

Reversal of Land Reforms and Land to Tiller Remains a Distant Dream

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In India land ownership is crucial for the livelihood of millions of rural poor. Even after seven decades of independence from British colonialism, the vast majority of the land is possessed by rich landed sections, although small farmers, landless poor constitute more than 80 percent of the farming community, the latter own a negligible land area. Consequently, inequalities in land ownership in villages became a major obstacle to poverty eradication and an obstacle to increasing agricultural production and productivity. Land reforms initially intended to provide land to the tiller, remained largely an unfinished agenda. Successive governments have conveniently ignored their implementation and even reversed the agenda of land reforms. Neoliberal economic reforms facilitated land and food to become marketable commodities, depriving minimum livelihoods to millions of poor farmers and landless rural poor in South Asia.

Soon after the attainment of independence in India, the Zamindari system was abolished and Land reforms were proposed with the intention to distribute land to Tiller.

The original intention was to turn the landless into a small farmer by providing him with some land. We reached a situation where there is almost no land distribution for the landless and at the same time, small and medium farmers are losing their land at a fast pace. However, seven decades after independence, successive governments are steadily going back on the commitment of land reforms in India. This is true of the union government as well as with several state governments. This has been one of the most unfortunate aspects of development policy in India. The Green Revolution heralded in late 60's, though increased food production and at the same time brought increased inequalities between small, marginal farmers and rich landed farmers in villages.

What we see is the reversal of the land reforms taken up initially in the post-independence period. This is a serious betrayal to the demands of farmers who fought against feudal exploitation and British colonizers.

Inequalities in Land Ownership:

Land struggles waged by Communist Party in early 1950's led to nearly 10 Lakh acres of land belonging to feudal land lords occupied and distributed to thousands of land less poor during Telangana and Punnapravalur peasant struggles. During 1960's & 70's militant struggles waged by AIKS (All India Kisan Sabha) and BKMU (Khet Mazdoor Sangh) brought again land reforms – a major agenda. These struggles

forced Government of India and various state governments look in to implementation of land reforms.

As a result, legislations were made in some states, land ceiling was imposed and some land has been confiscated from land lords. The implementation of land reforms was half hearted. Eventually, the very structure of land ownership in villages did not change significantly. The bulk of the land remained in hands of large sections of rich & middle peasantry. Only a minuscule portion became accessible to small & landless peasantry belonging to backward & Dalit sections. **With the failure of land reforms undertaken by different states the poverty and unemployment in villages remained largely unresolved. As of 2020, small and marginal farmers (constituting 84.2% of the farming community), own less than two hectares. The small & marginal farmers together own only 47.3% of cropped area, while the remaining 52.7% is held by a small minority of large and middle sections of farmers.**

For example, in Telangana Land Reforms (Ceiling on Agricultural Holdings) Act,1973, land ceiling on agricultural holdings was imposed and surplus lands (including Bhoodan lands) were confiscated by the government. However, a mere 2.1 % of cultivable land was distributed among land less poor. A majority of the land either continues to remain in possession of big and rich farmers or embroiled in legal & bureaucratic litigations. The very idea of the distribution of surplus land to the landless tillers remained unfulfilled.

According to National Sample Survey, India (2020):

- Small & marginal farmers (84.2% of the farmers) own less than 2.0 ha. and own only 47.3% of cropped area
- Rich landed farmers of 13.8% (of the farmers) own 47.3% of cropped land. Further there are huge differences in land ownership structure across states.
- In Punjab and Bihar, 80 % of land is owned by mere 10 % of rich landlords.
- Where as in Telangana, Rajasthan and Karnataka, 55% of agricultural land is owned by rich 10% households.
- In India mere 4.9% of farmers control 32% of India's farmland.
- A big farmer in India has 45 times more land than a "marginal" farmer.
- Landlessness: Four million people, or 56.4% of rural households, own no land. (Data, 2018, National Sample Survey of India).
- Overall 48.9 % of cultivable land is irrigated with large tracks remaining dry lands dependent on monsoons.
- Of the total net cropped area, nearly 82 % of fertile & irrigated land is owned by top rich farmers.
- Small, marginal farmers own less fertile, mostly rainfed cultivable land in the country.

Pauperization of Small Farmers

- Vast majority of farmers are now depend primarily on the sale of labour for their sustenance i.e. turned into wage labourers.
- This shows increased Pauperization after farmers loosing his/ her land in villages.
- The reasons for small and medium farmers losing their land are many. Expensive food production technology was pushed on them, Due to the escalation of the cost of cultivation, unable to bear the high costs of fertilizers, diesel, seed small farmers are increasingly being exploited by markets and large agribusiness corporations. On the other hand, due to the lack of remunerative crop MSPs in markets, small farmers became vulnerable to rural indebtedness. This proved even more harmful in times of climate change with its more erratic rainfall and weather patterns. Small farmers became bankrupt in markets. The overall development model has moved in a direction where all four sections of rural India—1). Input supply, 2).Land ownership, 3). marketing and 4). Distribution are increasingly monopolized by big agribusiness companies, large supermarket chains under Corporate farming.

Recent Land Acquisition Act (2014) and three Farm laws are directed to displace small farmers, and hand over the land to Corporate ownership.

Thus the paradigm of land reforms is totally reversed to benefit large corporations.

Farmers Income:

- The average monthly net income of agricultural households was a bare '8,337 in 2018-19.
- But important is that wages (earned as farm labourers in others fields) now account for almost half the monthly income of agricultural households. This is a major shift as wage income not earned from crop cultivation but from wage labour, diary cattle and poultry rearing.
- Income earned outside crop cultivation has become the prime source of farm families.

Wages have become the main source of income of agricultural households replacing crop production.

It accounts between 56% and 70% of income of households with less than 1 hectare of land. Burdened with income loss, medical & educational expenses farmers are indebted and fast losing their lands. This land is being acquired either by real estate lobby or big corporations or rich land lords.

Major cause underlying the present agrarian crisis is accumulation by dispossession by big Agribusiness and Corporations increased number of tenant farmers.

High costs of cultivation and low crop MSPs are major reasons for the loss of land and pauperization of farmers. In India, according to the census of 2001 there were 127.3 million (1273 lakh) landowning farmers. According to 2011 census in a decade's time, the number of landowning farmers in India decreased by 8.6 million (86 lakh). This works out to a decline of over 2300 farmers in a day or almost a hundred farmers every hour. This is a huge decline.

Landless and small farmers have become tenant farmers and the numbers run to nearly 40 % in states such as Telangana, Gujarat, Maharashtra, AP and West Bengal. Tenant farmers. These are denied benefits provided by the state such as PM Samman, Rytu Bandhu, seed, fertilizer subsidies, crop damage relief compensation and other forms of relief. Besides tenant farmers meeting high costs of cultivation have to pay nearly half the income derived from crop cultivation to land owners, leaving very little for their households.

Farmer Suicides

Subsequently, unable to stand serious agricultural crisis, small farmers are joining ranks of waged farm labourers or emigrating to urban areas or committing suicides.

During the last two decades (200 to 2020) nearly 3.5 Lakh farmers (at a rate of 332 a day) ended their lives.

Land ownership and Women

Women farmers perform nearly 60 % of farm operations starting from seed sowing, weeding, transplantation, harvesting, cattle rearing and post-harvest operations.

Yet their labour is mostly unaccounted for or receive 30 % percent less wages.

In India only 12 % of women farmers own land. For example in Telangana only 10 % Of women hold land legally on title deeds.

Distribution of

Ceiling Surplus Land

All over India, 68,72,824 acres of land was declared ceiling surplus after abolishing Zamindari & feudal land ownership and government acquisition of land under partially implemented land reforms. Out of this, 60,27,180 acres was taken into possession of the government and 48,99,893 acres had been distributed till 2006. This means that only 71 per cent of the identified ceiling surplus land was distributed among the landless. The distribution of land was done in states of West Bengal, Kerala, Tripura (by Communist left governments) and Jammu & Kashmir. A small portion of land was liberated from feudal landlords and distributed to landless during the militant peasant struggles of Telangana and Punnapravalayar soon after independence. State governments had (though partially) implemented land reforms in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra. Bihar, Tripura, Punjab, Tamil Nadu after land occupation struggles were waged by All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), All India Agricultural Workers Union (BKMU) and communist parties in 1960's & 70's.

Most of the land (including donated Bhoodan lands) still remains either with the government or rich landlords, struck under lengthy legal, bureaucratic procedures & litigations. A committee appointed by AP state government a decade back on the status of land reforms had concluded that surplus land is available to distribute 1.0 acre per landless family in that state.

The total operated area of India in 2006 stood at 15,83,22,983 ha (that is, 39,10,57,768 acres). **This means that only 1.25 percent operated area was only distributed through land ceiling surplus measures under Land reforms. In present times of climate change, frequent droughts, floods, degradation of soil, water & environment only** sustainable, ecologically farming is the only alternative to protect livelihoods in small farmer holdings.

Conclusion

These figures clearly show surplus land is very much available for distribution among landless and small farmers. Unless Land reforms are implemented in a true spirit, it may not be possible to eradicate unemployment & poverty in villages. Land to the Tiller should be a priority. The land question should be solved immediately in favour of landless and small farmers to bring prosperity to rural India.

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