

Changing Land Structures of West Bengal: A Study of Inequality Across Minorities in Rural West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Land inequality in Indian agriculture has been a persistent issue as the feudal nature of the countryside enables a minority section of landlords to control a significant share of operational land where-as the backward communities remain landless and isolated from other means of production. Initially, land reforms in West Bengal made strides in reducing land inequality, benefitting the marginalised community; however, the 1990s liberalisation policies reversed these gains fostering a resurgence of land inequality. This cycle underscores the complex interplay between historical reforms and contemporary economic shifts, revealing the ongoing challenges in addressing land ownership disparities. The survey-based method helps understand land-dynamics in the villages at a micro-level.

Keywords: Small Farmers, Land, Caste, Minorities, village-study, Land-reforms

INTRODUCTION

When examining the agrarian issue in India, numerous discussions can be categorized into two main parts. The 'technical view' advocated by several scholars [(Ahluwalia, 2011) (Gulati & Sharma, 1995)] contends that the transition from traditional agriculture is a significant change, and technology developments alone are enough to achieve substantial growth in the industry. They advocate for the use of technology, free trade, liberalization, and other market-oriented policies to address the agrarian question, building upon the context of the Green Revolution. The alternative perspective, known as the 'institutional view' [(Raj, 1969), (Patnaik, 1986)] contends that rural India faces specific institutional obstacles that significantly impede equitable growth in the primary sector. These institutional hindrances, such as caste, class, tribe, gender, and other hierarchical forms of social exclusion, are deeply ingrained in society and require attention. (Ramakumar, 2022)

The concept of caste is a social institution that has persisted in rural areas, through which land and other resources have historically been concentrated among the higher caste group, resulting in social exclusion. The segment that goes in the other direction, viz. the Dalits, Adivasi, and Muslim communities in Indian villages have lacked land ownership, resulting in significant disparities and poverty. One of the main initiatives advocated by the 'institutional approach' was land reform, which sought to eliminate landlordism and redistribute excess land to disadvantaged areas. Following independence, the Indian government made a commitment to carry out land reform; however, most states were hesitant to accomplish this on a significant scale. Only a handful of states, such as West Bengal, Kerala, have successfully executed land reforms, which have involved the most extensive redistribution schemes in the

country. This had a positive impact on the marginalized group by improving their access to land. After the 1990s, when neo-liberal reforms were introduced, the national government fully abandoned its commitment to land reform. As a result, states like West Bengal began to reverse the progress made in land reforms.

This article used the methodology of village survey to evaluate the land-holding pattern in West Bengal, four decades after land reform and three decades of neo-liberal policies. It also evaluates the extent to which the distribution of land ownership varies among different communities in the villages.

Impact of social hierarchy and lack of land ownership

The concerns of caste and landlessness in India are intricately connected to economic and social issues with deep historical origins and substantial present-day consequences. The caste system, a stratified social structure mostly determined by birth and generally associated with occupation, has historically been essential in regulating property ownership and access in India. This system has perpetuated disparities, resulting in an uneven allocation of land among various caste groups and exacerbating the issue of land deprivation within specific communities.

An important element that contributes to landlessness is the historical accumulation of land ownership within upper-caste populations. Land, regarded as a representation of authority and affluence, was frequently governed by landowning castes who utilized their societal and economic sway to uphold dominion over agricultural assets. Consequently, lower-caste and Dalit groups were marginalized and frequently confined to tiling as agricultural labourers on land controlled by upper-caste landlords.

The enduring influence of past land distribution patterns continues to shape landownership in present-day India. These populations frequently face a shortage of land access because of social discrimination, restricted economic prospects, and insufficient enforcement of land reform regulations.

Lack of land ownership intensifies pre-existing disparities and continues cycles of destitution and impoverishment. Marginalized groups encounter difficulties in obtaining livelihoods, obtaining loans and government aid programs, and asserting their rights as citizens due to the lack of access to property. Landlessness exacerbates social and economic vulnerability, forcing individuals and families to rely on precarious and exploitative jobs in the rural wage market.

The interconnection between the land issue and caste dynamics in India is an inherent part of its social structure. As mentioned before, under the caste system, Dalits were denied the privilege of owning agricultural land. Although discriminatory practices were legally abolished after India gained independence, the lasting impact of historical injustices and ongoing social biases has resulted in continued disparities in land ownership between Dalits and Upper-Caste Hindus (Bakshi, 2008; Rawal, 2013; Thorat and Newman, 2007; Thorat and Newman, 2012). In addition, the Sachar Committee in 2006 observed that Muslim households residing in rural areas have seen discrimination when it comes to obtaining land. As a result, the lack of land ownership is far more prevalent among Dalit and Muslim communities in rural India. The concept of caste is a social institution characterized by prejudice, primarily found in rural areas of India. The Scheduled caste, also referred to as "Dalits," occupies the lowest position in the caste structure and experiences the most severe forms of discrimination. The institution of caste is deeply ingrained in social interactions and serves as a significant obstacle to the advancement of productive capabilities. (Ramachandran & Swaminathan, 2014) assert that the primary purpose of caste in today's world is to establish and enforce a social hierarchy based on inherited status. Its role is to discourage any revolutionary actions against the oppressive and degrading conditions prevalent in Indian society. The study of caste and other communities through extensive village research has expanded our understanding

of production relations in the central regions of India. An influential study conducted by (Thorat, Sabharwal & Thorat, 2014) demonstrates that a significant portion of the Dalit community lacks access to fundamental means of production. Based on his research conducted in 516 villages spanning 10 states, it is evident that the Dalit population is consistently denied entry to non-Dalit dwellings, temples, burial grounds, and water amenities in most of these villages. Furthermore, these groups work on a limited amount of land and have limited access to agricultural resources such as irrigation, loans, and markets, in contrast to other farmers.

Land reform of West Bengal

One of the primary policies that the institutional view advocates is land reform. Given the hierarchical nature of Indian society, it is imperative to implement extensive land reforms in order to empower the disadvantaged parts of society and provide them with access to the fundamental means of production, namely land.

Despite the pledges of land reform following independence, the majority of states failed to implement any substantial measures, leading to the accumulation of wealth and land among the higher castes. Conversely, states such as West Bengal and Kerala, which were under the governance of the Left Front government, exhibited distinctive characteristics. The Left in Kerala amalgamated three primary socio-political conflicts, viz. the populace engaged in a liberation campaign against the British colonial rule, a movement opposing the dominance of landlords, and a battle against the unjust treatment based on caste. (Ramakumar, 2014) conducted a study on the impact of land reform initiatives on the living conditions of Dalit agricultural workers.

Another significant state to consider in the context of land reform is West Bengal, where the Left Front undertook major land reform measures that had a significant impact on the scheduled caste and other underprivileged communities. West Bengal has a rich history and a strong tradition of peasant movements, with significant involvement from underprivileged communities. This paved the way for the establishment of land reforms, which had their origins prior to independence. The development of Kisan Sabhas¹ and the Tebhaga movement² effectively galvanized the peasantry in the state to a significant extent. As a result, the solid historical foundation of the peasantry in the state contributed to the implementation of land reforms. Furthermore, the involvement of marginalized communities in these movements was highly substantial. Dalits, tribals, and Muslims played a significant role in this movement, contributing to the empowerment of these populations in the state.

The land reforms revolutionized the land tenure systems of the rural areas in the state. The state of Bengal underwent these reforms throughout the late 1960s under the governance of two United Front governments. However, in 1977, when the Left Front government took office, land reforms experienced a significant policy enhancement. It is noteworthy that the state has a historical record of organized peasant organizations aimed at challenging landlordism, addressing the unequal distribution of land, and advocating for the rights of sharecroppers (Dasgupta, 1984, Konar, 2002, Bakshi, 2008, 2015).

The land reforms implemented by the state can be categorized into three distinct groups, namely. Allocation of excess land, revisions in rental agreements, and redistribution of residential property. It is crucial to acknowledge that the success of these changes differed throughout the state due to variations in pre-tenurial relations across different regions. According to (Basu, 2021)

¹ All India Kisan Committee, which was later renamed as Kisan Sabha was formed at the All India Kisan Congress held in Meerut on 11th April 1936 (Sen, 1972)

² The Tebhaga movement was the first State-wide movement organised by the Kisan Sabha in Bengal.

Success of the land reforms programme can be largely attributed to its two-pronged approach of combining administrative legal measures with political mobilization of beneficiaries. The involvement of peasant organizations and local-level institutions challenged the feudal hold of the landlords. This created an environment for beneficiaries to claim and retain their rights over themselves as sharecroppers under operation Barga.

It is crucial to consider the occurrence of land reforms and its beneficial influence on the minority population. These changes were a consequence of a succession of pre-independence social activities in the state. The socialist ideology of the region was influenced by significant movements such as the founding of Kisan Sabha in the 1930s, the Tebhaga movement, and other notable agitations.

The Tebhaga movement was the inaugural large-scale agrarian movement in the state that advocated for a two-thirds portion of the agricultural yield to be allocated to the sharecroppers. The Rajbanshi and Namasudra peasantry played a crucial role in this agitation, serving as both participants and leaders of the campaign. The State Acquisition and Tenancy Bill, which aimed to abolish zamindari, was successfully approved in 1947 as a direct result of the impact of this movement. The bill failed to resolve the issues faced by the sharecroppers. Following many legislative changes related to land, the efforts of the peasant movement in 1930 eventually bore fruit in 1977 when the Left Front assumed power.

The Left Front government implemented a range of measures, including extensive land redistribution projects. According to Basu (2021), Bengal accounted for 54% of all land redistribution recipients in the country, while this policy directly helped 50% of the rural households in the state. Bakshi (2008) affirms that the marginalized groups, namely the Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), and Muslim households, who constitute the greatest portion of the landless population in rural areas, have achieved increased access to agricultural land and residential plots. According to the 2012 government report, as of 2011, 36% of the beneficiaries of land-reform initiatives were from the Scheduled Castes (SCs), 18% were from the Scheduled Tribes (STs), and 44% were Muslim households. Furthermore, the portion allotted to sharecroppers (Bargadars) was 30% for SC, 11% for ST, and 59% for Muslims. The 2004 West Bengal Human Development Report recognized the economic empowerment resulting from the allocation of 'patta' rights to the Dalit and Adivasi people.

THE LAND QUESTION IN THE NEO-LIBERAL ERA

Notwithstanding this accomplishment, the agricultural policy saw a noticeable shift in the 1990s. The administration officially rejected the institutional concept and instead pursued neoliberal policies, which emphasized a market-oriented approach. These policies supported free trade, the elimination of subsidies, and most notably, the reversal of land reform. Due to the lack of land-reform measures in most states, the existing structural disparities in rural areas worsened after the implementation of neoliberal policies.

Impact on Minority Communities

The marginalized community is the most adversely affected by the reversal of land reform programs. Table 1 shows that the percentage of Dalit households without land increased from 43% to 57% over the past 20 years. The percentage of individuals belonging to tribal communities climbed from 23% to 33%, while the percentage of those belonging to the Muslim community increased from 40% to 53%. The significant increase of landless individuals is evident among other populations as well.

Table 1: Landlessness among different communities

SOCIAL GROUP	Dalit	Adivasi	Muslim	Others
NSSO				
1991-92	42.4	22.9		
2002-03	41.8	24.8	39.2	28.6
2012-13	46.2	26.7	41.9	30.6
2018-19	57.3	32.8	53.1	35.2

Source: (Rawal & Bansal, 2022)

Bakshi, 2017, examined land accessibility using the metric 'Index of Access'. The access index is calculated by dividing the proportion of total land owned by group j by the proportion of households that belong to this group. Hence, the index measuring Dalits' access to land can be expressed as the ratio of the percentage of total land owned by Dalit households to the percentage of Dalit households among all households.

Reversal of land reform

Regarding West Bengal, despite initially seeing favourable outcomes from the implementation of land reforms, there has been a subsequent reversal of the process over a span of 40 years. Since the 1991 reforms, there has been a gradual transition away from the strategy of implementing institutional reforms, which has led to unequal distribution of land.

The seeming contradiction of an increase in landlessness and landlordism in West Bengal, despite long-standing attempts at land reform, can be attributed to a multifaceted interaction of historical, economic, social, and political elements. To comprehend this phenomenon, it is necessary to analyse various crucial processes. First and foremost, the state's land-reform initiatives were inadequate. The implementation of the reforms encountered numerous obstacles, including bureaucratic impediments, political intervention, and legal disputes, resulting in delays and inefficiencies in the land transfer plans.

Secondly, within a span of 30 years, the state experienced the rise of new influential groups. Certain recipients of land reform became landlords in their own right, amassing extensive land holdings and wielding significant economic and political power. This occurrence, referred to as "neo-landlordism," (Kodirekkala, 2011) has played a role in the consolidation of land in the possession of a smaller number of individuals, intensifying disparities and marginalizing farmers who operate on a smaller scale.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of Migration and Urbanization resulted in the reversal of the process. Rural-to-urban migration in West Bengal has been prompted by the shifting economic conditions and the scarcity of agricultural prospects. A significant number of farmers without land or with small landholdings have migrated to urban areas in pursuit of better employment prospects, resulting in the fragmentation of their landholdings or their transformation into landless labourers within their own villages. This phenomenon has played a role in the rise of land deprivation and the decline of the agricultural labour force, thereby affecting rural economies.

Moreover, the escalation of Market Forces and Commercial Agriculture has played a substantial influence in exacerbating the structural disparities within the communities. The proliferation of commercial agriculture, namely in the cultivation of cash crops and agribusiness, has resulted in the concentration of land ownership by larger farmers or agribusiness entities. The marginalization of smallholders, who lack the necessary resources and scale to effectively compete, is a result of market pressures and investment

dynamics. Landlessness may arise when small-scale farmers are compelled to sell or lease their land because of economic constraints or the absence of feasible alternatives.

Finally, Traditional social systems, such as caste-based hierarchies and landowning patterns, still exert a significant influence on landownership in West Bengal. In certain areas, the practice of landlordism continues to exist, with ancient landowning families retaining control over extensive estates. The social norms and power dynamics present in villages can reinforce disparities in the availability of land and resources, leading to a lack of land ownership among marginalized groups.

Small and Marginal Farming

Indian agriculture, similar to the rest of South Asia, is mostly characterized by small-scale farming. Most farms in the country function on plots of land that are less than 5 acres. Even though most small farmers have access to only a small fraction of the total cultivable land, this situation highlights the prevailing land disparity in the country. In West Bengal, the land-holding pattern deviates substantially from the national average because of land reforms. The state government's thorough redistribution policy resulted in increased land access for small farmers.

After the implementation of these reform measures, the land-holding pattern in rural areas became fragmented over a span of 40 years, resulting in farmers operating on smaller pieces of land. The data from the 77th Round of the NSSO provides information on the current land-holding pattern and land distribution in West Bengal. Table 2 displays a comparative analysis of the distribution of land-size categories for operational holdings and operated area in West Bengal and India. The land-size categories refer to the classifications utilized in the NSSO surveys of Land and Livestock holdings. These categories encompass all land owned by a household, including the land used for residential purposes. In the 77th round, the term "operated area" refers to the land that is used by the household for agricultural production. Therefore, it is a more suitable indicator for studying the distribution of agricultural land.

The data indicates that 95% of the families in West Bengal operate on less than 2.47 acres of land, whereas at the all-India level, this percentage is 73%. It is worth mentioning that in the state of Bengal, 73% of the total operating area is made up of marginal holdings, whilst at the national level, this percentage drops to 27%. The prevalence of small and marginal farming in the region is a direct consequence of land reforms implemented in the state. In contrast, states like Punjab have only 1.2 percent of households with operational holdings in the highest land-size category, however they control 12.6 percent of the total operated land. Furthermore, the data indicates that West Bengal had the lowest average operational holding, measuring 0.186 hectares (0.46 acre), in comparison to the national average of 0.639 hectares (1.58 acres).

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Operational Holdings of West Bengal and India

Land-size	West Bengal		India	
	Household	Area	Household	Area
Landless (<0.005 acre)	0	0	0.03	0
Marginal (.005 - 2.47 acres)	95	77.7	72.6	31.7
Small (2.47 - 4.94 acres)	4.1	15.3	16.4	24.7
Semi-medium (4.94 - 9.88 acres)	0.8	5.3	8	22
Medium (9.88 - 24.7 acres)	0.1	1.7	2.7	16.2
Large (> 24.7 acres)	0	0	0.37	5.4

All	100	100	100	100
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Source: Computed from NSS, 77th round

Note: Figures in NSS, 77th round are given in hectares which have been converted to acres

METHODOLOGY

This study is predicated on a field survey that was carried out in the Bankura district throughout the years 2019 and 2021. A sample of 200 houses has been chosen for this purpose. The district of Bankura has been deliberately selected due to its extraordinarily diversified people and topography. Bankura is highly favourable in terms of agriculture due to its rural location, far from the state capital and international border. It is mostly a district focused on agricultural activities. It is understood that districts in close proximity to the state capital will experience more development due to policymakers' increased attention to these areas, resulting in improved infrastructure and increased access to funding. Therefore, the presence of bias and the tendency to overestimate are evident in the analysis.

Table 3 provides a detailed breakdown of the household composition for the 200 families. The data reveals that 93% of households possess landholdings that are smaller than 2.5 acres, so supporting the state's land distribution pattern. This is mainly attributed to land-reform policies, which, although reducing landlessness in the state, have also resulted in a significant decrease in land size. This table provides detailed information on the demographic mix of caste-tribe households and the distribution of land ownership among the Muslim community. The Dominant caste primarily consists of Other Backward Classes (OBC) and the general category, while the Scheduled Castes (SC) represent the Dalit homes in the region. The term "ST population" refers to the tribal population.

Table 3: Household Composition of Peasantry

Households	Marginal farmers	Small and Medium Farmers	Total
Dominant Caste	91	11 (78)	102 (51)
Muslim	45	1 (7)	46 (23)
SC	13		13 (6)
ST	37	2 (14)	39 (20)
Total	186 (93)	14 (7)	200

Source: Primary data from Village survey

Note: Farmers with less than and more than 2.5 acres of land are considered as marginal and small and medium farmers respectively.

Table 3 reveals that the dominating caste comprises 51% of the households. While most farmers in the hamlet are marginal, a sub-section of small and medium farmers, comprising 78% of them, belong to the dominant caste. This suggests that the prevailing caste functions on extensive land properties. Out of the families polled, 23% identify as Muslim. Within this group, 93% are classified as marginal farmers, while 7% are categorized as small and medium farmers. It should be noted that the composition of tribal households differs from this pattern. Out of the homes surveyed, 20% belong to the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category, and out of these, 14% are small and medium farmers. It is crucial to carefully observe all the surveyed homes in the SC category, as they all belong to the marginal category.

DATA ANALYSIS

The village surveys reveal distinctive characteristics that are not captured in the macroeconomic land data. The survey results unequivocally demonstrate that following four decades of land reform, the distribution of land ownership has been increasingly fragmented, resulting in marginal farmers working on progressively smaller pieces of land. Furthermore, there has been a noticeable increase in a group of small landowners who have obtained extensive parcels of land and now possess significant authority over their operational assets. This disparity significantly affects the minority population in the region. The SC, ST, and Muslim communities possess a relatively lesser proportion of operational holdings, agricultural land, and homestead land.

Unequal distribution of land ownership

The reversal of land reform has not only divided an already limited community of landowners, but it has also allowed large-scale farmers to obtain several tiny parcels of land, resulting in an unequal distribution of land ownership.

Table 4: Share of Operated land in accordance with different category of farmers

	Share of Households	Share of Operated Land
Marginal Farmers (I) (0-1.25 acres)	75%	46%
Marginal Farmers (II) (1.25-2.47 acres)	18%	21%
Small (2.47 - 4.94 acres)	4%	11%
Semi-medium (4.94 - 9.88 acres)	1%	2%
Medium (9.88 - 24.7 acres)	2%	20%

Source: Primary data from Village survey

Note: Marginal Farmers are sub-categorized in two strata's

The macroeconomic trend of the state indicates that because of land reforms, a significant portion of the land has been consolidated among the marginal farmers. This trend aligns with the primary data. Approximately 93% of farmers possess less than 2.5 acres of operational holdings. Therefore, it is crucial to classify marginal holdings into sub-categories. Through the process of sub-categorization, it becomes evident that 75% of marginal farmers (I) possess less than 1.25 acres of land, which signifies a significant level of land-fragmentation in the area. Just 18% of marginal farmers (II) possess operational land holdings ranging from 1.25 to 2.5 acres. An additional significant finding is that the macro-economic table of West Bengal reveals that 95% of operations are conducted on 77% of cultivable land (table4). However, this distribution does not align with the results of the primary survey. The study results indicate that a significant number of small-scale farmers cultivate a relatively small amount of land. Out of the total operational holdings, the first group of marginal farmers, comprising 75% of the total, only operates on 46% of the land. On the other hand, the second category of marginal farmers, accounting for 18% of the total, operates on 21% of the land. This illustrates the asymmetrical distribution of land ownership in the area.

Moreover, it is evident that a mere 2% of the sample population, consisting of only 3 houses, possess control over 20% of the operational land. This signifies the increase in extensive land ownership and the emergence of landlordism in the region.

Distribution of land across different communities

The disparity in land ownership in rural areas is closely connected to caste and other forms of social marginalization. The village survey clearly indicates that the dominant caste possesses a greater proportion of both homestead land and agricultural land in the area.

Table 5: Share of homestead and agricultural land across communities

Caste	Share of Households	Share of Homestead Land	Share of Agricultural Land
Dominant Caste	102 (51)	198.16 (70)	147.45 (66)
Muslim	46 (23)	36.14 (13)	31.3 (14)
SC	13 (7)	10.71 (4)	8.42 (4)
ST	39 (20)	39.72 (14)	36.34 (16)
Total	200 (100)	284.73 (100)	223.51 (100)

Source: Primary data from Village survey

Table 5 reveals that the dominant caste holds a majority population share of 51% in the region. Additionally, they possess 70% of the total owned property and 66% of the total agricultural land. Conversely, the Muslim population comprises 23% of the total population and possesses 13% of privately owned land and 14% of agricultural land. The SC population, as a minority community, comprises 7% of the total population and owns 4% of the agricultural land. Ultimately, the Scheduled Tribe (ST) community comprises 20% of the population, with their ownership of land and agricultural land accounting for 14% and 16% respectively.

Operational Holdings across communities

It is crucial to bear in mind that, notwithstanding the unequal distribution of land ownership, the majority of farmers, located in various localities, have small landholdings. Therefore, in table 6, marginal farmers are classified into four strata in order to provide us with further information regarding caste and operating holdings. This table provides insights into land ownership patterns based on caste. It is evident that 68% of the predominant caste possess less than 1.25 acres of land and they cultivate 34% of the total cultivated land within the predominant caste group. However, 44% of them possess a land area above 1.25 acres (with 11% having more than 2.5 acres), and they utilize 65% of the total available land for operations (45% for those who own more than 2.5 acres). Regarding the Muslim population, 79% of them possess less than 1.25 acres of land and utilize 63% of the total operable land within their community. Conversely, only 2% own more than 2.5 acres of land and operate on a mere 7% of the total operable land. Within the SC population, 92% of individuals possess less than 1.25 acres of land and utilize 92% of the total operable land within the SC community. It is worth noting that no SC household possesses land above 2.5 acres in size. On the contrary, the ST population consists of 82% individuals who own less than 1.25 acres of property. These individuals operate on 92% of the total operable land within the ST community. Only a small percentage of them possess land over 2.5 acres.

Table 6: Cross-Classification of operational holding across communities and different acreage groups

Caste		0.01-0.41	0.41-.80	0.80-1.25	1.25-2.5	2.5 and above	Total
Dominant Caste	Number	14 (14)	26 (25)	30 (29)	21 (21)	11 (11)	102 (100)
	Acre	8.92 (4)	27.01 (13)	33.37 (17)	40.98 (20)	91.08 (45)	201.36 (63)
Muslim	Number	22 (48)	9 (20)	5 (11)	9 (20)	1 (2)	46 (100)
	Acre	15.96 (32)	6.93 (14)	8.45 (17)	15.09 (30)	3.39 (7)	49.82 (15)
SC	Number	2 (15)	7 (54)	3 (23)	1 (8)	0	13 (100)
	Acre	1.16 (7)	10.67 (64)	3.57 (21)	1.4 (8)	0	16.8 (5)
ST	Number	14 (36)	6 (15)	12 (31)	5 (13)	2 (5)	39 (100)
	Acre	1.16 (7)	10.67 (64)	3.57 (21)	1.4 (8)	0	16.8 (5)
Total	Number	52 (26)	48 (24)	50 (25)	36 (18)	14 (7)	200 (100)
	Acre	36.63 (11)	48.91 (15)	62.7 (20)	68.53 (21)	104.13 (32)	320.9 (100)

Source: Primary data from Village survey

Note: Marginal Farmers are sub-categorized in four strata's

Due to the broad designation of the marginal group in the instance of West Bengal, it is difficult to comprehend the various subtleties and dynamics among households belonging to the marginal category. The analysis of marginal farmers reveals that among those with operational holdings of less than 0.41 acres, the Muslim community has a greater proportion. The SC population has a bigger share in the second tier, specifically the operational holding within 0.41-0.80 acres. For the third category of land (0.80-1.25 acres), the SC and ST population have the largest proportion, while the dominant caste thereafter gains control over most of the operational holdings. This classification of land ownership demonstrates that the minority population mostly works on tiny parcels of property, while the dominant caste tends to have authority over larger parcels of land.

CONCLUSION

Despite 77 years of independence, the agricultural sector continues to face challenges such as sluggish growth, insufficient investment, and a shortage of diverse resources including formal financing and irrigation infrastructure. In addition to this, there are profound systemic disparities based on caste, class, and other forms of social marginalization. This leads to entrenched poverty in rural areas of India. Land availability is a key factor in rural India's production, with the higher caste historically owning most of the cultivable land, resulting in landlessness among lower caste and marginalized groups. The Indian government's commitment to land reform after independence was not realized, and the implementation of neo-liberal reforms in the 1990s shifted the focus of policy discussions away from land reform. Consequently, there was a rise in the number of people without land ownership, particularly among the disadvantaged segments of society, as evidenced by a low Index of Access.

In the 1970s, West Bengal and other states governed by the Left Front deviated from this course and carried out land reforms. This entailed the establishment of tenancy rights, the elimination of the zamindari system, and the transfer of surplus land among the landless underprivileged people. The agricultural expansion of the state in the 1980s was a direct result of these policies. Following the implementation of neo-liberal reforms, a process of reversing land reforms began to take place. Due to the lack of government assistance, agriculture became an unsustainable occupation, leading many farmers to abandon their small parcels of land and seek employment in the rural labour market. As a result, the consolidation of scattered land by wealthy and high-caste farmers resulted in a significant increase in land inequality. The macroeconomic statistics and field results presented conflicting findings on this matter. The analysis of land-holding patterns by the NSSO indicates that most marginal farmers have a larger share of land compared to the national average. However, field assessments reveal that most marginal farmers have a relatively smaller share of land. On the other hand, a small percentage (2%) of large farmers own nearly 20% of the total operated land.

This structural shift also had a substantial influence on the disadvantaged segments of society, as the primary recipients of land reform, viz. the SC, ST, and Muslim people are cultivating on significantly limited parcels of land. The primary cause of this is the escalating fragmentation of territory inside the state. The Index of Access measure for homestead and agricultural land indicates that the proportion of land allocated to marginalized communities is significantly small, while most of the land is concentrated among the dominant caste. Given that most farmers in the state were marginal, it was imperative to classify them into sub-categories based on their land-holding patterns. Upon evaluating the operational land, it was noted that much of the Muslim population operates on less than 0.04 acres, while most of the marginal and other communities operate on less than 1.25 acres. The dominant caste holds a greater proportion of land in the top layers, which indicates their dominance on homestead, agricultural, and operational land.

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