

## **Land, Caste and Power: Politics of Land Distribution to Dalits in Madhya Pradesh**

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A significant development in the Hindi heartland since the mid 1980s has been a strong wave of dalit and simultaneously OBC assertion, which has introduced change in the power of rural caste hierarchies. Scholars have pointed out that caste is now associated more with difference and identity than dominance;<sup>1</sup> lower castes have successfully entered politics, formed parties and captured power;<sup>2</sup> while ritual untouchability has not disappeared, it has been increasingly replaced by caste atrocities based on competition for land, wages, jobs, and that land and authority has been de-linked in village India.<sup>3</sup>

While these changes are increasingly accepted, there are differences among scholars over the exact nature of this change. This is because despite similarities, generalization across the sub-continent has become difficult as change in different states/regions/sub-regions is rapid in some cases and slow in others. It seems to be context determined. Moreover, scholars agree that while caste-based dominance has not disappeared it has taken new forms based much more on economic power, political empowerment, electoral politics, and increase in literacy and new sources of employment and income. Dominant groups in the countryside are no longer from the top Brahmin order but are increasingly from the intermediate middle caste groups. Much of the conflict often is because no one group is completely dominant as in the past but at different points of time different groups emerge dominant. Increasingly 'social jealousies' on the part of middle castes due to improvement in the economic and political conditions of dalits leads to violence. New dominance is often reluctantly accepted leading to competition which affects state politics. Thus, the exact nature of the change taking place needs to be contextualized through empirically grounded studies for each region.

This paper examines the attempt by the Congress government in MP led by Digvijay Singh to distribute government-owned *charnoi* (common grazing land) to landless dalits and tribals between 1998 and 2003. More specifically, it attempts to understand the impact of the land distribution programme on relationships at the village level between middle caste landowning groups and dalits, which led to conflict and in some cases violence and had a direct significant effect on state and electoral politics, more particularly the 2003 assembly election. Drawing upon extensive fieldwork undertaken in two selected districts of Morena and Rajgarh on the implementation of the land distribution programme, the paper argues that in backward states such as MP where no alternative source of employment is available, at the village level land retains its importance as the source of livelihood, prestige and power capable of creating conflict. Due to encroachments on fertile common land by middle caste landowners and continuation of traditional, exploitative relationships, it is today very difficult to redistribute this land to landless dalits. Further arguing that adoption of the land distribution programme was of central importance for state politics, the paper attempts to understand why the Congress was not able to reap the fruits of the attempt to carry out such a significant structural reform. While the adoption of the programme pointed to commitment of the Digvijay Singh government to upliftment of disadvantaged sections, political necessity and calculations also played a

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<sup>1</sup> Dipankar Gupta 2004 (ed.) *Caste in Question: Identity or Hierarchy* Sage, New Delhi

<sup>2</sup> Sudha Pai 2002 *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: the BSP in Uttar Pradesh* Sage, New Delhi.

<sup>3</sup> Mendelsohn, Oliver & Marika Vicziany 1998 *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in India* CUP; Oliver Mendelsohn "The Transformation of Authority in Rural India" *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Oct., 1993): 805-842

role. By the early 1990s the Congress in MP faced two challenges: rising dalit assertion and the attempt by the BSP to create a base in the northern districts from where it could spread into the state; and a shift by the middle castes/OBCs moved towards the BJP attracted by its ideology of Hindutva, which made the Congress even more dependent upon the lower castes/classes, a feature that increased during the decade.

These developments underlay the organization of the Bhopal Conference in January 2002 and the Dalit Agenda that it adopted in which land distribution was a central proposal. The land distribution programme raised political consciousness and aspirations among dalits, but as many did not gain actual possession of the land allotted and in some areas experienced violence, it did not lead to support from below for the Congress party. While in Morena due to encroachments on land allotted to them Dalits could not gain actual possession, they were intimidated, but were not attacked or killed. In contrast, in Rajgarh the land distribution programme created strong social jealousy among the OBCs and led to large-scale violent confrontation and killing of dalits throughout the Malwa plateau and retaliation by the latter in some villages. Digvijay Singh's efforts to strengthen the base of the Congress among dalits through redistributive programmes had ignored the rising aspirations of the powerful OBCs thereby increasing the already existing antagonism between these two upwardly mobile and ambitious groups. These developments politicized the land distribution programme and provided the BJP an opportunity to fan the discontent in the countryside among both the dalits and the OBCs against the government through a well-organized campaign contributing to the defeat of the Congress party in the 2003 assembly elections, at least in some parts of the state. Thus, the paper concludes that a developmental regime that attempts to change socio-economic relationships through redistribution of resources using state power – in this case by providing land - can be successful only if there has been an upsurge from below.

The paper is divided into two parts. The first part briefly describes the land distribution policy and the ideas underlying it, while the second analyses the impact of land distribution in the two selected districts of MP. The concluding section returns to an analysis of the question of the relationship between land caste and power and its implications for state politics in MP.

## I The Land Distribution Programme<sup>4</sup>

The Congress government under Digvijay Singh embarked upon a programme of land reform in the state beginning in 1998, consisting of distribution of a portion of the government-owned charnoi (common grazing) land to dalits and tribals, restoration of tribal lands, removal of encroachments and ensuring actual possession of land to owners and providing them assistance to improve their land.<sup>5</sup> The Congress leadership attempted to employ the politics of development/welfare using state power rather than identity as in UP and Bihar during the same period. Certain features of politics in MP underlay this decision. The dalits and tribal together constitute almost 30% of the population and Digvijay Singh had inherited a legacy of many welfare programmes for these groups from earlier Congress regimes as they have always been significant for the electoral fortunes of the party in the state. While the Congress had succeeded in maintaining its hold over the dalit/tribal vote in the early post-independence period, there were signs of a gradual erosion of support by the early 1990s. This was particularly true in the case of dalits with the Jan Sangh/BJP being the major beneficiary,

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<sup>4</sup> Part I and II of the paper unless otherwise stated, draws upon Sudha Pai 2010 Developmental State and the Dalit Question in Madhya Pradesh: Congress Response Routledge, New Delhi.

<sup>5</sup> In this paper only distribution of land to only dalits in two districts is examined out of the larger study on the land reform programme.

following the establishment of a two-party system in the mid 1960s. At the same time, during the 1990s dalit assertion in UP had acquired a strong position; the BSP had formed the government twice while the Congress and the BJP were in decline. It was also felt that the BSP was making preparations to improve its position in the northern districts of MP where it has won seats in the early 1990s. Equally important as a study has argued, Mayawati had distributed land to about 1,52,000 dalits and they had gained actual possession of 1,20,000 acres of land (Kumar; 2007: 254). These developments led the Digvijay Singh government from 1993 onwards to introduce a state-sponsored model of development with programmes for weaker sections culminating in the Dalit Agenda at the Bhopal Conference in January 2002 in which distribution of land to dalits and tribals was an important component.<sup>6</sup> Singh was sympathetic to the urgent need to provide livelihood to dalits and tribals as seen from many policies put forward by his government to improve the conditions of these sections. However, the land distribution programme was undoubtedly a conscious political agenda adopted to retain the support of the dalits and tribals to meet the challenge posed by the BJP and the BSP. Land was both an economic as well as an emotive issue, which could help the Congress strengthen its support base.

A significant feature of MP politics which affected the land distribution programme was the growing antagonism and competition throughout the 1990s between the dalits and the OBCs. Both were upwardly mobile groups encouraged by political parties: the dalits by the Congress and the BSP and the OBCs by the BJP. While the dalits emboldened by promises of land distribution made at the Bhopal Conference and steps taken by the Congress government, were keen to acquire control over the land allotted to them. The OBCs were unhappy that the Congress government during its two terms in office had done a lot for the dalits but not for them. The drive to distribute grazing land was resisted by the upper and middle castes, but mainly the OBCs. This set the stage for antagonism and hostility and in some places where there was provocation, violence between two groups.

On March 4, 1998 and again on September 19, 2000 the government of MP issued orders to the district administration for redistribution of land gained by downsizing the area of charnoi in each village from 7.5 per cent to 5 per cent and again to 2 per cent respectively, in order to obtain more land for distribution among dalits and tribals.<sup>7</sup> The Digvijay Singh government selected charnoi land for distribution, because it found that over the years big and powerful landowners were encroaching upon these lands in the villages. As these lands were not being used as grazing lands in most cases, it was felt that it would be better to remove the encroachments and give the land to the disadvantaged sections so as to provide them livelihood and a share in the common resources of the village that they were currently denied. In addition, Charnoi land unlike surplus land, which had to be identified for distribution or wasteland that required legislation for distribution, was identifiable within each village in the records under direct government control. The process would be faster as identifying surplus

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<sup>6</sup> The Bhopal Document was authored by a number of dalit intellectuals regarding the challenges facing the dalit community particularly with regard to Protective Discrimination and need to introduce new policies. It was discussed at the Bhopal Conference January 2002 organized by the Digvijay Singh government in at Bhopal in MP in which leading dalit and non-dalit intellectuals participated. Following this Conference a number of new programmes for dalits were introduced by the government. The land distribution programme had already begun in 1998 but was now followed with greater vigour. For an understanding of issues dealt with by the Bhopal Conference see, Aditya Nigam 2002 "In Search of a Bourgeoisie: Dalit Politics Enters a New Phase" Economic and Political Weekly, XXXVII, no. 13, March: 1190-93.

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<sup>7</sup> Under Section 237 of the MP Land Code certain lands are designated as grazing/common or charnoi lands and set aside in each village by the government. From 1959 to 1997 the amount of common land to be earmarked for charnoi purposes and how much that area would be in proportion to the cultivable area of the village was governed not by the Code but by executive fiat.

lands would be time consuming and controversial whereas common lands were marked in revenue books since the colonial period. A series of Government Orders between 1998 and 2000 provided detailed rules to the district collector for identifying the grazing land available for distribution. After ensuring that enough land has been left for habitation and for official buildings, the collector was to distribute the remaining land to the landless SCs/STs in the village: 1 hectare irrigated and 2 hectare unirrigated to each. While the aim was to provide land to as many as possible, no person was to be given less than half a hectare. The district collector was responsible for removing any encroachments prior to allotting the land to SCs/STs and to ensure actual possession of the land by these groups. All villagers had the right to appeal in the revenue and civil courts against the decision of the DC or tehsildar. A significant feature of the land reforms programme was that it was undertaken in partnership with a civil society organization, the Ekta Parishad.<sup>8</sup> A Joint Task Force (JTF) at the central level and a similar District Task Force in each district, consisting of officials from the state/local administration government and members of the Parishad was constituted in 2000 to provide overall guidance in the formulation of a comprehensive land reform policy for the state and its proper implementation at the local level.

The land distribution programme was adopted in 1998 due to the tremendous pressure exerted on the government by the Ekta Parishad. However, the local administration did not act on it immediately except in some districts such as Rajgarh.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that the policy was announced by Digvijay Singh just prior to the 1998 state assembly elections. But a Task Force to implement it was established in 2000 and it was only after the Bhopal Declaration in January 2002 that the programme to distribute land gained greater momentum. Consequently, with the approaching 2003 state assembly elections a major portion of the land allotted was distributed throughout the state in a massive *abhiyan* or 'allotment drive' begun in March 2002 and continued up to early 2003 when it was stopped by the High Court ruling against it. The state administration put enormous pressure on all district collectors and lower revenue officials to fulfil targets fixed by it leading to many mistakes such as allotment of barren land. Hence, while the programme was progressive, reflected political commitment on the part of the Congress government and detailed rules were made for its implementation, politics did play a role in the manner in which it was executed.

## II

### Politics of Land Distribution in Morena and Rajgarh

The two districts of Morena and Rajgarh were selected for study<sup>10</sup> because dalits constitute about 16% and 17.4% of the population respectively, which is above the state average of 15.2% (2001 Census). Both are also backward districts low in terms of both economic and human development with few alternative sources of employment making land the most important source of livelihood for the rural population. The number of upper castes in our sample villages in both Morena and Rajgarh are few compared to the middle castes most of whom are OBCs making the latter powerful. The two districts provide a contrast in two other aspects: implementation of the landowning programme and the nature of conflict among the dalits and the middle castes/OBCs. In Morena out of 283818 hectares of cultivable land, 11196.95 hectares of land was available for distribution as it lies within the Chambal

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<sup>8</sup> The role of the Ekta Parishad has not been dealt with here. See Sudha Pai 2011 Developmental State and the Dalit Question in Madhya Pradesh: Congress Response Routledge, New Delhi.

<sup>9</sup> In some districts pro-active district collectors implemented the land distribution programme from 1998. Good examples apart from Rajgarh are Shivpuri and Guna.

<sup>10</sup> In the larger study four districts were selected. The two others are Shivpuri because it has a large tribal population and Gwalior because in contrast to the other districts it is a more developed and urbanized district and the BSP won a seat here in the 1993 assembly elections.

ravines; of which 7768.19 hectares was distributed to 10789 dalit beneficiaries. In Rajgarh, which is a fertile and well-irrigated district, out of cultivable land of 479914 hectares, 30822.514 was available for distribution of which 18824.572 hectares was allotted to 25541 dalit beneficiaries. The manner in which the programme was implemented and the extent of success also differed.

Starting from the early 1990s Morena experienced assertion by the dalits against upper and middle caste domination due to the presence of the BSP in eastern UP which lies contiguous to the northern districts of MP. The BSP had performed well in the assembly elections in the region. In 1993 it gained two seats in Morena (with 25.8 per cent of the valid vote) one seat in Gwalior (23.8 per cent) and also performed well in some of the neighbouring districts. In the 1998 assembly elections it stood third after the Congress (41.73 per cent) and the BJP (39.28 per cent) gaining 6.15 per cent of the votes in the state. In the 11 constituencies where it won, the party obtained 40 per cent of the vote share in two and 30 per cent in five constituencies (Pai 2004). Although the BSP seemed poised to enter into MP through the northern districts which are close to UP, this did not happen and the party has subsequently failed to spread in the state. However, in our sample and other villages of Morena and neighbouring districts, mobilization by the BSP has resulted in rise in political consciousness among the Jatavs seen in their assertion against upper/middle-caste landowners, litigation and absence of open violence against them.

On the contrary, Rajgarh witnessed tension and heightened antagonism, violent conflict and caste atrocities on a large scale on dalits by the dominant OBCs of the district. This was due to social jealousies among the latter over successful removal of encroachments by the local administration and actual possession of land to dalits. The BSP does not have a base in Rajgarh, rather the district lies in a region that has been the cradle of the RSS in the colonial period and has therefore been an electoral stronghold of the Jan Sangh/BJP since at least the mid 1960s (Jaffrelet 2003). Equally important as Rajgarh was the parliamentary constituency of Digvijay Singh until 1993, the local BJP cadres actively encouraged the violence against the dalits prior to the assembly elections of 2003 as described a little later.

The sample villages in these two districts were selected on a twofold basis: where a large amount of charnoi land had been allotted to dalits and second, where significant factors such as encroachments, social conflict, litigation and role played by the administration had impacted upon the success/failure of the land distribution programme. Accordingly, seven villages were selected from Joura tehsil in Morena and five villages in Rajgarh district from four different tehsils: Narsinghgarh, Biora, Sarangpur and Rajgarh. The latter were selected because they experienced violent conflict between the OBC landowners and the dalits over the land distribution programme. An equal number of respondents from each sample village were not possible as the number of dalits allotted land differ from village to village depending on the amount of charnoi land available and distributed in each village. Accordingly, in Morena the number of respondents was 210, and in Rajgarh 133, that is, a total of 343 respondents. Within each village a questionnaire was used to interview the respondents consisting of beneficiaries drawn from SC households. Some of the upper/middle caste landowners and local officials such as the tehsildar, SDM, DM and patwari were also interviewed.

#### *Context of land distribution in selected districts*

The impact of the land distribution programme on relations between agrarian classes and on state politics in the selected districts cannot be understood without examining the socio-economic and political context in which it took place. At least four factors were important: encroachments on the charnoi land by landowning middle castes/OBCs such as Yadavs, Tyagis and Dangis led to the dalits not obtaining actual possession of land and created conflict between the two groups; due to lack of

fertile grazing land the administration often distributed barren land which made the dalits unhappy; rising political consciousness due to mobilization by political parties- the BSP in Morena and the BJP in Rajgarh; and the presence in Morena of the Ekta Parishad which made strenuous but unsuccessful efforts, to help dalits obtain actual possession of allotted land.

Encroachment on land by the powerful landowning upper/middle castes/class is a long-standing socio-historical feature of many districts in MP. Following the failure of land reform, this class encroached upon all the remaining fallow land, including charnoi land. While some encroachers have ancestral lands of their own, the large majority does not, and in the absence of alternative sources of livelihood it is very difficult as our study shows, to remove them. In fact, common lands have virtually disappeared due to increase in population, fragmentation of land due to partition in every generation, encroachments due to lack of supervision by the local administration or, in some cases in connivance with them, and poor maintenance of land records. The encroachers were unwilling to give up the land allotted to dalits as they will also lose cheap and readily available labour and it will affect their powerful socio-economic status in the village. Rise of political consciousness among the OBCs in MP has been late compared to their counterparts in UP and Bihar; consequently it is in recent years they have become conscious, aggressive and upwardly mobile. Realizing that the Congress both traditionally and under Digvijay Singh has attempted to mobilize the dalits and tribals in MP, the BJP has since the early 1990s tried to mobilize the OBCs; all their recent CMs have been from this section.

Morena which lies in the Chambal region close to Eastern UP and Bundelkhand has a particularly large number of locally dominant, powerful middle caste/OBC landowners mainly Yadavs, Kushwahas, Rawats and Thakurs, compared to many other districts. A “gun culture” left over from the time when dacoits infested the Chambal region makes this encroacher class prone to violence that makes removing them very difficult. In Morena the local administration afraid of conflict did not try to remove the encroachers and the dalits did not gain possession of land, or gained possession of land which was barren and therefore lying vacant. In Rajgarh also there is little land available for distribution but the reasons are different. It was a district which had a great amount of charnoi land as it is a flat and well watered fertile plain unlike Morena which has ravines and stony soil. But, most of the fertile land has been taken over by dominant Yadavs and Dangis who now constitute part of the oppressive and politically powerful groups of OBCs. In some of our sample villages in Rajgarh encroachments were more recent due to their rising power and some even took place after the announcement of the land distribution programme. The encroachers were from the very beginning opposed to the land distribution programme and tension existed in the villages even before land began to be allotted to dalits.

### *Land Distribution in Morena*

In Morena the dalits consist mainly of Jatavs who constitute nearly 65% of the dalits followed by the Shakya or Koli who make up around 30% and a few Khatik.<sup>11</sup> The Jatavs are dominant in all respects: landowning, literacy and political awareness. The seven sample villages<sup>12</sup> in Morena district lie within 10-30 kms of Jaura town the headquarters of the tehsil. In all the sample villages except Dhamkan,

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<sup>11</sup> Information provided by Muneesh the EP village level activist who belongs to Jatav community.

<sup>12</sup> The fieldwork in Jaura tehsil was conducted from 20 to 27 March, 2007. The villages were selected with the help of Harendra Sharma in-charge of the Ekta Parisha in Morena, and Muneesh EP village activist for Jaura tehsil. They are fairly large in size, with population above a thousand in all cases. Narhela and Gaddi Dhamkan (henceforth Dhamkan) have the largest number of households. Gebri and Gebri Ka Pura consist of two hamlets that constitute one village in the revenue records. All the villages have at least one primary school only Dhamkan the largest village has a middle school. The villagers are dependent mainly on wells or hand-pumps for drinking water and not much agricultural land is irrigated.

which is a large village, all the beneficiaries of the land distribution programme were included in the sample of respondents as the number was not large. In Dhamkan a sample of 26 out of 55 total beneficiaries were questioned. As table 1 (appendix) shows all the beneficiaries selected in the 7 villages were mainly Jatavs or Kolis with a few Valmikis. In three villages – Narhela, Burawali and Sankara – all the *pattas* fell into category I i.e. was allotted within the village, in the other villages as the table shows, both categories are seen. The plots range from 2.5 to 5 bighas, which is less than a hectare, which is in keeping with the rules of the programme.<sup>13</sup>

Morena falls in the category of ‘low’ implementation i.e. the amount of land distributed was much less than in the other districts in the state. More important, our fieldwork revealed that large number of dalits did not *acquire actual possession of the land allotted to them, or were allotted land that was uncultivable*. As table 1 shows, out a total of 210 beneficiaries only 63 were in actual possession of the land allotted to them, and that included 30 uncultivable plots, making possession of little use. The plots allotted to 121 beneficiaries were cultivable but on 76 there were encroachments. Percentage wise in terms of cultivable land the actual beneficiaries are only 21% while in terms of possession the actual beneficiaries are only 15.7% out a sample of 210.

Throughout 2002 when the land distribution programme was in progress there was tension in our sample villages between the landowning OBCs and the dalits particularly in Dhamkan, Gepri Pura, Mai and Sankara – which had high level of encroachments. In Dhamkan, out of a sample of 26 beneficiaries although every one of them had received *pattas, not a single person had been able to gain actual possession and cultivate the land allotted*. In the case of 18 beneficiaries i.e. 70% it was due to encroachments by the upper/middle caste landowners, the rest of the land allotted being uncultivable. In Mai all the land allotted is fertile and the encroachers reluctant to give it up went to court leading to cancellation of all *pattas*. In Gebri Pura 19 beneficiaries out of 21 had received land that was cultivable, but in the case of 10 the Rawats had encroached upon the land; 9 were able to gain possession out of which in the case of 2 the land was not cultivable. In Sankara while 29 beneficiaries had received cultivable land only 9 had managed to gain possession of which 1 plot was not cultivable. Moreover, as table 1 shows much of the land allotted to dalits is not in their own villages as there is no charnoi land available. While in Gebri Pura land was allotted in villages about 5 kms away, in Sankara it was allotted in villages between 5 to 20 kms away. In Dhamkan and Mai land was allotted in Mudawali, Purtapura, Dhalan and Kirori, villages that are more than 20 kms away. The beneficiaries pointed out that they received little support from the dalit community in these villages against the encroachers, and are unfamiliar with the patwari and other officials responsible for the allotment.<sup>14</sup>

Nidhan is the only village where the programme has achieved some success. There are three powerful Tyagi landowners but they possess substantial amounts of ancestral land, which they have been tilling for many years.<sup>15</sup> Out of a sample of 24 beneficiaries 20 had been able to gain possession out of which only 6 were unable to cultivate. Out of the 24 allotments 15 were cultivable and only 1 was encroached upon. The reason is the availability of considerable amount of common land of good quality without encroachments; and as land was available plots were allotted to dalits within the village it was easier for the beneficiaries to obtain possession. But an equally important reason was the newfound assertiveness among the Jatavs since the early 1990s against middle caste oppression due to the existence of the BSP in the region. There is considerable antagonism among the two groups that has led to a large number of appeals to the local administration and litigation in the revenue and civil courts by both the beneficiaries of the programme and the encroachers. A good example is Ram Het a Jatav leader, who challenged the Tyagis in court setting an example to many others. As many as 33

<sup>13</sup> 1 hectare is equal to 6.25 bighas and 1 acre is equal to 2.5 bighas (1 hectare is equal to 2.5 acres).

<sup>14</sup> Collective discussion with the beneficiaries in Dhamkan with help of EP activists.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with the Tyagis, including Matadin Tyagi’s son at his residence on March 26, 2007.

court cases and appeals by 53 persons to the local administration are pending in the 7 selected villages. The Ekta Parishad despite its best efforts could not ensure actual possession of land to them as the administration did not work together with the Parishad on the District Task Force while implementing the programme and also failed to clear encroachments.<sup>16</sup> Even in cases where courts have upheld the rights of dalits to the land allotted, the administration has not enforced these judgments. As the encroachers are big landowners the administration and the police find it difficult to take action against them.

Conflict over the land distribution programme was not absent but the presence of the Ekta Parishad's village level workers helped prevent atrocities against the dalits. The relationship between the dalits and the encroachers worsened after the former received their pattas. Beneficiaries from Dhamkan who tried to take over the lands allotted to them in Mudawali village were threatened by the encroachers with guns after which no person has dared to try again. The Rawats in Simroda village did not allow the beneficiaries from Gebri Pura to enter the fields allotted to them. An attempt by a beneficiary from Sankara to call the police to village Badhona where he was allotted a plot to remove the Yadav encroachers ended in failure. The police could not persuade the Yadavs and withdrew, as they felt it could lead to bloodshed. Similarly others described the Thakurs of Simhauri as "ready to kill" to keep their land. In villages such as Gebri Pura where the dalits were settled on land available *within* the village they did not face hostility or threats whereas those who were allotted land outside could not take possession.

The encroachers on their part argue that they have been in possession of their lands for a long period of time – in some cases since the 1960s - and have been paying *Jurmana* (fine) to the revenue department. Many in Mudawali<sup>17</sup> who have encroached upon the land allotted to dalits from Dhamkan, argued that they have spent considerable amount of money and labour to make the land cultivable and therefore the government should allot it to them and not to the dalits. While the former Patwari of Dhamkan held that the fine was levied to prevent encroachment and that the encroacher must promptly vacate the land.<sup>18</sup> The *Jurmana* receipt does not state this, and those paying it believe that it has over the years provided them at least *partial* possession.

The encroachers are not alone in holding this view but also have sympathizers in the administration. The SDM of Jaura<sup>19</sup> described the policy of the Digvijay Singh government as "taking from one and giving to the other" which he felt was not justifiable and difficult to implement. Removing encroachments he admitted was not a 'priority' of the administration as it involved using police force against them, which it is reluctant to do as many have political connections. Even in cases where encroachers were removed with the help of the police, they have regained their position soon after. The beneficiaries blame the patwari and the revenue inspector who they allege made little attempt to remove encroachments and give them possession of their land. However, these officials argued that their job was to provide the pattas, measure the plots allotted and hand them over to the beneficiaries; removal of encroachers would entail use of police force which is not under their control.<sup>20</sup> But in Jaura

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<sup>16</sup> In contrast in Shivpuri district the District Level Task Force worked smoothly as both sides worked together to ensure better implementation of the programme. The EP workers helped dalits fill forms, meet officials, have the land measured and take possession after encroachments were cleared in large number of cases.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with some encroachers in Mudawali on 25 March, 2007. While the majority consists of Kushwahas there were some Brahmins also. They provided us with receipts of the fine they are paying. A copy of a receipt dated 1963 are in possession with the author. While initially they were keen to discuss the issue of encroachment, gradually the discussion turned hostile indicating that the Kushwahas are not willing to hand over the land allotted to the dalits at any cost.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Patwari Dinesh Srivastava, patwari of Dhamkan in 2003, on 22 March 2007 at his residence in Jaura.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with then SDM at his office 24 March, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Dinesh Srivastava patwari of these villages on March 26, 2007 in his office at Jaura.

although encroachment and attempts to gain possession has caused considerable social tension, heated verbal arguments and small fights, it has not led to violence or killings of dalits as in Rajgarh.

The Congress party performed poorly in the Chambal region in the December 2003 assembly elections held soon after the distribution of land to dalits. While in 1993 the Congress had obtained 19 out of the 34 assembly seats in the Chambal region, the BJP had gained 9 and the BSP 5 seats. In 2003 it could gain 9 seats, the BSP only 1 seat, while the BJP increased its tally to 22 seats. Land was not an important issue in the electoral campaign of any political party in the 2003 assembly elections. Nor did the Congress publicize or use the Bhopal Document or the Dalit Agenda contained in it, in a region which has a large number of dalits in the population. However, our fieldwork suggests that the keen desire among the dalits to obtain land and their openly expressed intense disappointment in not being able to gain actual possession perhaps contributed to the poor performance of the Congress.

### *Land Distribution in Rajgarh*

In Rajgarh the five selected villages lie between 90 to 130 kms from Bhopal.<sup>21</sup> Yadavs and Dangis<sup>22</sup> form the dominant landowning social group while the dalits most of whom are landless form a small minority. The former have encroached all the fertile land in the village. In none of these villages the OBC landowners have been paying *Jurmana* or fine as in Morena. In Punarkhedi some dalits received land about twenty years ago during the regime of Arjun Singh when land was distributed to dalits. However, the amount was very small and it is now divided among many brothers. All the sample villages still have some Charnoi land – between 30-60 bighas – but it is under the control of the Yadavs and Dangis.

The dalits consist mainly of Chamars, with a few households of other sub-castes such as the Balahi, Mehtar, Balmiki, Varma and Malvi. The dalit *bustees* here were much poorer than those in Morena. In some villages such as Punarkhedi the dalits are spread through the village, but the Chamar, Balmiki and Balahi tolas are separate reflecting the lack of unity among dalits in the village. All the beneficiaries were practically illiterate though a few claimed they had been to school for a few years. As most of them were landless or near landless, they were either dependent and tied labourers to the Dangi or Yadav landowners or were working outside the village on road building and construction sites to maintain their families. The Chamars of Rajgarh are much more passive compared to those of Morena district. Smaller in numbers, residing in remote villages in a backward district and in the absence of a dalit party like the BSP, they have much lower levels of awareness and do not migrate in search of jobs as the Chamars in Morena.<sup>23</sup>

The total sample of beneficiaries in the five villages in Rajgarh as table 2 (appendix) shows was 133. Most of the beneficiaries were Chamars with some Balahi, Balmiki or Mehtar, Varma, Malwi and a few families of STs consisting of the Bhils or Bheels as they are locally called. All the beneficiaries had heard of the land distribution programme from the Patwari or from community members in the neighbouring villages. With two exceptions in village Selapani and Latahedi, all the beneficiaries in the other villages belong to category I i.e. they did not own land earlier. All the plots have been allotted inside the villages and they range from 2 to 3 bighas of land. Fieldwork in the sample villages

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<sup>21</sup> Khedi, Lasudia Maharaj (henceforth Lasudia), Selapani, Latahedi and Punarkhedi are in Narsingarh, Biora, Rajgarh, Sarangpur and Biora tehsils, respectively. Khedi is the closest to Bhopal being about 90 kms and about 20 kms from the tehsil headquarters. They all have about 100 to 200 households with about 40-60 dalit households. All of them have at least a primary school, Lasudia has a middle school and Punarkhedi has a middle and high school. None have any public facilities such as post-office, bus stop or health centre but all have handpumps for drinking water.

<sup>22</sup> An OBC group standing in the middle of the caste hierarchy similar to the Yadavs and Tyagis in MP.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Mr J.N.Kansotiya (IAS) at his house in Bhopal, August 27, 2007.

revealed that the caste system and feudal values remain deeply entrenched. A reason for this and the lower levels of assertion by the dalits are the strong presence of the BJP and the RSS in the district, which encourages the middle castes to behave in an oppressive manner. However, in recent years there have been simmering murmurs of protest beneath the surface by the dalits as a result of which, when the land distribution policy was implemented they were keen to own land and throw off their dependence on the Dangis. The latter on the other hand were keen to continue the earlier feudal relationship and opposed the land distribution policy.

There are no encroachments 'visible'<sup>24</sup> in the sample villages and on paper all dalits are in possession of the land allotted. The local administration had removed encroachments and given dalits actual possession of the land allotted to them. In terms of possession, as table 2 shows, the actual beneficiaries are 97.74% i.e.133 minus 3 i.e. 130 out of a total sample of 133. *But some probing revealed that in actual fact, apart from Khedi, in all the other villages, almost all the land is partially encroached.* In Lasudia 1, Selapani 2, Latahedi 33 and Punarkhedi 44 plots were partially encroached upon by the local big landowners consisting of the Dangis, or in some cases the Yadavs. The most complaints were heard in Punarkhedi. As Mangi Lal and Kalabai of Punarkhedi argued, out of the 3 and 4 bighas allotted to each of them, at least 1½ bigha was encroached upon. This was because the neighbouring plots either belonged to or, were already encroached upon by the Dangis who were not prepared to give up an inch of land to the dalits. There were perhaps more beneficiaries whose lands were partly encroached but were afraid to complain, as they are afraid of the consequences. Several beneficiaries pointed out that there was little they could do about this state of affairs as they were economically dependent upon the Dangis and Yadavs for employment and were also afraid of retaliation. They agreed that they felt economically somewhat better off as they had some land on which they could grow some food, which also provided them a sense of security. But at the same time they remain very frustrated and unhappy that they have not obtained the full benefit of the programme by tilling all the land allotted to them.

Despite the presence of honest and efficient senior officers, partial encroachments were possible due to high levels of bribery and corruption in which the Patwaris of the district played a dubious role. Though the pattas mention the exact amount allotted to each beneficiary, they point out that in almost all cases the land was not properly measured by the Patwari and Revenue Inspector, but merely indicated by a "straight line" as a result of which most plots were actually much less than the 2-4 bighas they were allotted. The Patwari was either scared or preferred to avoid conflict, or as the beneficiaries alleged, took money from the Dangis to give them smaller plots. In some cases even after the land was allotted the Dangis encroached upon neighbouring plots allotted to dalits and used it to store their harvest or graze their cattle, and the latter were unable to protest or do anything about it. In Latahedi beneficiaries alleged that they had to pay money to the Patwari to get land, as a result there remain about five families who did not get land as they were unable to pay. They also pointed out that the Yadavs paid money to the Patwari and got back some of the land they had encroached, which had been cleared and allotted to the dalits. In Lasudia one of the beneficiaries pointed out that the Patwari did not give him land and it was only after he went to the tehsil headquarters and met the SDM personally that he was allotted land. At least 25 Patwaris in the district were suspended and a few were dismissed from service for bribery or not allotting land correctly.<sup>25</sup> A few persons were allotted land after the enquiry, but no major changes were made in the pattern of land distribution as the elections intervened and the term of the Digvijay Singh government was over.

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<sup>24</sup> Unlike in Morena no plots were completely under the control of the Yadavs or Dangis.

<sup>25</sup> A few examples: Patwari Shivnarain Mandloi of village Sarangpur and Patwari Mangelal Malviya of village Selapani were jailed for taking bribes in July 2002. In the latter case the dalit youth Dheeraj who paid the bribe did not get the land and committed suicide. In Latahedi Patwari Pokhraj was suspended by the District Collector for taking bribes to return land to the Yadavs in the village.

### *Violence over land distribution in Rajgarh*

In Rajgarh due to a pro-active and sympathetic District Collector large amount of Charnoi land was distributed between 2000 and 2002 to dalits and tribals amounting to over 20000 hectares. The land distribution programme had already begun in 1998, and speeded up following the Bhopal Conference in January 2002. However, in contrast to Morena, the district experienced violent conflicts between the dominant landowning middle castes and the landless dalits. In Rajgarh from the very beginning the upper castes had strongly resented the policy of allotment of land to the dalits and tribals and in 2002 began to actively oppose it. Unable to gain full possession of the land allotted, out of a sense of frustration, anger and unhappiness and emboldened by the steps taken by the Congress government and promises made at the Bhopal Conference the dalits retaliated worsening the situation (Deshbandhu, Bhopal, August 19, 2002). Two immediate reasons sparked off the violence in Rajgarh. First was the attempt by the district administration to remove all encroachments and provide actual possession to dalit beneficiaries. Second the land distribution policy in 2002-03 became highly politicized prior to the state assembly elections to be held in December 2003, which in a situation already charged with hostility between the landed middle castes and the landless dalits, led to conflicts that spread over a large part of the district and Malwa region. These violent events impacted significantly on the results of the assembly elections as described a little later.

The violence began in Selapani, where on July 30, 2002 unhappy at the failure to gain possession of land allotted to him, despite bribing the Patwari, a dalit youth Dheeraj committed suicide. The incident created widespread unhappiness in Rajgarh district, despite the fact that two patwaris were jailed for taking the bribe from the youth. Soon the violent conflict spread rapidly in the sample villages: Lasudia on August 9; Selapani and Punarkhedi on August 10; Latahedi and Khedi on August 12, 2002.<sup>26</sup> In all these villages the pattern of violence was similar. Most of the dalits had received land in 2001 and by August 2002 they had managed to grow a first crop. Due to abundant rainfall in 2002 their crop in the villages was good, which aroused the jealousy of the Yadavs and Dangis already unhappy at the dalits gaining land. They destroyed the standing crop by either sending their cattle into the fields or burning it in some places. As soon as the cattle were led into the fields, dalits opposed it and fighting and violence spread rapidly through the village.<sup>27</sup> The news spread and in Selapani there was fighting between the Yadavs and the dalits but the police and the District Collector intervened in time to prevent a major incident. However in Latahedi they were not in time to prevent the murder of Ghisalal, a dalit panch. Even today in Latahedi there remains a palpable air of hostility towards the dalits who continue to work for the upper/middle castes. As one of the women pointed out “if we keep our mouths shut and work on their fields there is no problem. But if we ask questions and raise issues then there can be real trouble”.<sup>28</sup> The Yadavs remain hostile to the idea of giving land to the dalits though some of them regret the violence. They did not think the dalits would retaliate as they had never done so in the past. As Nanhe Singh a Yadav from Latahedi ruefully admitted “we thought we could take over all the land so we fought, and Ghisalal died”.<sup>29</sup> Confidential police reports mention 9 major incidents in some villages between July-August 2002 in Rajgarh district in which arrests were

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<sup>26</sup> Police Report, January 2003, File no. MP-108-Bhopal-03-05. Mantralya, Vallabh Bhawan, Bhopal.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with beneficiaries in the sample villages who experienced violence.

<sup>28</sup> In Selapani we were berated for talking to the dalits and “sitting only” in their Bustee. Unlike in Morena and Gwalior the upper and middle castes were not prepared to share their views on the land distribution policy.

<sup>29</sup> Interview on August 29<sup>th</sup> 2007 at village Latahedi.

made and punishments given.<sup>30</sup> The Malwaanchal area was the worse affected where the two sides were sharply opposed to each other and not prepared to compromise.

Police reports mention that Rajgarh district was the centre of the violence that took place around issues of land distribution. The highest number of cases and arrests were in two Police Ranges/divisions - Bhopal and Ujjain. In Bhopal division alone the number of cases and arrests were 164 and 459 of which Rajgarh accounts for 52 registered cases and 275 arrests.<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere the numbers are not significant though many incidents were not registered with the police. Of the 48 cases of serious clashes that reportedly took place; the OBCs were involved in 46 of them and the Rajputs in only 2. ("Polls And That Looming Dalit Factor" Neerja Chowdhury The Indian Express, New Delhi, 27 June 2003). The reasons cited in reports for these incidents that took place throughout 2002 in most cases was land meant for schools, cremation grounds, roads and other common purposes being distributed to dalits leading to conflict. However, an equally large number of the incidents were due to violence by big landowners against dalits who had received land. Police reports also record that in places where major incidents took place the BJP unhappy at the popularity of the ruling Congress party fanned the existing hostility of the upper/middle castes landowners to the policy of giving land to the dalits.

The violent incidents in our sample villages (and other villages in the region) have introduced significant changes in relations between dalits and middle caste landowners. During our fieldwork dalit beneficiaries pointed out that while a feudal attitude always existed, since they were given land by the government, open ill-treatment in the form of abuse, hitting and berating them by the Yadavs and Dangis has become very common. Most beneficiaries held that it is not so much "jatiwad" (caste discrimination) as an attempt to prevent land from coming under the control of dalits. At the same time the violent incidents have increased social and political awareness among the dalits making them more aggressive. Following the violence, in Khedi and Lasudia village the dalits no longer work on the lands of the Dangis. They prefer to cultivate their own fields and supplement it with labour outside the village. An air of hostility still permeates the villages and affects relationships between the two sides. The beginnings of rising dalit assertion can be witnessed, which the BSP, following its victory in UP in March-April 2007, is trying to take advantage off. During the fieldwork we were told about rallies being held in the district by the party and many dalits were keen to attend them.

#### *Court Judgments and Worsening Conflict over Land Distribution:*

The violent conflict over land worsened with the judgment of the MP High Court by a single judge on August 5, 2002 while these incidents were taking place, against the Dalit Agenda of the government. Hearing a number of PILs that were filed in June 2002 particularly in Tikamgarh against the distribution of Charnoi land by upper/middle caste landowners, the court set aside the GO dated March 2, 2002 and earlier ones on which the land distribution programme was based, ruling that it was illegal and void. It restrained the government from converting "public land" under Section 237 of the MP Land Revenue Code into agricultural land and distributing it anyone, but also directed that encroachments on such lands should be cleared expeditiously.<sup>32</sup>

The judgment created uncertainty and heightened the already existing tension in villages in Rajgarh. According to police and media reports, BJP cadres and the Bajrang Dal published advertisements in

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<sup>30</sup> The villages were Devrikala, Thana Kaipete; Lasudia Maharaj, Thana Malawar; Selapani, Thana Karanwas; Latahedi, Thana Talen; Barkhedi, Thana Chapiheda; Chodapur Thana Khujner; Dabri Thana Jeerapur; and Charkheda, Thana Biora. Police Report, Government of MP, Bhopal.

<sup>31</sup> Detailed lists are provided in the Confidential Police Reports, Government of MP, Bhopal.

<sup>32</sup> High Court of Madhya Pradesh, Jabalpur, W.P. No. 6973/2002. In the matter of: State of Madhya Pradesh Versus Dayaram and others – Respondents.

newspapers, circulated copies of the judgment in villages and spread rumours that the Court had ruled against the policy of the government, which encouraged the upper/middle castes to take back their lands and perpetuate violence upon the dalits. At the meeting of the Gowshala committee<sup>33</sup> on August 8 a resolution was passed thanking the high court. OBC landlords held meetings on the night of August 8 in many villages in which it was decided to teach the dalits a lesson the next day. Thus, according to officials the violence was planned.<sup>34</sup>

The Digvijay Singh government decided to impose a “community fine” on the villages where the violence took place based on the hectares of crop destroyed by the upper/middle caste members.<sup>35</sup> The fines were criticized both by the big landowners and in a section of the press as leading to more animosity. 44 persons were arrested in Rajgarh of whom 21 were sent to jail: 1 from Selapani, 2 from Khedi and 3 from Latahedi among our sample villages. The dalits whose crop was destroyed were provided compensation of Rs. 25000 and another Rs. 1000 per month for six months as many of them fled the village and had to stay with relatives in other villages or at the tehsil headquarters. In Latahedi due to the murder of Ghisalal the police remained for a few months in the village until peace was fully restored. At least 26 persons were later convicted and sent to jail for four years. The person responsible for the murder of Ghisalal was sentenced for 21 years. Thus the district administration took prompt steps to stop the caste conflicts, protect the dalits and punish the perpetrators of the violence.

However, the conflict took a worse turn in mid August when the government despite the approaching elections decided to appeal to the Division bench of the High Court against the judgment of the High Court. It informed the Court that about 2.76 lakh hectares out of the total 3.46 lakh hectares charnoi land identified by the government had already been distributed and asked for leave to continue the programme. The Division Bench of the High Court looked into 112 petitions against the policy of the government to distribute Charnoi land to SC/ST population in the state. In its judgment on January 16, 2003<sup>36</sup> the Division Bench upheld the state government’s decision to reduce the area of grazing land from five to two percent under Section 237(3) of the MP Land Revenue Code, 1959. However, it ruled that while the government could distribute land to landless individuals in the state including SC/ST persons, it could not do so *solely on the basis of caste* leaving out other deserving landless individuals. The Court directed the state government not to distribute more than 50% of the acquired grazing land to SC/ST, in keeping with the Supreme Court cap on reservations. While it did not interfere in the land already distributed to SC/ST in the state; it gave the government a year to acquire 50% more land from other unoccupied government land including grazing land for distribution among the landless belonging to other categories.<sup>37</sup> The government decided not to give up the land distribution policy and implement the court’s orders. But it also decided to move a Special Leave Petition to the Supreme Court in which it sought permission to carry out its programme of land distribution to only SC/ST individuals. The government pointed out that the land distribution policy was based on the Bhopal Document published by the State government following the Bhopal Conference held on January 12-13, 2002. It also provided statistics to show that less than half of the SC/ST (43.90%) in MP own

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<sup>33</sup> These were committees set up by local Bajrang Dal workers during the election campaign to “protect the cow” as they held that grazing lands were being distributed to dalits.

<sup>34</sup> Discussion with Mr Kansotiya on the events of the period at his residence at Bhopal on 26 August, 2007.

<sup>35</sup> It took advantage of the provision in the PCR and Atrocities Act that if a group hurts Dalits or their property they can be levied a collective fine. In Latahedi 128 persons were fined 5 lacs; in Purankhedi and Lasudia Maharaj 129 and 140 people were fined Rs.9.61 and 5.27 lacs respectively. Village Khedi and Selapani were fined Rs.3.73 and 2.16 lacs respectively. However, the fine was not paid as the elections intervened and the BJP government reversed the decision. Interview with Kansotiya on August 26, 2007 in Bhopal at his residence.

<sup>37</sup> See also “HC puts 50pc cap on charnoi land The Hindustan Times, Bhopal, January 7, 2003; Dainik Jagran, Bhopal, January 17, 2003.

agricultural land while the rest derive their sustenance by selling their labour or, through rent or sharecropping. In his atmosphere the final and most gruesome incident took place in Chanderi village in Bhopal district, hardly 30 kms from the capital on October 25, 2003 when five dalits including a woman, their mother, were attacked and murdered, their standing crop burnt and many others injured, in a violent clash by the locally dominant middle castes (Dainik Jagran, October 26, 2003).

### *Land Distribution and the 2003 Assembly Elections*

The land distribution policy proved to be socially divisive leading to violence and impacted significantly on the state assembly elections held in December 2003. On one of the highest turnouts in the state's history the BJP won 173 seats defeating the Congress that had gained a stable majority in 1998 reducing it to just 38 seats. The vote share of the BJP rose from 38.98% to 42.50% while that of the Congress fell sharply from 40.57% to 31.63%. Falling in the Mahakoshal region which has been the traditional battleground with a long history of political rivalry between the Congress and the BJP, Rajgarh district became an important site of contestation in the election. It was the parliamentary constituency of Digvijay Singh from the mid 1980s to 1993 before he moved to state politics and had witnessed strong contests between him and BJP leaders. Moreover, the five assembly constituencies falling within Rajgarh district had witnessed a straight fight between the Congress and the BJP in state assembly elections in the 1990s with no other party gaining seats with the exception of the Janata Dal gaining 1 seat in 1990 after which it disappeared. In 1990 the BJP won 4 seats gaining 45.5% while the Congress gained no seats with 24.9%. In 1993 the seats were divided between the two parties the BJP gaining 3 and the Congress 2 with the former gaining 40.3% and the latter 45.6%. However, in 1998 the Congress had managed to gain all the 5 seats with a percentage of 44.2 while the BJP gained no seats and a lower percentage of 34.2. The BJP was hence keen in 2011 through their mobilization against the land issue to both embarrass Digvijay Singh and defeat the Congress party, which under his leadership had completed two terms in office.

Analysis of the electoral campaign in the 2003 elections based on interviews, revealed that the policy of land distribution, assumed political significance quite early in the BJP's electoral campaign in Rajgarh and other districts in the Malwaanchal region. The BJP and the RSS ran a "meticulously managed"<sup>38</sup> election campaign i.e. strategies were planned around regions and issues carefully and in this area the 'caste-cum-land' rather than the 'Hindutva card' was used. The BJP fanned the discontent among the OBCs who felt ignored by the Digvijay Singh government leading to violence against the dalits; which also enabled the BJP to consolidate the votes of the OBCs.<sup>39</sup> Simultaneously the BJP sympathized with the unhappiness among the dalits and tribals, a section of whom, decided to support the opposition party when their aspirations to possess land remained unfulfilled. Thus, a major issue in the elections was dalit/OBC competition in districts such as Rajgarh, Vidisha, and Sehore, which underlay the violence during the election campaign in these districts. The BJP used three issues from mid 2002 onwards to mobilize the rural population in Rajgarh against the land distribution programme: the problems in the land distribution programme such as removal of encroachments and inability to gain possession; the *Gowshala* or cow protection movement, which appealed to the religious sentiments of the people and was used to encourage the encroachers, largely OBCs, to take back the land distributed to the dalits; and High Court judgments to spread uncertainty among the dalits and OBCs leading to greater amount of conflict and violence. The sequence of the political build up by the BJP to the violence in Rajgarh district is clearly visible in both police reports as well as in the media. Newspaper reports show that in July and August in a number of towns and particularly villages in all the tehsils of Rajgarh, meetings were held between 6 and 8pm where it was highlighted that land redistribution had affected the village economy and destroyed village harmony. There were attempts on a number of occasions by the local BJP cadres to highlight the impact of distribution of grazing land by using cattle and hay to block the National Highway in protest against

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<sup>38</sup> Manor 2004; this was also mentioned by a senior Congress MLA, a former minister in the Digvijay Singh government, in an interview on August 28, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> In fact the authors of the Bhopal Document had suggested to Digvijay Singh that he should implement the Supplier Diversity programme rather than the land distribution programme which they warned might lead to conflict and violence. They had also suggested that while the Congress government was implementing many programmes for dalits and tribals something should be given to the upwardly mobile OBCs who might otherwise retaliate leading to loss of political support.

distribution of charnoi land. Demonstrations were also held in front of the DM's office in which local BJP leaders criticized the Congress for using land for political gain in the approaching elections, creating trouble between castes, wrong implementation and corrupt practices.<sup>40</sup>

Our field study of the land distribution programme, the violence which took place and the campaign which followed in Rajgarh district strongly suggested that the discontent with the land distribution programme on the part of the dalits and the middle caste/OBC landowners was a *wider phenomenon* present in large parts of the state. As large amount of land was distributed to dalits and tribals during 2002-03 just prior to the 2003 elections throughout the state, the unhappiness on the part of the both the dalit beneficiaries whose aspirations remained unfulfilled and the landowning OBCs opposed to the programme contributed in a considerable measure to the poor performance of the Congress in many parts of the state including its stronghold of Mahakoshal. The CSDS survey shows that the BJP made inroads into the rural areas, considered the traditional strongholds of the Congress: 42% of the rural electorate voted for the BJP and 30% for the Congress.<sup>41</sup> However, elsewhere this discontent present simmering beneath the surface did not translate into large-scale violence as the BJP and its affiliates did not mobilize strongly on the land distribution issue. In Rajgarh the BJP, RSS and Bajrang Dal taking full advantage of this rising discontent, through a well planned campaign fanned it against the government leading to violence and killing of dalits that led to the defeat of the Congress. Unfortunately as few in the Congress party were interested in the land distribution programme the Chief Minister did not realize until it was too late how unpopular the programme proved to be particularly in districts such as Rajgarh.

Consequently in the 2003 elections the BJP managed, following a keen contest, to wrest 4 seats – Biora, Narsingharh, Sarangpur and Rajgarh constituencies with high margins of victory in Narsingharh and Sarangpur of 24.1% and 20.3% respectively. Local leaders Badrilal Yadav and Mohan Sharma, who played a key role in the campaign against the land distribution programme, were able in a keen contest to win back Biora and Narsingharh seats.<sup>42</sup> The BJP snatched back its traditional stronghold of Malwa, and in the Mahakoshal region performed well defeating the Congress which gained hardly 8 seats and its vote share dropped to 29.9%; while the BJP gained 43 seats and a little over 40% of the votes. These are the regions as our study shows, where most of the conflicts around land distribution took place, leading to politicization of the issue.

The caste and community wise results of the post-election sample survey of the CSDS support our arguments. The Congress had hoped by introducing programmes for dalits (and tribals) to increase its percentage of votes from these groups at the expense of the BJP and most particularly the BSP, as the latter had not performed well in MP in the Lok Sabha elections of 1999. But this did not happen, the difference between the percentages of votes gained from dalits by the Congress and BJP was less than 1%.<sup>43</sup> The BSP obtained 14.5% while the “others” consisted mainly of the Samata Samaj party of Phool Singh Baraiya, which had left the BSP to form its own group, gained 8.6%. Thus, the dalit vote was divided badly affecting the Congress party. At the same time the BJP won 59.6% of the votes of the OBCs who constitute the powerful landowning class in the countryside against 29.1% for Congress. 22% of those who supported Congress in 1998 swung to the BJP, while the latter lost only 8% of its 1998 votes to the Congress.<sup>44</sup> The BJP's opposition to the land distribution programme helped it consolidate OBC support prior to the election. The BSP in MP also was not able to gain any part of the OBC vote as in UP, leaving it almost entirely to the BJP.<sup>45</sup>

The Congress party which faced opposition both in the state assembly and during the campaign did little to counter these efforts. Acrimonious debates in the legislative assembly in September 2003 between the Congress

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> CSDS election study in *The Hindu*, New Delhi, December 10, 2003.

<sup>42</sup> For details of the role played by Yadav and Sharma see Pai 2010

<sup>43</sup> The support of the Ekta Parishad, which endorsed Singh policies openly prior to the elections, also did not help the Congress party *The Hindu*, New Delhi, September 15, 2003.

<sup>44</sup> CSDS study quoted in Manor 2004: 19.

<sup>45</sup> *Frontline*, Sukumar Murlidharan “Assembly Elections” November 21, 2003.

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and the BJP on the issue of land distribution heightened social tension in the countryside prior to the election. The Congress was blamed for the conflict over land as it had given land only to dalits and not the landless poor and had created an acute shortage as no land was left for grazing cattle or even for common roads and paths in villages. Attempts by the revenue minister to explain that it was an innovative programme based on the Bhopal Document did not help the government. The decision by the Chief Minister to fine the big landowners in Rajgarh and some other districts who had participated in the attempt to take back land and in violence against the dalits, his and refusal to remove or transfer district magistrates made him more unpopular. No Congress leader apart from Digvijay Singh had shown interest in the land distribution programme and few defended him in the assembly. Rajgarh had five Congress MLAs none of whom tried to stop or interfere in the violent incidents that took place in the district in 2002 and 2003. Rather they held the District Collector responsible for the incidents as he had distributed land to the dalits and tribals. They felt that the upper and middle castes had held the charnoi land for a long period and spent considerably on improving it and they should be allowed to continue. Due to lack of support for his policies Digvijay Singh did not have the support of Congress MLAs during the electoral campaign. He campaigned alone and had to face the opposition parties. Consequently, the Congress party managed to win only in Khilichipur constituency in Rajgarh district where conflict between dalits and OBCs and violence was much less; the difference in the popular vote between the Congress and the BJP was only 7.4%.<sup>46</sup>

### Conclusion

The paper has examined the experiment by the Congress government in MP under the leadership of Digvijay Singh to distribute village grazing lands to landless dalits between 1998 and 2003. It was part of a larger land reform programme of the state government keen to improve the socio-economic condition of dalits based on the Dalit Agenda adopted at the Bhopal Conference of January 2002 and thereby strengthen its base among these groups to meet the challenge posed by the BJP and increasing influence of the BSP in MP. Analysis of the implementation of the programme based on extensive fieldwork in two districts, demonstrates that in backward states such as MP where no alternative sources of livelihood are available to landless groups and there is no strong, organized challenge to the dominant landowning groups from below. Land continues to be a significant source of power and prestige at the village level; an instrument through which the upper/middle castes/classes are able to dominate over dalits and continue to use them as a source of cheap labour. It also shows that as land is a scarce and highly contested resource, an attempt to redistribute it 'from above' impacts upon wider political developments taking place in the state such as mobilization by political parties leading to identity assertion by dalits and OBCs and electoral politics. The programme raised aspirations among dalits but failed to provide them actual possession of the land allotted creating unhappiness prior to the 2003 elections. It also antagonized the OBCs who as encroachers had tilled much of the grazing land over a long period of time and felt that the government was favouring the dalits leading to conflict and in some cases violence that contributed to the defeat of the Congress party in the 2003 assembly elections.

At the same time the fieldwork suggests that the specific context matters and both caste-based dominance and politics can create differential patterns. In Morena, dalits could not gain actual possession of the lands allotted to them due to encroachments by powerful middle castes/OBCs landowners hostile to the programme whom the administration afraid of violence did not try to remove. The presence of the BSP did not help the dalits in acquiring possession as the party has not spread in the region after its initial success in the early 1990s. But rising levels of political consciousness and assertion among the Jatavs and the presence of the Ekta Parishad ensured that the dalits were not subjected to violence, though it did not help them gain possession of land. The attempt to distribute land in the Chambal region which has a large number of dalits in the population failed to stem the declining seat share in the region of the Congress party after 1993 when it came to power in the state. Our fieldwork suggests that an important contributory reason was intense disappointment among the dalits on not being able to gain possession of the land allotted to them on paper.

In Rajgarh though the land distribution programme was more successful due to an honest and supportive administration and dalits were able in many villages to gain actual possession, there was widespread violence

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<sup>46</sup> Statistical Report General Elections, 2003 to the Legislative Assembly of Madhya Pradesh, Election Commission of India, 2003, Constituency Data Summary: 186-191.

against them. The majority of the chamars of the district are still passive and in absence of assertion, the middle-caste Dangis and Yadavs have maintained tight control over the fertile and irrigated lands of the district through encroachments and oppressive practices. However, in recent years there has been rising anger especially among the younger dalits against the oppressive practices of the middle castes, which led to retaliation and killing by the former also. These developments underlay the defeat of the Congress in four out of five assembly constituencies in Rajgarh, most of which it had won in the past. In sum, our field study points to both the potentials and limitations of the model of 'development from above' in a democracy. It suggests that the absence of an upsurge from below by disadvantaged groups, limits the ability of enlightened political elites manning the developmental state to introduce social change and help the weaker sections of society.

The MP experience of attempting to introduce change in landownership from above by giving land to dalits, points to some developments in the region after independence, which is presently determining the relationship between land, caste and power in the state and perhaps large parts of the Hindi heartland. The failure of land reform to distribute available cultivable land particularly to disadvantaged sections such as dalits and tribals, led to encroachments by powerful social groups in the villages. The local administration could not/did not prevent or, in some cases was in connivance in this process, which was helped by the absence of land records. The land distribution programme proved to be socially divisive which created discord at the village level and impacted on electoral politics. Today land reform is a very difficult agenda for any government, it would be impossible to appropriate land without resistance from the encroachers who have invested funds in improving it and believe they are the rightful owners having tilled it -in some case - for over fifty years. It is only the Left parties in West Bengal and Kerala who having adopted land reforms as a central part of their ideological/political agenda have been able to distribute land to the weaker sections.

Second, following Zamindari abolition certain changes took place in the rural caste hierarchy in the Hindi heartland, which underlie the violent, confrontations taking place in this region over issues associated with land such as ownership, tenancy and wages. Large sections of the upper castes many of whom were absentee landlords, moved away to urban areas into non-agricultural professions leaving the middle castes/OBCs such as Jats, Yadavs and Tyagis as the owners/controllers of the land and dalits as the landless labour. Both these groups in recent years are experiencing strong identity assertion and have become aggressive and upwardly mobile, leading to the middle castes/OBCs emerging as the direct oppressors of the dalits, leading to confrontation which impacts on electoral politics. Third, in this situation is the significance of the dalit vote for all parties following the strong wave of assertion and rise of the BSP in the Hindi heartland including MP although the party has not done well there. Since the late 1980s the Congress has been gradually losing the support of the dalits to identity-based parties such as the BSP and the BJP due to the strategy of social engineering among these groups. The dalit vote proved to be a significant factor in the highly charged competition between the Congress and the BJP over the land issue in parts of MP.

Finally, the village power structure, which had not experienced change in states such as MP in the colonial period, as in southern and western India, is in the process of undergoing change due to an upsurge from below by the lower castes, political mobilization by dalit/OBC-based parties, rise in literacy, strengthening of PR institutions etc. The dalits have seriously challenged the power of the upper/middle castes by forming political parties and even capturing state power in the Hindi heartland, but have not been able to undermine their position at the village level. It is here that competition and confrontation is taking place leading at times to violence. In sum, the inter-relationship between land, caste and power is in the throes of upheaval displaying presently elements of both continuity and change which is impacting on politics in the states.

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