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Major Land Reforms in India

Introduction- Land reform usually refers to redistribution of land from the rich to the poor. More broadly, it includes regulation of ownership, operation, leasing, sales, and inheritance of land (indeed, the redistribution of land itself requires legal changes). In an agrarian economy like India with great scarcity, and an unequal distribution, of land, coupled with a large mass of the rural population below the poverty line, there are compelling economic and political arguments for land reform. Not surprisingly, it received top priority on the policy agenda at the time of Independence. In the decades following independence India passed a significant body of land reform legislation. The 1949 Constitution left the adoption and implementation of land and tenancy reforms to state governments. This led to a lot of variation in the implementation of these reforms across states and over time.

The pre-British scenario

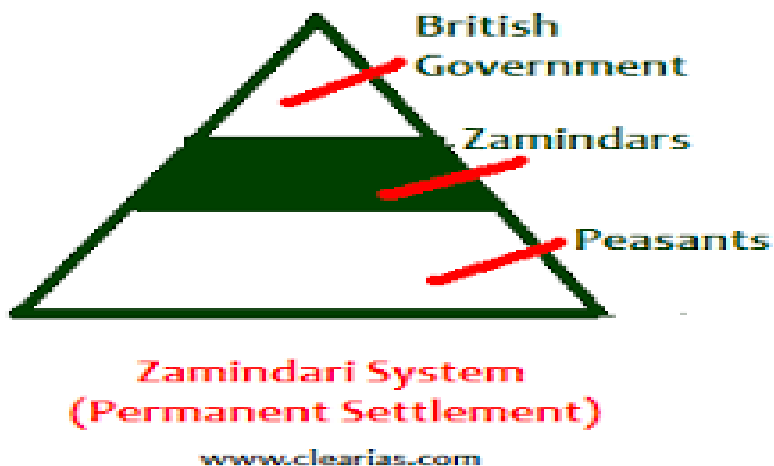
Traditionally, in India before the coming of the British, private ownership of land was an unfamiliar idea. Land was generally owned by the village community collectively. A proper land revenue system was initiated by Todar Mal during the reign of Akbar. Under this system, land was measured, classified, and the 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 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).

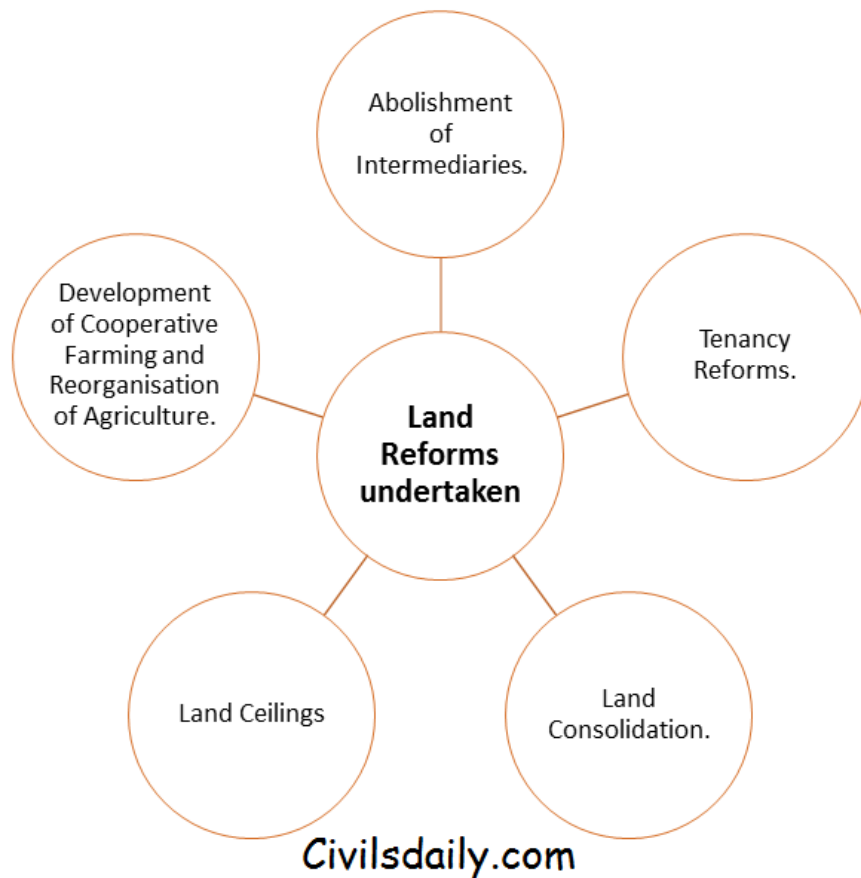
Land reforms since independence

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.

Land Tenure Systems in British India

