

**CASTE, LANDLESSNESS, AND AGRARIAN DISTRESS:
DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR'S PERSPECTIVES ON THE
MARGINALIZATION OF FARMERS AND LABOUR REFORMS**

Yankoba Mangalapur* & Dr. Dhruva B. Jyothi**

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ABSTRACT

Caste shapes farming struggles across India. Not just known for drafting the constitution or fighting caste abuse, B.R. Ambedkar deeply analyzed land systems under British rule and after. His work focused on peasants, farm workers, especially Dalits crushed by hierarchy. Early writings like his 1918 piece on tiny farms show how he saw fragmented plots as an effect, not root cause. Underlying problems? Unemployed hands in fields, weak investment, missing factories - this built deep countryside hardship. Through decades, he tied land pain directly to caste exclusion. Looking closely at how he tackled the Khoti and Mahar Watan setups in the Bombay Presidency, his thoughts laid out in States and Minorities (1947) come into view. His time as Labour Member under the Viceroy's council between 1942 and 1946 shaped key worker safeguards - work hours capped, pay floors set, maternity care ensured, injury coverage provided, groups allowed to form freely. These steps taken side by side suggest Ambedkar saw hardship in farming regions not as separate issues but tied together - caste rank, missing land titles, labor abuse feeding one another. That same pattern shows up now: farmers ending their lives, earnings stuck low, women doing more farm work, Dalits and Adivasis still locked out of owning fields - all traces back to old colonial roots. Because of this, ideas once pushed

* **Yankoba Mangalapur**, Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Karnataka University, Dharwad.

** **Dr. Dhruva B. Jyothi**, Senior Professor and Chairman, Department of Studies and Research in Sociology, Karnatak University, Dharwad.

by him - state-led factory growth, shared farming plots, farmland brought under public control, legal shields for workers, land given with attention to caste history - still cut deep today, shaping both ethics and law for changing rural India.

KEYWORDS: *Ambedkar, Caste, Agrarian Distress, Landlessness, Small Holdings, Khoti System, Mahar Watan.*

1. Introduction

India's farming setup, during British rule and after, was never just about who owns land. Instead, it ran on caste lines. Who does which job gets passed down through families. Some tasks are seen as clean, others dirty, creating a ranked system. People labelled "untouchable" were shut out from owning any plot at all. These layers built what Ambedkar called rising respect for some, growing scorn for others. In this fixed imbalance, small farmers sit beside tenants, landless workers, and Dalits trapped in debt - all caught in linked forms of hardship. His thoughts on economics, often overlooked next to his role in shaping laws and rights, dug deep into these connections early on. Out of Ambedkar's economic training came sharp attention to rural life. Though best known as a Dalit leader, his roots were in rigorous study - Columbia, then London - where numbers and policy shaped his vision. A paper written in 1918 on tiny farms hinted at what would follow: deeper dives into money systems, labor rights, land patterns. While speaking in Bombay's council during the late twenties through thirties, he wove economics with justice for oppressed communities. Work under the colonial government between 1942 and 1946 let him test ideas in real governance. By 1947, when outlining plans within States and Minorities, it all connected - land reform tied firmly to dismantling caste hierarchy. This study looks into Ambedkar's views on caste, lack of land ownership, and hardship in farming regions; it also weighs how useful his ideas still are when tackling labor issues and changing village life. His take went beyond just handing out resources - instead, he showed how deep systems keep people down, a point that hits hard even now when trying to make sense of why inequality lingers across Indian countryside.

2. Objectives of the Study

Four aims shape how the research moves forward. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's thinking shows how caste ranks tie into missing land ownership, especially when farming struggles under British rule and after. His view unfolds through close study of power, soil access, and social layers across changing times. Though some overlook it, his work reveals patterns still felt today in rural hardship. Because status shapes who gets what, lower castes often face exclusion by design rather than chance. When control over earth shifts slowly, old hierarchies adapt instead of fading away. Start by looking at Ambedkar's work on land issues, especially his 1918 piece about small farms in India and what could fix them. His thoughts show up again through laws he backed much later. One such effort was the 1937 move against the Khoti system, where landlords held tight control over tenants. Earlier, back in 1928, there was another push linked to rights tied to Mahar Watan lands, revisited in 1937 too. These steps connect directly to how peasants lived and worked. Each document reflects concern for farming people stuck under unfair systems. Focus stays firm on improving lives shaped by deep-rooted inequality. Looking at how Ambedkar shaped labor changes while serving under the Viceroy between 1942 and 1946. His role touched pay rules, time spent on the job, worker protections, along with shared negotiation rights. Though not always highlighted, his influence ran deep during those years. Because he pushed for fairness where it had been missing. Where others hesitated, he laid groundwork quietly. Each policy shift carried traces of that period. Even now, some structures reflect what began back then. Looking at how Ambedkar's ideas still fit today comes first. State-driven industry once seemed key. Farming together was part of his vision too. Land taken under public control mattered deeply. Fair sharing based on caste history shaped his approach. Each piece connects to current farm troubles across India.

3. Methodology

Looking closely at how things connect shapes this work. From Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's words, drawn straight from the BAWS series by the Maharashtra government, ideas take form slowly. Instead of broad claims, attention sticks to what was actually written

or spoken. Alongside these primary materials, findings from national surveys - like those tracking farming conditions or household income - add context quietly. Books and papers reviewed by experts also feed into the picture, without overstating their role. Rather than forcing conclusions, meaning emerges through careful reading. Each passage from Ambedkar meets real-world numbers on land ownership, pay in villages, and patterns tied to caste. What results comes not from theory alone but from letting texts speak with present-day evidence. Looking closely at how ideas repeat in Ambedkar's texts shaped part of this work, while placing his legal suggestions into their proper time frame formed another. Examination relied on written material instead of interviews or surveys. Themes emerged by reviewing documents already available. Legal history helped show what influenced proposed laws back then.

4. Caste and the Agrarian Question in Colonial India To Ambedkar,

caste meant more than old customs - it shaped who got what work, who held wealth. From his early essay on castes up to Annihilation of Caste, he showed how hierarchy worked by ranking jobs and blocking access to things like farmland. Land mattered most because control over soil decided survival. Dalits were kept from owning plots, growing crops alone, choosing where to labor. It wasn't just custom keeping them out - it was enforced lack, built into daily life. Poverty stayed fixed not by accident, but design woven deep into village economies. Out near the western coast, under British rule, where Ambedkar first stepped into politics, deep-seated barriers stood firm - built on the Khoti practice in Konkan soil, another rooted in the Mahar Watan across village lands of Maharashtra. Power sat with middlemen called Khots who could decide a farmer's fate without appeal, whereas Mahars found themselves locked into lifelong duties just for scraps of farmland. These setups turned birth rank straight into chains and empty hands. His journey in public life opened through farm-linked struggles: leading people to drink from the Chavdar pond at Mahad (1927), challenging temple doors shut to untouchables later at Kalaram (1930) - each act tied tightly to long legal fights aiming at tearing down caste-based control over earth and harvest. What made Ambedkar's view stand out was his rejection of seeing farmers as all

the same. While dominant nationalist and Gandhian narratives often painted “the peasant” as one uniform group suffering under colonial tax, he looked closer. Inside rural communities, he argued, power split people into distinct groups. Landowners from upper castes held control, followed by tenants of middle castes, then small growers from lower castes, with Dalits at the very bottom - working without owning any land. Reform aimed only at colonial structures missed these divisions entirely. Without addressing such hierarchies, change never reached those most crushed beneath them. Rent payments flowed through Khots, who handled collections across villages near the western coast. These middlemen gathered taxes while demanding extra work and fees from farmers tied to the soil. Power sat with them during British rule in parts of what used to be called Bombay Presidency. Labour duties piled up alongside cash demands, shaping daily life for many rural families. Control rested not with officials but local figures embedded in old hierarchies. People tilling land faced pressure beyond just harvest shares. Authority came dressed as tradition, enforced by those collecting on behalf of larger systems. Back then, the Mahar Watan tied the Mahar people to lifelong duties for villages - granted only poor-quality scraps of soil in return. This system kept generations locked into roles shaped by birth, passing down obligation like an inherited thread. Power stayed fixed, rooted in old hierarchies, while land rights remained thin and conditional. Lives unfolded within limits drawn long before they were born.

5. Small Holdings, Productive Capital, and the Problem

Wrongly Framed That 1918 study by Ambedkar, focused on small farms in India and how to fix them, stands as a rare early example of sharp economic analysis rooted in local conditions. Back then, most experts - including figures like Keatinge and government-backed Famine Commissions - insisted farm troubles came mainly from scattered plots; their answer always seemed to be merging those bits into larger units. Yet Ambedkar didn't just question that view - he picked it apart using real data alongside solid reasoning. It isn't field size that lifts farm output, he said, rather how much working money goes into each stretch of soil. When smaller plots get enough support - like water systems, better seeds, animal strength, loans - they often outgrow vast fields missing these tools. Merging land by itself fixes nothing at all. What drags down farming

across India, in his view, stems less from tiny farms and more from empty investment alongside a flood of unused hands: endless people clinging to narrow strips of earth, with factories nowhere near ready to take them in. Fixing India's deep rural crisis meant building factories, Ambedkar believed. Not farming more, but moving people into city jobs would ease pressure on farmland. More machines, fewer farmers per field - this shift could grow savings and change how crops were grown. He wrote this in 1918, long before others like Arthur Lewis shaped similar ideas about idle workers in poor nations. Yet for him, steel mills did more than boost output - they broke old chains. Factories didn't care who you were born as, unlike villages where status stuck from birth. Leaving the farm behind meant leaving caste control, stepping out of tight circles passed down through generations. Back in 1918, Ambedkar wrote about tiny farms across India. Though published first in an economic journal, it later appeared again in a government collection. The topic focused on land size struggles faced by farmers. Instead of vague ideas, he offered clear fixes. His work showed deep concern for rural hardship. Even decades later, the piece remains part of a larger compiled series. Page numbers ranged from four hundred fifty-three up to four hundred seventy-nine. While rooted in data, the tone stayed close to people's lives. Originally volume one of a society's publication, it gained new life years after. He did not shy from hard truths. Each argument built slowly, without flash. Thoughtful spacing between points gave weight. Not dramatic, yet firm in stance. This essay stands as one early voice among many in his lifelong effort. What weighed on Dr. Ambedkar's mind most wasn't tiny farms, but missing funds to grow them. Instead, he saw factories staying shut when they could've hired rural hands. Beyond fields, work options stayed thin - too few paths outside farming paid enough to live. Money didn't flow where it was needed most, leaving land idle despite effort. Progress stalled not from plot size, yet lack of investment and alternate livelihoods.

6. Landlessness

The Khoti Abolition Bill, and the Mahar Watan That day in 1937 changed how land worked along the Konkan coast. Though part of a bigger assembly, one voice stood firm for farmers without power. A new bill arrived - its aim, to dismantle old control held by

land agents called Khots. Instead, those tilling the soil would gain legal standing. Behind it all sat Ambedkar, speaking not with rage but cold clarity. His words cut deep: such systems offend basic fairness. This middleman, labelled Khot, did little yet took much. Not a builder, not a grower - just someone feeding off labour. Progress? It begins when the farmer can stand without fear. Without safety in farming, no real change takes root. Back then, in 1927 and once more ten years later, Ambedkar put forward legislation aiming to end the Mahar Watan. This system bound Mahars to their villages by inherited duties like delivering messages, watching crops, removing dead animals - all for small patches of poor-quality soil. He saw it not as tradition but as forced labor shaped by caste rank disguised as land rights. Getting rid of that setup, in his view, meant turning those locked in servitude into full members of society. Though quiet in tone, his push carried weight. For him, freedom started when dignity replaced duty imposed by birth. What ties these efforts together? It's Ambedkar's claim - landlessness isn't some random twist of population shifts or markets. Instead, it grows straight out of caste hierarchy. Long ago, owning earth became a privilege locked behind high-status birth; sacred rules stripped those called "untouchable" of any plot at all. When new India tried fixing old wrongs, ending landlord systems and setting limits on holdings, gains mostly slipped into hands of middle-ranking groups - not Dalits - who started with nothing anyway. The extra plots handed out were too few, often snatched back by dominant castes before change could take root. This exact failure? Ambedkar already saw it coming. In his 1947 plan titled States and Minorities, he pushed past common fixes: seize farmland under public control, hand it back through shared farming units - with government holding final title. That day in September, Ambedkar stood before the assembly. His voice carried through the hall, steady and clear. The year was 1937, seventeen days into the month that changed things. Laws were being questioned like never before. A bill lay waiting, meant to erase an old injustice. He spoke of landholders who held power too long. Their control had shaped lives unfairly for generations. Pages later, his words still echo - recorded in volume two of a lasting collection. Eighty pages marked the start, eight more showed how far it went.

7. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar as Labour Member:

Statutory Protections for Workers Working under the Viceroy between 1942 and 1946, Ambedkar reshaped India's labour laws in quiet but lasting ways. With factories expanding during war times, and villages losing people to cities, he stepped in where others hesitated. Instead of waiting, he advanced policies shielding workers across fields and factories alike. His time in office marked change not through speeches, but steady legal shifts. Because conditions were tough then, his actions carried weight beyond paperwork. Rural hands, often ignored, found new safeguards because of moves made in those years. What stands out most is how he pushed factory shifts down from fourteen hours to just eight, matching global norms set by the International Labour Organization. Paid time off found its place in law because of efforts tied to his influence. Equal earnings for identical jobs, no matter who performed them, took root during this period. Worker groups gained legal standing thanks to changes made to the Indian Trade Unions Act in 1943. Support for mothers at work emerged as a clear priority. Early designs for health coverage and retirement savings schemes began forming under his guidance - later becoming landmark laws in 1948 and 1952. Job placement centers appeared, linking job seekers with companies needing labor. A base level for wages was outlined long before it officially arrived via legislation in 1948. Laws improving safety in coal mines, rights for dockhands, and rules governing tough environments like mica and manganese pits carried his mark. What also mattered deeply - but gets little attention - was how Ambedkar saw farm workers. Not once or twice, yet many times he pointed out that most Indian laborers tilled fields rather than ran machines. Without set pay, clear shifts, or power to negotiate together, those working the soil faced deep injustice, both ethically and legally. His push reached into tea gardens, tobacco-rolling sheds, farmland - all places where Dalits and Adivasis made up much of the workforce. These efforts around work conditions tied closely to his fight against caste hierarchy; fair treatment on the job meant freedom for people long trapped by birth-based roles. Ambedkar sidestepped the usual clash of individual freedom versus group control. Instead of picking a side, he pushed for something else entirely - state-guided socialism shaped by law. His vision meant key sectors like farming and industry would belong

to the people through state oversight. Yet personal freedoms still held strong under this model. Written into States and Minorities, it tied fair economic rules directly into the nation's legal core. Not separate from politics, but built right beside it. Working under the Viceroy between 1942 and 1946, Ambedkar held responsibility for labour issues while shaping new laws aimed at workers in factories and farming. Though his role began during wartime, it led to lasting changes once peace returned. Because conditions were tough back then, he pushed reforms that addressed wages, safety, and rights. While others focused on independence, he built systems behind the scenes. Since industry was growing fast, rules had to catch up quickly. After four years, his work laid groundwork future leaders would later follow.

8. Collective Farming and “State Socialism” in Agriculture

Ambedkar, in his 1947 work States and Minorities, laid out a plan where major industries fell under public ownership. Insurance too would rest solely in government hands. Farming, meanwhile, was meant to function like an official enterprise. All farmland would shift into state control through acquisition. These lands were then to be split into uniform plots. Villagers got them back - leased - not as owners but as collective growers. Tools, money, and expert help came from authorities above. Harvests distributed based on contribution. Any assignment of fields tied to caste? That became illegal. This idea, bold even compared to leftist views in India during the 1940s, tackled three issues at once. Not only did it sever ties between caste and farmland, but also ensured that land distribution ignored caste completely since the government acted as the single owner. Instead of private funding gaps dragging down farming progress, pooled resources took charge of agricultural investment. Then again, avoiding what Ambedkar labelled village oppression stood as another goal - his view of rural life lacked warmth or sentimentality. Far from admiring Gandhi's idealized vision of self-governing villages, he bluntly called them nests of isolation, filled with prejudice and closed thinking. Since only a constitution-backed state held real power here, dismantling deep-rooted caste hierarchies inside those communities became possible. Pages 381 to 449 in Volume 1 of BAWs hold a reprint of Ambedkar's 1947 work titled States and Minorities. This piece examines rights belonging to

minorities within free India's constitutional framework. Thoughts on securing those rights also appear throughout. The original publication date remains 1947. Later inclusion in the collected works gave it wider reach. Each idea stands grounded in context of its time. Reflections on structure and justice shape much of the discussion. Found among significant writings by Ambedkar, it holds place without need for exaggeration.

9. Contemporary Relevance:

Continuities of Caste and Crisis Back then, Ambedkar pointed out patterns that still show up today. Not much has shifted beneath the surface when it comes to farming families' earnings - figures from 2019 confirm they fall short of basic needs. Growing crops brings in less money now than working for wages on someone else's plot. Landlessness sticks tightly to Dalit and Adivasi homes across generations. Government counts reveal how little farmland those communities actually hold compared to higher-caste groups. Research done recently keeps finding proof of this lasting imbalance. When people from oppressed castes try claiming their right to soil, resistance often turns violent - cases like Khairlanji speak clearly here. What one thinker saw long ago lives plainly in present struggles. Since the late 1990s, wave after wave of farmers taking their own lives has continued. Real wages in farming have barely moved, stuck near where they were years ago. Women now do much of the farm work because men leave to find jobs elsewhere. Land reforms remain unfinished business, never fully realized. These facts support what Ambedkar argued - patching up pricing rules or lending programs won't fix deep rural hardship. The roots of the crisis run deeper: industry fails to absorb surplus labor, caste shapes who gets tools and soil, fairness lacks legal backbone, people left tilling fields without safety nets. Problems hide beneath surface fixes. Still today, Ambedkar's ideas hold together well. Industry lifting people up forms one part. Wages protected by law matter for farm workers too. Land divided with caste in mind makes another piece. Government spending on farming fits into the plan. He wanted economic rights written into the Constitution. Not left to shift with changing governments. That thinking lines up with modern arguments. About whether those guiding policies can be enforced in court. A report from 2019 by the NSSO looks at farming households

across rural India. This survey covers land use and animal ownership patterns in villages. It comes from the 77th round of data collection by a national agency. The study falls under the Ministry responsible for statistics and programme execution. Information is provided by the Indian government. Thorat, Sukhdeo and Newman, Katherine (eds.) (2010). *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. That book by Teltumbde, Anand, came out in 2010. Its title? *The Persistence of Caste*. Murder in Khairlanji shaped much of what it says. Published in New Delhi. The press was Navayana. This work links old hierarchies with violent acts. Not a distant past - happened recently enough. Focus stays sharp on caste as ongoing force. Lives shattered because of social ranking. Structures hidden yet very real appear here. Beyond individual hate lies system after system.

10. Conclusion

Starts with how Dr. B.R. Ambedkar saw caste, lack of land, and farming struggles not as separate thoughts but parts of one clear idea. Because he treated caste like a frame holding up unfair farm systems, everything else followed. Poor tools, too many workers chasing little pay - that's what he said made villages poor. Instead of small fixes, he pushed big changes: factories rising alongside shared farms where people worked together. From early laws fighting landlord control to later rules boosting worker rights between 1942 and 1946, then again in his plans for minorities and states, each step carried his thinking forward. Ends by showing we cannot fix broken farmland without tearing down caste-built barriers first - since it acts less like tradition, more like money power dressed in old clothes. Still grappling with caste-driven land inequality, unchanging pay in villages, while farm labour stays unstable - here, Ambedkar's vision does more than explain the past. It pushes conscience and law forward. What remains undone in farming fairness echoes what Ambedkar left unresolved.

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