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PG Department of Geography, Patna University

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Niharika Narayan

Assistant Professor (Guest)

Email Id- narayanniharika@gmail.com

Post-Independence 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, a fact that has been utilized in empirical studies trying to understand the causes and effects of land reform.

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 overtime 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 landholdings. 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

Land ceiling refers to fixing a cap on the size of landholding 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 the 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 – 66	Food security concern. Cultivable wasteland to be cultivated. Including all regions into growth.	Intensive area development programme adopted for selected districts. Soil surveys.
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 dryland 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 –	Underutilization of land resources. Drought-prone areas.	Land and water management programme under drought-prone area programme in select areas.

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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	Dryland and rain-fed areas needing attention. Degradation of land is irrigated command areas.	Watershed approach. Soil conservation combined with watershed programmes. Agro-climatic regional planning approach 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 landholding, 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.

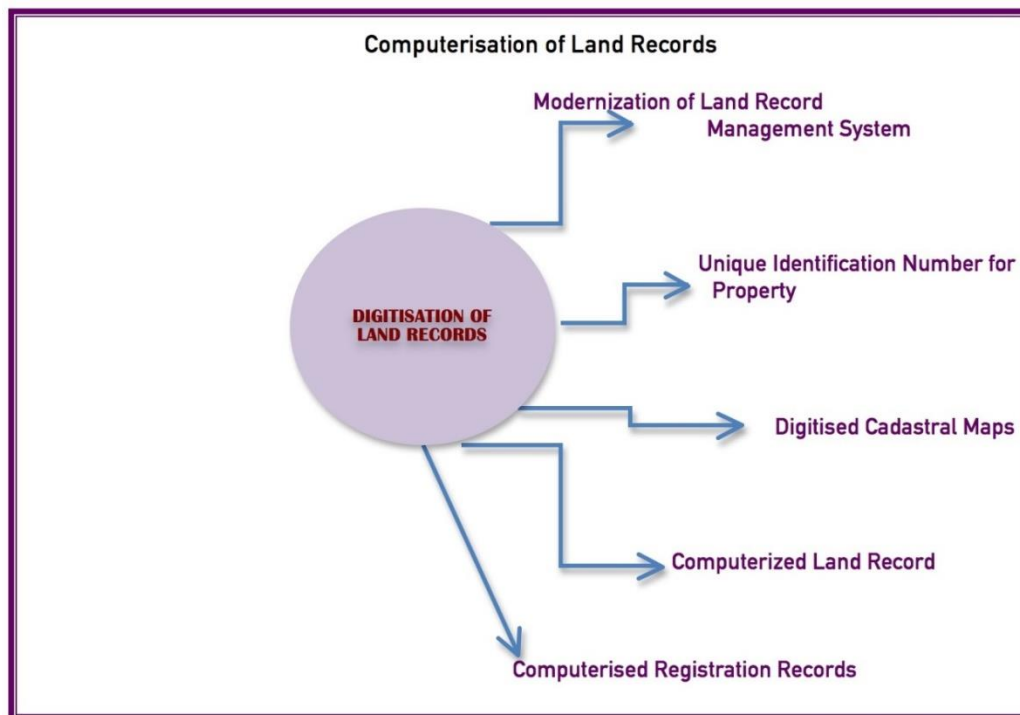
- Land possession

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.

- 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 landholding 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.



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, the 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.