

Distribution of Landholdings in Rural India: A Comparative Study of Scheduled Castes, Tribes and Non-Scheduled Caste and Tribes

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The study, based on NSS data, reveals that the per cent of total land owned by the households belonging to non-scheduled caste and tribe declined by varying degree during the 1980s practically in all the major states of India. It, pari passu, implies an increase in the share of land owned by the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe households. Nonetheless, the per cent of total land accounted for by scheduled caste households was much less compared to their share in total population and also compared to the land owned by the remaining two social groups. Likewise, notwithstanding decline in the incidence of landlessness among all the three social groups in a majority of the states, the proportion of landless households among scheduled castes, in about half the states, was higher compared to both scheduled tribes and non-scheduled caste and tribes. The amount of total land accounted for by scheduled caste households was also highly unequally distributed. The extent of inequalities in the distribution of land, measured by Gini coefficient, the proportion of total land accounted for by the households at the top 1 per cent, 5 per cent, 10 per cent and 20 per cent and the area owned by large holdings, increased further between 1982 and 1992 in a majority of the states pointing towards an acceleration in the process of polarisation of landholdings among scheduled castes.

In India, a tradition which goes back to centuries, if not millennia, is that low castes, in particular scheduled caste and other untouchables, are born with their hands to labour and serve high castes who are privileged to enjoy on their labour. Though the prevalence of this belief and tradition has mellowed considerably over the years, it still continues to prevail in the countryside. The erosion of this belief and tradition is, however, vehemently resisted by the high caste population; the occasional occurrence of land related atrocities by high caste people on the scheduled castes bear an ample testimony to this¹.

In order to check alienation of land belonging to scheduled tribes, official policy has been to impose total ban on the transfer of tribal land to non-tribals. Following the recommendations of several Committees and Commissions, namely, The Dhebar Commission, 1961 and Shilu Ao Committee, 1969 and the concern voiced in the Five

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¹ Some incidence of the land related atrocities on scheduled caste households are reported in the pages of EPW. For example, see, Gupta, 1992, pp. 929-930; Mukul, 1992, pp. 1780-1781; Mishra, 1993, p. 2059; Moses, 1995, pp. 246-247.