Land Ownership is Key to Dalit Up-liftment

What is the issue?

• Socio-economic subjugation of dalits has inherent connections to their historic deprivation of rights to own land.
• This issue has come to the fore again as demands for land ownership by dalits of Gujarat has been causing social tensions lately.

What is the historical perspective?

• History - Under the diktats of the Manusmriti, the “Shudra” had no right to property, which had historically condemned them to economic subjugation.

• But Dalits did have some form of land ownership pre-independence in the form of “community land”, which they owned collectively.
• This was granted to them by the kings (or other villagers), in lieu of the hereditary services they offered to the state and the other communities.
• Interestingly, Ambedkar had opposed this conditional ownership module as he felt that it was condemning Dalits to perpetual subordination under others.

• Recent Events - In Dudkha village of Patan district in Gujarat, Dalits had been maintaining a tract of community land for generations.
• But the Gujarat government had refused to grant them full ownership rights despite the well established national policy recognizing traditional claimants.
While multiple protests to press for the demand had failed, a frustrated dalit activist “Bhanubhai” had recently immolated himself.

Notably, Jignesh Mehwani’s “Jan Adhikar Andolan” that followed the Una incident was also centred on the issue of land ownership rights.

How much progress has been made in land reforms?

Under the British Raj, land reforms were carried out to enhance state revenue collections and different models were adopted at different provinces.

**Rise of Patidars** - Patidars of the erstwhile Saurashtra state were historically “Shudras”, but the British land reforms had unintended benefits for them.

- They bagged 3.75 million acres of land, which laid the foundation for their emergence as a socially, economically and politically dominant class.
- Notably, economic progress also culturally transformed the community, and they resorted to Brahminical rituals and vegetarianism over time.

**Post-Independence** - Land reforms were the sole state programme to ensure economic equality, as land ownership remained only with the few.

- Limits for ownership were introduced and the excess were to be distributed to the landless peasants among who dalits and tribals were to be given primacy.
- Various legislations ensured primacy for the tillers, and communists in Kerala and West Bengal ensured that these initiatives were pushed vigourously.

- But despite successes in some states, most states remained regressive due to their apathy to the cause and the resistance of the politically powerful groups.

**Gujarat’s case** - Gujarat had a patchy record in land reforms and deprivation was particularly striking for the dalits, who gained less than $\frac{1}{3}$ of the total land allocated through the reforms.
Gujarati society is still highly feudal and in many cases, despite dalits being the official owners of land, the upper casts continue to control and operate them.

Navsarjan Trust had discovered that in 251 villages of Surendranagar district (Gujarat), Dalits couldn’t gain actual possession for over 6,000 acres of land, despite having been granted legal ownership.

Notably, Golana massacre of 1986, was because Dalits who had the legal possession of the land tried to take actual possession.

While many lawsuits have been filed to remedy this, justice looks elusive even 4 decades after land reforms were unleashed.

Currently, the tension over land is fast snowballing into a dalit versus others issue in Gujarat, and even dalit burial grounds have come under attack.

How is Gujarat’s pro-business land policy affecting social equations?

Till a few years ago, land was an instrument of social and economic status and people preferred to marry into homes that owned agricultural land.

There were legal safeguards for buying and selling of agricultural land through governmental checks in order to ensure that land remained with the tiller.

There were also mechanism for preventing big farmers nudging out small and marginal ones by buying out their processions.

But the BJP government eased many of these provisions and also relaxed norms for denotifying agricultural land to enable its diversion for other uses.

These changes had in effect seen massive land parcels being diverted for establishing industries (often coercively).

Also, coastal Gujarat has been seeing massive and industrialisation in the past decade, which has degraded vast swathes of adjacent cultivable land.

In fact, the resultant deprivation from land caused by these policies is what had triggered the Patidar agitations of 2015.
What is the way forward?

- Marginal agricultural land ownership among Dalits is a key systemic reason for social and economic inequity in India.
- Various studies have noted that castist violence is majorly triggered by land disputes and that Dalits are struggling retain even their meagre possessions.
- While land reforms legislation were instrumental in uplifting significant sections of the agrarian classes, Dalits and tribals were largely neglected.
- Unless these deep rooted structural issues are addressed with a determined policy push, social tensions will continue to simmer.

Source: Indian Express