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46% own nothing, 1% own 18%: The truth about India's land inequality



By Vikas Meshram*

“Agriculture is the backbone of India” — this is what we have been hearing for generations. But there is a pain hollowing out this backbone from within: the unequal distribution of land. On one hand, news of farmer suicides, indebtedness, and rural migration keeps coming; on the other, agricultural land across the country continues to concentrate in the hands of a few wealthy individuals.

A significant report has recently brought this reality to light.

Titled [Land Inequality in India: Nature, History, and Markets](#), the study by the [World Inequality Lab](#) — co-authored by [Nitin Kumar Bharti](#), David Blakeslee, and Samreen Malik — involved an in-depth analysis of land ownership data from approximately 270,000 villages across ten major states, covering a population of 65 crore people. Its findings are shocking.

Only the top 10 percent of wealthy families in rural India control 44 percent of the land, while 46 percent of rural families are entirely landless. The richest 5 percent of families hold 32 percent of the land, and just 1 percent of ultra-wealthy families have 18 percent of rural land concentrated in their hands. The [Gini index](#) — the standard measure of land inequality — has reached an average of 71.

In some villages, the situation is so severe that more than 50 percent of the village land is in the possession of a single landlord. On average, the largest landholder controls approximately 12 percent of the total land. A person who owns no land gets neither bank loans, nor government assistance during drought, nor any assurance of income from farming. He remains trapped in the web of wage labour for eternity — a vicious cycle that rolls forward from generation to generation.

Take Maharashtra, considered one of India's progressive and agriculturally innovative states. It grows all kinds of cash crops: sugarcane, cotton, orchards, and vegetables. Yet even within this market-oriented agricultural economy, land inequality persists —

and in some respects, it appears even more starkly. According to the report, Maharashtra's Gini coefficient stands at 0.709, indicating an extremely high level of inequality. Approximately 48.1 percent of families in the state are landless — nearly half of all families do not own even a single piece of land in their own name.

The top 10 percent of families hold 40.8 percent of the land, while just 1 percent of wealthy families have 14.7 percent of the land concentrated in their hands. Furthermore, even proximity to roads or markets has not reduced this inequality. This observation tells us that the roots of inequality do not lie in land productivity alone; they are deeply embedded in history, social structure, and power equations.

Across states, there are vast differences in land inequality. Punjab has the highest rate of landlessness, reaching up to 73 percent — astonishing, since Punjab is considered an agriculturally advanced state. In Bihar, the share of the largest landholder goes as high as 20.1 percent. In Kerala, the landlessness rate is 65.4 percent, while in Tamil Nadu it is 66.5 percent. An important point emerges from this comparison: Kerala and Tamil Nadu are considered frontrunners in social indicators, yet even there, landlessness is high. This means that even if literacy, health, and education improve, land inequality does not automatically diminish. It requires special policy intervention.

One major cause of land inequality is the land revenue system imposed during British colonial rule. In areas that were under the [zamindari system](#), greater land inequality is still found today,

whereas in areas that were under princely states, this proportion appears comparatively lower. The three types of land revenue systems — ryotwari, zamindari, and mahalwari — profoundly influenced the economic and social structure of rural India.

The zamindari system gave intermediaries unlimited power over farmers. These intermediaries remained in a race to extract maximum revenue, pushing the farming class into an abyss of debt, while land continued to concentrate in the hands of the wealthy. After independence, land reform laws were enacted, zamindari was abolished, land ceiling laws came into force, and through Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan movement, some land was distributed to the landless. However, although these post-independence efforts have shown positive results, the fundamental inequality in land ownership still remains.

Another major cause is the caste system — equally historical and equally profound. The impact of social hierarchy is still clearly visible on land ownership. Landlessness is highest among [Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe families](#). For centuries, these communities were denied the right to hold land. “Till the land, but the land remains in the names of the upper castes” — this vicious cycle still continues in many places. Looking at tribal areas in Maharashtra — Nandurbar, Gadchiroli, Palghar, and Chandrapur districts — tribal farmers have been cultivating land for generations, yet their names do not appear on the 7/12 land extract.

In the Sahyadri valleys, Vidarbha, and Khandesh, many tribal and hilly-area farmers have been farming on forest or grazing land for generations. They nurture that land with their own sweat, but their names do not appear in government records. As a result, they receive neither crop loans nor government assistance during droughts. The reasons are historical absence of land registration, fake purchase agreements, transactions carried out under pressure, and ignorance about the complexities of the law.

In Maharashtra, there are strict provisions under Section 36(A) of the [Maharashtra Land Revenue Code, 1966](#) for the protection of tribal lands. A tribal person can sell land only to another tribal person; if the sale is to be made to a non-tribal, the prior written permission of the district collector is mandatory. However, in the past, fake purchase agreements, fake powers of attorney, incorrect succession entries, or transactions carried out under pressure took place in many locations, and as a result, thousands of tribal people were deprived of their land.

No matter how stringent the laws, as long as enforcement is not effective, as long as tribal communities are unaware of their rights, and as long as corruption and pressure persist, the prospect of reducing land inequality continues to recede. In 2006, the Government of India enacted the [Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers \(Recognition of Forest Rights\) Act](#).

This Act attempted to grant legal rights to tribal and forest-dwelling communities over the land they have been cultivating for generations — an important remedy for a historical injustice. With

proper documentation, supplemented by modern satellite evidence and the strength of the gram sabha, legal rights over land can be obtained. However, the implementation of this Act is extremely slow. Many claims are rejected, the process is cumbersome, the government machinery's response is inadequate, and claims still remain pending — trapped in the web of landlessness.

It is often argued that the development of markets, road networks, and agricultural trade will reduce land inequality. This argument may seem theoretically attractive, but the reality is different. Market integration does not completely eliminate historical land inequality. The proximity of cities, roads, and markets does not change the deeply entrenched patterns shaped by natural conditions and institutional history. On the contrary, market orientation often increases pressure on small farmers. Unable to afford the capital needed for cash crops — seeds, fertilizers, irrigation — small farmers sell their land, wealthy farmers and industrialists buy it up, and land inequality increases further.

The unequal distribution of land directly impacts poverty, agricultural productivity, and rural development. Land is a crucial factor in rural India that determines income, social status, and access to credit. A farmer who owns land gets bank loans, government subsidies, and compensation in the event of crop failure. But a landless farmer is deprived of all these benefits. He works as a labourer on others' farms, depends on seasonal employment, migrates to the city when the monsoon ends, sees his children drop out of school to work as labourers, pays for treatment

through debt when health deteriorates, and sells whatever little he has to repay that debt. This vicious cycle continues from generation to generation.

If solutions are to be found, multi-dimensional policy intervention is needed. Digital land registration, computerisation of 7/12 extracts, and land surveys reduce fraudulent transactions. Maharashtra has made some progress in this area, but in rural and tribal regions, the work is still not complete. The lakhs of tribal families whose forest rights claims remain pending must be resolved immediately.

Government lands, grazing lands, and Class-II lands in the possession of the state should be allocated on a priority basis to landless Dalit and tribal families. Through women's self-help groups and cooperative organisations, collective land cultivation, group farming, and producer companies can include the landless in the production chain. Many non-governmental organisations are working in this direction, and the results of their efforts are beginning to show.

The diversity of land inequality across Indian states is almost as vast as the diversity found among nations across the world. This observation tells us that each state needs a different policy; a uniform national answer is not sufficient. The World Inequality Lab — a research institution affiliated with the [Paris School of Economics](#) — works to explain the causes of inequality worldwide through evidence-based research. Its report has sparked discussion at the international level on India's land inequality, because as long

as this issue remains confined to local discussions, it does not receive its rightful place in national and international policies.

This report reflects our reality. The data encompassing the land issues of 65 crore people tells us that much still remains to be done. The landless must receive land, tribal rights must be strengthened, and Dalit farmers must receive the fruits of their labour. These are not merely welfare measures, but the indispensable necessity of a just society. Eliminating land inequality does not merely mean distributing pieces of land — it means restoring to a person his dignity. These matters must be taken seriously.

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