of “equality” and “identity” simultaneously. According to the authors, most of the Indian social movements aimed at (1) the correction of unequal or unfair politico-economic-social relations and (2) the formation or consolidation of collective (rather than individual in many cases) identities for specific castes, religions, classes or regions (Ray and Katzenstein 2005, as cited in Ishizaka and Funahashi 2013, p. 5).

In a modified framework of “dual politics”, we have tried to look beyond a residual approach to social movement activities and problematise the given categories of class/caste and equality/identity. The organizations exist and work in two extremes of a *sangathana* (people’s organization) and an NGO. This dichotomy while seemingly distinct in the speech of activists and leaders is highly blurred in the field. The older activists were still associated with the *sangathan* and provided legitimacy for the entire dual structure of *sangathan*-NGO. The newer NGO workers were professionals who worked for a pay but got their work done. It is no mean task that thousands of Dalits got regularized occupation of grazing land in a non-violent democratic manner in a region mired with violence against Dalits.

The NGOs and their activities were the result of two inter-related factors. First, the 1991 GR has provided a framework in which land occupation could be regularized. This framework was a typically NGO agenda since it required project orientation and documentation. The international and national NGOs jumped at the occasion. Secondly, there was a genuine disenchantment with the older movements since it achieved the 1991 GR but did not deliver *pattas*(ownership documentation) to Dalits. The new NGOs seemed proud of the fact that their focus was singularly on grazing land. Once the land problem was defined within the framework of 1991 GR, the NGO strategy was largely confined to documentation and application to the government. The demands of the movement shifted slightly from *grazing encroachment* to *grazing regularization*. However, the current state of the movement altogether betrays its biggest weakness, that movement was also a function of the funding to a large extent and has become largely non-existent after funds dried up.

Two different organizations under study, Jamin Adhikar Aandolan (JAA) and Lok Paryay Lok Samiti (LPLS), display different understandings of the Dalit land problem and the way forward for the movement. LPLS was originally inspired by socialist thought as well as Phule-Ambekarite perspective. Their approach, however, remains unique owing to a multi-caste social base that they have inherited from the earlier phases of the *sangathan*. Two things stand out: their long-term emphasis on bringing together women from all castes, including from the dominant castes; and their Lohiaite understanding of creating a *picchda*(backward) unity to democratically capture Gram Sabhas for land rights. The society is generally considered as an opportunity for mobilization and unity while the state is viewed with suspicion though state agencies have played a significant role in the so-called Vaijapur pattern.

The JAA model of a Dalit NGO is more Ambedkarite in its ideology and actions. It holds that Dalits cannot find redemption within Hindu caste society. State power is the only instrument that can, if at all, secularly intervene to bolster the condition of Dalits in a rebalance of power relations. On the other hand, LPLS is a coming together of a Phule-Ambedkarite and socialist understanding. Unfortunately, both of these models cannot resolve the main question of securing a land redistribution legislation in favour of the Dalits/landless lower castes. This is the bitter truth of contemporary Maharashtra society and politics, contextualised in a historical process of highly skewed land relations enabling unparalleled scale of Maratha domination.

4 Conclusions

In conclusion, the democratisation of social and economic life depends upon the resolution of the agrarian question. The agrarian question in India is present along with caste. Non-recognition of this

aspect will render all reforms hollow. Thus, the farmers' movement in Vidarbha and its seemingly singular focus on prices (as opposed to land) is actually a testimony to the hegemony of big farmers and agricultural capital over the flow of credit, resources and labour in the farm economy which bears itself most decisively on prices for farm produce. This is directly related to the profitability of small and marginal farm owners. On the other hand, the historically landless Dalit labour's movement for dignity and a livelihood, independent of caste bondage, has stamped its claim to land in the grazing commons of the village. In doing so, it exposes the lack of common access to commons and politicises the highly unequal basis of landownership in Indian agriculture. Thus, the issues of land, livelihoods, and social dignity have been consolidated into newer demands that go beyond the earlier dualities of class and caste.

Overall, the state of the Dalit land movement is uninspiring right now. Despite a series of GRs which have no legislative backing, a law on grazing or other forms of government waste land is not in place. This is despite six decades of Dalit activism which also reflects on the stranglehold of Marathas and other social groups over political and social power in the state. The older political movements have been inherited by some old and some other new *sangathans* which got transformed into NGOs in the 2000s because the nature of work was defined as such under the 1991 GR. Ideologically, there remained a difference in their approach to the state and the society but the grazing land struggle is passive now since funds have dried up. A number of interview participants spoke about the grazing land struggle and its future. A lot of them were hopeful and optimistic. They claimed that if advocacy with the state was done properly, then the *grazing* occupation and regularisation could still be completed. As far as the Dalit land question is concerned, its resolution is nowhere near. The political parties of all shades feared working towards *grazing* because they perceived it as a caste issue and not an economic issue. In particular, grazing was identified as a Dalit issue. And since many parties also believed that taking a pro-Dalit stand openly might lead to a reaction from the Marathas, they kept away from the *grazing* land issue. In the absence of the resolution of the Dalit land question, the real liberation of all Dalits from the state of corporate servitude is impossible. The Dalit sangathans and NGOs need a new push to organise a new round of the Dalit land movement.

New Extractivism, Peasantries and Social Dynamics: Critical Perspectives and Debates

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