

Ambedkarite Perspectives on Land, Water, and Irrigation Policies in Karnataka's Agrarian Regions Bhimasheppa Muddapur¹ & Mahalinga K.²

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ABSTRACT:

This paper looks at the land, water, and irrigation policies within the agrarian areas of Karnataka regarding the concept of social justice, redistribution of resources, and the role of the state as put forward by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. It is concerned with the ways the contemporary land reforms, irrigation programs, and state water policy answer the question of caste inequality, ownership, and access by the Scheduled Castes and other marginalized rural population. The analysis, relying on the descriptive approach that is founded on secondary sources, such as policy reports, commission papers, and scholarly literature, emphasizes that there are structural inequalities in land tenure, lack of equal access to irrigation sources (canal and groundwater), and that the Dalit populations are largely disinterested in institutions of water governance. It maintains that the principles of equal distribution of resources, legal protection, and democratic management of common resources of the work of Ambedkar offer a serious look into the agrarian policy regime in Karnataka to substantively equalize and dignify the historically oppressed communities.

KEYWORDS:

Karnataka, land reforms, irrigation, water policy, social justice, Ambedkar.

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Introduction:

The land, water, and economic democracy philosophy by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar provides a strong normative framework to assess the agrarian policy in modern India. His argument that without the means of productive production, there can be no social equality, puts land and water at the center of the fighting of dignity and citizenship in the rural society. Karnataka, situated along agro-climatic zones, land reforms, and the scale of surface and groundwater development is a valuable backdrop in which to explore to what extent state policy is compatible with the ideas of equality and social justice embodied by Ambedkarites in distributing

resources. Land ownership, tenancy and irrigation access in the agrarian parts of Karnataka is still deeply rooted in caste hierarchy. Dominating castes continue to dominate large and medium pieces of land, and Scheduled Castes and other marginalized communities often end up landless or occupying marginal, unirrigated acreages. The agricultural productivity has improved in various areas due to irrigation infrastructure—major dams, networks of canals, and groundwater extraction using boreholes, however, the allocation of the advantages has not been socially equal. The planning and allocation of water as a national wealth that should be used by the poor is a significant reference point on which to assess the water and irrigation policies of Karnataka as recognized by Ambedkar. This paper uses an Ambedkarite view of land, water, and irrigation policy in Karnataka, on the impacts of these policies on the agrarian communities of the marginalized. It discusses how the existing arrangements shift either to the egalitarian rural community of resources envisioned by Ambedkar or and recreates the older systems of dependency and marginalization.

Objectives:

- To explain the key land, water and irrigation policies in agriculture areas in Karnataka and elaborate on their objective stated in both equity and development terms.
- To explore how these policies facilitate or limit fair access to land and irrigation to the Scheduled Castes and other marginalized rural populations.
- To explain these tendencies in the policies as the reflection of the ideas of the social justice, redistribution of resources and the role which the state plays in the changes of the agrarian relations as proposed by Ambedkar.

Methodology:

The researcher adheres to descriptive approach to research where the research is based purely on the secondary sources to give a systematic representation of Ambedkarite views of land, water, and irrigation in Karnataka. It does not strive to take up field-based data-collection or causal inference but rather it is a synthesis of existing knowledge.

The sources used include: The state policies concerning land reforms, irrigation projects, and state water.

Report of state and central commissions of agrarian development and water governance.

Books and journal articles on the economic thought of Ambedkar, and agrarian change in Karnataka.

Rural development policy notes and rural development policy appraisals and Dalit welfare schemes and water management schemes policy notes and appraisals.

The analysis will be done in three phases:

- A descriptive overview of the main ideas of the land, water and planning as held by Ambedkar is given first.
- Second, significant land and irrigation policy aspects in Karnataka are outlined, focusing on equity provisions and Dalit-oriented schemes.
- Third, such policies are construed to find the areas of overlap, contradiction and missed opportunities against the principles of Ambedkarite.

Review of Literature

Another aspect that is highlighted by Ambedkar in his writings on land and water is the fact that ownership of productive resources is the core of social emancipation. The proposals of state ownership of major industries, communal management of land in large farms and powerful protective laws against tenants and agricultural workers reveal his opinion that political democracy alone would not emancipate the oppressed castes. His ideas of multipurpose river valley development, central planning of inter-state rivers, and establishment of water and power development institutions were based on the notion that big, publicly owned infrastructure had to go to the poor, rather than the interests of the regional elites.

Investigations of Karnataka agrarian structure revealed that land reform and control of tenancies enhanced security to a part of the cultivating classes but it failed to eradicate landlessness among the Dalits. Studies of the irrigation development show that the number of canals and ground water has expanded greatly, but the accessibility is uneven, with small and marginal farmers being at the end of the canal or relying on expensive private boreholes. Researchers studying Dalit rural livelihoods in Karnataka note that they remain reliant on wage labor, have restricted access to credit and technology, and also they are susceptible to drought

in the unirrigated regions.

Ambedkarite movements in the state Work indicates that Dalit movements have actively sought to connect land rights, house sites and access to drinking water to the larger call of social change that was made by Ambedkar. According to this literature, an Ambedkarite interpretation of land and water policy introduces the agrarian analysis to the questions of caste power, state responsibility, and democratic dominion over common resources.

The structure of the land policies of Karnataka and Ambedkar.

Ambedkar presented his argument that the caste system is not merely a social order but also an economic order in which the ownership and control of land and all other resources is a foundation of the dominance of upper castes. In this sense, land reforms need to be evaluated on the basis of the effect they have on the most oppressed classes rather than through the aggregate redistribution statistics. In Karnataka, the ceiling laws and tenancy reform did result in redistribution and some security of tenants, but much of Scheduled Castes were left landless agricultural laborers or with small and fragmented and unirrigated plots. The collective responsibility and reforms through the state as spurred by Ambedkar implies that incremental, market-based or litigation-intensive reforms do not accommodate the vision of transformation. The questions that would be required in an Ambedkarite interpretation of the Karnataka land policy would include:

What is the number of Dalit families that are enjoying a secure title to cultivable land?

What is the share of irrigated and productive land belonging to the Dalits?

What is the specific way in which land allocation schemes can respond to historical dispossession?

The schemes to buy land in behalf of Dalit women or give cultivable land to the landless laborers echo the insistent call by Ambedkar to ensure economic and gender justice. However, the small scale of those schemes and lack of implementation documents, such as delay in buying land, low land quality, irrigation and support infrastructure demonstrate that the system of agrarian power is mostly preserved. Even in an Ambedkarite sense land policy in Karnataka is still seen more in terms of

incremental rather than revolutionary.

Water, irrigation and the concept of national wealth as came to be understood by Ambedkar. Ambedkar viewed water as one of the national resources which needed a coordinated, supra-provincial planning. His ideas on multi-purpose river valley projects were associated with flood control, famine alleviation, irrigation development, and hydro-power generation to develop the country on a wide basis. He also stressed that it requires large projects to incorporate rehabilitation and resettlement of displaced populations which was an early concern with social impacts. In Karnataka, the command areas have been increased by large and medium irrigation projects of Krishna, Cauvery, Tungabhadra and other rivers and have allowed a transition to high-value crops. Nonetheless, an Ambedkarite evaluation is concerned with beneficiaries of irrigation water and whose lands are dry. According to empirical studies in the state, it is proposed:

More predictable canal irrigation is usually gained by the head-reach villages and larger landowners.

The irregular supply is common in tail-end villages, small farmers and Dalit hamlets.

Borehole emergent development of groundwater is highly capital intensive where individuals with access to credit and equipment benefit whereas poor households rely on selling labor or share-based water services.

The fact that the call made by Ambedkar to the state transcending the local provincial and sectarian interests in the cause of collective wellbeing suggests that the water policy should be made aware of redressing these imbalances. This in practice would imply canal extension, tank rejuvenation and ground water recharge, on a priority basis in Dalit dominated and rainfed regions, formation of transparent and inclusive water user associations and that pricing and energy policy should not be biased in favour of large pump owners and small farmers. There is imbalanced implementation of such measures in water policies that Karnataka has implemented.

The problem of institutional responsibility and democratic control.

Ambedkar viewed the state as a tool that may either serve or decline the caste privilege, based on its constitutional undertakings and institutional design. He demanded that law and administration should be

designed in a way that they benefit the interests of the weakest segments. When applied to the agrarian context in Karnataka, it means that land and water institutions need to address the issue of representation and voice of the Dalit communities. This would be in the area of land administration, which would include active identification of surplus land, strict implementation of the ceiling laws and transparent land allocation processes with legal assistance to marginalized claimants. In water management, it would presuppose: Membership of Dalit representatives in the watershed committees, water user associations, and local irrigation management organizations. Surveillance of discrimination of access to canals, wells and drinking water sources. Redressal mechanisms to deal with grievances that are made available to rural poor in their language and social environment. Another lens on agrarian policies that is also attracting attention is the ways that agrarian policies intersect with caste-based violence and social boycotts concerning land and water issues. In case Dalit tries to enforce land and autonomous access to irrigation, which causes social sanctions, legal reforms should be supported by powerful protection and social education. In the absence of these, what happens to the policy instruments may be left on paper and older hierarchies still lived.

Conclusion

The agrarian politics of Karnataka can be evaluated using a strict set of standards of Ambedkarite views on land, water, and irrigation. This framework focuses on providing rural communities with the most marginalized as the center of analysis and prioritizing them as compared to aggregate development indicators and concentrating on substantive equality in accessing resources. The historic land reforms, irrigation ventures and new water policy projects of the state have produced significant production and infrastructure advantages but have not completely removed caste based differences in ownership, control and decision making. In order to approach somewhat near to the vision of Ambedkar, land policies of Karnataka would have had to increase secure and irrigated landholding among Dalit and other marginalized families in proportions of credit, extension, and market assistance. The policies of water and irrigation would have to put priority on tail-end and rainfed areas, democratize the water governance institutions, and articulate caste-based exclusions in access and management. The ability of the state to

formulate and enact such measures is based on institutional commitment, political will as well as sustained mobilization of Ambedkarite social movements. Based on a descriptive review of the current policies and the literature, the idea presented by Ambedkar appears to be quite useful in the modern discussion of agrarian justice in Karnataka. It calls on policy makers, scientists, and other activists to redefine land and water as not just a source of supply of goods, but as a tool of emancipation and equity to the historically oppressed societies.

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