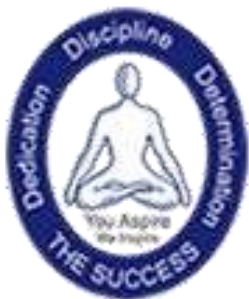


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Land Reform In INDIA

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LAND REFORM IN INDIA

“Land is not merely soil, it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants and animals.” – Aldo Leopold

In simple terms, land reforms mean equitable redistribution of land with the aim of increasing productivity and decreasing poverty. It refers to the redistribution of land from the few who have to the many who are landless or own far too little.

The pre-British scenario

Traditionally, in India before the coming of the British, private ownership of land was an unfamiliar idea. Land was generally owned by the village community collectively. A proper land revenue system was initiated by Todar Mal during the reign of Akbar. Under this system, land was measured, classified and rent was fixed accordingly. When the leash of power went into the hands of the British, a sea-change was seen in the pattern of ownership of land in India.

Land ownership patterns under the British rule

PERMANENT SETTLEMENT OF BENGAL/ ZAMINDARI SYSTEM

Lord Cornwallis introduced the Permanent Settlement in 1793. Under this system, a class of landlords called Zamindars was created whose responsibility it was to pay a fixed rent to the government for the lands they owned. They gave out parcels of land to farmers who became their tenants. Their title to the land was hereditary. What was intended as a system beneficial for all parties concerned soon turned out to be exploitative. The State was only concerned with maximising revenue with minimum effort. The Zamindar too wanted maximum rent from his tenants irrespective of the land's true potential. He could increase his own wealth by extracting most out of his farmer tenants since his due to the State was fixed. In addition, several layers of intermediaries were created between the Zamindar and the tenants adding to the burden. The landless farmers and labourers suffered greatly in poverty. Also, this led to

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the creation of a group of rich Indians whose loyalty lay largely with the British. As you can see the Permanent Settlement gave rise to the Zamindari system of tenancy in Bengal and soon was adopted in other regions.

Another system was called the Jagirdari system which was similar to the Zamindari system.

RYOTWARI SYSTEM

Under this system, the proprietor of land gave the rent and taxes directly to the government in the absence of any middlemen. This started in Madras and was later adopted in Bombay as well.

MAHALWARI SYSTEM

This system was introduced by William Bentinck's government under which landlords were responsible for the payment of revenue to the State. These landlords or Zamindars had a whole village or a group of villages under their control. The Mahalwari system prevailed in UP, the North Western Province, Punjab and parts of Central India.

Outcomes of landowning systems during the colonial era

- Extreme peasant indebtedness due to sky-high tax rates.
- Creation of a class of a rich few who mostly exploited the poor peasant.
- Peasants lived in constant fear of eviction.
- Poverty was entrenched into the farmer class.

These systems created, at the time of independence, a class of landlords who owned large swathes of land and innumerable peasants who owned nothing and lived in dire poverty and misery. The following figures will reveal this.

7% of the landowners owned 54% of land. In contrast, only 6% of land was owned by 28% of landowners (with marginal and sub-marginal holdings).

Land reforms since independence

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Land reforms refer to the regulation of ownership, operation, leasing, sales, and inheritance of land.

Objectives of land reforms after independence

Land is the basis of all economic activity and for a largely agrarian society like India; this carries a lot of import.

Indian rural society is symbolised by a rich landowning minority (zamindars/landlords) and an impoverished landless majority (peasants). Therefore, land reforms are a vital step towards economic and social equality.

Objectives of land reforms:

- Redistribution of land across society so that land is not held in the hands of a few people.
- Land ceiling to disburse surplus land amongst small and marginal farmers.
- Removal of rural poverty.
- Abolition of intermediaries.
- Tenancy reforms.
- Increasing agricultural productivity.
- Consolidation of land holdings and prevention of land fragmentation.
- Developing cooperative farming.
- To ensure social equality through economic parity.
- Tribal protection by ensuring their traditional land is not taken over by outsiders.
- Land reforms were also for non-agricultural purposes like development and manufacturing.

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Out of these the major objectives post-independence were abolition of intermediaries, regulation of tenancy, land ceiling, consolidation of fragmented holdings.

In India, the abolition of intermediaries who existed under the various British systems has largely been successful. The other objectives have yielded mixed results and vary across states and over time periods. Land reforms come under the State List and so, the success of land reforms varies from state to state. The most comprehensive and successful reforms took place in the communist strongholds of Kerala and West Bengal. Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar saw inter-community clashes as a result of land reforms.

India has seen four 'experiments' since independence to redistribute the land holdings. They are:

- 1. Reforms from 'above', i.e., through legislation.**
- 2. Reforms from above from the government coupled with peasant mobilisation; like in Kerala and West Bengal where land was seized and redistributed; and also to improve the conditions of peasants.**
- 3. Naxalite movement and also the 'land grab' movement.**
- 4. Reforms from 'below' through voluntary donations by landlords and peaceful processions by farmers like the Bhoodan movement and the Gram Dan.**

Zamindari Abolition Acts

Initially when these acts were passed in various states, they were challenged in the courts as being against the right to property enshrined in the Indian Constitution. So, amendments were passed in the Parliament to legalise the abolition of landlordism. By 1956, Zamindari abolition acts were passed in many states. As a result of this, about 30 lakh tenants and share-croppers acquired ownership rights over a total of 62 lakh acres of land all over the country.

Land Ceilings Act

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Land ceiling refers to fixing a cap on the size of land holding a family or individual can own. Any surplus land is distributed among landless people like tenants, farmers, or agricultural labourers.

Tenancy reforms

This focused on three areas:

1. Rent regulation
2. Tenure security
3. Conferring ownership to tenants

Land policy formulation through planning period (Five Year Plans)

Plan Period	Chief Issue	Policy Thrust
First Plan 1951 – 56	Increase area under cultivation. Community Development networks to take care of village commons.	Increase land under cultivation. Rights to tenants to cultivate land. Abolition of intermediaries.
Second Plan 1956 – 61	Agriculture mostly dependent on rains alone. Low land productivity.	Soil conservation. First phase of land reform implementation. Irrigation development.
Third Plan 1961 –	Food security concern. Cultivable waste land to be cultivated. Including all regions into growth.	Intensive area development programme adopted for selected districts. Soil surveys.

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Fourth Plan 1969 – 74	Food security concern. Minimum dietary requirements to be met. Incentives for cultivating food crops. Technical efficiency.	Irrigation and soil conservation in dry land regions. Technological changes. Second phase of land reforms with land ceiling acts and consolidation of holding.
Fifth Plan 1974 – 79	Problems of degradation. Drought-prone areas.	Drought-prone area development. Desert area development programmes. Soil conservation. Dry farming.
Sixth Plan 1980 – 85	Underutilization of land resources. Drought-prone areas.	Land and water management programme under drought-prone area programme in select areas.
Seventh Plan 1985 – 90	Soil erosion. Land degradation. Deforestation. Degradation of forest lands.	Soil and water conservation. Prevention of land degradation. Wastelands Development programmes.
Eighth Plan 1992 – 97	Dry land and rain fed areas needing attention. Degradation of land in irrigated command areas.	Watershed approach. Soil conservation combined with watershed programmes. Agro climatic regional planning approach

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		incorporated.
Ninth Plan 1997 – 2002	Land degradation. Integrating Watershed Development Programme across various components. Gap between potentials and actual crop yields need to be bridged. Need for a long-term policy document.	Bringing underutilized land under cultivation. Management of wastelands. Maintenance of village commons. Decentralized land management system. Panchayati Raj institutions to manage the village lands. Rethinking on land legislation.

Outcomes of Land Reforms

- **Abolition of middlemen like landlords**

The powerful class of Zamindars and Jagirdars cease to exist. This reduced the exploitation of peasants who now became owners of the land they tilled. This move was vehemently opposed by the Zamindars who employed many means to evade the law. They registered their own land under their relatives' names. They also shuffled tenants around different plots of land so that they wouldn't acquire incumbency rights.

- **Land ceiling**

With a cap on the size of land holding an individual/family could hold equitable distribution of land was possible to an extent. With only landlord abolition and no land ceiling, the land reforms would not have been at least partially successful. Land ceiling ensured that the rich farmers or higher tenants did not become the new avatar Zamindars.

- **Land possession**

Land is a source of not just economic income but also social standing. Land reforms made it mandatory to have records of holdings, which was not the case previously. It is also compulsory to register all tenancy arrangements.

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- **Increased productivity**

More land came under cultivation and since tillers themselves became the landowners, productivity increased.

Land reforms were largely successful in the states of West Bengal and Kerala because of the political will of the left-wing governments to implement them efficiently. There was a sort of revolution in these places in terms of land holding patterns and ownership, and also the condition of peasants. The backing slogan was '**land to the tiller**'. In Jammu and Kashmir also, there was partial success in the redistribution of land to landless labourers.

There are arguments in favor of and against land reforms.

Arguments in Favor of Land Reforms

- Equity – now the majority of land in India is enjoyed by a minority of landlords.
- The inverse relationship between land size and efficiency – the smaller the land, better will be the productivity and efficiency.
- Owner-cultivation is more efficient than share-cropping.

Arguments Against Land Reforms

- If a centrally managed large agricultural land is divided among individual private owners, the peasants who take it up may not be efficient enough to individually carry out the cultivation.
- Results in Fragmentation of land and pockets of inefficiency. For large scale cultivation, the fragmentation of land normally won't help (this has another side too – see the inverse relationship).
- Evidence suggests that land reforms had a negative effect on poverty.
- Land reforms had led to economic decline and food insecurity in countries like Zimbabwe.

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Drawbacks of land reforms

- There are still many small and marginal farmers in India who pray to the clutches of moneylenders and continue to remain indebted.
- Rural poverty still exists.
- Land ceiling varies from state to state.
- Many plantations were exempt from land ceiling act.
- Many people own huge tracts of land under 'benami' names.

Land reforms also include agrarian reforms which deal with measures to improve the productivity of land especially agricultural land. This includes the Green Revolution.

To fix the various loopholes in the land reforms, in the late 60s and early 70s, the recommendations of the **Central Land Reforms Committee** were implemented.

- The ceiling was lowered according to the crop pattern. It was brought to 54 acres for inferior dry land.
- For purposes of law, family of five was made one unit.
- Land distribution was given priority particularly to the landless peasants, SC and ST communities.

The government was responsible for the acquisition of land which it did under the Land Acquisition Act of 1894. This law, being archaic and inadequate to address farmers' concerns was replaced by the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act of 2013. In 2015, the government proposed a few amendments to the law and introduced the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (Amendment) Bill of 2015, which came into effect as an ordinance.

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