

States:

Telangana - Land Alienation on the Agenda

The state government of Telangana announced a scheme named Rythu Bandhu, which envisages disbursement of Rs.8000 per acre per year as capital assistance to every owner of farm land in the state. The Chief Minister, K. Chandrasekhar Rao, inaugurated this scheme in May 2018. First tranche of Rs.4000 for kharif season had been disbursed along with *Pattas* (title books of ownership of land), while the second tranche would be distributed in November this year. As total land under cultivation in the state is around 14 million acres, it might cost the exchequer around Rs.55 billion.

A programme to update the existing land records was taken up in the un-bifurcated AP with the aid from the World Bank. (The Digital India Land Records Modernisation Programme - DILRMP - was launched over a decade ago. The project aims to bring India's land records like information about land, ownership and usage, to be kept in easy-to-access central repositories, with real-time updates) But it could not progress much. The Chief Minister claimed that surveying and issuing of titles to farm lands is his brainchild and it was completed in a record time, which made possible the implementation of Rythu Bandhu successfully. But the scheme is riddled with problems.

The official data shows that out of 5.8 million title books only 4.4 million are prepared by May 20 and they were distributed along with the cheques for Rs.4000 per acre. Out these title books one million are found to be defective due to wrong entry of names, survey numbers etc. Similarly, out of the 4.4 million bank cheques, only 1.7 have reached to the banks for encashment. Most of them are withheld by the land-owners due to various reasons such as wrong entry of names, Aadhar number, bank account etc. Now the farmers are running from pillar to post to get corrected these wrong entries.

Leaving aside these practical hiccups, there are larger issues at stake. Most of the adivasi lands were alienated. They are in the hands of non-tribals. According to official survey, 60 per cent of land in Adilabad, 71 per cent in Warangal and 52 per cent in Khammam districts, where most of the adivasis in Telangana reside (districts were reorganized after bifurcation. Here we mentioned old ones) were alienated from adivasis before the bifurcation of AP. The Rythu Bandhu scheme has legalized this alienation of adivasi lands and issued titles to illegal occupation by non-tribals.

There are thousands and thousands of acres of land categorized as government banjar, eenam, community lands etc. These are supposed to be given to the rural poor by law. But most of these lands are in possession of influential persons in the villages. These are transferred to others in benami transactions (with agreements written on white paper). The TRS government has legalized these holdings by issuing title books throwing the law on statute book to the wind.

Another major problem is that Rythu Bandhu has not included tenant farmers, the actual tillers of land, under the scheme. There are 6 lakh tenant farmers in the state who are either landless agricultural labourers or poor peasants having a small patch of land. When this was pointed out to the Chief Minister, he bluntly told that their inclusion would create problems to the landowners and hence they could not be provided with capital assistance as they have not registered their tenancy. Even the peasants who are cultivating temple lands according to the due process of law are being denied capital assistance under Rythu Bandhu on the specious plea that they are tenant farmers, despite the fact that they have taken the land on rent from the Endowments Department of state government.

After a number of prolonged struggles by the peasants, the protection of tenancy act was made in 1950, which stipulated the registration of tenancy. But it was never implemented in earnest during all these seven decades and tenancy agreements between owners and tenant peasant continued as oral agreements. The Section 10(4) of 1950 act says that institutional credit can be provided to tenants. The previous Congress government in undivided AP had issued Loan Eligibility Certificates (LEC) to tenant peasants. This scheme was bereft with many problems could only reach to a tiny fraction of tenants and largely remained on paper. Now the TRS government decided to put a stop to the issuing of LECs and directed the officials to take steps, probably by an ordinance, to abrogate the tenancy protection Act of 1950 on the same specious plea that it is creating problems to the owners of the land.

It is definitely a land reform in reverse in state where peasants continuously waged many struggles to realize their demand "Land to the Tiller".

This is not the end. There is much more in the offing. The out-going Economic Advisor to the Government of India, Arvind Subramanian revealed this. In a write up in Business Standard (23-7-2018) he praised the Telangana's Rythu Bandhu as the future agri-cultural policy in India. He called it

as QUBI (pronounced as Kyoo Bee – Quasi Universal Basic Income). See his reasoning: (open quote)

“Of course, Rythu Bandhu mainly intended as an agricultural rather than a social policy. In fact viewed from this perspective, it could be the future of agricultural policy. Consider how. Think of current system of support to agriculture. Right now, there are schemes for every possible state of the world. There are schemes for bad harvests (monsoon failure) such as crop insurance and loan waivers. There are schemes for good harvests (bumper crops that depress prices) such as MSP-plus-procurement and price-deficiency schemes. And there are schemes independent of outcomes such as various subsidies on inputs (fertilizers, seeds, power and water).

“Rythu Bandhu today provided in addition to these schemes and hence can become financially unsustainable. However, if Rythu Bandhu is used to replace some or all of these schemes, three critical advantages would ensure.

“First, surfeit of state capacity/administrative apparatus as well as financial resources ...

“Second, farm income could be decoupled from production avoiding serious distortions ...

“Third, the magnitude that can be transferred can be increased so that farm incomes can be augmented substantially and quickly. One illustrative calculation is as follows: elimination of fertilizer and power subsidy in Punjab would finance an annual transfer of about Rs.92,000 to every cultivator or Rs. 50,000 to every agricultural worker.”

The reasoning of Arvind Subramaniam needs no explanation; it is self evident. Coming from the mouth of Economic advisor to the government of India one can discern what is going on in the corridors of powers. The Rythu Bandhu is a project that is being implemented to test the waters for a larger policy of withdrawing all the support being given to the Indian peasantry by creating a rosy picture of affluence without toiling. The ultimate aim of this entire scheme of things is to alienate the peasantry from their lands and to append the Indian agricultural sector to the whims of market forces that are serving the imperialist monopoly capital.
