

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### B R Ambedkar on Caste and Land Relations in India

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**Abstract:** Ambedkar identified the land monopoly of caste Hindus in village society as the material basis of the caste system. The land question for Dalits is concerned with human dignity, with freedom from bondage and caste-based exploitation in village society. Ambedkar was critical of mainstream land reforms discourse for its disregard of the interests of the mass of landless Dalits, and its focus on the creation of peasant proprietors, which, he argued, was counterproductive for the agricultural development of India. Ambedkar advocated the annihilation of caste, the liberation of peasants and workers through modernisation of the economy, and the distribution of cultivable land to Dalits. Ambedkar's was a modern approach to the agrarian problem in that it called for a complete break with existing and archaic institutional structures.

**Keywords:** Agrarian relations, Ambedkar, caste system, village society, democracy, land reforms, landless labour.

In this paper, I shall present B. R. Ambedkar's thoughts on land and agriculture and their relationship with class and caste in rural Indian society. While his contributions in the field of constitutional law, his struggles against the caste system and Hindu Code Bill, and his contribution to drafting the Constitution of India are well known, a systematic study of his views on the land question and rural economy has not been undertaken.

#### *CASTE, LAND, AND VILLAGE SOCIETY IN INDIA*

Ambedkar's was one of the early and pioneering attempts to draw a coherent connection between land and caste status, focusing in particular on the landlessness of Dalits, in India.<sup>1</sup> While Jotiba Phule, the nineteenth century anti-caste warrior

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<sup>1</sup> I have used the term Dalit to refer to the former "untouchable" castes of the Hindu social hierarchy. I have retained the terms "untouchables" and "Scheduled Castes" as they appear in Ambedkar's writings. The term Scheduled Caste is used in administration. The politically significant term Dalit (oppressed) was first used by Jotiba Phule.

and social thinker, was also deeply concerned about the agrarian and social situation in the countryside, his analysis did not concentrate as closely on agrarian relations as did the work of Ambedkar.<sup>2</sup> Further, most land reform programmes in the country, ranging from those of the mainstream Congress Party to those of sections of the Left, were centred on the call for “land to the tiller.” This slogan did not address the class of landless workers, whose condition was far worse than that of the landowning castes. Ambedkar’s perspective on land and caste relations in the Indian village was comprehensive and nuanced as it encompassed the phenomena of landlordism and peasant differentiation, along with the specific conditions of the landless Dalits.

### *Land Ownership: The Material Basis of Caste*

John Dewey, the American philosopher of education and Ambedkar’s teacher at Columbia University, greatly influenced Ambedkar’s thinking on the subject of the relationship between the individual and society. Like Dewey, Ambedkar believed that the individual is embedded in the social (Mukherjee 2009). “Social efficiency” (the term is Dewey’s), that is, a state where these socialised individuals develop freely, can be achieved by means of a democracy, that is, not merely a “form of government” but “associated living” (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 57). It is important in a democracy to break the “social isolation” of the oppressed classes through free choices in education, employment, and social interactions (*ibid.*). To cite an oft-quoted paragraph from Ambedkar’s paper *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (1916):

The atomistic conception of individuals in a Society so greatly popularised – I was about to say vulgarised – in political orations is the greatest humbug. To say that individuals make up society is trivial; society is always composed of classes. It may be an exaggeration to assert the theory of class-conflict, but the existence of definite classes in a society is a fact. Their basis may differ. They may be economic or intellectual or social, but an individual in a society is always a member of a class. This is a universal fact and early Hindu society could not have been an exception to this rule, and, as a matter of fact, we know it was not. If we bear this generalisation in mind, our study of the genesis of caste would be very much facilitated, for we have only to determine what was the class that first made itself into a caste, for class and caste, so to say, are next door neighbours, and it is only a span that separates the two. *A Caste is an Enclosed Class* (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 15) (emphasis in original)

The caste system is characterised by hegemony and exploitation. As Ambedkar points out, one single caste could never exist in isolation; the system always existed as *castes*. Hindu society functioned in such a way that every caste behaved like an “anti-social group,” the interests of each being exclusive, with “others” shut out from communication and sharing. Ambedkar made creative use of Dewey’s concept of *social endosmosis*.<sup>3</sup> Advance within Hindu society was not possible because of the

<sup>2</sup> On Phule, see Deshpande (2002).

<sup>3</sup> Mukherjee (2009) points out that the term was used by Dewey only once in Dewey’s own writings.

barriers to social endosmosis, which envisages exchange and fluid relationships between social groups. However, and this is pertinent to the sphere of economic activity and relations, Ambedkar's diagnosis in *The Annihilation of Caste* (1936) was the following:

Caste System is not merely division of labour. *It is also a division of labourers.* Civilised society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilised society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into water-tight compartments. (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 47, emphasis in original)

Ambedkar further asserted that the caste system was not only a division of labourers but also a *graded hierarchy* of labourers ascribed even before birth. The caste system operated through culture and religion in a largely agrarian and backward society, working to disenfranchise the lower castes and classes. In this way, the caste system prevented a free intermingling of social groups and classes (*ibid.*). This graded hierarchy involved complete separateness of the concerns of different caste groups and, in a larger sense, the separation of the poor and the oppressed from the ruling classes and dominant castes.

In his *Thoughts on Linguistic States* (1955), Ambedkar defines the caste system as displaying the following essential features:

(1) Castes are so distributed that in any given area there is one caste which is major and there are others which are small and are subservient to the major caste owing to their comparative smallness and their economic dependence upon the major caste which owns most of the land in the village. (2) The caste system is marked not merely by inequality but is affected by the system of graded inequality. All castes are not on a par. They are one above the other. There is a kind of ascending scale of hatred and a descending scale of contempt. (3) A caste has all the exclusiveness and pride which a nation has. It is therefore not improper to speak of [the] collection of castes as a collection of major and minor nations. (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 167)

Three points emerge. First, the caste system is characterised by the existence, in every region, of a major caste that is the dominant landholder and on which the people of other castes are dependent. Secondly, the caste system embodies different kinds of inequalities, going beyond the economic and extending to different forms of cultural and social inequality. Thirdly, castes within the caste system possess an exclusive and inward-looking quality that makes them resemble autonomous units, almost like nations. The first point here, which relates to a dominant caste and aspects of land monopoly, forms a recurrent theme in Ambedkar's writings.

### *The Land Question and the Dalit People*

Ambedkar's understanding of the land problem vis-à-vis Dalits has two main component parts. First, the Indian village, according to him, was constituted by two classes of people – the “Touchables” and the “Untouchables.” The latter existed in a

state of what has been called “corporate bondage,” since the “touchables” had complete monopoly over ownership of land and other economic resources.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, land ownership was understood as an aspect of dignity. We take the case of the demand for abolition of *Maharwatan*, a customary and hereditary land title awarded by medieval regimes to Mahars in return for their services as village servants. On August 3 and 4, 1928, Ambedkar presented a proposal in the Bombay Legislative Assembly to amend the Bombay Hereditary Offices Act, 1874 (BAWS, Vol. 2, p. 79). Ambedkar highlighted the problems of the holders of *Maharwatan*, who could be called for service any time of the day and whose entire families were treated as village servants by others in the village and by the Government. The Mahars were compensated in kind by the village society at the time of the harvest. Other hereditary village posts such as the Patils, Kulkarnis, and Mamlatdars were to be kept in good humour; any attempt by a Mahar to advance himself or his family, however, met with opposition from other castes and ultimately by a time-tested strategy of social boycott. Thus, even in this case where Scheduled Castes had operational control over land, they were unable to free themselves of dependence on the village (BAWS, Vol. 2, p. 79). Thus, *Maharwatan* was understood by Ambedkar as a “major aspect of Dalit exploitation” since it provided “false security” and effectively forced Dalits to remain integrated in Hindu village society (Omvedt 1994, p. 157).

Ambedkar recognised that in a largely agrarian society, the main source of earning was land, a resource that was not open to purchase by the Dalits. However, as has been pointed out earlier, the obstacles to Dalits owning land were beyond economic in nature. In *Untouchables or the Children of India's Ghetto*, published posthumously, Ambedkar commented on the obstacles in the way of landownership for Mahars:

In an agricultural country, agriculture can be the main source of living. But this source of earning a living is generally not open to the Untouchables. This is so for a variety of reasons. In the first place purchase of land is beyond their means. Secondly, even if an Untouchable has the money to purchase land he has no opportunity to do so. In most parts, the Hindus would resent an Untouchable coming forward to purchase land and thereby trying to become the equal of the Touchable class of Hindus. Such an act of daring on the part of an Untouchable would not only be frowned upon but might easily invite punishment. In some parts, they are disabled by law from purchasing land. For instance, in the Province of Punjab there is a law called the Land Alienation Act. This law specifies the communities which can purchase land and the Untouchables are excluded from the list. The result is that in most part the Untouchables are forced to be landless labourers. (BAWS, Vol. 5, p.23)

In his essay *Which is Worse? Slavery or Untouchability?* (1944), Ambedkar wrote that even slavery might have had some advantages over untouchability, since the slave was

<sup>4</sup> Ramachandran (1990), p. 7, citing Menon (1983).

considered valuable property and hence food, shelter, health, and basic wellbeing were taken care of by the owner (BAWS, Vol. 12, p. 758). In the case of untouchability, however, no such security of body and life existed for the Dalit. Dalits were left to die without village society accepting either responsibility or guilt.

Ambedkar believed that the overall agrarian power structure was against the welfare of Dalits and would continue to be so if not understood and countered effectively. More specifically, caste Hindus would never allow land to be held by Dalits lest Dalits, as a class, became economically independent.

An important instance of Ambedkar's formulation of the land question and its relationship with the emancipation of Dalits is his intervention in the discussion on *The Report of Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes for 1953*, which took place in Parliament on September 6, 1954. Ambedkar had a strong and consistent view of the relationship between land and dignity from as early as 1928. In his response to the Report, Ambedkar began by pointing out that the report did not faithfully record the uncountable cases of violence against Dalits. He then made some key observations about the report. The first observation was that the economic dependence of Dalits on the Hindus made it impossible for Dalits to defend themselves or bring criminal action against their tormentors.

Secondly, Ambedkar pointed out that in almost all cases of violence against Dalits, the police were hand in glove with the Hindus. He discussed the bleak educational and public service records and prospects of the Scheduled Castes caused by the discriminatory attitude of the government. He went on to say that, along with education and services, the economic emancipation of the Scheduled Castes was the most important means to improve their social status. And to improve the conditions of the Scheduled Castes, the government must provide them land. He said:

Unless and until doors are open to them where they can find gainful occupation, their economic emancipation is not going to take place. They are going to remain slaves, if not slaves, serfs of the land-owning classes in the villages. There can be no doubt on that point at all. Now, Sir, out of these gainful occupations I personally feel no doubt that the most important thing on which Government ought to concentrate is the giving of land to the Scheduled Castes. They must be settled on land so that they might obtain independent means of livelihood, cease to be afraid of anybody, walk with their heads erect and live fearlessly and courageously. (BAWS, Vol. 15, p. 913)

In his response to the report, Ambedkar also outlined the nature of land holding in India. He asserted that land was not simply a matter of economics but also of social status and hence, "a person holding land has a higher status than a person not holding land" (BAWS, Vol. 15, p. 913). Land ownership in the agrarian system in India was as much about dignity as it was about social and economic freedom.

### *On Small Landholdings, Zamindari, and Peasant Differentiation*

At a more general level, Ambedkar identified the vast number of smallholdings and the social differentiation within the peasantry as being at the root of the agrarian question in India. His interest in agriculture can be gauged from the fact that one of his early papers, *Small Holdings in India and their Remedies* (1918), dealt with the uneconomic nature of smallholdings in Indian agriculture. Ambedkar defined smallholding not merely in the sense of the size of holding but also in terms of the availability of other factors of production necessary for an optimal yield.

A small farm may be economic as well as a large farm; for, economic or uneconomic does not depend upon the size of land but upon the due proportion among all the factors including land. (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 468)

In this paper, Ambedkar clearly outlines his assessment of Indian agriculture. According to him, the agricultural sector in the country is characterised by very high levels of “idle labour.” In the absence of alternative forms of employment, this labour exerted enormous pressure on land and created a premium on landholding, however small the size of holding. The productivity of agriculture remained too poor to support any reasonable standard of life because of the scarcity of capital. Enlargement or consolidation of land holdings alone, therefore, would not benefit the sector. The transformation of the sector was possible only if there was enough capital and the simultaneous development of industries to absorb such labour from agriculture and reduce the pressure on land.

During the debate on the annual budget, in the Bombay Legislative Council debates on February 24, 1927, Ambedkar contrasted the levy of land revenue on every farmer, big, small, rich, or poor, with the principles of income tax. He argued that an individual who had earned no income was not asked to pay income tax; however, the same principle was not applied to land revenue (BAWS, Vol. 2, p. 3).

Ambedkar's dissertation at Columbia University was titled *Administration and Finance of the East India Company* (1915). In it, he presented an extensive and detailed critique of the land revenue systems established by the Company in different regions of India. Quoting R. C. Dutt and other sources, Ambedkar highlighted the unusually high rent and land tax extracted by the Company not only in the zamindari areas of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa but also in ryotwari areas in Madras. The largest contributor to the coffers of the Company, throughout its reign in India, was land revenue. Ambedkar also noted the extraordinary nature of everyday oppression, humiliation, and exploitation faced by peasants at the hands of government-appointed or hereditary officers or other intermediaries in the entire process of land revenue collection (BAWS, Vol. 6, pp. 5–50).

In *The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India: A Study in the Provincial Decentralisation of Imperial Finance* (1925), Ambedkar begins by questioning the

very basis of what he labelled “State Landlordism,” the principle through which the State justified its right to collect land revenue. The underlying principle was that land in India had always been “regarded as property owned by the State” (BAWS, Vol. 6, p. 73). For the 64-year period between 1792–93 and 1855–56, Ambedkar wrote, the average share of land revenue in total revenue in India was about 54.1 per cent, varying from 66.2 per cent to 31.7 per cent. The quantum and burden of land tax effectively took away all profits to be had from agriculture and closed the gates to any further advance in the system of agricultural production.

Land revenue and the way it was administered in different parts of the country in the colonial period exemplified the iniquitous nature of taxation systems in India. In some cases, such as zamindari, land revenue was fixed permanently, while in others it was revised periodically. Ambedkar also underlined a more fundamental source of inequity, that is, that land revenue was fixed on a unit of land irrespective of how much income it generated to the holder in a given year (BAWS, Vol. 6, pp. 230–1). Land revenue administration

... taxes the poor peasant with only one acre to cultivate and the landlord owing hundreds of acres at a *uniform* rate without realising that as the total incomes of the two must be vastly different this uniformity of taxation must produce a glaring inequity of treatment as between the rich and the poor. (BAWS, Vol. 6, p. 231, emphasis in original)

In a speech during the third session of the Kolaba District Peasants’ Conference on December 16, 1934, Ambedkar began by pointing out that the term *shetkari* (farmer) was a misnomer, since it included everyone from the landlord to the landless agricultural labourer. He also highlighted the injustice meted out to tenants-at-will by the *Khoti* landlords (BAWS, Vol. 17, Part 3, pp. 91–3). Ambedkar returned to this theme of differentiation within the peasantry during the debates of the Constituent Assembly. On September 3, 1949, in a response to queries about the welfare of farmers, Ambedkar emphasised that the term “agriculturalist” had no meaning since it included big landlords as well as small cultivators (BAWS, Vol. 13, p. 933).

In sum, Ambedkar was emphatic in his position against zamindari. He was sympathetic to the masses of the peasantry, even as he was aware of social differentiation within the class of peasants.

#### *THE DISCUSSION ON LAND REFORM: AMBEDKAR’S VIEW*

In order to distinguish Ambedkar’s position from the mainstream discourse on land reforms, it is instructive to look at the nature of the agrarian demands of the Congress during the anti-colonial struggle. In the early and mid-twentieth century, the consistent agitation by the Congress party for a permanent resolution of the problem of revenue demands, for instance, had little to offer to the actual tiller or the small peasant. The Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee set up by the Congress Party in 1948, that is, the Kumarappa Committee, gave a “muddled

message” on agrarian reforms (Jannuzi 1994). In the Congress position, it was not clear whether agrarian reforms simply meant *zamindari* abolition or the implementation of the longstanding promise of “land to the tiller” (*ibid.*)

Ambedkar believed that post-Independence discourse on land reforms had nothing for the people of the Scheduled Castes (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 408). In his response to *The Report of Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes for 1953*, presented on September 6, 1954, Ambedkar discussed ways in which land could be given to the Scheduled Castes. The first issue related to the availability of cultivable land in the country. Here he took the case of Uttar Pradesh, where the average size of landholdings was small, and every inch of cultivable land was occupied. The government had the power to take away land from those who owned it and give it to the Scheduled Castes, but to give Dalits land in circumstances where land itself was scarce was to deceive them. An alternative way was government-financed purchase of land by the Scheduled Castes. Now, since the land legislation as passed by the Indian government recognised the peasant as the proprietor of the land, it was difficult to ensure a ceiling limit on landholdings or give land to the Scheduled Castes. Since land also signified social power, no Hindu would allow a Scheduled Caste person to get hold of land through purchase. In an extraordinary speech, Ambedkar warned of “most evil” consequences if the government did not solve the land problem:

The fire is burning outside; it may easily come in and the Scheduled Castes may carry the banner and you and your Constitution will go under. Nothing will remain. (BAWS, Vol. 15, p. 914)

Despite his sympathy for the peasantry, Ambedkar did not agree with the mainstream view on land reforms. Indeed, he stood against the entire idea of creating peasant proprietorship in agriculture. Further, he was deeply concerned with the interests of the landless, mostly Dalits, who were often left out in the discussions around land reform.

During the debate on the Constitution (First Amendment) Bill that took place on May 10, 1951, Ambedkar strongly defended the insertion of Articles 31A and 31B, and the Ninth Schedule in the Constitution. These amendments protected the right of the state to implement land reforms and also make special provisions for the social and educational advancement of the backward classes. In the course of his speech, he elaborated upon his views on land reform policies as formulated in India at the time. He argued that since a majority of Indian farmers did not have the necessary resources, such as capital, livestock, seeds, and irrigation, it was a bad idea to “create peasant proprietors in this country” (BAWS, Vol. 15, pp. 354–5). He expressed his deep suspicion about the future of the agricultural and food economies in the country. Additionally, he argued that the current land reform laws only focused on the abolition of intermediaries, which, although a noble goal in itself, did not address the problems of about fifty million landless workers.



I propose that there are three component parts to Ambedkar's solution for the agricultural and land problems of India. The first is his focus on a revolution at the foundation of Indian society by means of the annihilation of caste. Secondly, his understanding was that the eventual liberation of the peasantry and landless agricultural workers lay in rapid industrialisation, urbanisation, and education. However, it was clear to him that this process was a complex one and that a large mass of small peasants and Dalit landless labourers would continue to be engaged in agriculture. The third component part followed from the others. Ambedkar recommended that agriculture be reorganised in the lines of a state industry, with separate villages for Dalits, and that cultivable land be distributed to Dalits. Ambedkar's was a modern approach to the agrarian question, in that it broke completely with existing and archaic institutional structures.

### *Annihilation of Caste*

In a chapter titled "A Plea to the Foreigner: Let Not Tyranny Have Freedom to Enslave" from *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* (1945), Ambedkar argued against the prevalent understanding of concepts such as nation, society, and country. Ambedkar distinguished between the "constitutional form of government" and "self-government." A government based on adult suffrage, in Ambedkar's opinion, did not necessarily ensure what Ambedkar called "self-government" (BAWS, Vol. 9, pp. 202–3). This is because, sociologically, a nation is constituted by, broadly speaking, two classes – the "governing class" and "servile classes." In India, Ambedkar identified the governing class to be led by Brahmins in alliance with the Banias. The governing class in a society is able to capture power despite universal suffrage because of its historical and ideological dominance over the servile classes. Ambedkar argued that the governing classes in India were concerned only with their own selfish interests and that they held the servile classes in deep contempt. Ambedkar believed that, after the withdrawal of the British, the governing classes would not even work towards basic "social amelioration," leave alone the destruction of Brahmanism, the thought system on which their power was based (BAWS, Vol. 9, p. 212).

Ambedkar's life-long struggle was against the governing classes, thus conceptualised, who, he believed, would use the freedom movement and self-rule to establish their own regime. The oppressed classes and castes were kept unfree through confinement in conditions of bondage and indignity, and alienation from education, representation in bureaucracy, and social interaction.

A recurrent theme in later writings is the relationship between social reform and political self-government in India. In the article titled *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah* (1943), Ambedkar said that he regarded ". . . social Reform [as] more fundamental

than political reform” (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 226). In *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), Ambedkar distinguished between two views of social reform. The first, held by the Social Reform Party, an early constituent of the Congress Party, referred to the reform of the Hindu family, with respect to widow remarriage, child marriage, and so on. The second view, to which he subscribed, was of a thorough “reorganisation and reconstruction of the Hindu society . . . [and] abolition of the Caste System” (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 41). Despite the fact that the Social Reform Party weakened and, in the course of time, became defunct, Ambedkar maintained that

political reform did in fact gain precedence over social reform. But the argument has this much value if not more. It explains why social reformers lost the battle. It also helps us to understand how limited was the victory which the Political Reform Party obtained over the Social Reform Party and that the view that social reform need not precede political reform is a view which may stand only when by social reform is meant the reform of the family. That political reform cannot with impunity take precedence over social reform in the sense of reconstruction of society is a thesis which, I am sure, cannot be controverted. (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 42)

Ambedkar’s view was that political self-government had little meaning without social reform (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 42) and social reform meant the abolition of the caste system.

### *Education, Industrialisation, and Urbanisation*

Most contemporary accounts of Ambedkar’s views on rural society emphasise his call to Dalits to leave the villages and migrate to urban areas. An oft-cited passage in this regard is from a statement Ambedkar made during the first reading of the Draft Indian Constitution on November 4, 1948:

The love of the intellectual Indians for the village community is of course infinite if not pathetic . . . What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness, and communalism? (BAWS, Vol. 13, pp. 61–2)

This cynicism towards village society stemmed from his modern beliefs. As pointed out earlier, Ambedkar laid out his characterisation of Indian agriculture and its problems in one of his early papers, namely, *Small Holdings in India and their Remedies* (1918). In the same paper, his solution was quite straightforward: “strange though it may seem, industrialisation of India is the soundest remedy for the agricultural problems of India” (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 477). Later, in a debate on the budget in the Bombay Legislative Assembly on February 21, 1939, Ambedkar argued that agriculture could never be relied upon to enhance the standard of life of the people in India and anyone who was insistent upon destroying whatever little industry or urbanisation there existed was indeed an enemy of the people (BAWS, Vol. 3, p. 33). He, in fact, emphasised the need for urbanisation in these words:

I say this with full deliberation — that the salvation of this province and, if I may say so, the salvation of the whole of India lies in greater urbanisation: in reviving our towns, in

building our industries, in removing as much population as we possibly can from our villages to the towns. (BAWS, Vol. 2, p. 32)

In a situation where the large mass of the population was completely dependent on smallholdings and a few controlled a mammoth share of total cultivable land, Ambedkar suggested industrialisation as a way to reduce the social and cultural premium on land.

The arguments in support of industrialisation and urbanisation were supported by Ambedkar's deep understanding of the "social" role of education.<sup>5</sup> Following Dewey, Ambedkar believed that modern education provided a space in which different social groups could share experiences, could end the social isolation of the oppressed, and facilitate social endosmosis.<sup>6</sup>

### *Reforms and Reorganisation in the Agricultural Sector*

Ambedkar was aware that while rapid industrialisation of India was desirable, agriculture would still require massive transformation. In the election manifesto of the Scheduled Caste Federation, released on October 3, 1951, this point was made clearly:

While the rapid industrialisation of the country is very essential in the opinion of the Federation, agriculture is bound to remain the foundation of India's economy. Any scheme of increased production which does not take into account the re-construction of Indian agriculture is doomed to disappointment. (BAWS, Vol 17, Part 1, p. 392)

Ambedkar's resolution of the land problem in India, as mentioned, had three further components. At the most ambitious, programmatic level, he proposed the nationalisation of land and collectivisation of agriculture, which was to be a state-run industry. Secondly, he proposed separate settlements for Dalits that would give independence to them from Hindu village society. Thirdly, he demanded that government wasteland, forest, and pasture be distributed to landless Dalits.

### *Nationalisation of Land and Collectivisation of Agriculture*

In an intervention on the Constitution (First Amendment) Bill on May 10, 1951, Ambedkar said:

<sup>5</sup> With the arrival of the British, a new process of educating the natives began that did not discriminate between castes. Colonial modernity appeared as an opportunity for the oppressed social groups within Indian society such as peasants, tribes and Dalits. The outlook and reactions towards colonial modernity during the nineteenth century can be divided under two broad categories: elite and subaltern. The elite espoused the ideology of national revolution whereas the oppressed social groups stood behind the project of social revolution (Omvedt 1971). It is to be noted here that Jotiba Phule was also the first advocate of mass education in India. In his representation to the Hunter Commission (1882) on education dated October 19, 1882, he demanded that primary education be made compulsory for all.

<sup>6</sup> See his *Annihilation of Caste* in BAWS, Vol. 1, pp. 23–98.

But when you make these laws, making the tiller of the soil the owner of it, what provision can you make for the welfare of these landless labourers? They will remain where they are – high and dry – notwithstanding the abolition of the *zamindars*. I am, therefore, not very happy at what is being done. (BAWS, Vol. 15, p. 355)

Ambedkar was very critical of an understanding of land reforms that went no further than zamindari abolition. He advocated that the government take over all agricultural land and lease out land for cultivation to peasants on permanent leases. Going further, in *States and Minorities: What are Their Rights and How to Secure Them in the Constitution of Free India* (1947), Ambedkar argued for agriculture to be declared a state industry and for the state to nationalise all land. The owners of the land were to be given compensation in the form of debentures that would be transferable and inheritable (where the land itself, however, could not be reclaimed). The proposal included collectivisation of agriculture and leasing land to families and groups of families without distinction based on caste so that “there will be no landlord, no tenant and no landless labourer” (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 397). Later, in the text of *States and Minorities*, he pointed out the limitations of the prevailing land reforms discourse and argued for collectivisation of agriculture:

Consolidation of Holdings and Tenancy Legislation are worse than useless. They cannot bring about prosperity in agriculture. Neither Consolidation nor Tenancy Legislation can be of any help to the 60 millions of Untouchables who are just landless labourers. Neither Consolidation nor Tenancy Legislation can solve their problem. Only collective farms on the lines set out in the proposal can help them. There is no expropriation of the interests concerned. Consequently, there ought to be no objection to the proposal on that account. (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 408)

In this scheme, the state was made responsible for the supply of the requirements of the collective farm. In a striking statement on the reorganisation of agriculture, Ambedkar said:

I am of (the) opinion that peasant proprietorship in this country is going to bring about complete ruination of the country. What we want is – although I am not a Communist – the Russian system of collective farming. That is the only way by which we can solve our agricultural problem. (BAWS, Vol. 15, p. 960)

In an interview with the novelist and writer Mulk Raj Anand in May 1950, Ambedkar argued that the abolition of private property was possible if the “outcastes” (in which he included Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims), who far outnumbered the caste Hindus, fought along with socialists against it. When asked about whether “state capitalism” would harm liberty, he pointed out that liberty in contemporary society was mostly the liberty of the landlord to increase rents and the capitalist to not pay wages. He went on to call capitalism the “dictatorship of the private employer” (BAWS, Vol. 17, part 1, p. 381).

### *Separate Villages*

Ambedkar proposed the establishment of a Settlement Commission that would provide separate villages for the Scheduled Castes (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 403). This demand was voiced by Ambedkar as early as 1926 (Zelliot 2013, pp. 186–7). In demanding separate settlements for the Dalits, Ambedkar noted that while the Hindus lived in the village, the Dalits were forced to live in ghettos outside the village. Further, he argued that the village system of India was such that the Dalits, mostly landless labourers, were completely dependent on the Hindus for employment on land that the latter owned and controlled. Their wages were depressed for Hindus to profit and they had “no way of earning a living which is open to the Untouchables so long as they live in a Ghetto as a dependent part of the Hindu village” (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 426). As pointed out earlier, Ambedkar called this a relationship of “economic dependence” and went on to analyse its social and cultural implications and many inhuman practices Dalits had to undergo. Village society in India was

a contest between the Hindus who are economically and socially strong and the Untouchables who are economically poor and numerically small. That the Hindus most often succeed in suppressing the Untouchables is due to many causes . . . But the chief weapon in the armoury of the Hindus is economic power which they possess over the poor Untouchables living in the village. (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 426)

In the second session of Ratnagiri District Bahishkrit Parishad (1931), Ambedkar suggested migration to “some better and distant lands” if Dalits wanted to get rid of the oppression in the villages. He even suggested Sindh and Indore as destinations where he would try to secure cultivable land for the Dalits (BAWS, Vol. 17, Part 3, p. 128). Ambedkar was very sensitive to the multifaceted nature of the dependence of Dalits on the Hindus, a dependence further “legitimised” through religion. The demand for separate villages for the Scheduled Castes to be settled on the cultivable wasteland was reiterated in Ambedkar’s memorandum to the Cabinet Mission on April 5, 1946 (*ibid.*, Part 2, pp. 171–86).

In a news report published in the *Times of India* on April 23, 1946, Ambedkar is reported to have made a public statement demanding separate villages for the Scheduled Castes. He argued that, in the prevailing village system, the members of the Scheduled Castes were treated as slaves because of the economic dependence on the village. He went on to make an important point in support of the separate settlements, saying that since the village is a social unit and not an economic one, such separate villages for Scheduled Castes would surely survive. The produce from the separate villages would be bought by everyone, which was not the case in the prevailing system where the main Hindu village was the only buyer of the products of the Scheduled Castes and a social and economic boycott by the caste Hindus could cause starvation for the people of the Scheduled Castes (*ibid.*, Part 1, p. 351). In a meeting of the All India Working Committee of the Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF) held on August 21, 1955, a resolution was passed urging the Planning Commission to “reserve all

cultivable waste-land, to make barren land cultivable, and let colonies of Untouchables settled on such land” (*ibid.*, Part 1, p. 441).

The document titled *States and Minorities* was submitted by the Scheduled Caste Federation to the Sub-Committee on Fundamental Rights of the Constituent Assembly. The document reflected the demand, made by Ambedkar and the SCF, for agrarian reforms that focused on problems of the Scheduled Castes. The document had a number of important suggestions, for instance, separate electorates for the Scheduled Castes and establishment of a Settlement Commissioner to create separate settlements for Scheduled Castes. Ambedkar argued that all government land and other reclaimed land be given to the Settlement Commissioner for this purpose. However, the SCF fared very badly in the elections held in 1945–46 and its performance adversely affected its bargaining power (Zelliot 2013; Bandyopadhyay 2000). Perhaps for this reason, the Constituent Assembly accepted a few demands regarding affirmative action, but not the demands regarding land distribution, separate electorates, and separate settlements for Dalits.

### *Immediate Distribution of Unutilised Land*

In his response to *The Report of Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes for 1953*, submitted on September 6, 1954, Ambedkar asserted that the creation of peasant proprietorship was the “greatest folly” committed by the Government (BAWS, Vol. 15, p. 913). Given the situation as it was, he made certain important suggestions. According to the Planning Commission, there were about 98 million acres of “cultivable waste” land available in the country. Ambedkar recommended that the government, through an Amendment to the Constitution, put the cultivation of such wasteland in the list of Central subjects. He also suggested the levying of salt tax, which, according to him, was a very minor tax, to raise funds to settle the Scheduled Castes on the available wasteland. The same demand was put forward in the election manifesto of the SCF in October 1954 (BAWS, Vol. 17, pp. 386–403). In the discussion on the Untouchability Offences Bill, 1954, that took place on September 16, 1954, Ambedkar again spoke of the appalling conditions of the Scheduled Castes in the countryside, where landholding zamindars, through perfectly legal means, prevented the members of the Scheduled Castes from purchasing, occupying or enhancing their landholdings.

The case in point was the Punjab Land Alienation Act, 1900, which prevented people of the Scheduled Castes from buying land because they were not classified as an “agriculturalist” caste. In Punjab, he said, there were other customary laws such as *shamilat*, which allowed only hereditary landholding castes or zamindars to use land held in common by the village. The working *kaminas* could not get a share of the common land, nor could they build pucca houses on land on which they lived lest some zamindar throw them out. During the discussions on the Constitution (Fourth Amendment) Bill, 1954, on March 19, 1955, Ambedkar revealed the deep

divisions within the Congress Party with respect to Article 31 (right to property) at the time its inclusion in the draft Constitution of India was being debated. He castigated the sentiment behind the article and went on to say that “Article 31, in my judgment, is a very ugly thing, something which I do not like to look at” (BAWS, Vol. 15, p. 948).

The redistribution of cultivable wasteland, government land, forest land, and pasture for Dalits, in this scheme, would achieve two inter-related outcomes: the landholding would provide a source of livelihood and reasonable income to the Dalits in village society, and the ownership of land would eventually lead to the economic independence of Dalits from village society. Ambedkar also hoped that the vast extent of such wasteland could be used to start separate settlements for people of the Scheduled Castes.

The demand for public or common land to be distributed to Dalits was also related to Ambedkar’s project of nation-building, which was distinct from that of the Congress Party. The Dalits, according to Ambedkar, were, along with Hindus and Muslims, party to the construction of the Indian nation. The real needs of nation-building and modern constitutional morality demanded that minorities be given rights and constitutional guarantees. In Ambedkar’s writings, therefore, the demand for the distribution of government wasteland, pasture (*gairan*) or forest land to Dalits was transformed from being a demand for medieval “grants” or a demand to “uplift” Dalit society; the demand derived from the altogether modern vocabulary of constitutional and political rights (Omvedt 1994, p. 132).<sup>7</sup>

#### *AMBEDKAR’S POSITION ON LAND STRUGGLES OF HIS TIME*

As pointed out earlier, Ambedkar understood land holding as being more than just an economic phenomenon in India. Land was a social and political asset and its ownership was linked with social dignity. In this respect, Ambedkar tirelessly worked to reconceive the relationship between land, the tiller, and the landless. From the very beginning, he put the force of his opinion and support behind the agrarian and land struggles of his times.

#### *Struggles Against Khoti Landlordism and Maharwatan*

During the discussion on the First Amendment to the Constitution of India, Ambedkar as Law Minister defended the right of the state to take over land from *zamindars* irrespective of their objections regarding violation of their fundamental rights or inadequate compensation. This was a crucial bill, and allowed governments to go ahead with land reforms, particularly the implementation of those relating to the abolition of intermediaries.

<sup>7</sup> Grazing land in Marathi. *Gairan* movement in the Marathwada region was initiated by Ambedkar himself in 1953.

On September 17, 1937, Ambedkar also introduced a bill in the Bombay Legislative Council to abolish the *Khoti* tenure system prevalent in the Konkan region. The bill was intended to get ownership rights for tenants (Suradkar 2017). Ambedkar's Independent Labour Party (ILP), founded in 1936, had included the protection of tenants from the *Khoti* system in its programme (BAWS, Vol. 17, part 2, p. 416).

One of Ambedkar's early legislative interventions in the Bombay Legislative Council was on the abolition of *Maharwatan*. In the Kolaba District Depressed Classes Conference held at Mahad on March 19 and 20, 1927, Ambedkar asked Mahars to abandon their *watan* lands and seek forest land for agriculture (BAWS, Vol. 17, p. 5). Ambedkar argued indefatigably for the Mahars to be given the choice to withdraw from the traditional social arrangement. There were many struggles against *vethbegari* (bonded labour) going on in different States in India at that time. Ambedkar's early struggles against *khoti* landlordism in Konkan and for the abolition of the *Maharwatan* system have been well documented in Omvedt (1994) and Keer (2009). What is less known is the Dalit land movement in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra, which was led and initiated by Ambedkar himself but took off only after his death.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Gairan Movement*

The first political party formed by Ambedkar in 1936, the ILP, was avowedly a socialist party. It did not succeed in its aims because of a combination of historical factors. The second political organisation formed by him, the Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF), formed in 1942, sought to take a more cooperative stance after Independence. It failed, however, to win elections over more than a decade (Zelliot 2013). Ambedkar then established the Republican Party of India (RPI) in 1956.

According to Zelliot (2013), two demands made by Ambedkar between 1942 and 1956 stand out. The first demand was actually made as early as in 1926, but was restated more forcefully in the 1940s, especially in *States and Minorities* (1947). It concerned separate villages for the Scheduled Castes (pp. 186–7). The second demand was access to public land, initially in the Nashik-Ahmadnagar area and later, and more powerfully, in Marathwada.

Until the early 1950s, many Marathwada Dalits cultivated government wasteland. After the Congress government came to power, however, the land was taken away from the Dalit farmers before the crop was harvested (this event occurred in 1952 or 1953). In response to this injustice, a satyagraha was organised in Aurangabad district in the Marathwada region. The protest was triggered by a speech by Ambedkar at a meeting of the Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF) on August 9, 1953. In the speech, he asked the people of the Scheduled Castes to be strong and not rely on requests, applications, and other constitutional means alone. If the Government

<sup>8</sup> See for details, Kumar (2018).



took back land farmed by the Scheduled Castes, his followers were to occupy government or cultivable wasteland (Rasal 2011, pp. 24–5). More than 1,700 people were arrested in Aurangabad. On November 6, 1953, Ambedkar wrote a hard-hitting letter to B G Bindu, the Minister concerned. Ambedkar said that the government was prosecuting starving people asking for bread (BAWS, Vol. 17, Part 1, pp. 426–7). In response to news reports that the satyagraha was not backed by him, Ambedkar clarified that it was fully authorised by him and that the SCF would organise an “all-India Satyagraha against the central government when our patience is exhausted” (BAWS, Vol. 17, Part 3, pp. 498–9).<sup>9</sup>

One of the most direct statements by Ambedkar on the issue of land for Scheduled Castes was made on March 18, 1956 in a public meeting organised by the SCF at the Ramlila Maidan, Agra, Uttar Pradesh. In this meeting, attended by over 200,000 people, Ambedkar asked his followers to occupy government wasteland. In the event of someone objecting to their occupation, he asked them to respond thus: “We will not leave the land, though we are willing to pay the appropriate revenue to the government” (Rasal 2011, p. 25). Ambedkar also promised the gathering that, once his health improved, he himself would lead the movement of the Scheduled Castes to claim government wasteland (*ibid.*). In this way, it is clear that in the early 1950s, Ambedkar supported militant struggle as a means for the resolution of the land question for Dalits in India.

Gail Omvedt (1994) observes that the Dalit land movement was one of the consequences of the joint struggle waged under the banner of the *Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti* (united Maharashtra committee), and in particular by the Republican Party of India (RPI) and Communist Party of India (CPI). The *Samiti* demanded a linguistic State that included the Marathi-speaking regions of Bombay province. Dadasaheb Gaikwad (RPI) and Nana Patil (CPI), two pioneers of the movement in Marathwada for establishing the rights of Dalits and Adivasis over public land, came from the *Samiti* and shaped a united left front as envisaged by Ambedkar (Omvedt 1994, p. 257–8). In 1959, after Ambedkar’s death, another land satyagraha was organised in Nashik and Ahmadnagar districts. There were 300,000 participants in a land satyagraha organised in Delhi around October 1964 (Zelliot 2013, pp. 200–1). The struggle in Marathwada continued in different forms through the 2000s.

In the *gairan* movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the largely Dalit participants raised a slogan that went beyond “land to the tiller”: “*kasel tyachi jamin, naseel tyache kaay?*” (“Land to the tiller, but what about landless labour?”). The answer was to take over and occupy common, waste, and forest land by Dalits across the region.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This also refutes the assertion made by Zelliot (2013) that Ambedkar himself was not directly involved in the earliest land satyagraha organised in 1953 (p. 200).

<sup>10</sup> I have dealt with the evolution of the *gairan* movement, which was inspired by Ambedkar’s thinking on land, in detail elsewhere (Kumar 2018).

## CONCLUSIONS

Some broad themes from B R Ambedkar's writings on land, agriculture, and rural society in India have been identified in this article. The first was his concern about the state of agriculture in the country. In a variety of ways, he articulates the core problem: that the real reason for the poverty of the masses in India is their dependence on agriculture. He saw industrialisation as the way forward. Industrialisation would reduce population pressure on agriculture and provide alternative occupations to tenants and landless workers. Secondly, Ambedkar was keenly aware of the destruction and misery caused by colonial land revenue policy in India. At the same time, he emphasised the casteist nature of the pre-colonial political and legal system, driven as it was by the Hindu social order. Thirdly, he described "economic dependence" as being at the core of the unequal and exploitative relationship between the "Touchable Hindu village" and the "Untouchable ghetto" outside the village. Caste Hindus tried their best to prevent the economic emancipation of the Scheduled Castes because the slavish conditions in which the latter lived and worked were essential for the perpetuation of the village social and economic order.

To overcome oppression at the hands of the caste Hindus, Ambedkar had a plan for the future that involved redistributing cultivable wasteland available in the country among the Scheduled Castes. This plan also included the creation of separate villages for the people of Scheduled Castes. Ambedkar did not trust land reform that solidified peasant proprietorship in land. He suggested the nationalisation of land and collectivisation of agriculture under the auspices of the state. Only such a policy, together with industrialisation and modernisation, he said, could break the ties of dependence and oppression between the people of the Scheduled Castes and caste Hindus.

Two important and more general points bear emphasis. First, freedom was possible only when the corporate unfreedom of Dalits in rural society was brought to an end by, among other things, breaking the land monopoly of caste Hindus. In this sense, the solution to the land question involved more than just providing land and establishing land ownership for every peasant (or, for that matter, landless worker). It had to involve the freedom of the people of the Scheduled Castes from corporate bondage, and the achievement of collective economic liberation from the exploiting castes. Embedded in the land question, thus, was the demand for social and economic freedom.

Secondly, the Dalit land movement understands land holding as a means to achieve dignity and freedom in village social life. The caste system prevented Dalit land ownership. Even in the case of *Maharwatan*, the grant of land was actually an expression of feudal bondage in which Dalits were tied to servitude, that is, to certain menial tasks assigned to the most oppressed and exploited sections of rural

society. The solution to the land question thus had to involve the assertion of social dignity.

In Ambedkar's worldview, the land question for Dalits is a component part of the struggle to annihilate caste, which, in turn, is essential to establish democracy in India.

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#### GLOSSARY

*gairan* (Marathi): grazing land or pasture. It is often understood to be a common or public resource in the villages of Maharashtra.

*kamina*: manual worker, worker to whom tasks considered menial were assigned. Kaminas were mostly Dalit landless agricultural workers. Kaminas, earlier by custom and later even by law, were not allowed to hold or buy land in the village. In this way, they were dependent on zamindars.

*khoti*: a land tenure system established by the British Raj in the coastal Konkan region of Maharashtra. The exploitative nature of the system and the hereditary landlords who also acted as revenue collectors, called Khots, sparked protest among tenants and landless workers in the region in the 1930s.

*maharwatan*: rent-free land grant allotted to "untouchable" Mahars in exchange for compulsory services to the village.

*patil*: hereditary office of village chief, generally occupied by a member of the Maratha caste.

*shamilat*: common or public land in colonial Punjab.

*shetkari*: farmer or cultivator.

*vethbegari*: custom of unpaid, forced labour generally imposed on the lower castes, particularly Dalits, in military, civil and private spheres of work.

*watan*: hereditary land title gifted to various social groups, generally belonging to middle and upper castes, by feudal regimes in recognition of specific services. In the state of Maharashtra, these included Patil, Kulkarni, Deshmukh, Deshpande.

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