

Land of injustice

A tragedy, the self-immolation of Bhanuprasad Vankar, a 61-year-old Dalit activist in Patan, last week, has brought the issue of landlessness among Dalits into focus. Vankar, a leader of the Rashtriya Dalit Adhikar Manch, is said to have taken the extreme step after the Patan district administration kept stalling the transfer of ownership titles of two plots to their Dalit owners. The protests across Gujarat that followed Vankar's death have forced the state government to action: It has agreed to facilitate the title deeds, free protestors who were arrested, including independent legislator Jignesh Mevani, and promised to address other concerns flagged by the protest.

Land has become central to the Dalit political discourse in Gujarat, especially since the Una protests in July 2016. Leaders who emerged from the mobilisations around Una, like Jignesh Mevani, have foregrounded the issue of land ownership over more routine discussions about constitutional rights and caste discrimination.

In fact, they see Dalit access to land as an essential step towards ending marginalisation and as a means to break free of the social relations and economic structures that reinforce discrimination. A major demand of the Mevani-led Dalit Asmita [Yatra](#) in 2016 was five acres of land for each landless family. However, mainstream political parties have so far refused to endorse the demand of land for the landless.

Not surprisingly, then, Dalit mobilisations over the land question have been spearheaded mostly by new social movements, outside the platforms of established parties. According to the Socio Economic and Caste Census 2011, over 67 per cent of Dalit families in the country do not own land. Dalit landlessness, more than even among tribals, is a serious concern even in states like Kerala that have experienced land reforms in some form.

Here, state interventions did not go beyond tenancy reforms and protection, which mostly benefited the intermediary and backward castes, and failed to facilitate transfer of land ownership to Dalits. At the same time, socially empowered communities have been encroaching and appropriating the commons, further marginalising Dalits. Gandhian movements like Bhoodan to communist party-led mobilisations engaged with the land question, but they refused to recognise that it also had a caste dimension.

The new Dalit mobilisations have been insistently raising the land question as a caste issue. Governments have so far evaded acting on the demand by arguing that they are short of land to distribute among the landless, a claim increasingly contested by the new social movements. If radical or innovative solutions are necessary to address the claims of the landless, the administration must explore those quickly.

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