

Significance of Land Reforms for the Empowerment of Dalits in Contemporary Tamil Nadu

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Land is a source of livelihood for the people of our country. Because, the country is having largest population and its largest section of workforce is primarily depended on land and its subsidiary activities. Among the workforce depended on land the 'Dalits' consist of a major social base in this nation. Though, Dalits have been the major social base of our workforce that is largely depended on land, the equitable distribution of land to these people is still a serious concern. Because, the evolution of four-fold division of society and crystallization of complex caste system in due course inflicted various duties, obligations and restrictions on these people. Therefore, these people's property and ownership rights and involvement into every social, economic, political and cultural activities have been consistently denied from ancient period. However, in India and particularly in Tamil Nadu, after independence land reform measures have been initiated with the objectives of eliminating inequality, reducing poverty, rectifying unequal distribution of land resources, rural development, establishing democratic society and making headway in the existing socio-economic order comprehensively by which facilitating the processes of empowerment among Dalits in our contemporary society.

Land Distribution in India

Land reform can be defined as the redistribution of rights and interests in land in favour of the landless and the poor cultivators¹. Thus, land reform provides a means for redistribution of landed property through structural reforms which can bring about revolutionary improvements in the standard of life on the rural poor who have been deprived of their due rights in land due to domineering influence of the landed class in all spheres of rural life including social, political, administrative and religious spheres². In India land has been more important from pre-historic period due to the social, professional and productive values of human. In due course, in the four-tier Hindu society, caste started to play a significant role in all social equations. While the upper strata in the caste hierarchy were enjoying all the social, economic and political luxuries, the lower strata were denied opportunities to get even a measure of equality with the upper strata. In the traditional Hindu hierarchal society, Dalits, also known as Panchmas, were socially, economically and politically suppressed people. The Dalits mostly subsisted by engaging in occupations like scavenging, leatherwork and other menial works. Moreover, they were neither allowed to

owning land, nor taking land on lease³. This trend was continued until the medieval period in India despite they had been tillers of the soil irregularly.

However, during the British period significant changes took place gradually in the socio - economic conditions of Dalits. For the first time in India, the right over land was given to Dalits during the British period. A commission was appointed in 1891 by the Madras Presidency to study the conditions of the *Pariah* a Dalit community and got the positive report to assign the lands to Dalits. The policy of assignment of land to *Pariahs* started from 1918 in every Ryotwari village. Land was assigned for these depressed groups not only for cultivation, but also for building houses, establishing schools and for forming small *Pariah* settlements. Meanwhile, the land assigned for cultivation rose sharply from 19,251 acres in 1920-21 to 3, 42,611 acres in 1931⁴. The land rights received by Dalits gradually strengthened their presence over land but it was not universal among all other Dalit community across the presidency as well as the country.

After independence, the government of India took major initiatives on land reforms in order to establish social equality among citizens and make comprehensive economic development in our country. So in the original document of our constitution itself they included right to property as a fundamental right but later on it was converted into legal right and provided legal sanction⁵. Besides, the planning commission constituted for organized and balanced economic development in our country too insisted land reforms must be initiated to establish a socialistic pattern of society in India⁶. Therefore, land reform measures were taken with the main objectives of abolition of the intermediary system between the state and the tillers, imposition of ceiling on agricultural landholdings, consolidation of landholdings and adoption of modern techniques in agriculture. However, the actual implementation of land reforms rests with the state governments and legislative measures were enacted and adopted in this regard vary from state to state suiting to local conditions and requirements⁷.

Land Reform Initiatives in Tamil Nadu

Since the inception of independence land reforms have continued to be on the national agenda through various measures of planning commission and other agencies of government of India. In consonance with national agenda the Tamil Nadu government took major initiatives in land reforms from the period of first people elected government to redistribute rights to marginalized sections, ensure common justice and protect them from deprivation of upper ladder of the society and other intermediaries and achieving higher levels of social equality across the state⁸. The major land reform initiatives of Tamil Nadu government are as follows:

a) Tamil Nadu Cultivating Tenants (Protection) Act, 1955

The Tamil Nadu cultivating tenants (Protection) Act passed and received assent of the President of India on 24th September 1955. The Act primarily lays down that no cultivating tenant shall be evicted from his holdings, except for the non-payment of rent or doing any act which is injurious to the land or crops thereon, failure to cultivate the land, using the land for any purpose other than agricultural or denial of the title of the landowner to the land⁹. Thus, this Act protects the interest of the cultivating tenants, from eviction from the lands, except for non-payment of lease rent or doing any act of injurious or destructive to the land or crops thereon, using the land for any purpose other than agricultural or horticultural or wilfully denying the title of the land owner to the land. The disputes between the land owners and tenants are settled by the Revenue Courts¹⁰. Besides, in 1968 special provisions were made in Tamil Nadu cultivating tenants Act. To enable the cultivating tenants to pay the arrears outstanding on the 20th April 1968 in easy installments¹¹.

b) Tamil Nadu Bhoodan Yagna Act, 1958

The Bhoodan Movement or Land Gift Movement was a voluntary land reform movement in India, started by Acharya Vinoba Bhave in 1951 at Pochampally village in Telangana. In extension of this movement Vinoba visited all the places in India, while his visit in Tamil Nadu, few people made land donation to this movement. In order to regulate lands received as donation by Acharya Vinoba Bhave through Bhoodan Yagna Movement the Tamil Nadu Bhoodan Yagna Act was enacted in 1958. Through the enactment of this act proper distribution of donated lands to Dalits and reasonable protection to them have been made¹².

Recently, as per G.O (Ms.) No. 144, rural development and Panchayat raj department dated 11.10.2006 the Bhoodan subject has been transferred and attached with land reforms department for the plausible improvement of land reforms and extent more concentration of Dalits empowerment in Tamil Nadu. Besides, as per G.O. (Ms.) No. 493, revenue department dated 23.12.2009, the Tamil Nadu Bhoodan board has also been reconstituted mainly to rejuvenate and face the challenges in the contemporary globalized world¹³.

c) Tamil Nadu Land Reforms (Fixation of Ceiling on Land) Act, 1961

The Act was enacted with a view to reduce the disparity in the ownership of the agricultural land and concentration of such land with certain persons and to distribute such land among the landless poor. Tamil Nadu Land Reforms (Fixation of Ceiling on Land) Act, 1961 came into effect on the 6th April, 1960, wherein the ceiling area for a family consisting of five members had been fixed as 30 standard acres¹⁴. For every additional member of the family consisting of more than five members, an additional extent of 5 standard acres was allowed in addition to the ceiling area of 30 standard acres, subject to the overall ceiling of 60 standard acres¹⁵.

As on the date of the commencement of the Act, any female member of the family having lands in her own name, to be entitled to hold *stridhana* property upto a ceiling of 10 standard acres. The notified date of the said Act was 02.10.1962. The reference date for holding of land was as on 06.04.1960¹⁶. With a view to increase the number of beneficiaries by acquisition of the agricultural lands held by the big landowners in excess of the ceiling area and for the distribution of such lands to the landless and other rural poor, reduction of ceiling on land was introduced in the year 1970, by amending the Parent Act, by the Act to the effect that the ceiling area fixed earlier at 30 standard acres has been reduced to 15 standard acres. The notified date of the Act was 02.10.1970. The reference date for holding of land was as on 15.02.1970. It may be seen from the Parent Act, that exemptions were granted under the Principal Act for the lands grown with sugarcane and the lands used exclusively for grazing purposes¹⁷.

With a view to achieve the object of distribution of ceiling surplus lands to the landless and rural poor, the exemption granted under the Principal Act for lands grown with sugarcane and grazing lands were ordered to be withdrawn by amended Act, with effect from 15.01.1972. The overall ceiling area of 60 standard acres, as fixed under the Parent Act, has been refixed at 40 standard acres through an amended Act called the Tamil Nadu Land Reforms (Fixation of Ceiling on Land) Second Amendment Act, 1971¹⁸. This Act also came into effect from 01.03.1972. Subsequently, by another amended Act, viz., Tamil Nadu Land Reforms (Fixation of Ceiling on Land) Fourth Amendment Act, 1972 the overall ceiling limit was further reduced from 40 standard acres to 30 standard acres¹⁹. This Act came into effect on the 1st March 1972. Even though the Trusts were not attracted by the provisions of the Parent Act, ceiling limit has been fixed for the Trusts through Tamil Nadu Land Reforms (Fixation of Ceiling on Land) Third Amendment Act, 1971 according to the character of the Trusts. To sum up, as on date, 30 standard acres of land is the maximum extent of land that a family can hold in the State²⁰.

d) Land Purchase Scheme

The Land Purchase Scheme was introduced in 2002 with the aims to provide agricultural land and various other agricultural inputs to landless, small and marginal female farmers belonging to Scheduled Castes in Tamil Nadu. The maximum unit costs Rs.1.00 lakh subsidy 50 percent of the unit cost and 50 percent loan from Bank. The registration cost and stamp duty is exempted for 75 percent. Preference to be given to *Adi Dravidar* Women Self Help Group and income limit to rural is Rs.18,460 and urban is Rs.28,536²¹. The scheme is exclusively for Scheduled Caste Women. The beneficiary will be permitted to purchase land upto 5 acres of dry land and 2.5 acres of wet land. The government has issued orders for the exemption of 100% stamp duty for the registration of the land purchased under the scheme²².

Impact of Land Reform Initiatives in Tamil Nadu

The task of land reforms were one of the serious concern of the first people elected government in Tamil Nadu. Though, the Britishers were the first one to provide land rights extensively to Dalit community but they not at all keen in adopting progressive measures. Therefore, this had given space for mushrooming the *zamindars* and the other big land lords and provided a golden opportunity to exploit the Dalits to a great extent. But after independence serious of efforts have been taken by Tamil Nadu government that has infused profound impact on the socio-economic order of Tamil Nadu²³.

The focal issue confronted by the first people elected government was abolition of intermediaries, protection of tenants from discrimination and fixing of land ceiling. So then government passed two important acts one is tenants 'protection act in 1955 and land ceiling act in 1961. As a result of tenants protection act, tenants have come into direct control of state government and more lands have been brought to government possession for distribution to landless Dalit farmers²⁴. Though, these two aspects resulted heavy burden on the state exchequer, created safety and security to small and marginal Dalit farmers in Tamil Nadu. Besides, the land ceiling act 1961, also has reduced concentration of lands from big zamindars and land lords in Tamil Nadu and gradually reduced social and economic domination over Dalits in Tamil Nadu²⁵. Anyhow, the consolidation of land and ceiling of landholdings were important measures adopted by almost all the states of the Union including Tamil Nadu.

However, "A Study of Tamil Nadu's Economy" by K. Nagaraj, a Professor of Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS) notes: "while there has been a substantial transfer of land ownership from the upper castes to the middle and lower castes, access to land remains very low for the Scheduled Castes. This is particularly true for landholdings in higher size classes, and for holdings with better quality irrigation like well irrigation²⁶. Besides, "Thangaraj, professor of the MIDS, also notes that data from the Population Census of 1991 and the Agricultural Census of 1990-91 show that while Dalit accounted for 19.18 per cent of the State's population, their share of area operated was only 7.1 per cent²⁷.

The Table-1 reveals distribution of land holdings among Dalit community in Tamil Nadu as per the Agricultural Census, 2010-11. Besides, these census clearly demonstrates the uneven distribution of land holdings and how other people having more land than Dalit people. Moreover, in Tamil Nadu, as per the 2011 census the total Scheduled Caste population is around 1,44,38,445²⁸. Tamil Nadu stands in the fourth place among the states having the highest percentage of the Scheduled Caste population in India.

Table-1
Number and Area of Land Holding by Scheduled Castes in Tamil Nadu

S. No.	Size of Holding (in ha.)	Individual Holdings		Joint Holdings		Total holdings	
		Number	Area	Number	Area	Number	Area
1.	Below 0.5	552844 (99.07) [63.83]	130967 (99.34) [26.81]	5199 (0.93) [70.46]	868 (0.66) [22.68]	558043 (100) [63.89]	131835 (100) [26.78]
2.	0.5-1.0	187024 (99.37) [21.59]	131811 (99.38) [26.98]	1186 (0.63) [16.07]	820 (0.62) [21.42]	188210 (100) [21.55]	132631 (100) [26.94]
3.	1.0-2.0	95536 (99.32) [11.03]	130370 (99.29) [26.69]	653 (0.68) [8.85]	930 (0.71) [24.31]	96189 (100) [11.01]	131300 (100) [26.67]
4.	2.0-3.0	20280 (99.14) [2.34]	48296 (99.14) [9.89]	175 (0.86) [2.37]	420 (0.86) [10.98]	20455 (100) [2.34]	48716 (100) [9.90]
5.	3.0-4.0	5958 (98.72) [0.69]	20368 (98.73) [4.17]	77 (1.28) [1.04]	261 (1.27) [6.82]	6035 (100) [0.69]	20629 (100) [4.19]
6.	4.0-5.0	2170 (97.88) [0.25]	9631 (97.91) [1.97]	47 (2.12) [0.64]	205 (2.09) [5.36]	2217 (100) [0.25]	9836 (100) [2.00]
7.	5.0-7.5	1621 (98.30) [0.19]	9667 (98.15) [1.98]	28 (1.70) [0.38]	182 (1.85) [4.76]	1649 (100) [0.19]	9849 (100) [2.00]
8.	7.5-10.0	434 (97.97) [0.05]	3712 (97.98) [0.76]	9 (2.03) [0.12]	77 (2.02) [2.00]	443 (100) [0.05]	3789 (100) [0.77]
9.	10.0-20.0	238 (97.94) [0.03]	3177 (98.04) [0.65]	5 (2.06) [0.07]	63 (1.96) [1.66]	243 (100) [0.03]	3241 (100) [0.66]
10.	20.0 & Above	15 (100) [0.00]	479 (100) [0.10]	0 (0) [0]	0 (0) [0]	15 (100) [0.00]	479 (100) [0.10]
11.	All Classes	866120 (99.16) [100]	488479 (99.22) [100]	7379 (0.84) [100]	3827 (0.78) [100]	873499 (100) [100]	492306 (100) [100]

Source: Agricultural Census, 2010-11.

Meanwhile some of the human development indicators are helping us to understand the present scenario of Dalits in Tamil Nadu after various land reform initiatives. They are as following:

a) Poverty

Poverty is one of the social crime in our country²⁹. The Dalit people are the prime victims of these crimes. In Tamil Nadu, around 23% of total population is under poverty line among these Dalit communities having highest proportion of percentage. The main reason behind these is unequal distribution of land resources, over dependence on agriculture and unemployment³⁰. The below table explicit the percentage of poverty among various social groups in Tamil Nadu.

Table-2
Percentage of Population below Poverty Line by
Social Groups in Tamil Nadu (2004-05)

Rural				Urban				Rural & Urban
SC	OBC	Others	All	SC	OBC	Others	All	Combined
31.2	19.8	19.1	22.8	40.2	20.9	6.5	22.2	22.5

Source: Planning Commission Report, 2005

b) Workforce Participation

The work participation rate is the percentage of workers to the total population. The work participation rate among Dalit population is 48.1 per cent in 2001, which is higher than 44.7 per cent for the state population as a whole. The work participation rate of Dalit population however, has declined marginally, if compared to 48.4 per cent reported in 1991 Census³¹. The male work participation rate has been 55.8 per cent and female work participation rate 40.3 per cent at 2001 Census. At individual caste level, the work participation rate varies from the highest 55.4 per cent among Chakkiliyan to the lowest 44.4 per cent among Adi Dravida. Adi Dravida has also recorded the lowest female work participation rate of 35.1 per cent³². It shows the insecure job nature of Dalit population, landlessness and overdependence on agriculture and its allied works.

Table - 3
Percentage of Marginal Workers in Tamil Nadu

Gender	2001 Population			2011 Population		
	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total
Male	12.8	6.1	9.9	14.8	7.9	11.5
Female	27.1	14.6	23.8	24.3	16.0	21.6

Source: Primary Census Abstract Data, 2011.

These two important indicators reveal the status of Dalits in Tamil Nadu and their relation with land after various land reform initiatives. Though, land reform measures made various changes in the socio-economic life of Dalit people it doesn't fulfill the expected results comprehensively.

Conclusion

Early human person needs land primarily for their survival. But the emergence of concepts like territorial expansion, domination over territory, land revenue and commercialization of agricultural products increased the real value and importance of land. However, in the years following India's independence conscious process of nation building considered the problem of land reform with pressing urgency. Because, the land is not just a primary means of production but as the holder of social status, economic security, power and identity. Therefore, in Tamil Nadu land reform initiatives have taken as consonance with the above ideas and these measures provided numerous safeguards to Dalits like universal access to land resources, proper distribution of land, and protection from eviction and so on. Despite, these measures relieved Dalit people from earlier stress it is still not fulfilling all the expected objectives. There are many factors responsible for this tardy progress but important among them are the lack of adequate direction and determination, lack of political will, absence of pressure from below, inadequate policy instrument, legal hurdles, absence of correct-up-dated land records and the lack of financial support. Besides, the neo-liberal policy of Indian government has been obviously adding new pressure to Dalits because allowing the corporate sectors to accumulate land in the name of economic development. Moreover, Dalit communities have always been largely at the receiving end of all the initiatives. Hence, it is important to realise that land reforms are not just distribution of existing lands but it serves as one of the major apparatus to empower Dalits in contemporary Tamil Nadu.

Endnotes

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10. *Ibid.*, p. 562.
11. *Tamil Nadu Cultivating Tenants (Special Provisions) Act*, 1968, p. 581.
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13. *Ibid.*, p. 588.
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15. *Ibid.*
16. *Tamil Nadu Land Reforms (Fixation of Ceiling on Land) Act*, 1961, pp. 958-965.
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18. *Ibid.*, p. 971.
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29. *Primary Census Abstract*, 2011, p. 26.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
31. *Data Highlights Scheduled Castes of Tamil Nadu*, Census of India, 2001, p. 4.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 5.