Land Ownership is Key to Dalit Up-liftment

What is the issue?

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

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- **History -** Under the diktats of the Manusmriti, the “Shudra” had no right to property, which had historically condemned them to economic subjugation.
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- But Dalits did have some form of land ownership pre-independence in the form of “community land”, which they owned collectively.
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- This was granted to them by the kings (or other villagers), in lieu of the hereditary services they offered to the state and the other communities.
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- Interestingly, Ambedkar had opposed this conditional ownership module as he felt that it was condemning Dalits to perpetual subordination under others.
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- **Recent Events -** In Dudkha village of Patan district in Gujarat, Dalits had been maintaining a tract of community land for generations.
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- But the Gujarat government had refused to grant them full ownership rights despite the well established national policy recognizing traditional claimants.

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- While multiple protests to press for the demand had failed, a frustrated a dalit activist “Bhanubhai” had recently immolated himself.
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- Notably, Jignesh Mehwani’s “Jan Adhikar Andolan” that followed the Una incident was also centred on the issue of land ownership rights.
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How much progress has been made in land reforms?

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- Under the British Raj, land reforms were carried out to enhance state revenue collections and different models were adoped at different provinces.
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- **Rise of Patidars -** Patidars of the erstwhile Saurashtra state were historically “Shudras”, but the British land reforms had unintended benefits for them.
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- They bagged 3.75 million acres of land, which laid the foundation for their emergence as a socially, economically and politically dominant class.
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- Notably, economic progress also culturally transformed the community, and they resorted to Brahminical rituals and vegetarianism over time.
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- **Post-Independence -** Land reforms were the sole state programme to ensure economic equality, as land ownership remained only with the few.
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- Limits for ownership were introduced and the exess were to be distributed to the landless pesants among who dalits and tribals were to be given primacy.
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- Various legislations ensured primacy for the tillers, and communists in Kerala and West Bengal ensured that these initiatives were pushed vigourously.
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- But despite successes in some states, most states remained regressive due to their apathy to the cause and the resistance of the politically powerful groups.
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- **Gujart’s case -** Gujarat had a patchy record in land reforms and deprivation was particularly striking for the dalits, who gained less than $1/3^{rd}$ of the total land allocated through the reforms.

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- Gujarati society is still highly feudal and in many cases, despite dailts being the official owers of land, the upper casts continue to control and operate them.
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- Navsarjan Trust had discovered that in 251 villages of Surendranagar district (Gujarat), Dalits couldn’t gain actual possession for over 6,000 acres of land, despite having been granted legal owenership.
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- Notably, Golana massacre of 1986, was because Dalits who had the legal possession of the land tried to take actual possession.
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- While many lawsuits have been filed to remedy this, justice looks elusive even 4 decades after land reforms were unleashed.
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- Currently, the tension over land is fast snowballing into a dalit versus others issue in Gujarat, and even dalit burial grounds have come under attack.
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How is Gujarat’s pro-business land policy affecting social equations?

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- Till a few years ago, land was an instrument of social and economic status and people preferred to marry into homes that owned agricultural land.
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- There were legal safeguards for buying and selling of agricultural land through governmental checks in order to ensure that land remained with the tiller.
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- There were also mechanism for preventing big farmers nudging out small and marginal ones by buying out their processions.
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- But the BJP government eased many of these provisions and also relaxed norms for denotifying agricultural land to enable its diversion for other uses.
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- These changes had in effect seen massive land parcels being diverted for establishing industries (often coercively).
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- Also, coastal Gujarat has been seeing massive and industrialisation in the past decade, which has degraded vast swathes of adjacent cultivable land.
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- In fact, the resultant deprivation from land caused by these policies is what

had triggered the Patidar agitations of 2015.
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What is the way forward?

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

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