

The State should come to the rescue of the landless Dalit farmer in India

Seven decades after Independence, while a majority of farmers cultivate their own land (however small their holdings may be), most Dalit farmers in much of India are daily wagers, according to data released recently by the Census of India. With the aim of alleviating farmer distress, the Centre included in the Union Budget an increase in the minimum support price for monsoon crops and pledged Rs 500 crore to Operation Greens, a programme to help farmers growing tomatoes, onions, and potatoes. Such measures will benefit farmers who own land, not those who don't.

Data shows that 71% of Scheduled Caste farmers are what the census refers to as agricultural labourers — they work for wages on land they do not own. That figure is much lower among other groups: 47% for Scheduled Tribe farmers and 41% for non-SC/ST farmers. Data from the 70th round of Land and Livestock Holdings Survey of the NSSO indicates that 58.4% of rural Dalit households are landless -- a much higher proportion than households in any other social group. Landlessness is particularly severe among Dalits in states with a history of feudalism such as Haryana, Punjab and Bihar, where more than 85% of Dalit households do not own any land other than the plot they live on. More than 60% of Dalit households are landless in Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Kerala, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha. The Socio Economic and Caste Census points out that 'landlessness and dependence on manual casual labour for a livelihood are key deprivations facing rural families', making them far more vulnerable to impoverishment.

Apart from sporadic efforts, most notably in the Gandhian Bhoodan movement pioneered by Vinoba Bhave in Telangana in the 1950s and by Left governments in West Bengal and Kerala, and to some extent the National Conference government in Jammu and Kashmir, radical measures such as land distribution have not been taken.

Of late, a newer generation of politicians has again voiced the demand for giving five acres of land to landless Dalit households as a means to resolve the crisis of rural livelihoods. It is not in agricultural alone that the Dalits have been short-changed. They are under-represented when it comes to jobs in the private sector and education. The State's role in fighting this inequality is crucial. But with land holdings becoming even more fragmented — 86% of the holdings in India are small and marginal, less than two hectares — it remains to be seen whether populist sops such as loan waivers, employment guarantee schemes and food security initiatives bring relief to small, marginalised farmers fighting landlessness, discrimination and poverty.

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