Environmentalism, labor and the history of food production in Mumbai

Pradnya Garud

Abstract: *This article aims to understand the pushback by middle-class citizens against lower-caste migrants farming along the railway tracks in and around Mumbai. It highlights the entanglements of complex histories of state driven Grow More Food campaigns to combat food insecurity, the rural agrarian crisis that triggered urban migration, and the unequal process of urbanization. Author shows that class is not the only parameter of power and inequality at play but, rather, caste serves as the organizing principle for domination and labor exploitation in food production. To grasp urban agriculture in the current political moment requires unpacking the history of urban food production with attention to social, political and economic dimensions. This article examines these dynamics in the historical context of food production policy and practices in Mumbai and in India's rural hinterlands to understand how and why caste structures and interconnected relations of power emerges as a central organizing frame.*

Keywords: Urban Food Production, Environmentalism, Grow More Food campaign, Migrant Laborers.

Pradnya Garud: pradnyagarud2@gmail.com

Pradnya Garud completed her Ph.D. in geography and works as an environmental public health specialist.

Introduction

During a food gardening workshop that I attended in Mumbai in 2020, a young and energetic urban gardener introduced a PowerPoint slide with a question:

> *"Do you know where your green leafy vegetables come from?" The next slide showed pictures of vegetables along the railway tracks. "20–30% of your green leafy vegetables in Mumbai markets come from gutter farming. The sewage water which runs through the drains gets used for irrigation; also synthetic chemical fertilizers and pesticides are used to cultivate your food. The unhygienic ways of irrigation along with the chemicals is a deadly combination which results in green poison. What is the use of earning good money if we can't eat healthy and take care of our bodies and surrounding environment?" she asked the audience with frustration in her voice. "Corruption has led to mass poisoning of the food cycle and mother nature. Growing your own organic food will allow you to take control of what you eat and eventually contribute towards the process of healing the earth."*

The gardener's concerns were about the contamination of the food production cycle which they feared had severe health and environmental effects. To counter the production of "toxic" vegetables along the railway tracks, they employ urban food gardening as an intervention for safe and sustainable food production.

The aforementioned urban gardener is not alone in her concerns. Middle-class, upper-caste environmental activists across the city have mounted a passionate attack on the ubiquitous practice of urban farming on public railway land. Urban gardening has occurred for several decades prior to the recent wave of environmental and health activism of these privileged and dominant groups. Activists have targeted their outrage at 400 acres of land primarily cultivated by lower-caste farm workers along several miles of commuter railway lines. Despite supplying an estimated 30–40% of fresh produce to urban residents and creating green spaces in otherwise barren wastelands, these environmentalists see the railway farms and farmers as enemies of public health and the environment.

In May 2019, at the beginning of my fieldwork, the Bombay High Court directed the Indian railways to cancel the license of cultivators suspected of using sewage water to irrigate vegetables along the railway tracks. The court order ruled that only cultivators using clean sources of water for irrigation would be allowed to continue farming on railway-owned land (Thomas, 2019; Ahmed, 2019). This highly publicized court hearing addressed longstanding middle-class citizens' grievances about the use of unhygienic water for growing vegetables in the city. For over a decade, upper-caste, middle-class groups have successfully galvanized citizen forums, petitions, litigation, media platforms in their campaign against farming undertaken by lower-caste migrant laborers along the railway tracks (Kulkarni, 2016; Menon, 2013).

[Figures 1-4: The above photos show the land under cultivation along the railway tracks on the central line of Mumbai. All photos are taken by the author.]

Working-class laborers who are hired to farm along the railway tracks have a different opinion on urban farming. For them, these farms are their livelihoods and provide affordable locally-produced food for a broad range of urban citizens. The railway lands were initially leased to low-paid employees of the railway authority. Today, however, railway workers no longer farm the land, but rather lease it out to seasonal migrant laborers who are hired to do the farming because of their cheap labor and their food production knowledge and skills. I argue that we cannot understand the urban gardening campaigns and environmentalism of privileged residents without attending to the food production practices of migrant laborers on the urban railways that are being attacked through deeply interconnected caste- and class-based registers of power.

[Figure 5: Above photo depicts the dug-well constructed by the railway track farmer after the Bombay High Court banned using sewage water for irrigation.]

In October 2019, farmer Kisanji (name changed) showed me around his four acres of land under cultivation along the railway tracks. He showed me spinach, radish, and okra spread in neatly created beds across the farm. After I assured him that I was not a journalist reporting on the sewage water irrigation issue, he offered me a seat on a stone laid outside his tent. I began our interview by asking about his thoughts on the court orders; he explained:

> *The Bombay High Court order for cancellation of lease has created strain on the already scarce resources available for farming. We don't want to use drainage water for irrigation, but we grow vegetables on vacant land along the railway lines with minimal facilities. Previously clean sources of water are polluted now. Mumbai is a coastal city so even if we dig an expensive borewell the water table is salty, so drainage water is the only option for irrigation. If we are provided with enough sources of income in our villages, we won't have to migrate to cities. We are working hard to feed our families for which we are getting demonized by the city people. (Kisanji, personal communication, November 12, 2019)*

This farmer's position reveals the whole political and economic structure of power and inequality in urban and rural agriculture and food production that goes beyond simply "dirty irrigation" practices. One cannot understand this without attention to the history of food production and most

importantly, as I argue throughout this paper, the structured power relations of caste-based domination and labor exploitation.

Farming along the railway tracks constitutes one of the earliest and most widespread practices of urban food production in Mumbai; the colonial and later postcolonial state had long promoted railway farming as a strategy for national food sovereignty. After World War II, critical food shortage and famine conditions initiated the Grow More Food campaign, which was later continued by the postcolonial state leading up to the Green Revolution[1]. Throughout the existence of this campaign, food production was encouraged on every vacant land available. This launched urban gardening, especially in the 1960s, when the Indian railways who owned the largest amount of land made a policy to give vacant railway lands to the lower-caste employees, who work as maintenance workers and other low paid jobs, for food production to sustain their livelihoods (Government of India—Ministry of Railways, 2009). Interviews with the railway track farmers revealed that, presently, the vacant land is subleased to migrant farmers as they are well-versed with farming and need to supplement their livelihood with agrarian work.

The situation for the railway track farmers is an entanglement of complex histories and sociology of state-driven initiatives and campaigns to combat food insecurity, urban migration-triggered rural agrarian crisis, and unequal and uneven processes of urbanization. To understand the current political climate of urban agriculture, we need to unpack the history of urban food production with attention to both political economic dimensions and cultural politics.

This paper examines these dynamics in the historical context of food production policy and practices in Mumbai and Indian rural hinterlands to understand the role of caste structures and interconnected power relations. It historicizes railway land farming as part of a rural-urban structure of caste-based food production in contrast to the middle-class gardening practices. This paper explores how the state implemented food insecurity campaign measures shape food production, livelihoods, and urban agricultural practices in Mumbai. I interviewed 10 railway farm laborers during my fieldwork in Mumbai. While I had intended to conduct a more thorough analysis of these farming practices, this was not possible due to a number of factors including the highly politicized nature of the May 2019 court judgment, the farmers' fear of criminalization, limited access due to my gender, and the curtailed research term due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this paper, I draw upon some key findings related to caste-based labor and migration in railway land agriculture and contextualize these dynamics in relation to the history and caste-based structure of food production and policies. I analyze the historical relationship between caste and agriculture labor using Jotirao Phule's two seminal works: Slavery, published in 1873, and Shetkaryaca Asud (The Whipcord of the Cultivators), published in 1881, together with Stuart

[1] Green Revolution refers to a period that began in 1960s in India; it transformed Indian agricultural systems by introducing high-yielding varieties of wheat and rice through adopting technology.

Hall's theory of articulation to understand how caste and class are entwined and inseparable. I argue that these theoretical framings provide better insight into the nature of urban environmental politics, domination, and subjectivity in the context of urban agriculture than bourgeois environmentalism (Baviskar, 2003, 2006, 2011, 2020) and singular class-based urban political ecology alone. My empirical evidence comes from qualitative interviews with the railway tracks farmers, secondary sources, and archival resources (newspapers[2] and government documents) to discuss caste-based agrarian land and labor relations with a special focus on the Grow More Food Campaign, which galvanized urban agriculture as we see it today.

Reviewing the current agricultural scene in rural areas through the lens of caste slavery enables us to understand the seasonal migration of lower-caste laborers to work on farms along the railway tracks in Mumbai. Historically, along with railway track farming, the upper-caste, middle-class gardening practices symbolically began as part of the Grow More Food campaign to combat the food insecurity crisis during WWII and the early decades of the postcolonial period. Past and present middle-class gardening practices will be discussed in subsequent chapters. Here, I analyze archival documents and contemporary railway tracks farming practices to trace the history of agro-food policy and practice, especially the Grow More Food campaign during colonial, postcolonial, and contemporary times in relation to the class-caste structure of agrarian labor and land relations. This will enable us to ascertain not just the impacts of food policies and discourses on the lower castes, but also the centrality of caste in the articulation of political economy of food and agrarian power relations in Indian society across the rural-urban divide.

The historical analyses of food production will help in highlighting the caste inequities fostered by the formation of the modern Indian state, which created a primarily upper caste middle class while leaving the lower castes as the majority among the rural poor struggling in impoverishment. These articulations also speak to the broader agrarian crisis in India that, on one hand, has destroyed subsistence farming and pushed marginalized farmers into cycles of debt and poverty, while, on the other hand, has given rise to alternative farming movements such as the upper-caste-led urban organic food gardening devoid of equity considerations.

[2] I analyze the archives of The Times of India mainly because, historically, it has been one of the prominent English-language newspapers in India, and, during the time of the grave food crisis, they dedicated a page to covering different aspects of food insecurity issues and related governmental policies.

Urban Agriculture along the Railway Tracks in Mumbai

In an interview along the Kanjur Marg railway station, a subletter clarifies:

> *Farming along the railway track is not a new phenomenon. Food production has been going on here for a few generations now. Public lands that come under the jurisdiction of Indian Railways are subleased for cultivation. Growing vegetables along the tracks is a tedious task since the soil is of poor quality, and there is water shortage. We hire seasonal laborers usually from our villages. They are neechi jati (lower castes) who are mostly either landless or small landholders. It is difficult to make a living as a farm laborer in villages as compared to the cities. Here we sell the cultivated vegetables at relatively higher prices which enables us to pay the laborers minimum 6,000–8,000 rupees ($80–106) per month along with free stay and food. This is a better deal for the laborers as they work here for 6–7 months and go back to the village during the rainy season. (Personal communication, November 30, 2019)*

Urban agriculture along the railways is a longstanding practice, which was officially started by the Indian Railways in 1965 by leasing vacant land to grow food during the Green Revolution period when low agricultural productivity was posing a serious threat of famine. Since then, the policy has continued to contribute towards urban food production in Mumbai. The seasonal migrant lower-caste laborers from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh work along the railway tracks to produce food (Vazhacharickal et al., 2013). The cultivated vegetables are sold to local vendors or markets. "There are slum settlements nearby railway tracks, so the local vendors sell vegetables in the slum markets" informed a farm laborer (personal communication, 2019). Given that food insecurity, malnutrition, and anemia among children and women living in slums is high (Chatterjee, Fernandes, & Hernandez, 2012), railway track farming plays an important role in providing access to fresh food to slum dwellers.

Unlike other poor African and Latin American countries, the slum dwellers have not been able to adopt the strategy of growing food to mitigate food insecurity because of spatial constraints in Mumbai, as approximately 42% of the urban population lives in slums, which occupy 6% of the total landmass of Mumbai (Shrinivasan, 2013). Thus, the railway track farming not only supports the livelihoods of the migrant railway track laborers, but also provides the poor slum dwellers, who are majority lower castes, access to fresh food. In addition, the farming activities have contributed to green cover in a city with shrinking green spaces (Rahaman et al., 2021). The seasonal rural migrants are a crucial part of the urban fabric and informal sector workforce. Still, they are marginalized, excluded, and subjected to hostility from middle-class constituents (Gaikwad & Nellis, 2017). The railway track farmers are part of the same pool of seasonal migrants who come to cities to find work for survival but are criminalized based on where they live and how they earn their livelihoods.

The next section presents a brief discussion about the changes in the agrarian hinterlands over time that have led to the lower castes' dependence on seasonal migration to cities for sustained livelihoods

Agriculture labor as caste slavery

One farm laborer along the railway track said, "Our jati (caste) people work as agricultural laborers for upper-caste landowners…. They (the upper castes) own the maximum land in the village, we mostly do majduri (wage labor work) or sharecropping on their farms as a source of livelihood," (Personal communication, November 13, 2019). To understand the caste dynamics of agrarian relations, Bedide (2019) starts by explaining who is the primary food producer in India. He writes that the most basic way of categorizing farmers is in terms of landholdings, i.e., small landholders or large landholders. But in India, the number of landholdings does not necessarily indicate the number of landholders. For example, an individual or a household can own more than one landholding in different parts where the land title could be under the name of a family member, a relative, or a minor, etc. So, landholding does not accurately define who produces food. Rather, Bedide (2019) suggests that labor should be considered as a category to distinguish types of farmers. People who labor to produce food and entirely rely on agriculture as their income source are the cultivators or farm laborers. In total, 60–80% of lower-caste farmers with ownership of 1 acre of land or less are the cultivators or farm laborers, while the rest, 20–30%, are the upper-caste large landowners who do not perform labor. They can be distinguished from the lower-caste farmers based on the profits they earn from agricultural production. The lower-caste farmers are also known as marginal laborers given their minimal land ownership and dependency on seasonal migration to supplement their livelihoods (Government of India—Department of Agriculture, Cooperation & Farmers Welfare, 2020, p. 7, 31, & 62). The lower-caste marginal laborers are the ones who are forced into seasonal migration to work in the urban informal sector such as in the case of railway track farming in Mumbai.

Urban industrialization and the modernization of agriculture is often thought to reduce the number of people dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods. But in India, even after capital investment through state interventions, scientific technology, and mechanization initiatives like the Green Revolution, agrarian modernization has not been able to reduce dependency on agricultural livelihoods. Instead, reliance on agricultural livelihood has grown. Since 1947 the population in India has increased four times, while the livelihood dependency on agriculture and allied activities has increased three times (Bedide, 2019; Government of India—Department of Agriculture, Cooperation & Farmers Welfare, 2020). This means that capital-driven agricultural mechanization and limited industrialization in post-independence India has not been able to absorb displaced agricultural labor in different sectors of work. Several scholars discuss the loss of agrarian livelihoods in rural areas that leads to high levels of precarity and impoverishment in both rural and urban areas, as well as the informalization of livelihoods and housing in urban areas due to

out migration and displacement. Theorists like Davis (2006) call this process "urban involution," while Sanyal (2007) discussed the dynamics of the "need economy," and Li (2010) unpacked the politics of "surplus rural populations."

However, these analyses are insufficient to understand the case in India. Following the work of anti-caste scholars, I argue that these accounts need to be coupled with a caste analysis to understand the stubborn ongoing dependency on meager rural and urban livelihoods. Bedide (2019, 2020) argued that either the Indian economy had failed to expand with the growing population or the state has not invested enough to develop social and other institutional infrastructure in the rural areas that would reduce the livelihood dependency on agriculture. He explained that this situation cannot be simply understood in terms of economic stagnation, but rather we must also investigate the processes of social stagnation connected to caste. It is the functioning of the caste-based political economy that designates birth-based labor divisions, where the lower castes remain the servants of the society. In the classic text, Shetkaryaca Asud, Jotirao Phule, the founder of the anti-caste and farmers movement in western India, theorized that the brahmin-bania dominated society benefits from the social and economic exploitation of the lower castes (shudra and ati-shudras) (Phule, 2002).

Omvedt (1973) clarified that the British governing institutions and bureaucracy, including the administration, courts, educational institutions, etc. were dominated by brahmin intelligentsia that served as an intermediatory system between the British government and peasantry. Omvedt (1973) writes:

> *Prior to British rule peasants did, indeed, borrow money; but decentralization, the strength of village society and hereditary rights in the land were such that moneylender was relatively helpless vis-à-vis the village leaders. Now the moneylenders, with the help of lawyers, could use the courts to claim the land, and "outsider" (i.e., Brahman professionals) could gain control of the land in a way they could not have in pre-British times. Thus, the traditional village caste economy with peasants, artisans and laborers maintained in their positions by feudal overlords, was replaced by a village opened not only to more intense market influence but also to a new control by moneylending and intelligentsia classes. (p. 1425)*

British policies changed the social fabric of Indian agriculture through 1) land enclosures and introduction of property relations; 2) land tax revenue system; and 3) profit and market-oriented crop production (Karmakar, 2015). The move from subsistence farming to cash crop production opened up farmers to the whims of the market and led to a dependency on the banias, who were engaged in the traditional caste-based occupation of money lending. The two main reasons for taking loans were to pay the yearly taxes, especially since the collection period did not coincide with the harvest times, and in case of crop failure, droughts, or other climate-related factors; these two factors created a permanent dependency of farmers on money lenders. Thus, colonial rule

created a debt-ridden contractual form of slavery that continued even through to when caste occupation replaced the pre-British traditional form of caste economy (Omvedt, 1983, 2011).

Later drawing on Phule, Ambedkar (1991) described brahmin-bania alliance as follows:

> *He lives on interest and as he is told by his religion that money lending is the occupation prescribed to him by Manu (Hindu religious law text), he looks upon it as both right and righteous. With the help and assistance of the Brahmin judge who is read to decree his suits, he is able to carry on his trade. Interest, interest on interest, he adds on and on and thereby draws families perpetually into his net: Pay him as much as a debtor may, he is always in debt. With no conscience, there is no fraud, and no chicanery that he will not commit. His grip over the nation is complete. The whole of poor, starving, illiterate India is mortgaged to the Bania. To sum up, the Brahmin enslaves the mind and the Bania enslaves the body. Between them, they divide the spoils which belong to the governing classes. (p. 216–217)*

Like Phule, Ambedkar pointed out that the brahmin-bania alliance formed through common caste interests of controlling and benefiting from the exploitation of the lower castes. He emphasized that the caste duty of brahmins is to gain education that they used to secure institutional control as lawyers, accountants, magistrates, and clerks in the British administration, while the bania castes controlled the flow of money by following their religion prescribed caste occupation of money lending. Thus, caste is inscribed to the capitalist relations that controlled the lower-caste cultivators defining the feudal nature of agrarian relations in the rural hinterlands. This framework is helpful in making sense of the present context in which the rural lower castes are perpetually tied to forms of agricultural labor that barely sustain their livelihoods. This indicates that the relations between labor and capital are dictated by caste structures. The caste mode of production (Bedide, 2018) is adapted in a global capitalist system that reproduces the hierarchical servile relationships between the brahmin upper castes and the laboring castes.

It is also important to note here that the anti-caste movement emerging among the rural peasantry did not align with the anticolonial or nationalist struggles of Congress Party[3] and other Swaraj (self-rule) formations as they were dominated by brahmins, and their demand was to replace British rule with brahmin rule. On the contrary, the rural peasantry was grappling with deeper questions of caste labor, land relations, and religious-based caste subjugation. Aloysius (1998) writes that the nationalist struggle was a reaction to the lower-caste formations against caste oppression in the colonial period. This dynamic is important to understand as the following section on the Grow More Food Campaign during the colonial and postcolonial period was an iteration of the nationalist struggle for territorial control.

[3] Indian National Congress, usually referred as Congress Party, was a nationalist political party established in 1885. The Congress Party dominated the anti-colonial struggle against Great Britain.

The story of postcolonial India can be understood in two parallel, but interconnected, realities of urban and rural. In this case the urban upper castes' concern about food, health, and environmental safety as opposed to the rural lower-caste migrants farming to sustain their livelihoods. The process of capital accumulation is marked by a period of colonization that transformed agricultural production from subsistence farming to a cash crop economy (Chaudhary et al., 2015) that had subsequent impacts on agricultural productivity, food insecurity, and food consumption. The issues of hunger and food shortage played a significant role in ending colonial rule and defining the early decades of postcolonial state to the launch of the Green Revolution. Even in contemporary times, the question of food captured the political imagination of the country—be it unsafe food systems, debates on sustainable forms of agriculture, policies targeted to mitigate malnutrition, or food insecurity issues.

Urban agriculture emerged as a partial solution. Through state intervention, the Grow More Food campaign was designed to combat the issues of food shortage during the colonial and postcolonial times. In the following sections, I examine the trajectory of this campaign to map out the divergent histories that shaped the food production narratives and practices of urban agriculture in India. Drawing on Phule and Bedide's articulation, I contend that caste-based capital accumulation processes provide an accurate lens to view the contradiction of upper caste community gardening versus lower caste migrant farming in Mumbai.

Grow More Food campaign during British rule: 1942–1947

Railway tracks farming was formalized in 1965 under the policy of the Grow More Food campaign during the Green Revolution period, but this campaign dates to colonial rule when the British initiated the process of shifting agricultural production from cash to food crops to stave off famine. These efforts were carried forward by the postcolonial state leading up to the Green Revolution.

This section will explain the beginning of the Grow More Food campaign during colonial rule, which was a wartime effort to increase food production in British colonies. The British implemented market-orientated agricultural policies and tax revenue systems and developed a cash crop economy, which neglected subsistence food production. The Grow More Food campaign was an attempt not just to secure food needs, but also to retain British control in its colonies during the advancement of fascist axis power. Here, I focus on the question of how these major global changes impacted the laboring lower castes of India.

World War II triggered a food shortage in Britain and the U.S., prompting the colonial administration to order colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean to focus on growing food crops as opposed to export-driven cash crops (Nkhoma, 2021). In India, the propaganda office and the colonial government's agriculture department played an important role in overseeing the shift from cash crop to food production. Reports suggest that:

An additional yield of 714,214 tons of food grains is expected from the grow more food schemes for which financial assistance has been given to provinces and states by the government cover distribution at concession rates of improved seed and manure, the carrying out of minor irrigation projects, the construction of embankments and reclamation of land.…An increase of ten million acres of area under rice, and millets and 3 million acres under wheat and gram over the acreage… in British India. ("Grow More Food in India: Government Schemes," July 13, 1944)

Agricultural practices were intensified by distributing improved seed quality and making irrigation facilities available at cheaper rates. Wastelands were brought under cultivation without rent charges. The agricultural department set up a Central Food advisory council which provided direct financial assessments or subsidies to divert land under cotton production to food crops. The reports noted that, as compared to 1941–1942, there was an increase of 80 lakh acres of land under food crop production in 1942–1943. However, the agricultural incentives and increased food production benefited the large landowners with more profits, while the large masses of lower castes were forced into destitution and hunger due to the rising food prices and hoarding of food grains (Mishra, 2004).

Two important points to note here are first, the two centuries of British policies with the brahmin-bania alliance altered the agricultural landscape from subsistence farming to a cash crop economy, which consolidated large landholding under upper-caste control and ownership. This created India's food dependency on imports and a vulnerability to famine conditions affecting the lower castes the most (Davis, 2001). Second, the Grow More Food campaign's war-time effort to intensify agriculture and incentivize food crop production effectively brought more land under food cultivation in rural and urban areas. These subsidies targeted the land holder and not the lower caste laborers working on the farms. Thus, the Grow More Food Campaign efforts to intensify agriculture and control market prices to increase the food crop productivity directly benefited the upper-caste landholder, while the lower castes struggled with hunger and malnutrition.

World War II and the Bengal Famine

The catastrophic Bengal famine was the turning point as the widespread nationalist movement used the devastation to demand complete independence from British rule. The deep food crisis that led to the famine became the political agenda and foundation of the modern Indian state. This quote, from a white paper on the Bengal famine, describes the events leading up to the catastrophic event and its aftermath:

The Bengal famine is attributed to the fall of Burma, the cyclone of October 1942, the hoarding resulting from the fall of Burma and the air raids on Calcutta and the floods which this year breached the main railway lines to the Presidency in a "short and factual

narrative of the events in Bengal…." ("White paper on Bengal famine: Causes analysed," October 30, 1943).

Siegel (2018) wrote that while the British were preparing the colonies for the war efforts, the Japanese invaded the British colony of Burma, which lies southeast of India. With the fall of Burma, the east of Bengal became a war front. In 1942, the British adopted a scorched earth policy to stop the Japanese invasion of India and the collapse of the British empire. But the policy catastrophically affected the agriculturists of the region by depriving them of their source of income and resulting in increased impoverishment in the area. The sudden stop of rice exports from Burma and natural calamities like cyclones and tidal waves that hit the coastline of Bengal and Orissa in October 1942, furthered the devastation and made the landscape vulnerable to famine. The combination of a war economy and natural disasters inflated the price of the staple food of the diet—rice—leading to starvation. Burma was the major rice exporter to British India, and this added to the widespread food shortage. Though early indications of the catastrophe were evident, the colonial administration ignored it so as not to drain resources and keep the war efforts moving. Instead, the newspapers were censored from reporting on the severe food shortages and hunger in order to reduce the incentive of the Japanese to invade India; and therefore, the colonial administration officially denied the existence of famine. The upper-caste landlords had been hoarding food grains since the early signs of famine, and this denial of food scarcity shut the doors for any possibility of aid from outside. The result of the elite upper castes within the country hoarding food gave rise to one of the biggest human catastrophes of all time. The official records suggest that nearly 4 million people starved to death during the Bengal famine (Simonow, 2020).

A special correspondent investigative report for The Times of India newspaper documented:

The first and most striking impression gained by the visitor to almost any town or village in Bengal is that only a section of the population has been visibly affected by the famine. Moreover, there is a very wide difference between the sufferers and the general public…. The middle-class Bengali continues his well-known rotundity, but on the streets of every village and town are men, women, and children, particularly women and children, who are little else than skin-covered skeletons. The first time you come across a group of them the shock is profound. As time goes on, you find they form a regular feature of the landscape…. While the poorest landless groups, beggars, day labourers, boatmen and village artisans- and the small cultivators were the most affected in all the famine areas. Local conditions sometimes pushed the lower middle class into the breadline. ("Stricken Bengal II: Genesis of the famine," 1943)

This report clearly states that the famine's impact in Bengal wasn't equally felt. The poor, landless lower-caste laborers and artisans faced the severity of the famine. Thus, the Bengal famine was a genocide of the laboring poor people in India.

The Grow More Food campaign of the colonial government could not mitigate the large-scale food crisis, and it did not address the caste-based inequalities that allowed the persistence of food insecurity among the lower-caste population (Law-Smith, 1989). The elite upper caste anticolonial struggle used the agony of starvation, the deaths, and the hunger among the lower castes to galvanize support against British rule and demand complete independence (Mukherjee, 2015). The Congress party's upper-caste leaders made a case for self-rule, which will be devoid of food shortages and austerity. Though the question of food security and the elimination of hunger was foregrounded, the nationalist movement did not see these issues as related to caste inequalities. Aloysius (1998) wrote that India's nationalist movement was a ruling-caste formation to curb lower-caste resistance that was building in different parts of the country. Thus, the Congress party's goal was to gain territorial and administrative control of the Indian state in order to consolidate the power of the brahmin and allied castes.

Indian independence and continuation of the Grow More Food campaign

The promise of food self-sufficiency and of the elimination of hunger was the core message of the nationalist movement. By the end of WWII, the food situation saw slight improvement, but the post-war global recession and conflicts that emerged due to the partition of India and Pakistan triggered food shortage concerns. India entered its independence on August 15, 1947, with deep worries over its food economy. Due to its fears and also with a deep spirit of self-sufficiency, the first government of the newly independent India relaunched the British Grow More Food policy. This iteration continued with the same programmatic strategies to intensify food production as the import of food grains and the public distribution at subsidized prices added to the state's debt (Government of India, 1952). Initial policy talks suggested:

> *measures for intensifying the "Grow More Food" Campaign in the Bombay province and for increasing joint conference of the provincial rural development board and the provincial food and cloth advisory committee held in the council hall, Bombay on Saturday…. The present policy of the Government of encouraging cultivators to grow food crops in preference to non-food-crops was fully discussed. The opinion expressed at the conference was largely in favor of continuing the operation of Food Crops Act, restricting the acreage under non-food crops, in the coming year, but it was suggested that the provisions of the Act might be modified wherever necessary to suit the local conditions. The conference was of the opinion that better scope for cultivating rotation crops and cattle feed should be provided to the cultivators." ("Grow more food" campaign: Bombay talks," March 31, 1947)*

Similar technocratic strategies of intensification of agriculture were adopted. After a few years of implementation, when productivity targets had not been met, the agriculture minister said:

> *Now, this is not the job only of the Agricultural Department, nor only of the Government as whole. The drawback in the "Grow More Food campaign" until now was that it was left only to the Agricultural department... we want to enthuse the cultivator with the improvements which we want to introduce and make him look upon increased food production both as being in his own interest and as a national duty....Hence again the feeling that the "grow More food" movement must percolate from the top to the bottom and from the cities to the cultivators.... ("Making 'grow more food' campaign A success: Mr. Patil's call to urban workers to tour villages," August 27, 1949)*

Though the nationalist anti-colonial struggle promised land reforms and a focus on equity, after independence, these goals were not reflected in the programmatic handling of the food crisis. Rather, Congress party leaders and ministers used the rhetoric of national duty of the postcolonial citizen to help the country combat the food insecurity crisis. The Agricultural Department complained that the cultivators were unable to meet the food targets due to their use of the traditional ways of farming, which lacked the modern techniques of agriculture.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, today, lower-caste migrant groups farming along the railway tracks are criminalized by the middle-class and the state for using sewage or drainage water to grow food; however, archival evidence suggest that the use of sewage water for food cultivation was actively pursued by the postcolonial state to increase food productivity. For example:

> *India's Food and Agriculture Minister, Mr. K.M. Munshi, who is arriving in Bombay on Friday on his way to Coimbatore, will meet the State Minister of Agriculture, Mr. M.P. Patil, personally to acquaint himself with the progress of the various Grow More Food schemes launched hitherto and discuss plans for their effective implementation in future. Mr. Munshi will also discuss with Mr. Patil a scheme for utilising sewage water in some principal cities in Bombay for cultivation purpose. ("Grow more food schemes: Talks in Bombay," July 26, 1951)*

Later, the Government of India report on the Grow More Food campaign in 1952 noted the successful implementation of sewage water and urban compost for food cultivation in Bombay (Mumbai) municipalities, "During the last few years, the work relating to utilisation of urban compost and sewage water has recorded satisfactory progress" (Government of India report, 1952). The lower-caste migrants who produce food along the railway tracks for their livelihoods are denigrated for risking food safety and public health, but the historical examination of the Grow More Food policy suggests that the use of sewage water for food cultivation stems from state intervention in Mumbai.

The Failure of Independent India's Grow More Food campaign

While the early postcolonial state focused on increasing domestic food production, there were simultaneous debates occurring at the national level related to Indian agriculture's broader fate concerning land relations, which was considered the larger source of structural inequality. Here, it is important to note the postcolonial state's decisions related to land relations, which have directly impacted the agrarian situation and structural inequalities based on caste and class during and "post" the Green Revolution period (i.e after 1980s). The 2015–2016 census record shows that the total operated area in the country was 157.82 million hectares (ha.), and only 24.035% of operational land is under 68.45% of the marginal landholdings (holding below 1.0 ha.). The average land holding declined to 1.08 from 1.15 ha in 2010–11 (Government of India—Department of Agriculture, Cooperation & Farmers Welfare, 2020, p. 16)

The lower-caste population mainly consists of small and marginal landholders. Concerning the fate of these marginal farmers, Ambedkar advocated for the Soviet-style collectivization of farming and bringing agriculture under state ownership. He opposed Prime Minister Nehru's inclination towards capitalist forms of agriculture as it would aggravate the issues of small landholder and landless laborers (Sreenivasulu & Tajuddin, 2020; Nancharaiah, 2020). Sherman (2018) critically examined the broadly-accepted perception of the Nehruvian era, which professed that the ideals of socialism were the guiding principles for the first two decades after India's independence. She wrote that Nehruvian socialism was individual-oriented and centered around private property rights, since upper-caste landowning males dominated the Congress party. The ideas of reform and policies always had caste and class biases. According to Sherman, both Gandhian members and Nehruvian socialists, who were considered left of the Congress Party, believed that the upper castes should not be coerced; rather, they should be persuaded into voluntarily helping the lower castes to uplift themselves from poverty. Sherman (2018) noted, "the psychological needs of the elite, male property owner outweighed the material needs of the landless laborers or the factory worker. This was a remarkable form of deference to the privileged classes," (p. 490).

Post-independence, Brahmin and allied upper castes were not interested in abolishing caste hierarchies that constituted the economic inequalities in India. Instead, they appealed to the moral duty of the upper castes in rural and urban areas to rehabilitate the lower castes.

These casteist underpinnings were reflected in the Grow More Food policy in the postcolonial era. The efforts of increasing agricultural productivity to fulfill the promise of economic independence and food security was filled with nationalist rhetoric that was void of any concrete plans to change the agrarian relations. The superficiality of the Grow More Food campaign became evident when the set targets were not met. The famine concerns again loomed, along with the worries of revolts in deprived parts of the country.

The criticism of the Grow More Food campaign as merely rhetoric came not just from the opposition, but from the legislative members of the assembly as well. For example:

> *The Members complained that the scheme had not added a single grain to the food normally produced in the province…. The Grow more food policy of Government came in for several criticism…. If at any time no imports were received, they would have to face starvation…. He complained that Grow More Food Schemes were mere paper schemes and were not implemented in action…. Grow More Food campaign was now in its fifth year, and possibly the final year, but it was not clear how much food had actually been grown. ("Treat grow food campaign as emergency measure: Members' suggestion in Bombay assembly," March 19, 1949)*

There were major concerns of famines in different parts of the country. Indeed, the then Chief Minister of Bihar, Anugraha Narain Sinha, threatened to resign because the Grow More Food department did not provide the necessary support resulting in famine-like conditions in Bihar, which captured national attention. In a press conference, the Chief Minister of Bihar said:

> *I shall resign my(sic) office as a Minister if I do not receive co-operation from such quarters as can help in an abundant measure to tide over the food crisis, which is deteriorating from day to day," declared Mr. Anugraha Narain Sinha, Food and Supply Minister, Bihar, in an interview today…. He added that as food Minister he had every right to expect that those departments would, play their part, but it was common knowledge that the "Grow More Food Department" had not played their part adequately…. Mr. Sinha, who has just returned from a tour of Bhagalpur Division…the Minister said that he had heard complaints from villagers that the staff of the Food department had not even put in their appearance. It is understood, from reports reaching here, that semi-famine conditions still prevail in Bihar…. ("Bihar food minister threatens to resign: Inadequate help from grow more food department," October 26, 1950)*

Famine conditions and growing political discontent toward the Congress Party gave rise to rebellion among oppressed groups. The possibility of being overtaken by communism was a matter of serious concern, which can be gauged by the speech given by the Congress leader at the legislative assembly:

> *He reminded the House that the country was faced with the serious danger of Communism. This danger could only be avoided by improving the condition of the peasantry, Communism, he said, thrived on chaos and discontent. The peasants were the bulwark against this menace because they were small proprietors. If they were kept happy and contented, he was sure that they would be able to combat successfully the threatened menace. ("Raise food yield or Bombay may have a Bengal famine": Warning in assembly: Need to reorientate policy," March 31, 1950)*

Thus, after independence there were no tangible efforts to bring meaningful transformation in the agrarian relations entrenched in socioeconomic caste divides. Instead, the Indian state focused their initial efforts more on continuing the colonial Grow More Food policy than on undertaking reconstruction measures. The state leadership indulged in individual solutions for the dire problems of the food economy such as diet change, substitute foods, food gardening, which were presented as solutions. Sherman (2013) wrote that the half-hearted efforts of Congress leadership to combat the food crisis for most of the lower castes were evident within a very few short years post-independence. The elite brahmin and upper-caste-led Congress party focused on securing their material interests, while the Grow More Food campaign failed to combat food shortages.

Thus, nationally, the Grow More Food campaign came to an end in 1957 without achieving much of the goals it had set out to meet. India was more dependent on foreign aid and exports. This predicament provided a fertile ground for capitalistic Green Revolution policies without any changes in the caste modes of production. Analysis of this historical juncture reveals the caste supremacist ideology of the ruling elites in post-independent India, which portrayed an imaginary socialism and concerns about agrarian relations, but ultimately caused the impoverishment of lower-caste producers and led to an upper-caste state formation.

Land Reforms in Independent India

Recently, one of the main reasons for lower-castes laborers to seasonally migrate and work at the railway farms was landlessness. During my fieldwork, I met four teenage boys from Musahar caste who recently migrated from a remote village in Bihar to work at the railway farm near Thane station. One said:

> *My father used to work as a wage laborer on a Thakur's (land owning upper caste) farm, but, recently, he fell sick, so he is unable to work anymore. Through some contacts, my family got to know that there is farming work in the city which pays better. So, I decided to come along with a few other boys…." (Personal communication, December 3, 2019)*

When I asked whether the majority of people are migrating to cities from their villages, one of them replied, "Not everyone…. Mostly people from our biradari (caste)…. Like bade jati (upper castes), we don't have much land or any other resources…so we eat only when we work…. With the opportunity of getting higher wages in the city I am trying to support the survival of my family."

Land ownership patterns have had significant impacts on the rural-urban migration (Rawal & Bansal, 2021); hence, it is necessary to examine the land reform initiatives of the postcolonial state that determined the trajectory of Indian agriculture in the 20th century. Thorner (1982) indicated that first Prime Minister, Nehru, desired to bring changes to the lives of rural poor without distributing the agrarian caste structures; a composition from the Congress party was brahmin and

bania castes with large land ownership representing the Indian bourgeoisie or aristocratic interests (Ghosh, 1983; Josh, 1983). So, although, in theory, Nehru espoused socialist principles, his actions were guided by the conservative faction of the Congress Party rooted in the ideals of caste supremacy. In terms of land reforms, Congress Party's leadership were against the violent communist methods of land redistribution and believed in appealing to the consciences of the upper-caste landowners to help the poor cultivators.

Land reforms were an important step towards democratizing the land relations. The Congress Party's upper-caste landlords' interests that were entrenched in the political structures of the colonial administration were influential in the policy decisions that led the upper-caste landowners to use every means possible to retain land ownership. Even after the abolition of the zamindari system, landlords were able to hold on to their large land holdings (Mander, 2013).

The failed land redistribution efforts and capitalistic agricultural policies have driven the decline of livelihood for most oppressed castes. This has also fueled the migration from majorly northern states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to cities like Mumbai and pushed the oppressed caste farming communities into the informal labor sector (Gidwani & Ramamurthy, 2018). It has also led to widespread criticism of the Congress Party. To pacify the growing anger, Acharya Vinoba Bhave launched the Bhoodan movement in 1951, a derivative from Vedic interpretation of land gift (Mandal, 2015). As a Gandhian follower, he believed in the care work to enhance an individual's personal and spiritual growth. Hence, he proposed that the solution for inequality in rural areas could be found by appealing to upper caste landowners to gift small portions of their land to landless cultivators. This action of self-sacrifice—of giving up property for the collective good—was a way of spiritual revolution to avoid inequality-induced violent conflicts in rural areas (Sherman, 2018). The collapse of legislative efforts of land reform was followed by the Bhoodan movement, which depended on the kindness of upper-caste landowners to alleviate the poverty and hardships of the laboring castes. Omvedt (1983) points out that land reform did not intend to give land to the landless, rather it ended up giving control of land to the rich tenants. The concentration of land should be seen as a ruling-class effort to move Indian agriculture towards capitalist forms of agricultural development (Patnaik, 1972a, 1972b; Nadkarni, 2002).

Knowing the percentage of where seasonal migrants who work as railway track laborers come from is instructive: 42% in Uttar Pradesh, 53% in Madhya Pradesh, and 61% in Bihar (Bharti, 2019). Based on national socio-economic data, 5% farmers own 32% of land, which implies that, on average, a rich farmer owns 45 times more land than the marginal farmer (Chaturvedi, 2016) showing that caste divisions remain the determining factor of land inequality in India (Bharti, 2019).

In the next two sections, I will explain how land concentration and the developmental trajectory of the postcolonial state led to the Green Revolution, which benefited the large landholders and deepened socioeconomic inequalities and environmental impacts.

Green Revolution

Urban India's upper and middle class's moves toward organic food consumption and gardening are related to their concerns over the negative health and environmental impacts related to the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Given these concerns, I wanted to understand the railway track farmers' perspectives. During a discussion about farming techniques, one farmer explains:

> *The soil along the railway tracks is kamjor (weak), so to prepare the soil we apply a mixture of the nitrate, potassium, and phosphorus to set the soil before the sowing season. We buy fertilizers and pesticides from the state-run companies (in this case, Rashtriya Chemicals & Fertilizers Limited, Mumbai). They direct the quantity to be applied for effective results…. A few generations ago we farmed using organic manures, but as the soil loses its strength, chemical fertilizers are helpful to maintain the productivity level. The farming techniques that we use here (along the railway tracks) are similar to how we farm in rural areas. The only difference is that we grow perennial crops like wheat, rice, and jowar back in our villages, and on railway farms we only grow vegetables given the climatic conditions and limited space…. We are not doing anything illegal here…. (Personal communication, 2019)*

The farmers' narratives indicate the institutionalization of chemical intensive farming that has led the farmers to change their traditional ways of agricultural production.

Brown (2020) noted that McMichael and Friedman's Food Regime Analysis (FRA) is a useful conceptualization to understand the global structuring of food order and the dialectical process of capital accumulation. On similar lines Patel (2013) succinctly wrote:

> *Motivated by the threat of communism, the Green Revolution advanced through the concerted effort of large-scale philanthropy, the United States government, recipient governments, and the World Bank in ways that ensured accumulation for the dominant hegemonic bloc within countries in receipt of the package of technologies, subsidies and violence that constituted the programme. (p. 50)*

This informs us about the global dynamics that led to the adoption of Green Revolution policies that resonated with the capitalist- and individual-oriented Indian ruling class. Explaining the Indian situation further, Omvedt (1983, 2011) wrote that the land reforms were not intended for redistribution of land to the landless, but it was to abolish the feudal tenancy laws in the country. The anti-feudal laws were implemented to increase food production through capitalist development. Selective privileging of large landholders and focusing on individual prosperity was at the core of Nehruvian politics. Sacrificing equity or the universal upliftment of all food producers to solve the food crisis were acceptable terms to the Indian planners and leaders (Siegel, 2018). Indian politicians, agricultural universities, cooperative societies, and banks played an important role in promoting the advantages of capital-intensive agriculture to help with the

immediate concerns of a looming famine in 1960s and the building resentment among the marginalized castes against the Congress government. The states of Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh, which had been agricultural investment centers during Britain's control, were selected for intensifying agricultural production. The programs and institutions developed as part of the Green Revolution helped larger farmers claim a share in the government resources to increase their prosperity (Omvedt, 1981). For example, as Bedide (2019) and Omvedt (1983) pointed out, government and international organization subsidies were provided to the chemical fertilizer, pesticides, and hybrid varieties of seed producing companies and not to the farmers. Both Bedide (2019) and Omvedt (1983) emphasized how the nationalization of banks played a significant role since the 1960s, which directed the flow of credit to the countryside, especially in Green Revolution states, which proved beneficial to the upper caste large landholders and helped them maintain their hegemony. By the 1970s, India was able to increase its food production and reach the goal of food self-sufficiency, but also became one of the largest consumers and producers of chemical fertilizers in the world (Thottathil, 2014). The mechanization of agriculture was undertaken by the Indian state to benefit the upper caste large landholders and facilitate the process of urbanization.

The disastrous impacts of Green Revolution technologies on small and marginal farmers, the majority of whom were from lower caste communities has been widely documented in terms of loss of employment and increasing poverty in rural areas. By the 1980s the increased dependency on market for fertilizers, pesticides, and seeds led farmers into cycles of debt and patterns of income insecurity, where marginal farmers have found it increasingly difficult to pay loans and input cost when the yields are lower than expected and the unpredictable fluctuations of the market-based crop prices. The environmental impacts such as low soil fertility, loss of biodiversity, and increased levels of groundwater pollution have also increased vulnerability (Aga, 2021). Exposure to chemical fertilizers and pesticides has led to harmful health impacts on the farmworkers (Kori, et al., 2020).

Even decades after the Green Revolution and the more recent robust economic growth, the Indian state has not been able to resolve the promise of eradicating hunger. The National Sample Survey (NSS) data shows undernourishment of rural households increased from 48% in the year 1988–1989 to 57% in the year 2001–2002. According to the latest NSS data, the undernourishment trend from 2006–2016 shows that the rural population remains largely impoverished (Nguyen et al. 2021). Harwood (2019) writes that the Green Revolution was not the most effective strategy to increase the food productivity for small farmers. It was intended to benefit large landholders, which means that the implementation of the Green Revolution land reforms were not meant for the socioeconomic wellbeing of the lower-caste cultivators. Unlike the earlier caste order, the development of capitalist agriculture has reconstituted a more complex relationship where the Indian state, through its liberal democratic apparatus, plays the role of maintaining the servitude of the lower castes.

The discussion of the Green Revolution is important not only because it relates to railway track farming, but because it also pertains to the “contamination” of food systems, which concerns the upper-caste, middle-class gardening community; the role of the Indian state; and the fate of lower caste cultivators.

Neoliberal Agrarian Reforms

Prior to economic liberalization, India faced a fiscal crisis during the 1980s which was later aggravated due to an increase in oil prices related to the first U.S. war on Iraq. The fear of defaulting on international payments coupled with growing internal tensions caused by nationwide anti-reservation protests led India to accept the International Monetary Fund’s liberalization program, which required minimal state involvement in economic development and greater dependence on market forces (Siddiqui, 2018). The country’s turn toward neoliberal policies in the early 1990s was facilitated by international financial institutions, and the World Trade Organization’s disciplinary regime led to the deregulation of state institutions and the onset of trade agreements. These policies marked a departure from the post-independence Nehruvian economic planning model where the state and major public sector enterprises played a leading role in production and investment.

The neoliberal reforms opened gates for global capital and technology leading to rapid unequal development and a “new phase of primitive accumulation” (Patnaik, 2008), accompanied by actual agricultural distress in different parts of the country (Patnaik, 2007b). The Green Revolution accelerated the deterioration of the agricultural sector in the following ways: 1) exacerbating the debt crisis due to increased production costs (which relates to the use of more chemical fertilizers as soil fertility declined); 2) withdrawal of state support and the stagnation of support prices for crop yields; 3) increasing levels of unemployment as landlords who previously extracted rents shifted to profit-oriented surplus; 4) selectively benefiting large farm holders over small farmers and laborers; and 5) worsening of ecological factors, including lower soil fertility, reduced water table levels, and erratic climate patterns (Patnaik, 1986; Singh, 2000). Following the Green Revolution, neoliberal policies led to predatory growth that systematically siphoned resources and surplus from rural areas for the process of urbanization. This privileging of urban areas has created an affluent middle-class and has resulted in widening of social, economic, and spatial inequalities within the country.

Patnaik (2007a) wrote:

> *The situation in many other third world countries is similar to that in India in that there is a deep crisis of not only employment and livelihoods but of material production itself. The irrational policies which have led the country to this pass, have been internalized by the ruling elite of this country who mindlessly echo the deflationary dogmas of global financial interests as expressed through the policy packages which continue to be advised by the*

> *Bretton Woods Institutions despite the mountain of evidence which has accumulated on the extremely adverse effects of these policies on the already poor mass of the population of these countries. The ruling elites and a mainly urban middle class have been made complicit in attacking the livelihoods of their own poor fellow citizens, by the inducement of la dolce vita, of attaining a consumption goods-glutted global life-style on par with advanced country populations. (p. 4, para. 1)*

As agricultural production was deprioritized with the withdrawal of state support for agriculture and the deregulation of banks, cheap agricultural commodities were imported from the developed countries. On one hand India's rising Gross Domestic Product was touted as a success of neoliberal reforms, while on the other hand dispossession and loss of livelihoods deepened rural poverty and inequality. National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) records show that 400,000 marginal farmers committed suicide from 1995 to 2018 due to agrarian distress (Tripathi, 2020).

The shift toward corporate-led growth has led to the displacement and marginalization of farmers, resulting in a steady pool of seasonal rural migrants who are forced into the informal economies of the city. Urban farmers producing food along the railway tracks are mainly seasonal migrants from northern states of India. They seasonally migrate to Mumbai to work on the urban farms to supplement their livelihoods. Mostly men migrate to cities in search of work. This pattern of male seasonal migration to urban areas has led to feminization of agriculture in rural hinterlands (Patnaik et al., 2018). The unequal capital accumulation process has received push back from the agriculturists in the form of widespread protests and movements seeking to improve the lives and livelihoods of the poor in rural areas. Agitation of the farmers' movement against pro-agribusiness and corporate agrarian policies reached its peak in the midst of COVID- 19 pandemic. Farmers from the Green Revolution areas of Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh staged one of the world's largest protests against the Farm Bill 2020, initiated by the rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party-led government, which was expected to lead to the removal of the few remaining state-support mechanisms such as the Minimum Support Price for public and private sector buyers of crops.

Scholarly analyses have pointed to the implementation of capitalist Green Revolution and neoliberal reform policies as the main reason for the acute agrarian crisis and dispossession of the rural poor. However, economic analysis alone is insufficient to explain why the majority of rural poor belong to the lower castes or why the majority of lower castes are perpetually bound to precarious livelihoods in rural and urban areas. This chapter has foregrounded a conceptualization caste slavery to shed light on this conundrum, arguing that lower-caste, rural-to-urban seasonal migration and dependence on informal livelihood should be understood as the functioning of a caste mode of production in the capitalist economic system. The overlooked caste-based labor relations of servitude have shaped structures of power and inequality in India.

Conclusion

This chapter takes a historical approach to understand the origins of farming along the railway tracks in Mumbai and its criminalization. It traces the Grow More Food campaign from the colonial to postcolonial era and explains how the campaign initiated and formalized urban food production practices in response to the prevailing food crisis. Drawing on archival evidence and qualitative interviews, this chapter argues that though urban food production during colonial and early postcolonial periods was a response to severe food insecurity, the present continuation of farming along the railway tracks is due to agricultural distress, which has caused seasonal rural-to-urban migration of the lower-caste people. To examine the question of why lower castes constitute the most vulnerable labor force, I use the framework of caste slavery to describe the role of caste-based political economic structures and to contextualize the land and labor relations of food production and policy across rural and urban contexts. I emphasize articulations by Phule and Bedide which describe caste slavery as an oppressive structure that reproduces and mutates the relations of power that tie historically oppressed caste groups to forms of labor servitude and maintain material and ideological dominance of the ruling upper castes. These deeply connected socioeconomic dynamics are crucial in understanding the entrenched power relations rooted in caste-based labor and property relations in India that explain the increased dependency on agricultural and precarious informal livelihoods.

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