



## Research Article

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**Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar and His Notions on Agrarian Issues: Old solutions to Modern Problems**Satyaki Paul<sup>1</sup>, Prokash Kumar Palit<sup>2</sup>, & Sabatini Chatterjee\*<sup>3</sup><sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, University of Calcutta, Kolkata, West Bengal, India<sup>2</sup>Faculty, Bangabasi Evening College, Kolkata, West Bengal<sup>3</sup>Junior Research Fellow, Anthropological Survey of India, Andaman & Nicobar Regional Centre (A&NRC), Government of India**Article History**

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**Abstract:** Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar is considered to be the Father of Modern India. He is well known for his anti-caste stance to overthrow casteism in India via his role as a traditional reformer. Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar sought state socialism which would enable education, insurance, industries and land to be nationalised. Herein the state will devolve lands to villagers without any form of discrimination which will ultimately lead to an egalitarian form of collective farming. Operation Barga can serve as an ode to Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar's vision, but the current forceful land grabbing has initiated a counter-narrative of marginalisation enforced by the state's hegemonic forces. In the early 2000s large tracts of land were acquired in various locations of West Bengal by the then-Left government such as Singur, Nandigram and Salboni for the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs). Such forms of forceful land grabbing have resulted in the socio-economic disenfranchisement of farmers including the loss of livelihood and food security. In this paper, we would delve into the issues of land acquisition with a special study of the case of Jindals and redress it through thoughts put forward by Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar. As Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar's systematic understanding of the land and caste relations is yet to be explored in social sciences.

**Keywords:** Dalit, Tribes, Marginalised, Dispossession, Land Alienation, Land Reforms.

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**INTRODUCTION**

In this research paper, we would like to galvanise the primary data collected during the field in five villages of Salboni Block, West Bengal with Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar's vision on land alienation and its association with casteism in society. Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar has sides to his characters such as he is a social activist, historian, prolific writer and even a traditional reformer i.e., reformed ancient traditions to uplift Dalits. But his systematic thoughts on the redressal of land-related issues are somewhat less discussed in the field of social sciences. There is a cogent relationship between land and caste with Dr Ambedkar differentiating between the land-owning and landless individuals across India (Kumar, 2020). The upper castes are usually seen as dominant landowners on which lower castes are usually dependent i.e., even for basic economic resources (see Srinivas, 1978). This results in a vicious cycle of graded inequality which is perpetuated by various notions of purity and pollution (Omvedt, 2017). Thus, if the domination of land-based resources collapses then automatically the annihilation of caste will take place gradually. This will ensure socio-economic liberty amongst the hitherto bonded individuals (ibid, 2017). Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar gave an all-encompassing view on the issue of possession of land, farmworker variation along with explicit conditions of marginalised classes (Kumar, 2020).

These are to be discussed in due course of the paper along with Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar's worldview to annihilate caste through addressing the land issues which itself would aid India in achieving a country valuing equitable thoughts. Furthermore, our recent fieldwork in the five villages namely Ramraidih, Balibasa, Ashnasuli, Notundihi and Lalbandh of Salboni block of Medinipur Sadar district of West Bengal provides the vivid enactment of the discriminatory government notions at action even after 75 years of Independence. These villages are dispossessed from neighbouring forest lands to build the world's largest Jindal steel plant (Jindal Steel Works [JSW]) in the region. However, the plan was abandoned and its place a cement plant was constructed in 2016. This cement plant is much smaller than the proposed steel plant factoring in the amount of dispossession of land which was borne by the localites. In this context, the Ambedkarite purview on such issues will act as an already available synthesis at play in the region. The similarity observed in the ground reality with Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar's viewpoint will act as the central crux of this particular research paper.

**METHODOLOGY**

This research paper contains an element of both primary and secondary data analysis from qualitative perspectives. The secondary analysis was

drawn from relevant articles, books, journals and online websites for topics related to Ambedkarite views on land alienation, proposals for land reforms, reimbursement of lands to the landless and so on. And, the case study on Jindals is added to this particular research paper from our fieldwork which took place intermittently from 2015-2022 at the five villages of Salboni Block, West Medinipur, West Bengal.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### Babasaheb on Land Revenue and its Reforms

Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar was significantly influenced by the thoughts of John Dewey of Columbia University (Omvedt, 2017). This enabled Babasaheb to take up the idea that the individual is entrenched in the social setting (Mukherjee, 2009). Social efficiency can be achieved by means of co-existing which is significant to democracy, and can be only achieved through eliminating social isolation faced by the broken men. In his work “Administration and Finance of the East India Company (1915)”, he critiqued the land revenue system in the regions of the then Bengal, Bihar and Odisha along with regions of Madras (Ambedkar & Rodrigues, 2002). In another work “The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India: A Study in the Provincial Decentralisation of Imperial Finance (1925)”, Babasaheb coined the notion of “State Landlordism” wherein the nation-state has the right to collect tax and the land is regarded as a government property (ibid, 2002). In pre-independence times, during a speech in 1934 at Kolaba District Peasants Conference Babasaheb tried to delineate “Shetkari (peasant)” as a misleading term, as because it signified both landlord and even landless individuals. The anti-Khoti movement was one such movement. The Britishers ruthlessly collected revenues by using middlemen (khots) from the farmers (Bharti, 2017). The khots often dispossessed peasants from their land. This was abolished in sometime around 1950s. Nonetheless, this aided in diminishing the caste barriers at the grass root level. Thereby reinforcing equality and unity which further aligned anti-caste discourse with class politics. In the constituent assembly, Babasaheb continued his struggle against accurately defining peasants/farmers. On September 3, 1949, in an answer to enquiries about the welfare of farmers, Babasaheb observed that agriculturalist is different because it includes landlords along with landless individuals (Ambedkar, 1979).

In post-independence times, at the time of the 1<sup>st</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bill, 1951 Babasaheb made robust points for including Article 31A and Article 31B through IX<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Indian Constitution (Bharti, 2017). Babasaheb was the then Law Minister. Per him, these articles were there as a fundamental right to protect farmer’s rights on the land through land reforms. He was sternly against the proprietorship of the peasant economy in our country and hoped that these articles would aid the marginalised farmers inhabiting the rural regions. However, these

two articles were shifted from fundamental to Article 300A as a constitutional right under 44<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 1978. Furthermore, Babasaheb as an answer to “The Report of Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes for 1953”, professed numerous ways to disburse unutilised lands to the landless farmers across India (Ambedkar, 1979). Babasaheb referred to an instance in Uttar Pradesh wherein farmers are usually small landholders. And, if the government of the day grabbed land and disbursed it to the farmers then it would create social disparity. So, the government of the day could finance marginalised individuals to buy land from landlords. But as per the land legislation, peasants were the proprietor of lands and it was difficult to formulate a land ceiling or hand out land to marginalised individuals. As because dominant upper castes held land titles, so disbursing it to marginalised individuals would be a prohibited act. They would fear that they might lose their social status through such an exercise. All these factors made Babasaheb a staunch critic of the then-prevailing law on Land Ceilings. Furthermore, he was empathetically disturbed by the welfare of the landless, generally, Dalits, who were often omitted in the deliberations concerning issues of land reform (Omvedt, 2017). In due course, the then Government of India announced a land ceiling law to provide a rationale for the dispersal of unutilised land among marginal farmers; further excess land available due to land ceiling implementation was dispersed amongst the marginalised groups of the Indian society; which was highlighted by Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar and adopted by the Government of India.

### Case Study on land acquisition for Jindals at Salboni Block, West Bengal

The lands which Jindals acquired through the help of the then-Left government were mostly used for monocropping in the region. This is considering the land use and land cover wherein 9% of the land was only barren, industrially built-up land was (1%), farming land (40%) with a monocropping pattern of 30%, forest land at around 37%, orchard 3%, eucalyptus forest 4%, water body at around 1%, road and network at around 4% and settlement of around 3%. Food security is an important aspect which has taken the largest toll considering the loss of farming lands.

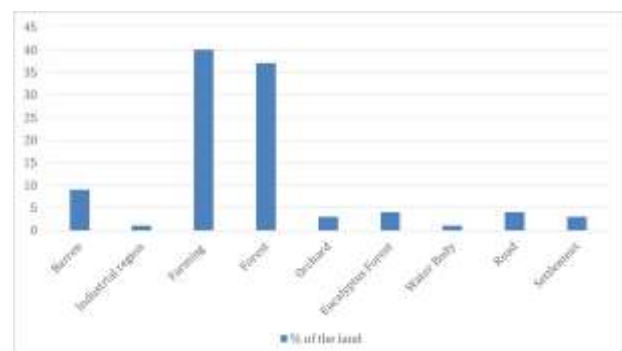
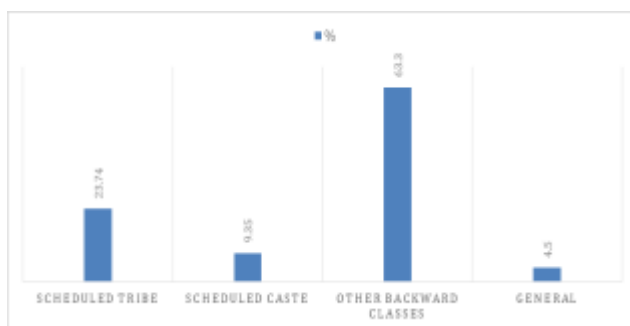


Figure 1: Current Land Use and Land Cover of the Region

The data on the fertility of the land was deliberately left out by the then regime to justify their land grabbing for industrialisation. Herein the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) status provided to Jindals by the then-Left government was done by keeping the land losers in dark. In this context, the notion of the dispossessed is connected to Harvey's emphasis on dispossession (Das, 2017). The dispossessed are divided into two categories: (a) those who lose their property as a result of the labour process, and (b) those who are being cast out of their property itself (including in means of production and subsistence). In concern of the second cohort of the dispossessed, his group is a cross-class category in that it consists of a class i.e., farmers and other small-scale producers; and (for example, savings, homes, jobs, etc.). Harvey (2009) contends that the loss of peasants' land is a kind of accumulation process because they result from governmental policies. In 2016, after seven years of dispute in the Salboni region, a 2.4 million tonne cement unit was set up by the Jindals, in contrast to the proposed 10 million tonne steel plant (Nagchoudhury, 2016). The cement unit has employed some, but others have yet to receive any form of work. Baidyanath Soren, a land-loser from Ashansuli village observed that, "There are a total of 1200 land losers, among them only 500 received jobs (mostly contractual) and 800 have yet not received any kind of employment". In a similar vein, Sunil Murmu, a resident of Notundihi village, stated that "If we don't receive enough wage, then how will we survive". Because he was initially lured by the three-step promised package i.e., 1. Money in return for land; 2. Job for at least one member from each of the land-giving families; and 3. Stocks of JSW Bengal Steel (Singha & Sengupta, 2009). All of these conditions stated by the then-local leaders and officers of Jindals as compensations were not penned down legally. Even the agreement of the state government with the Jindals was not openly publicised in from media.



**Figure 2:** Cultural representations of Land Losers from the five villages located near JSW Cement Plant

For constructing the Salboni SEZ, from the 4200 acres of informed land, 469 acres of land have been acquired from the farmers. Out of this, more than 100 acres belong to the Scheduled Tribes (STs). In this context, as per the 14B section of the Land Revenue Act of 1955, this type of land is non-transferable (Singha & Sengupta, 2009). Even the locals in the villages are

aware of this. The breeding of cattle is essential to rural economies. Cattle raising fulfils a variety of additional financial needs, such as family medical costs, children's educational costs, commerce charges, etc., in a similar way as farming provides for a complete year's worth of food. The people were able to pay for such numerous expenses by selling cow's milk. But all of these have significantly reduced due to the low availability of lands for grazing purposes. Adori Murmu, a local resident of Notundihi, stated that, "Due to the loss of forested lands, I am unable to collect firewood, Sal leaves, and minor products from the nearby forests. These items were sold at various marketplaces which ultimately aided to support". Thus, the agricultural and forest land acquired from the marginalised populaces caused disenfranchisement from their land-water-forest rights which they have enjoyed for many years. In terms of compensation, the pattadars have not yet received their share of compensation. The absolute deprivation of the farmers is worrying as it definitely affects food security in total. All of these when put together have diminished the ease of living of villagers from poor to destitute conditions. And, as discussed earlier the cement factory is one of the most polluting factories and produces so much fly ash that pollutes the waterbodies and air thereby making the area unliveable in the near future. Apart from this, most of the land currently lies vacant and is neither used for industrialisation, nor for any other productive purpose. This is a form of developmental deadlock which has led to an impasse between the Jindals and the resident of the neighbouring villages.

### Solutions proposed by Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar to such a Crisis

Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar had written a research paper titled "Small Holdings in India and their Remedies" (1918). Herein, he noted two facts i.e., firstly, India is largely an agricultural country, and secondly, India's agricultural productivity is the lowest. To counter such a narrative, Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar proposed numerous reforms. These are:

1. **State-run Industries:** That the State shall own and operate fundamental industries that are not strategic but nevertheless important, either directly or through corporations created by the government of the day.
2. **Nationalisation of lands:** The agricultural sector shall be wholly operated under the sponsorship of the government of the day.
3. **Reformation of Agricultural Industries:** The agricultural sector should be overhauled on the following components:
  - a. The government of the day shall divide the purchased land into farms of uniform size and lease the farms to villagers as tenants (consisting of groups of families) for cultivation under the following terms:
    - i. The farm must be run as a cooperative farm;

- ii. The farm must be farmed in accordance with the government's regulations and directives.;
- iii. After paying all fees legitimately owed on the farm, the tenants must divide the remaining farm produce with themselves in a particular way specified;
- b. The land will be distributed to the villagers in such a way that there will be no landowner, tenant, or landless labourers regardless of caste or creed;
- c. The government of the day shall be obligated to provide funds for collective farm cultivation through the provision of water, draught animals, implements, manure, seeds, and so on;
- d. The State will be authorised to:
  - i. To impose the following fees on the farm's output: a) A portion for land income; b) A portion to pay the holders of debentures; and c) A percentage to protect the cost of using capital equipment that has been provided; and
  - ii. To impose sanctions on renters who violate the terms of their lease, wilfully fail to make the best use of the state-provided cultivating tools, or otherwise behave in a way that is harmful to the communal farming plans.
4. **State-financed farming:** The plan must be implemented as soon as possible, but in no event may the time frame exceed 10 years from the day the Constitution entered into force, as proposed by Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar. By then communal farming would be the common practice in this situation, and the government would make arrangements for water, equipment, seeds, fertiliser, etc. The state would eventually have the authority to tax the harvest and punish leaseholders who break the conditions of the agreement.

Thus, from the aforesaid contexts of the problems and the proposed solutions, it is abundantly obvious that Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar was a traditional reformer. His agrarian reform philosophies were centred on social justice and equality for all. Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar sought to create an egalitarian society in the agricultural sector which is yet to be realised. The glacial pace of development in the agricultural sector is needed to be rejuvenated through mission-mode projects to reinvigorate the sector to meet the demands of contemporary times.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can observe that Babasaheb was concerned with the position of the landless marginalised individuals in India. Dispossession of land is another intensifying seriousness at hand. Babasaheb's vision can be viewed as a panacea to the agrarian crisis which even plagues the current 21<sup>st</sup> century. His vision for striving towards a high growth rate along with industrialisation and urbanisation is one of the central maxims to alleviate the conditions of landless individuals. Education is a development multiplier wherein it aids individuals to augment one's knowledge

and apply it in real-time conditions. However, few individuals would still resort to seasonal occupation. This is where Babasaheb's other proposition comes into play wherein he proposed that agriculture should be a public sector holding i.e., similar to that of public sector enterprises. There shall be distinct villages for the marginalised individuals (especially backwards and marginalised classes), and the cultivable wastelands to be disseminated amongst them. All these reforms were meant to unfetter the hitherto fettered masses to the traditional norms or authoritarianism (Omvedt, 2017). Being a traditional reformer, Babasaheb tried to inoculate neoteric structures in traditional institutions. Furthermore, he proposed three significant components to achieve the aforesaid status. First, all of these should be undertaken by the government of the day in mission mode along with the nationalisation of land and collectivisation of agriculture. Second, distinguished marginalised villages will act as a bulwark against the traditional village system thereby ending casteism. Last, he plead with the government to disseminate cultivable wastelands, forest lands, government lands, and pastures to such marginalised groups (Kumar, 2020). All these would ultimately lead to the annihilation of caste in India along with the reversal of the effects of dispossession. If we look closely into the proposals then we can clearly see their relevance to a modern agrarian crisis at hand. Babasaheb was strongly against the proposition of proprietorship of farmlands i.e., the zamindari system. As because this was the main cause which led to the social stratification of the masses in our Indian society. These propositions should be brought into light, so that changes can be made along similar lines as Babasaheb has already discussed the horrors of private capitalism (Bharti, 2017). And, with the upcoming 65<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of Babasaheb, it is high time that we should revisit his visions to accrue some positive advice to reshuffle our Indian economy accordingly to his philosophies.

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