

# **Equal Distribution of Agricultural Land under Land Reforms Programme of India: An Unfinished Agenda**

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At the time of independence the Indian agrarian structure was facing number of weaknesses which hampered agricultural growth. In this concern A.P. Appu stated that, "The more important among the factors that obstructed agricultural growth were the parasitic Zamindari system, insecure tenancies subjected to rack-renting, concentration of land in the hands of indolent land owners, great inequality in the size-class distribution of holdings, preponderance of tiny uneconomic holdings and widespread subdivision and fragmentation of holdings. The land policy adopted since independence ostensibly aimed at curing these weaknesses."<sup>1</sup> Similarly R.S. Deshpande observed, "At independence land was concentrated in the hands of few, with an extreme skewed distribution, and intermediaries proliferated who has the least interest in self-cultivation of land. The tenancy contracts were highly exploitative. Land records were in the dismal shape, causing a plethora of litigation."<sup>2</sup> In order to overcome these problems of Indian agrarian structure, immediately after independence various agrarian reform measures undertaken by the government.

After independence, the All India Congress Committee set up the Congress Agrarian Reform Committee, commonly known as the Kumarappa Committee. The committee proposed some recommendations. The first five-year plan generally endorsed the recommendations of the Kumarappa Committee and left it to the states to implement the provisions depending on the realities of each state. Since then, land reforms has been an item for action in all five year plans. The intensity of the policy of land reforms lessened in 1960s. The large and middle peasants who were the chief beneficiaries of tenancy reforms had consolidated their position, they effectively controlled political power in rural areas and their existence became necessary to the major political parties for gaining and retaining power at the center and in the states. By the middle of 1960s a major food security crisis occurred in the country following severe drought and political blackmailing by the United States in import of food grains under PL- 480. As a result, the country emphasised on the food self sufficiency campaign

to avoid the food crisis. In this concern D. Banodpadhyay commented, "Enthusiasm for land reforms abated in the early 60s when India faced a major food crisis, particularly in the eastern region. Naturally, the focus shifted from land reform to enhancement of foodgrain production and productivity. Land reforms retreated from the foreground."<sup>3</sup> The policy of Green Revolution was initiated in order to meet food self sufficiency, which benefited large landowners and supported them with subsidized inputs and new technology to produce required foodgrains for the country. Government's priority also shifted from land distribution to community development.<sup>4</sup> Predictably, the hold of large landowners over land and, therefore, their social, economic, and political power increased. As a result the rural unrest which emerged among those who were dependent on the land for survival intensified Naxalite Movement in the country. The rural unrest in the late 1960s and early 1970s brought the policy of Land Reforms into sharp focus again. In 1972 then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi convened a meeting of chief minister to tackle the problem of rising rural unrest, commonly known as 'Naxalism'. At that meeting the decision was taken to revise the ceiling laws, tenancy reforms and other measures. But these initiatives of the government failed to bring justice to the unrest rural masses. Reviewing the situation after a decade later the Sixth Five Year Plan observed, "If progress on land reforms has been less than satisfactory, it has not been due to a flaw in policy but to indifferent implementation. Often the necessary determination as been lacking to effectively undertake action, particularly in the matter of implementation of ceiling laws, consolidation of holdings and in not vigorously pursuing concealed tenancies and having them vested with tenancy/occupancy rights as enjoined under the law"<sup>5</sup>

The 1990s witnessed a major shift in economic policy towards neo-liberal economy with market as the determinant of decision making. The policy shift could be witnessed in the new discourse on land reforms which completely overturned the fundamental assumptions of earlier policy. In this concern D. Bandopadhyay observed that, "When

neo-liberal economic policies hit India with gale force in 1991, land reform went off the radar of the Indian Polity; it became a forgotten agenda in State Policy. Marketeers dominated all segments of governance and they found it repugnant to talk about land reform or even mention it in polite society in case investors and other big operators in the market were frightened away by any sign of government intervention in the land/lease market..... For many of them, land reform had become totally irrelevant, an undesirable anachronism in the heady days of liberalization, privatization and globalization.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly Saxena stated, “The important feature of the new land reforms is that it shifts focus from land distribution to land management. The implication is that land (as an asset) becomes the focus of reform and not the user of land (the cultivator and his interest in it).”<sup>7</sup>

Recently under the notion of land reforms what is advocated is the most efficient and productive use of land for accelerated agricultural growth irrespective of who the user is rather than its equitable distribution for improvement in the economic conditions of tenants and landless persons. Thus the new discourse stresses on access to land rather than ownership of land.

#### References:

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