

**SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN LAND OWNERSHIP IN INDIA:  
A STUDY WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO WEST BENGAL**

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# **Social Inequality in Land Ownership in India: a study with particular reference to West Bengal**

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## *I. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>*

The policies of stabilisation and structural adjustment implemented by the Government of India since 1991 have had a profound impact on agriculture, rural development and the living standards of the poor in rural India. One aspect of the new policy internationally is the attempt to replace classical land reform - which involves “the dispossession of a class of landlords, and the distribution of land to, and the enhancement of the freedom of, classes of the peasantry and agricultural workers hitherto dispossessed and exploited by landlordism” - with what has come to be known as “market-driven land reform”. However, studies have shown that in a capital constrained economy, the scope for achieving equitable distribution of resources through market operations is limited.<sup>2</sup>

Redistributive land reform not only enhances production and reduces poverty but is also a part of a democratic revolution that frees the people of the countryside from the fetters of landlordism.<sup>3</sup> An important requirement of genuine land reforms is that the State intervene to ensure access to productive resources, mainly land, to social classes and groups that traditionally have not had access to land and free these classes from social and economic oppression.

This paper deals with an important form of discrimination in the countryside, the lack of access of Dalit (Scheduled Caste) and Adivasi (Scheduled Tribe) households to ownership and operational holdings of land in rural India. It includes a case study of the impact of land reforms in one State of India, West Bengal, on land holding among Dalit and Adivasi households.

Dalits and Adivasis have been subjected to various forms of deprivation historically. In many places Dalits are still subjected to the criminal practice of untouchability and other atrocities

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance Ramachandran and Swaminathan (2002); see also El-Ghonemy (2002)

<sup>3</sup> Ramachandran and Swaminathan (2002)

(Thorat 2002). Dalits also face various forms of deprivation and inequality with respect to education, health, and access to different kinds of jobs.<sup>4</sup>

Access to land in an agriculture-based rural economy is important because land is a primary means and instrument of production. The social distribution of land in a village economy determines the economic position and power relations between different social groups in the village. Chakrabarty and Ghosh (2000), using NSS data on ownership holdings of land, showed that in most States of India the proportion of land owned by SC households was much lower than their share in total population. However, in rural India the proportion of land owned by SC households had increased in the period between 1982 and 1992 (*ibid*). Thorat (2002) noted that in 1993-94 only 19 per cent of all Dalit households were self employed in agriculture while the comparable statistic for non-Dalit/Adivasi households was 42 per cent. According to Thorat, “the limited access to agricultural land and capital assets is both due to the historical legacy associated with restrictions imposed by the caste system and the ongoing discrimination in land market and capital market and other related economic spheres” (*ibid*).

In this context it is important to distinguish land used for productive purposes from land that is not used directly for agricultural production. Land used for income bearing activities, for example cropland, plantations and orchards constitute productive agricultural land, while house-site land, fallow and barren lands are categories of land not used directly for productive purposes. Our aim in this paper is to determine Dalit households’ access to land for production, and compare this access with that of other social groups.

This paper is in seven sections. Section II gives a brief description of secondary sources of data on land holdings in India. In Section III, I present some findings from secondary data on the differential access to land by different social groups in India. Section IV of the paper uses primary data from seven villages in the State to examine the access to land by different social groups in West Bengal. In section V, I analyse the role of government intervention through redistribution of land in improving access to land among under-privileged groups in West Bengal. Section VI examines the participation of different social groups in land markets in the same seven villages of West Bengal. Section VII is a concluding section

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<sup>4</sup> Thorat and Newman (2007) discuss how caste discrimination in labour markets is a reality in modern India. Thorat and Attewell (2007), Jodhka and Newman (2007) show that qualified low caste applicants are less likely to find employment in modern formal sector in India compared to their higher caste counterparts due to discriminatory hiring practices. Madheswaran and Attewell (2007) use NSS data to show significant wage discrimination against Dalits and Adivasis than higher caste workers in similar occupations.

## II. SECONDARY DATA SOURCES ON LAND HOLDINGS IN INDIA

There are three major sources of secondary data on land holdings in India: the National Sample Survey (NSS) Land and Livestock Holdings (L&LH) surveys, NSS Employment and Unemployment (E&U) surveys and the World Agricultural Census.

The L&LH surveys of the NSS were initiated in 1954-55 as part of the World Agricultural Census and since 1970-71 these surveys have been carried out decennially. The NSSO conducted its most recent L&LH survey in 2002-03 (59<sup>th</sup> round). In these surveys, the NSSO deals with two kinds of land holding, household ownership holdings and household operational holdings. *Household ownership holdings* include all land owned or held in owner-like possession by households. The definition of household ownership holdings includes all kinds of land owned by households, including homestead land and non-agricultural land. The published reports of the NSS provide data on households that do not own land disaggregated by social groups. However, as the preceding definition indicates, households that have no land for production are nevertheless not counted as “landless” when they own homesteads or other types of land.

The data published by the NSS reports disaggregate total household ownership holdings into two sub-categories: homesteads and land other than homestead land. NSS reports provide data on aggregate household ownership holdings separately for different social groups. The data on homestead and non-homestead land are not disaggregated by social group.

The *household operational holding* is the extent of land managed - whether the land be owned, leased or otherwise possessed - as a techno-economic unit of production in which some agricultural production had been carried out in the reference period. Operational holdings are thus a better measure of access to land for production than ownership holdings. The NSS Reports do not publish data on operational holdings of land disaggregated by social group.

The NSS E&U surveys provide data on “land possessed” and “land cultivated” by rural households. The published Reports present the data disaggregated by social groups. “Land possessed” by households includes all land owned and occupied by households. It includes all types of land: agricultural land, homestead land and non-agricultural land. As in the case of ownership holdings in L&LH surveys, this kind of classification of land tends to underestimate the incidence of landlessness with respect to productive land.

“Land cultivated” includes all cropland, plantations and orchards cultivated by households. It excludes homestead land and non-agricultural land. This category includes land owned and self-cultivated, land occupied and land leased in. It excludes land leased out by households. It is equivalent to an operational holding of agricultural land.

According to the L&LH surveys, only 6.6 per cent of the rural households in India did not own any land in 2003 (Table 1). The incidence of landlessness declined between 1992 and 2003. According to E&U surveys, 2 per cent of households in rural India did not possess any land in 2004-05. There has also been a very sharp decline in the proportion of households without land between 1993-94 and 2004-05. These figures are such because of the inclusion of homestead land in the definition of ownership holding.

Table 1 *Households that do not own land as proportion of all households, by social group, rural India, 1992 and 2003 in per cent*

Year	Adivasi	Dalit	All
1992	7.3	8.1	8.1
2003	9.1	5.7	6.6
Growth	24.7	-29.6	-18.5

Sources: i) NSS Report No. 397, Household Ownership Holdings in India, 1992

ii) NSS Reports No. 491, Household Ownership Holdings in India, 2003

Table 2 *Households that do not possess land as proportion of all households, by social group, rural India, 1993-94 and 2004-05 in per cent*

Year	Adivasi	Dalit	All
1993-94	13.3	18.1	12.9
2004-05	3.6	2.7	2.0
Growth	-72.9	-85.1	-84.5

Sources: i) NSS Report No. 425, Employment and Unemployment Situation among Social Groups in India, 1993-94

ii) NSS Report No 516, Employment and Unemployment Situation among Social Groups in India, 2004-05

At the same time, according to NSS reports, landlessness with respect to the control of cropland and other productive land appears to have increased. Studies on landlessness often use the percentage of landless agricultural labour households in the total workforce from NSS E&U surveys to measure the extent of landlessness in India (Ghosh and Chandrasekhar 2003, Thorat 2002). Landless agricultural labour households are households that are engaged in agriculture but do not have access to land for purposes of production. The percentage of landless agricultural

labour households increased in the 1990s, which constitutes strong circumstantial evidence of an increase in landlessness itself in rural India (Ghosh and Chandrasekhar, 2003).

An Agricultural Census in India was initiated in 1950 as part of the World Agricultural Census programme organised by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Until 1960, the Agricultural Census of India was carried out by the NSSO. From 1970 the Agricultural Census has been carried out every five years by the Department of Agriculture. The Agricultural Censuses are censuses of land holdings, and provide data on the distribution of operational holdings of land. The available published data are disaggregated by social groups. In States where plot-wise land records are revised annually (typically, the erstwhile non-zamindari areas), the Agricultural Census is simply a retabulation of the existing land records. In the States that do not have plot-wise land records, the Agricultural Census is a sample survey of households that operate land. In any case, being a survey of *holdings* rather than *households*, the Agricultural Census does not provide us with estimates of landlessness among households.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Ramachandran (1980)

Table 3 *Descriptive Table of the major sources of official data series on land holdings in rural India*

Title of survey	Survey years	Category of land holding	Definition of land holding category	Level of disaggregation (in published reports)	
				By State	By Social group
NSS Land and Livestock Holdings Survey	1954-55, 1960-61, 1961-62, 1971-72, 1982, 1992, 2003	Household Ownership holdings	All land owned or held in owner like possession under long term lease or assignment by a member of the households, whether the land is cultivable or not	Yes	Yes
		Ownership holdings other than homesteads	Household ownership holdings excluding homestead land	Yes	No
		Household Operational holdings	All land owned, leased in or otherwise possessed under physical possession of the households and in which some agricultural production was carried out during the reference period	Yes	No
NSS Employment and Unemployment Survey	1972-73, 1977-78, 1983, 1987-88, 1993-94, 1999-2000, 2004-05	Land possessed	Includes all land owned, leased in and encroached by the household but excludes land leased out	Yes	Yes
		Land cultivated (including orchard and plantation)	All land owned, leased in and neither owned nor leased-in that is cultivated by the household during the reference period	Yes	Yes
World Agricultural Census	1970-71, 1976-77, 1980-81, 1985-86, 1990-91, 1995-96, 2000-01	Operational holdings	All land which is wholly or partly used for agricultural production and is operated as one technical unit by one person alone or with others without regard to title, legal form, size or location	Yes	Yes

### III. SOME RESULTS FROM SECONDARY DATA

I have used two indicators to assess access to land. Absolute deprivation of access to productive land is measured by the incidence of landlessness. Inequality in access to land is measured by an index of access to land for cultivation.

The previous section discussed the definition of ownership and operational holdings in the Reports of the NSSO on the L&LH surveys. A further note is necessary on the changes in the definition of ownership holdings at the L&LH surveys in the 48<sup>th</sup> round (1992) and the 59<sup>th</sup> round (2003).

In 1992 (48<sup>th</sup> round), a household ownership holding was divided into the following sub-categories:

- 1) homestead
- 2) all land other than homestead

In 2003 (59<sup>th</sup> round), a household ownership holding was divided into the following sub-categories:

- 1) a. homestead: uncultivated part  
b. homestead: cultivated part
- 2) all land other than homestead

As Rawal (2008) shows, the sub-category 1(b) of the 2003 survey represents land that could have been either in (1) or (2) in 1992. Thus, sub-category (2) of 1992 does not correspond either with sub-category (2) in 2003 or the sum of sub-categories 1(b) and (2) in 2003.<sup>6</sup>

The E&U surveys provide us with comparable serial data on rural households that do not cultivate land, that is, households that are landless with respect to operational holdings of productive land.

In view of the discussion above, I have used the NSS data in the following way.

First, I present the data on households that were landless with respect to ownership holdings from the L&LH 59<sup>th</sup> Round survey of 2003. For reasons discussed above, these data cannot be used to compute rates of change in landlessness between the 48<sup>th</sup> Round (1992) and 59<sup>th</sup> Round (2003).

Secondly, I present NSS data on rural households that did not cultivate land (that is, those that were landless with respect to operational holdings from the E&U surveys conducted in the 50<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For a full discussion, see Rawal (2008)



Round (1993-94) and 61<sup>st</sup> Round (2004-05)) and discuss the changes that occurred in the levels of landlessness over these two surveys.

Thirdly, I use NSS data from Employment and Unemployment surveys to calculate an Index of Access of rural households belonging to different social groups to productive agricultural land.

*Landlessness in the NSS Land and Livestock Holding Survey, 2003*

I have used NSS data on Land and Livestock Holdings Survey, 2003 by States and social groups in order to make an initial estimate of the proportion of rural households that do not own agricultural land. Table 4 presents data on the proportion of households that do not hold any land other than homesteads by States and social group in 2003, that is, category (2) in the preceding discussion on the 59<sup>th</sup> round data.

By NSS 2003 data, 41.6 per cent of rural households in rural India did not own any land other than homesteads. The incidence of landlessness was higher among Dalit households than among Adivasi households and non Dalit/Adivasi households. While 56.5 per cent Dalit households did not own non-homestead land, 35.5 per cent Adivasi households and 37.8 per cent non Dalit/Adivasi households did not own non-homestead land. The data generally substantiate the impression that while Dalit households are landless, Adivasi households have small plots of land of low productivity.

The proportion of Dalit households that do not own any land other than homesteads is highest in Punjab, Kerala and Haryana, where above 80 per cent Dalit households do not own any land other than homesteads.<sup>7</sup> The States with lowest incidence of landlessness are Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh. In West Bengal, 46.5 per cent households do not own land other than homesteads. This is slightly higher than the national average. However, the proportion of landless Dalit households is below the national average in West Bengal by both the definitions of land holdings. The proportion of Adivasi households that do not own land other than homesteads is much higher in West Bengal than in India as a whole.

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<sup>7</sup> On this see Annexure 1.

Table 4 *Households that do not own any land other than homesteads as a proportion of all households, by social group, rural India, 2003 in per cent*

States	Adivasi	Dalit	Non Dalit/Adivasi	All
Andhra Pradesh	48.7	64.5	49.6	53.2
Arunachal Pradesh	4.5	53.6	93.8	23.5
Assam	27.6	49.8	40.9	40.3
Bihar	22.1	72.3	35.3	43.7
Chattisgarh	18.4	31.5	31.0	26.2
Delhi	100.0	99.7	97.3	98.1
Goa	0.0		59.0	57.1
Gujarat	34.3	67.0	43.1	44.1
Haryana	100.0	84.1	34.9	49.5
Himachal Pradesh	14.5	22.7	23.5	22.7
Jammu & Kashmir	44.1	21.8	8.9	11.0
Jharkhand	18.7	41.7	24.9	24.7
Karnataka	54.0	57.5	34.7	40.4
Kerala	66.1	85.4	66.1	68.3
Madhya Pradesh	41.1	35.6	30.8	34.0
Maharashtra	61.2	69.6	35.5	44.8
Manipur	11.0	41.6	45.6	30.2
Meghalaya	25.4	59.2	60.9	29.0
Mizoram	15.0	100.0	6.0	14.9
Nagaland	9.3		100.0	15.5
Orissa	33.3	52.8	35.9	38.5
Punjab	98.9	88.9	36.5	56.9
Rajasthan	6.8	39.3	17.0	19.6
Sikkim	35.5	65.1	46.7	44.4
Tamil Nadu	66.7	78.7	59.5	64.5
Tripura	48.5	67.4	62.1	59.4
Uttar Pradesh	51.8	33.9	23.2	26.3
Uttaranchal	60.9	33.7	25.2	27.7
West Bengal	48.8	54.1	42.8	46.5
<b>India</b>	<b>35.5</b>	<b>56.5</b>	<b>37.8</b>	<b>41.6</b>

Source: Computed from unit level data, NSS Land and Livestock Holdings Survey, 59<sup>th</sup> Round

*Households with no Operational Holdings: NSS Data 1993-94 and 2004-05*

For any time series analysis of the incidence of landlessness based on consistent concepts and definitions, the only data source available is the NSS E&U surveys. NSS E&U surveys allow us to estimate the incidence of landlessness in terms of operational holdings of land. The change in

the proportion of households that did not cultivate land in the period between 1993-94 and 2004-05 is shown in Table 6.<sup>8</sup> (The proportion of households that did not cultivate land in 2004-05 is in Annexure 2).

The proportion of rural households that did not have access to land for cultivation in India has increased by 10.6 per cent between 1993-94 and 2004-05 (Table 5). The data show that the incidence of households that do not cultivate land has increased in almost all Indian States in the previous decade, Kerala, Jammu & Kashmir and Assam being the only exceptions. The decline in the incidence of landlessness in Kerala and Assam can to some extent be attributed to the extension of cultivation of plantation crops like rubber within the homestead. Homesteads are also included in 'cultivated land' in these States, since orchards and plantations are considered as 'cultivated land' by the NSS definition, thus bringing down the proportion of households who do not cultivate land, without an actual change in land holding structures. The highest increase in the incidence of landlessness was experienced in the States of Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh.

The increase in the share of households without access to land for cultivation in India between 1992-93 and 2004-05 is higher for Adivasi households (11.6 per cent) and non SC/ST households (10.4 per cent) than for Dalit households (8.7 per cent). In six States, Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala, Assam, Tripura, Bihar and Punjab, landlessness among Dalits has declined. Landlessness among Adivasis has also declined in seven States, namely Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala, Assam, Tripura, Bihar, Gujarat and Haryana. It is however important to note that in Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan which have witnessed the highest increase in landlessness, it is mainly the Dalits and Adivasis who have lost land. In these two States landlessness among Dalits has increased by more than 60 per cent. The increase in landlessness among Dalits is very low in West Bengal. It is mostly the Adivasi households and non-Dalit/Adivasi households who have lost land in West Bengal in this period.

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<sup>8</sup> To make the 2004-05 data comparable with 1992-93, we have aggregated data for the States Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh, Bihar and Jharkhand, Uttaranchal and Uttar Pradesh using population estimates from the same NSS round. The North-Eastern States, except Assam and Tripura, are excluded from the analysis because majority of the households in these States belong to Scheduled Tribes. Delhi and Goa are also excluded from the analysis because of the small proportion of Dalit and Adivasi households in these two States.

Table 5 *Growth in the proportion of households that do not cultivate land, by social group, rural India, 1993-94 to 2004-05* in per cent

States	Adivasi	Dalit	Non Dalit/ Adivasi	All
Kerala	-40.7	-32.2	-50.7	-47.6
Jammu & Kashmir	-100.0	-34.1	-20.2	-35.2
Assam	-29.3	-38.7	-8.8	-17.3
Tripura	-7.2	-0.2	14.4	3.8
Gujarat	-8.4	4.5	13.0	9.3
Bihar & Jharkhand	-0.1	-6.2	24.7	9.6
Punjab	25.0	-0.8	25.2	11.1
Maharashtra	3.7	13.2	7.8	11.6
Tamil Nadu	40.8	9.7	14.7	13.2
West Bengal	38.0	3.2	18.2	13.9
Haryana	-56.4	6.7	21.7	15.1
Orissa	6.1	3.7	30.2	17.2
Karnataka	12.1	20.5	19.9	20.4
Andhra Pradesh	54.7	23.7	19.9	22.6
Uttar Pradesh & Uttaranchal	20.3	22.6	23.6	23.4
Madhya Pradesh & Chattisgarh	23.9	13.4	35.3	26.1
Rajasthan	23.3	61.6	22.8	37.6
Himachal Pradesh	128.0	60.7	32.0	42.1
<b>India</b>	11.6	8.7	10.8	10.6

Source: Computed from i) NSS Report No. 425, Employment and Unemployment Situation among Social Groups in India, 1993-94

ii) NSS Report No. 516, Employment and Unemployment Situation among Social Groups in India, 2004-05

#### *Index of Access*

To measure the inequality in access to productive land across different social groups I have used a simple Index of Access.<sup>9</sup> The access index is defined as the ratio of the share of total land owned by group j to the share of this group in total number of households. Thus, Index of Access to land for Dalits, denoted as  $A_D$ , can be represented as;

$A_D = \text{Percentage of total land owned by Dalit households} \div \text{Percentage of Dalit households in total households}$

<sup>9</sup>See for e.g, K. Nagaraj cited in Ramachandran (1990)

The value of the access index range between 0 and  $\infty$ . If  $A_D$  takes the value 1 it represents a situation where Dalit household's access to land is in proportion to their share in total population. Where the Access Index is less than 1, it represents a situation in which the proportion of Dalit households in the population is greater than the share of total land that they own.

I have calculated the Access Indices from the unit level data on area cultivated by households from the 61<sup>st</sup> round E&U survey. The State level Index values are presented in Table 6.

The Index of Access to land for cultivation for non-Dalit/Adivasi households is 1.16 while that for Dalit households is only 0.45. This brings out the inequality between these two social groups very clearly. The data indicate that the index of access for land for cultivation in West Bengal is 0.8, which is higher than the all India average (0.45). Comparing the index values in different States, we find that West Bengal is second only to Jammu & Kashmir. For Adivasi households, however, the Index value in West Bengal is 1, which is lower than the national average 1.1.

Table 6 *Index of Access to land for cultivation, by social group, 2004-05*

State	Adivasi	Dalit	Non Dalit/Adivasi
Punjab	0.72	0.09	1.68
Haryana	2.85	0.10	1.35
Kerala	0.94	0.16	1.12
Gujrat	0.64	0.27	1.26
Bihar	1.31	0.39	1.16
Maharashtra	0.65	0.40	1.19
Tamil Nadu	0.39	0.42	1.21
Andhra Pradesh	1.06	0.42	1.15
Karnataka	0.71	0.48	1.20
Madhya Pradesh	0.88	0.50	1.24
Uttar Pradesh	1.39	0.53	1.17
Rajasthan	0.57	0.54	1.28
Orissa	1.24	0.60	1.02
Himachal Pradesh	1.18	0.69	1.11
Assam	1.51	0.79	0.89
Tripura	1.49	0.81	0.85
West Bengal	1.05	0.82	1.07
Jammu & Kashmir	1.05	1.01	1.00
<b>India</b>	<b>1.12</b>	<b>0.45</b>	<b>1.16</b>

Source: Computed from unit level data, NSS Employment and Unemployment Survey 2004-05

#### *IV. SOME RESULTS FROM PRIMARY DATA IN WEST BENGAL*

West Bengal is a State where policy efforts have been directed to distribute land to the landless and the poor, and specifically to Dalits, Adivasis and other deprived social groups, and also to issue joint title deeds to men and women. Some of the social-distributive effects of the land reform programme show up in recent village-based research and analyses of secondary data. These show that West Bengal is ahead of other States with respect to the distribution of agricultural and homestead land to Dalit and Adivasi households, and also with respect to the purchase of agricultural land by the rural poor, including Dalit households.

In this Section I shall examine specific features of the ownership of agricultural and homestead land by Dalit, Adivasi and other households from village-level data collected from different parts of West Bengal. The village-level data come mainly from a series of village surveys in seven villages in different agro-climatic zones in West Bengal conducted in May-June 2005.<sup>10</sup>

Dalkati is located in the red laterite zone of West Medinipur District. Its population is predominantly Adivasi. The levels of agricultural productivity are low, and, since the village is situated in the fringes of a forest, the collection of forest produce forms an important source of livelihood. Bidyanidhi and Kalinagar are in Bardhaman District, where paddy yields have traditionally been high. Kalmandasguri in Koch Bihar District and Amarsinghi in Malda District are villages where paddy and jute cultivation predominates, and where mechanisation (other than the energisation of well irrigation) is low. Thuthipakar is a village in Uttar Dinajpur where the cropping pattern has recently shifted from paddy to tea and pineapple. Tentultala, in the estuarine region of North 24 Parganas, has also witnessed major changes in cropping pattern in recent years. Cultivation has shifted from paddy to prawn cultivation in the village.

Dalkati village in West Medinipur district did not have a Dalit population (Table 7). In the other villages Dalits constituted over 30 per cent of all households. Tentultala and Kalmandasguri each had a significant Muslim population, and Thuthipakar and Kalinagar each had a significant Adivasi population.

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<sup>10</sup> The survey was directed by V. K. Ramachandran and Vikas Rawal.

Table 7 *Social composition in the study villages, May June 2005*

Village	District	As percentage of total households			
		Dalit	Adivasi	Muslim	Others
Tentultala	North 24 Parganas	39.0	0.4	59.4	1.2
Amarsinghi	Malda	32.7	0.9	-	66.4
Thuthipakar	Uttar Dinajpur	36.2	55.9	-	7.9
Kalmandasguri	Koch Bihar	46.1	5.5	39.8	8.6
Bidyanidhi	Barddhaman	47.9	-	18.3	33.8
Kalinagar	Barddhaman	32.8	38.8	-	28.4
Dalkati	West Medinipur	-	69.3	-	30.7

Source: Survey data

In three of these seven villages, the Index of Access to agricultural land of Dalit households was greater than one (Table 8). The Index value was 1.49, 1.28 and 1.41 in Tentultala, Thuthipakar and Kalmandasguri respectively. In other words, in these villages, the share of Dalits in land ownership was greater than their share in the population. In the two villages of Barddhaman district, the index values for Dalits were as low as 0.2 and 0.3. In Tentultala, Kalmandasguri and Bidyanidhi, Muslim households constitute a substantial part of the population, but the index value for Muslims was low.

Table 8 *Index of access to agricultural land (ownership holdings), by social group*

Village	District	Access Index - ownership holdings			
		Dalit	Adivasi	Muslim	Others
Tentultala	N-24 Parganas	1.5	5.8	0.6	2.3
Amarsinghi	Malda	0.5	0.0	-	1.3
Thuthipakar	Uttar Dinajpur	1.3	0.8	-	1.4
Kalmandasguri	Koch Bihar	1.4	1.2	0.5	1.1
Bidyanidhi	Barddhaman	0.2	-	0.4	2.4
Kalinagar	Barddhaman	0.3	0.3	-	2.8
Dalkati	West Medinipur	-	0.6	-	1.8

Source: Survey data

The Access Index for operational holdings of land is shown in Table 9. In each village, the index value for operational holdings for Dalit households is marginally higher than the corresponding index for ownership holdings. This indicates that land tenancies have helped Dalit households gain access to operational holdings of land. The case of Tentultala is an interesting one. In Tentultala, extension of prawn cultivation has had a striking effect on the pattern of land distribution. Operational holdings in Tentultala are highly concentrated in the hands of a few prawn tank owners who lease in most of the village land for prawn cultivation. The tank owners

living in the village belong to Dalit and Muslim households and that is reflected in the new position of these two social groups with respect to land.

Table 9 *Index of Access to agricultural land (operational holdings), by social group*<sup>11</sup>

Village	District	Access Index - operational holdings			
		Dalit	Adivasi	Muslim	Others
Tentultala	N 24 Parganas	1.6	2.2	0.6	0.0
Amarsinghi	Malda	0.6	0.0		1.2
Thuthipakar	Uttar Dinajpur	1.4	0.8		1.1
Kalmandasguri	Koch Bihar	1.5	1.3	0.5	0.7
Bidyamidhi	Barddhaman	0.3		0.4	2.4
Kalinagar	Barddhaman	0.5	0.4		2.4
Dalkati	West Medinipur		0.6		1.9

Source: Survey data

To sum up, in three of the six villages with a Dalit population, the value of the access index for Dalits is greater than one.

#### V. LAND REFORMS

West Bengal is well known for its land reform, a policy on which there is a large literature.<sup>12</sup> Till 2005, 445,503 hectares of agricultural land were redistributed in West Bengal to 2,817,179 beneficiaries. In a State in which 23 per cent of the population is Dalit and 5.5 per cent is Adivasi (Census of India 2001), of the new title-holders, 37 per cent were Dalits and 19 per cent were Adivasis (GoWB 2005-06). The social-distributive effects of the land reform programme are well acknowledged. The West Bengal Human Development Report 2004 states that “the disproportionate granting of *patta* rights to Scheduled Castes and Tribes is likely to have led not just to some degree of economic empowerment, but also a greater sense of social dignity as well” (p. 39).

The land reform programme of the Left Front Government in West Bengal brought land to new sections of the peasantry (Mishra and Rawal 2002). Land reforms in West Bengal had three components: tenancy reforms, redistribution of ceiling surplus land to the landless and the poor and distribution of homestead land. Our analysis below deals with the distribution of ceiling surplus land and of homestead land.

<sup>11</sup> Muslims are treated as a separate social group because there are considerable differences between Muslims and Other Non Dalit/Adivasi households in terms of economic conditions and access to land.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance, Mishra and Rawal (2002)



Table 10 *Redistribution of agricultural land in the study villages till May June 2005*

Village	District	Number of assignees	Share of assignees in total households	Area of agricultural land redistributed (in acres)	Share of redistributed land in total ownership holdings
Dalkati	W-Medinipur	107	59.8	47.3	32.0
Kalinagar	Barddhaman	27	40.3	4.5	13.6
Amarsinghi	Malda	33	30.8	11.6	15.0
Kalmandasguri	Koch Bihar	36	28.1	16.9	18.2
Bidyanidhi	Barddhaman	28	19.7	2.8	1.9
Tentultala	N 24 Parganas	19	7.6	5.5	3.6
Thuthipakar	U-Dinajpur	9	7.1	9.7	8.8

Source: Survey data

First, let us consider the redistribution of crop land to the landless and rural poor. Table 10 shows that the implementation of land reforms varied across the seven villages. In Dalkati almost 60 per cent of the households received agricultural land, while in Thuthipakar only 7 per cent of the households benefited from redistribution of agricultural land. This includes households that obtained pattas directly, and households that inherited assigned land. In terms of the area redistributed, the highest was in Dalkati, where 32 per cent of the total area of household ownership holdings in the village was acquired in the course of land reform. The area of redistributed land was lowest in Bidyanidhi, where only 1.9 per cent of total agricultural land owned was redistributed land.<sup>13</sup> It is interesting also to note that not one of the study villages was untouched by land reforms.

The major beneficiaries of the distribution of agricultural land in our study villages have been Dalit and Adivasi households and in Kalmandasguri, Muslim households (Table 11). In Dalkati, Tentultala, Kalinagar and Bidyanidhi more than 70 per cent of the agricultural land redistributed was assigned to Dalit and Adivasi households. In Kalmandasguri, 40 per cent of the redistributed agricultural land was assigned to Muslim households and another 43 per cent to Dalit and Adivasi households. In two of the villages, Thuthipakar and Amarsinghi, where major

<sup>13</sup> Though the area redistributed in Bidyanidhi was only 2 per cent of total area of ownership holdings, nearly 20 per cent of the households acquired land. This reflects a situation where, even when there is a demand for land and a political will to redistribute land, the availability of ceiling surplus land that can be acquired and redistributed poses a problem.

beneficiaries were non-Dalits, most of the non-Dalit households who were assigned land belonged to the Other Backward Classes group.<sup>14</sup>

Table 11 *Share of different social groups in agricultural land distributed in the study villages till May-June 2005*

Village	District	Percentage of total agricultural land redistributed				Total land distributed (in acres)
		Dalit	Adivasi	Muslim	Others	
Dalkati	W-Medinipur		73.2		26.8	47.26
Kalmandasguri	Koch Bihar	18.9	24.7	39.5	16.8	19.01
Amarsinghi	Malda	5.2	0.0		95.4	11.64
Thuthipakar	U-Dinajpur	8.4	45.4		46.3	9.72
Tentultala	N 24 Parganas	70.8	0.0	29.2	0	6.50
Kalinagar	Barddhaman	39.2	50.2		10.6	4.52
Bidyandhi	Barddhaman	82.1		17.9	0	2.80

Source: Survey data

Secondly, let us consider the distribution of house-site or homestead land, which is an important component of land reform in West Bengal. Access to homestead land is also an important aspect of land ownership in India. Ownership of homestead land means not only a place to live and a changed position in society, but also represents access to a new source of potential nutrition and livelihood support as a result of kitchen-garden cultivation.<sup>15</sup> The absence of ownership of a house-site is often a key factor in the unfreedom of peasant and agricultural worker households in India.<sup>16</sup>

In all seven study villages, Muslim, Dalit and Adivasi households were the major beneficiaries of homestead land distribution (Table 12). Out of 210 households that gained homestead land, 21 per cent were Dalit, 46 per cent were Adivasi, 24 per cent were Muslim, and 10 per cent belonged to other caste groups. Of the last group, a majority belonged to the Other Backward Classes. An important feature of the distribution of homestead land in Kalmandasguri, Thuthipakar and Dalkati was the larger size of homesteads compared to the other villages. In these villages, the average size of homesteads distributed per household was 0.13 acres, 0.15 acres and 0.17 acres respectively. Larger homesteads allow for kitchen garden cultivation and rearing backyard poultry, both a common phenomenon in these villages. Such activities enhance household incomes and nutritional standards.

<sup>14</sup> The households belonging Other Backward Classes group in Amarsinghi primarily belong to Tantubai Tanti caste. These are income poor migrant households from Bangladesh who were resettled in this village.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Government of Tripura (2007)

<sup>16</sup> See the discussion of this dimension in Ramachandran (1990)

Table 12 *Share of different social groups in homestead land distributed in the study villages till May-June 2005*

Village	District	Percentage of total assignees				Number of total assignees
		Dalit	Adivasi	Muslim	Others	
Dalkati	W-Medinipur		90.5		9.5	74
Bidyaidhi	Barddhaman	50.0		0	50.0	4
Kalinagar	Barddhaman	41.7	58.3		0.0	24
Amarsinghi	Malda	60.0	5.0		35.0	20
Tentulata	N 24 Parganas	13.6	0.0	86.4	0.0	22
Kalmandasguri	Koch Bihar	24.5	9.4	58.5	7.5	53
Thuthipakar	U-Dinajpur	30.8	69.2		0.0	13
All villages		21.0	45.7	23.8	9.5	210

Source: Survey data

## VI. PARTICIPATION IN LAND MARKETS

In a 2001 study, Vikas Rawal showed that while empirical studies in parts of Uttar Pradesh and Punjab had found that the net buyers of cultivable land were large landowners and that the net sellers of land were small landowners, the trend was quite the opposite in the two villages of West Bengal he studied. The major buyers of land in the period 1977 to 1995 in these two villages of Bankura District were landless households and small landowners. The paper attributed the ability to purchase land to the increased purchasing power among the poor in Bengal facilitated by land distribution, tenancy reform, higher wage rates, and access to credit.

The present study confirms and adds a new dimension to this conclusion. In the survey of seven villages, information was collected from households on the purchase and sale of all types of land between 1990 and 2005. Five of the seven villages have significant Dalit populations. In four of them, Dalit and Muslim households were net buyers of land, while caste Hindu households were net sellers. The only exception to the rule was Amarsinghi, where both Dalit and non-Dalit households were net sellers of land and Tentultala, where caste Hindus were net purchasers of land.

Table 13 *Purchase and sale of land in the study villages, by social group, 1990-2005*

Social group		Tentultala	Amarsinghi	Thuthipakar	Kalmandasguri	Bidyamidhi	Kalinagar	Dalkati
		N-24 Parganas	Malda	Uttar Dinajpur	Koch Bihar	Barddha- man	Barddha- man	West Medinipur
Dalit	Land purchased	16.0	1.3	21.1	29.4	9.1	0.2	
	Land sold	5.1	1.9	6.1	15.0	0.5	0.0	
	Net purchase	11.0	-0.6	14.9	14.3	8.6	0.2	
Adivasi	Land purchased	0.0	0.0	8.7	0.7		0.9	6.74
	Land sold	0.5	0.0	29.6	0.7		0.0	0.98
	Net purchase	-0.5	0.0	-20.9	0.0		0.9	5.8
Muslim	Land purchased	13.4			18.8	3.3		
	Land sold	7.1			3.1	0.8		
	Net purchase	6.3			15.8	2.6		
Others	Land purchased	1.2	10.4	3.0	4.8	6.3	1.8	12.03
	Land sold	0.3	20.0	6.4	6.6	7.1	4.4	7.81
	Net purchase	1.0	-9.6	-3.4	-1.8	-0.8	-2.5	4.2
All	Land purchased	30.6	11.7	32.8	53.7	18.7	2.9	18.77
	Land sold	12.9	21.9	42.1	25.4	8.4	4.4	8.79
	Net purchase	17.7	-10.2	-9.3	28.3	10.3	-1.5	10.0

Source: Survey data

The acquisition of ceiling-surplus land by the Government of West Bengal for redistribution was and still remains a major disincentive for landowners with relatively large holdings to purchase land. The case of Bidyanidhi is a striking example of how large land owning households have sold their rural property and have moved to urban areas for new types of employment. In this village, 13 acres of land was acquired for redistribution from the largest land owning household and the household owned roughly 16 acres of land during the 2005 survey. On my subsequent visit to the village in June 2006, I found that the household had sold another 5 acres of land. The head of the household informed me that most of the household members now lived outside the village and they had decided to sell the land before the State acquired any more land. In a State where control over land by old-style landowners have ceased to be a source of social and political power as in the past, large landowning households that are not mainly dependent on agricultural incomes for their livelihoods have not hesitated to sell their land.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The exclusion faced by Dalits in India in terms of access to basic economic resources remains a reality in contemporary India. In particular, the right of the Dalit masses to productive resources

such as land has generally been left unattended, if not grossly violated, since access to land demands deep and radical changes in social structure. West Bengal is one State in India where efforts have been made to grant land rights to landless households, especially Dalit and Adivasi households. The impact of land reforms in West Bengal is reflected in the national level statistics on land holdings.

Secondary data show that Dalit households in West Bengal have better access to land compared to other States. This is indicated by the fact that the proportion of landless Dalit households in terms of ownership holdings is lower in West Bengal than the national average and the Index of Access to agricultural land is higher than the national average. There has been very little increase in the incidence of landlessness among Dalits in West Bengal between 1993-94 and 2004-05.

Village level data show that Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim households have been major beneficiaries of land reforms in West Bengal. These social groups have gained access to agricultural and homestead land through the process of land reforms. The policy of land reform implemented by the Government of West Bengal has thus contributed though in a limited way to lowering inequalities across social groups in the State. Village level data show that Dalit and Muslim households were net buyers of land in recent years. This has also increased their access and control over this very crucial economic resource.

## ANNEXURE 1

As we have shown, the NSS 2003 data divide household ownership holdings of land into three component parts:

- 1) a. homestead: uncultivated part  
    b. homestead: cultivated part
- 2) all land other than homestead

The data on the proportion of households that do not own any land other than homesteads, that is category (2), was discussed in Table 4. Table A1 presents data on the sum of all land other than homestead and the cultivated part of homestead (that is, 2 plus 1b). The general conclusions for Table 4 hold other than for a few States, particularly Kerala, Punjab, Tripura and Haryana.

Cultivation on homestead land is an important feature of household cultivation in some States. This is especially true for States like Kerala, Punjab, Tripura and Haryana, where the proportion of landless households decreased by more than 20 percentage points when the cultivated part of homesteads is included in ownership holdings. In Punjab and Haryana, the proportion of Dalit households that owned land decreased from 88.9 per cent and 84.1 per cent to 43.3 per cent and 40.8 per cent respectively when cultivated part of homesteads was included in ownership holdings.

In Punjab and Haryana, the fact that the major proportion of the agricultural land owned by the poorest is concentrated in their homestead holdings reflects a long history of customary and statutory exclusion of Dalits from access to land.<sup>17</sup> In the case of Tripura and Kerala, the fact that a substantial portion of the agricultural land owned by the poor is concentrated in their homestead holdings reflects the traditional role of homestead land in household economies and the locational pattern of residences and cultivated fields in these States.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The Punjab Alienation of Land Act 1901 prevented Dalits and other non-agricultural castes from owning agricultural land. See Thorat (2004).

<sup>18</sup> See Ramachandran (1996), Ramakumar (2005), Government of Tripura (2007)

Table A1. Proportion of rural households that do not own any land other than homesteads (excluding cultivated part of homestead) as proportion of total households, 2003-04, by social groups, in per cent

States	Adivasi	Dalit	Non Dalit/Adivasi	All
Andhra Pradesh	44.1	59.8	45.2	48.7
Arunachal Pradesh	3.4	53.6	93.3	22.6
Assam	16.2	22.0	23.9	23.0
Bihar	19.6	51.0	25.0	30.9
Chattisgarh	12.6	20.7	27.4	20.8
Delhi	99.4	93.5	97.0	96.1
Goa	0.0		51.2	49.5
Gujarat	29.6	50.2	34.6	35.4
Haryana	0.0	40.8	19.9	26.0
Himachal Pradesh	14.5	20.9	23.0	21.9
Jammu & Kashmir	15.3	17.1	5.6	7.3
Jharkhand	15.0	23.0	19.2	18.1
Karnataka	34.7	42.0	27.5	30.7
Kerala	37.8	58.1	33.9	36.7
Madhya Pradesh	19.1	24.4	23.5	22.8
Maharashtra	53.3	58.9	30.2	38.3
Manipur	4.2	41.6	20.4	13.5
Meghalaya	17.4	22.5	46.5	19.9
Mizoram	6.7	100.0	2.5	6.7
Nagaland	4.4		100.0	10.8
Orissa	27.6	42.6	28.7	31.1
Punjab	30.0	43.3	20.8	29.5
Rajasthan	5.8	25.8	9.9	12.3
Sikkim	29.6	53.3	40.4	38.0
Tamil Nadu	48.6	67.2	51.4	55.4
Tripura	21.9	37.3	38.1	33.3
Uttar Pradesh	37.9	21.0	14.3	16.3
Uttaranchal	2.3	21.5	21.4	21.2
West Bengal	33.9	39.3	32.7	34.7
<b>India</b>	<b>26.4</b>	<b>41.4</b>	<b>28.5</b>	<b>31.1</b>

Source: Computed from NSS Land and Livestock Holdings Survey, 59<sup>th</sup> Round

## ANNEXURE 2

Table A2. Households that do not cultivate land as a proportion of all households, by social groups, rural India and States, 2004-05, in per cent

States	Adivasi	Dalit	Non Dalit/ Adivasi	All
Jammu & Kashmir	0.0	17.2	9.3	10.5
Himachal Pradesh	18.7	22.5	17.4	18.9
Assam	10.6	27.2	27.6	24.3
Uttar Pradesh & Uttaranchal	41.3	36.3	25.2	28.3
Madhya Pradesh & Chattisgarh	28.5	43.6	28.7	31.4
Rajasthan	11.1	45.1	23.0	26.0
West Bengal	53.7	48.6	46.1	47.4
Orissa	31.4	53.4	42.3	41.5
Kerala	44.5	55.0	33.5	36.4
Tripura	42.6	56.6	59.0	54.1
Karnataka	51.9	62.2	40.3	46.1
Bihar & Jharkhand	19.3	63.4	36.4	41.1
Maharashtra	53.9	67.6	42.8	48
Gujarat	37.3	74.5	49.6	50.6
Andhra Pradesh	57.1	74.7	57.4	60.7
Tamil Nadu	90.0	84.5	67.2	71.8
Punjab	84.4	94.1	48.9	68.3
Haryana	18.3	94.5	45.5	59.3
<b>India</b>	<b>33.6</b>	<b>57.4</b>	<b>39.6</b>	<b>42.8</b>

Source: Computed from NSS Report No. 515 (Part I) and Report No. 516



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