

# EVOLUTION OF IDEAS ON LAND REFORMS IN INDIA

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CERTIFICATE

Certified that this dissertation entitled 'Evolution of Ideas on Land Reforms in India' submitted by Ms. TANUJA LALL, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other university.

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for their consideration for the award of M.Phil. degree.

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Thal

To My Papa who  
dreamt a dream.....

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## INTRODUCTION

Absentee landlordism, high and fluctuating revenue demand, increasing agricultural indebtedness and the consequent transfer of land from the cultivating classes to the non-cultivating classes, etc. were the major problems inflicting the Indian rural society in the 19th and 20th century colonial India. The fact that the state to an extent promoted and preserved the ills affecting India agriculture for their own vested interests and failed to initiate changes for restructuring the Indian land tenure system evoked criticism on an unprecedented scale from almost all quarters of the Indian society. The nationalists approached the land question and utilised it to build a powerful critique of British imperialism as will be seen in the following chapters. The other section which elicited a keen interest in the Indian agrarian problems were a group of economists. These economists following in the footsteps of Gokhale, M.G. Ranade, R.C. Dutt, G.V. Joshi etc, were not slow to recognise the peculiar character of economic transition in India characterised by the destruction of the old harmony between agriculture and industry, the absence of the growth of alternative avenues for employment and the consequent ruralisation and immiserisation of the masses. They noted the peculiar difficulties of the Indian agrarian problem and tried to point out the absurdity of following such a policy.

The policy of the Government of India on the other hand was little affected by these criticisms and suggestions. Even recommendation of their own committees and commissions were not fully implemented.<sup>1</sup> In 1919 agriculture became a transferred subject but the limits of dyarchy, especially in the field of finance, made any radical improvements impossible. It was in 1928 that the Royal Commission on Agriculture was appointed with a view, "to make recommendations for the improvement of agriculture and the promotion of the welfare and prosperity of the rural population".<sup>2</sup> Although considered a landmark in the evolution of agrarian policy in British India the commission excludes from its scope of study, the issue of land reforms, though a passing reference has been made about the evils of fragmentation of land holding (in a work of more than six hundred pages barely thirteen pages are devoted to the question of land reforms.<sup>3</sup>

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1. The various Famine Commissions of the third quarter of the 19th century pointed out the seriousness of the agrarian problem. However, little was done to reorganise agriculture on scientific basis. See The Indian Rural Problem, Sir M.B. Nanavati and J.J. Anjaria, ICAE, Bombay, 1945, p.4.
  2. Royal Commission on Agriculture in India: A Report, Govt. Central Press, Bombay, 1928, p.1.
  3. Ibid., pp.129-143.



It was expected that a separate commission would be appointed later to deal with these questions, but that was never done.<sup>4</sup>

A common thread which runs through all the major works on the Indian rural problem of the first half of the 20th century is the role of British imperialism in promoting agricultural backwardness and the failure to reorganise agriculture on scientific lines.

The supersession of the ancient rights of the village community by creating rent receiving landlords and its unfavourable impact on the peasantry was seen as a product of British rule. Even the series of tenancy laws, starting from 1859 were not considered enough to check all the abuses of absentee landlordism. Also the increase in the number of intermediaries between the state and the actual tiller was seen as a phenomenon not merely confined to the permanently settled tracts but also in the ryotwari tracts. This had led to an increase in tenancy.

The genesis of this phenomenon was traced to the absence of any institutions on the transferability and subletting of protected tenants rights. As a result of extensive field researches in U.P., Bihar, Bengal, Central

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4. M.B. Nanavati and J.J. Anjaria, op.cit., p.5.

provinces, Dr. R.K. Mukherjee concluded that prevention of transfer & subletting were the crux of tenancy reforms.. According to him, in Bengal and Bihar, as a result of the license given for sub-infeudation and the failure of the measures devised to discourage subletting by landholders had led to their conversion into virtual rent receivers & middlemen while the actual cultivator was left without adequate security. This phenomena created a new non-cultivating and rent receiving class from among the landholders and for actual tillers and the middle and money-lending classes. This led to reduction of a large proportion of cultivators to the status of landless labourers<sup>7</sup>. Hence while suggesting the need for restrictions of transfer mortgage or sale of tenancies, he contended<sup>8</sup>:

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5. "Land Tenure and Legislation" in R.K. Mukherjee (ed.) Economic Problems of Modern India, MacMillan and Co. Ltd., London, 1939, pp. x-xii. According to him, of the 52% of land in British India held under the ryotwari systems 48% of it had intermediaries between the state and the cultivator.
6. Ibid., p.226.
7. Ibid., pp.227-230. For the same reason, he spoke in favour of the C.P. Tenancy Act 1920, which made every tenant an occupancy tenant whatever the length of the occupation and by which majority of the tenants had no rights of transfer.
8. Quoted in Baljit Singh (ed.). The Frontiers of Social Sciences: Essays in honour of Dr. R.K. Mukherjee, MacMillian 1955, p.446.

Real democracy in India is incompatible with the increase of a class of landless proletariat. The way towards swaraj is a devious path, but this difficulty has not hitherto attracted the attention it deserves viz: that there cannot be any true swaraj unless we have a proper utilisation and equitable distribution of land resources.

The excessive dependence on land revenue as a source of resource mobilisation made it necessary for the state, not only to pitch the revenue demand high initially, and then raise it from time to time, but also to put up with it and even encourage implicitly the high exactions of the landlord from the tenant. The Todhunter Taxation Enquiry Committee pointed out in 1924 that as a tax, land revenue in India, was of a very peculiar nature. In other countries the land tax is levied at a definite rate upon a definite basis of assessment. In India, on the contrary there was no definite basis for assessment, and land tax on different holdings varied very greatly. As a result the land revenue in one case could absorb only a small fraction of the 'net income' from the cultivator; in other cases it could absorb the whole of the net income and sometimes even exceed it.<sup>9</sup>

Second the Todhunter Committee pointed out, that viewed as a scheme of taxation the land revenue system

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9. Quoted in Brij Narain. India Before and Since the Crisis, Vol.II, The Indian Press Ltd., Allahabad, 1939, p.594.

suffered from serious defects. The scheme of taxation "is not only not progressive but actually tends in the opposite direction". Not only did it not place a heavier burden on the small and improverished holders, the income accruing from agriculture is not taxed as in the European countries.<sup>10</sup>

Thirdly it was pointed out by the committee that the existing definition of net assets, was based on two assumptions:

- i. The whole land which is assessed was given to the tenants as batai, and,
- ii. the peasants proprietors net assets are identical with the landlords net assets.<sup>11</sup>

However, it was argued that the actual situation was far from what it was assumed. It was contended that :

- i. The landlords net assets were not the true economic rent of the land unless<sup>12</sup> it could be shown that the tenant out of his share was able to

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10. Ibid., pp.594-595.

11. Ibid., p.600.

12. When the tenant does not get full wages for his work, the landlords net assets contain an element of the tenants subsistence. Ibid., p. 601.

meet all the expenses of cultivation, including wages for himself and the working members of his family i.e. the criticism was directed at the fact that the share of the tenant did not cover his entire cost of production; and that,

- ii. the peasant proprietor net assets could not be found out without deducting from the total value of the gross products all expenses, including the wages of the peasant proprietor and the working members of his family.<sup>13</sup>

Finally and most significantly the committee pointed out that, unlike in the European countries where land revenue was pumped back into the land for organising agriculture on progressive lines, in India it was a tax utilised for general purposes (italics mine). According to the committee:<sup>14</sup>

Only a very small fraction of the tax collected from the cultivator is actually used for rural development and the illiterate ryot is, therefore, unable to recognise the benefits which he derives from the direct tax that he pays.

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13. Ibid., pp.600-601.

14. Ibid., pp.596-598.

Dr. R.K. Mukherjee made certain other points before the Taxation Enquiry committee that has important current relevance. He held that the system of land revenue was such, that it, encouraged the continuous increase of the class of rent receivers and intermediaries. He recommended the imposition of heavy duties on estates, probates legacies, and succession duties and the exemption of non-economic holdings from taxation. Arguing that the tax on uneconomic holdings led to the loss of physical efficiency of the cultivator and his family and the transfer of his holdings into the hands of the money lending or middle classes, he suggested the supersession of the present system of land revenue by a system of taxation of agricultural profit, as it was in vogue in France. This was to be based on a careful definition of economic holdings on the basis of detailed farm surveys.<sup>15</sup> He was strongly critical of the illegal exactions such as 'Nazarana' imposed upon the peasant by the zamindars and called for the immediate abolition of the zamindari.<sup>16</sup>

On the issue of the relation of the size of holdings to indebtedness, Mukherjee wrote a note of dissent in the U.P. Banking Enquiry Report, showing that the cumulatively increasing burden of agricultural debt was largely due to

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15. Baljit Singh (ed.), op.cit., pp.446-447.

the undersized holdings which could not be relieved much either by the intensive cultivation or even by the promotion of subsidiary occupations.<sup>17</sup>

The colonial administrators were well aware of these evils inflicting Indian agriculture. However, bound by the need to meet the demands of imperialism, they failed to initiate any changes in the agrarian sector. This official disinterest in the Indian agrarian problem further worsened the state of Indian agriculture. The task of redeeming Indian agriculture from its present state of backwardness and stagnation, became a preoccupation with the representatives of Indian nationalism.

The central concern of this dissertation is to study the evolution of ideas on land reforms starting from the moderate phase of the national movement till the advent of the Green revolution in Independent India. The term land reform is taken here to mean basically institutional reforms within the limits of a bourgeois-democratic framework.

The essence of this evolution of ideas on land reform was a difference of strategy, within the Congress and the

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16. R.K. Mukherjee, op.cit., pp.225-226.

17. Baljit Singh (ed.), op.cit., p.447.

left on the one hand (left meaning the CPI, CSP and other independent elements), and within the dominant Congress leadership, on the other. The position of the Congress leadership, was conditioned by its "primary" aim of overthrowing imperialism which demanded a mobilisation of various classes, groups and sections towards this goal. In the long run the achievement of this "primary" aim would usher in a bourgeois-democratic state. Towards this end, therefore, the Congress proposed the abolition of feudalism, through major institutional reforms such as the abolition of zamindari, tenancy reform, etc.

The left on the other hand, with its goal of socialism and its perception of the Congress as "bourgeois" proposed a radical redistribution by expropriating land from the rent receiving parasitic landlord class without payment of compensation.

The moderate phase of the Indian National movement witnessed the emergence of ideas on the land question. Nationalist ideas on the agrarian problem originated against the background of British colonial rule and as a critique of the official British diagnosis and remedy for agricultural backwardness in India. The two basic tenets of the official stand point were an insular view of the agrarian problem and a technological bias for agricultural development. The former implied that the agrarian problem was analysed in



isolation from the problem of general economic backwardness associated with colonial administration. It also implied that attempts to overcome agrarian backwardness associated with colonial domination were unaccompanied by efforts to promote industrialisation. The latter was reflected in a tendency to view the backwardness of Indian agriculture mostly as a technical problem unrelated to the depressive effects of agrarian institutions.

The early nationalists sought to counter this in those very terms by proposing institutional reforms as well as a holistic approach towards the land question. The depressing state of affairs in agriculture was attributed to a high pitch of land revenue and constant revisions of assessment, short settlements, etc., as a result of which the frequency and intensity of famines had increased. The Nationalist critique of British land revenue settlements highlighted the fact that the Indian leadership believed the agrarian problem to be incapable of a solution without the proper reform of the system of land revenue. They hence demanded security of tenure as a basis for the creation of "progressive" agriculture. The other major demands were:

- i. Reduction of land revenue to a level at which the ryot was left with a surplus for subsistence.
- G.V. Joshi went to the extent of proposing the

exclusion of uneconomic holdings from revenue assessment.

- ii. The extension of permanent settlement of revenue in temporary settled parts of the country. The issue was first taken up in 1889.
- iii. Creation of private property in land along with a body of free and independent farmers as agents of agricultural development.

Although the early nationalists showed a keen insight into the problem, they approached only those issues which to them appeared as most crucial for building a unified nationalist public opinion in the country in order to further the process of nation in the making.

The historical contribution of the moderates lay in providing a lasting agenda to the Congress, within the framework of which the subsequent anti-imperialist struggle was conducted, albeit with modification.

The period following 1920's witnessed, both the entry of masses and peasants into politics as well as the democratisation of the Congress organisation. This historical development had a major impact on the prevailing ideas on land reforms - especially because the land question had become one of the central issues on the political

agenda. Chiefly the credit for this rested on the left lead by the kisan sabha - socialist combine. The kisan sabha movement which was born of an inequitable land system was basically led by the tenants and small holders who faced the direct brunt of zamindari exploitation. Consequently, Zamindari abolition became an all important issue in the 1930's, so much so that the UPCC actually proposed zamindari abolition although this did not immediately become a part of overall Congress programme. The reaction of the dominant Congress leadership was dictated both by the legacy of the agrarian programme of the moderates as well as the desire to maintain the anti-imperialist United Front in a manner which would not alienate the more substantial landholders. The class adjustment affected by the leadership with the emerging peasant forces was best reflected in the Faizpur resolution (1936) although the trend towards this was easily there in the fundamental rights resolution of 1931 and the Lucknow Congress.

Soon after independence the planning process was initiated in 1951 with the aim of accelerating the growth of the economy, uplifting the condition of the poor and bringing about equality in income. The architects of the Five Year Plans appreciated that the "production of an agricultural surplus (was) the key to industrialisation". However, scarce resources and foreign exchange reserves

permitted only marginal investment in yield increasing inputs. As a result the emphasis was on institutional reforms. The Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee Report provided the blue print for a structural transformation of Indian agriculture.

The overriding ideological goal of a "socialistic pattern of society" motivated the planners to devise a strategy of agricultural development to tackle the task of increasing productivity through the application of labour intensive technology. The crux of the approach was the promise of social reform held out by large scale initiatives for institutional change. Hence, highest priority was assigned to the rapid implementation of land reforms.

The land reforms envisaged by the Indian planners assumed certain basic structural changes in the rural countryside by way of :

- i. Abolition of intermediaries;
- ii. Tenancy reforms;
- iii. Fixing of ceilings; and
- iv. Reorganisation of agriculture including consolidation of holdings, the prevention of fragmentation and cooperative farming.

However, by the early sixties, it was abundantly clear that the Third Plan was a failure. One major reason for this was the lagging growth rates in the agricultural sector which had become a serious limiting factor in the overall rate of economic advance as early as 1958.

The new strategy advanced stood in striking contrast to the basic assumptions of past policies. Whereas, the older approach had relied on a more intensive utilisation of traditional inputs, e.g., reclamation of cultivable waste land and the more efficient utilisation of underemployed labour, the new approach urged the utmost importance of applying scientific techniques and knowledge of agricultural production at all stages.

It is the study of this shift in agriculture, from its emphasis on an institutional oriented growth strategy to a technology oriented one, which has been attempted in this chapter.

In Chapter IV, an attempt will be made to study the critique of the Congress agrarian reform programme that emerged in post-independent India. This chapter will essentially deal with the ideas of the Communist Party of India, the Indian capitalist class and Charan Singh.

**CHAPTER I**

**EMERGING IDEAS ON LAND REFORMS**

The peasantry constitutes the most important 'class' in a predominantly agrarian country like India and the peasant problem forms the core of the Indian economic problem. Nevertheless, the transition of this problem into a major issue of ideological confrontation was not achieved by political activists and ideologues of the peasantry. It was, on the other hand, mobilised as an ally in the multi-class national movement against imperial domination and to attempt a social transformation. The peasant question, therefore, threw up not a single unified ideology but diverse and even conflicting ideologies, the character of the ideology being dependent upon the nature of social force which sought peasant support.<sup>1</sup>

Also, the agrarian question involves conflicts of interests which are fought not only on the economic and political plane but also on the intellectual or the scientific plane. Conflicts of interests are, thus transformed, into conflicts of ideologies and interpretations.

This chapter is an attempt to study the efforts of the rising nationalist intelligentsia to grasp and explain

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1. Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, International Publishers, New York, 1969, pp. 123-124. According to Marx, the French peasant's mode of production isolated them from one another and consequently incapacitated them from enforcing their class interest in their own name. "They cannot represent themselves, they need to be represented."

rural poverty and agricultural backwardness with reference to colonialism and in the context of the anti-imperialist struggle. This emerging 'nationalist ideology' on the land question was not merely a means of detaching the peasants from the colonial ideology. It also represented a greater approximation to truth than the colonial ideology. The British Empire in India was based on the twin notions of benevolence and invincibility. The early nationalists, on the basis of sound economic analysis and scientific enquiry significantly eroded the notion of 'benevolence', the notion that the British ruled India in the interests of the Indians.

#### Section I

The conquest of a vast country as India created a host of problems. With the aim of consolidating their rule, the British had to devise suitable methods of government to control and administer it. Despite frequent changes in its administrative policy, it never lost sight of its main objects which were to increase its income, to enhance the profitability of its Indian possessions to Britain, and to maintain and strengthen the British rule over India; all other purposes were subordinated to these aims.<sup>2</sup> It was

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2. See, for example, S. Gopal, British Policy in India, 1858-1905, Cambridge University Press, 1965.



precisely with these objectives in mind that the British introduced the land settlements, starting from 1793.

The need to create political allies in an alien country who would act as a buffer between them and the Indian people guided the British into creating a class of zamindars as proprietors of land.<sup>3</sup> This class owed its very existence to British rule and was compelled by its own basic interests to support it. This zamindars as a class supported the foreign rule in opposition to the rising movement for freedom. Secondly and perhaps the predominant motive, was that of financial security. Before 1793, the British were troubled by fluctuations in its chief source of income. The revenue settlements, especially the Permanent Settlement, guaranteed stability of income. Moreover, the permanent Settlement enabled them to maximise their income, as land revenue was fixed much higher than it had ever been in the past.<sup>4</sup> Thirdly, these settlements were expected to increase agricultural production and introduce capitalism in agriculture (as it was capitalist agriculture which would

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3. The British very strongly believed that British rule could not be maintained only by force. They could not hope to govern the country effectively if they distrusted all Indians. The settlement of Oudh, for example, was a part of Canning's general scheme of strengthening an Indian aristocracy which would buttress British rule. Ibid., p.7.

4. Ratanalekha Ray, Change in Bengal Agrarian Society, Manohar, New Delhi, 1979, pp. 75-76.

produce a marketable surplus).<sup>5</sup> Since the land revenue could not be increased, it was believed, the zamindar would be inspired to extend cultivation and improve agricultural productivity.<sup>6</sup>

These revenue settlements departed fundamentally from the traditional land systems of the country. The British created a new form of private property in land in such a way that the benefit of the innovation did not go to the cultivators. All over the country, land was made saleable, mortgagable and alienable with the primary aim of protecting the government revenue. Also, these settlements, disrupted the stability and continuity of the Indian villages. In fact, the entire structure broke up.<sup>7</sup>

The British advocacy of the Ryotwari system, on the other hand, stemmed from their belief in the principles of Utilitarianism. They were convinced that the sentiments of

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5. See, for example, Aditya Mukherjee, 'Agrarian Conditions in Assam, 1880-1890 : A case study of Five Districts in the Brahmaputra Valley', IESHR (Indian Economic and Social History Review), Vol.XVI, No.2, April-June, 1979.
6. Enhancement finds no mention in the Cornwallis code of 1793. They proprietors were to pay the same fixed land revenue to the government. The tenants were to pay the same rates of rents forever to the proprietor so far as it could be inferred from the provisions. N.K. Sinha, The History of Bengal, 1757-1905, University of Calcutta, 1967, p.103.
7. Bipan Chandra, et.al., India's Struggle for Independence (1857-1947), Viking, 1987, p.50.

solidarity which tied the peasants in a close relationship of interdependence, flowed from the collective responsibility which they bore for its land tax and this hindered agricultural progress in the rural areas. Hence, they believed, that it was necessary to reorganise the land revenue system by creating a legal relationship between the peasant, as a tenant, and the State-as the supreme land lord in the country. The share of agricultural produce appropriated by the State would then be the rent payable to a land lord, leaving the wages of labour and profits to the cultivation who tilled the land. However, the main reasons for initiating Ryotwari or temporary settlement were :

- i. to remove the revenue collecting intermediary, thus increasing the share of the state by cutting into the surplus appropriated by the intermediary;
- ii. to enable the State to increase the revenue as prices and profits increased, by periodic revision of revenue rates, which was not possible in the permanent settlement.<sup>8</sup>

The introduction of the Ryotwari system, not only weakened the sentiment of solidarity in the rural society,

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8. Ravinder Kumar, Western India in the Nineteenth Century, A Study in the Social History of Maharashtra, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., Great Britain, 1968, p.86.

but increased the intensity of friction and the occasions for conflicts between different groups, especially between the moneylenders and the peasant cultivators. The situation worsened with the setting up of new courts of law which in theory were based upon concepts of equity and legality but in actuality favoured the money-lenders.<sup>9</sup> Also, the introduction of Ryotwari settlement did not improve the condition of the ryots. Debt, tenancy, etc., emerged as major problems in these areas too.

These policy decisions for vast changes in the agrarian institutions was preceded as well as followed by a series of debates and discussions among the British themselves. This discussion on land policy was conducted with an appeal, on the one hand, to the principles of the Western economic theory, and on the other, to the facts relating to the Indian Society in general and the agrarian system in particular, as they were perceived by colonial administrators themselves.<sup>10</sup>

However, the post-Mutiny period witnessed a complete reversal of British policy which was primarily determined in Europe and "moved in the direction set by the development of

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9. Ibid., pp. 152-153.

10. P.C. Joshi, Land Reforms in India: Trends and Perspectives, Allied Publishers, 1975, p.7.

the British economy."<sup>11</sup> The Mutiny brought about a reversal of the assumptions and premises of British policy in India. Not only did the Mutiny leave a deep and abiding mark on the fabric of the Indian society, but also decisively altered the nature of the British rule in India and the relation of the British and the Indian people.

The revolt of 1857 was a reflection of the precarious nature of the British position in India, and hence forced the British to re-examine their Indian Policy - which in itself was determined by the needs of the imperial superstructure. Above all, it reflected the strength and tenacity of the traditional Indian institutions and brought home to them the fact that it was far safer to accept Indian society as it was and concentrate upon the provision of sound and efficient administration.<sup>12</sup> In particular it marked the beginnings of a new era of maintenance of status quo in the institutional structure, especially the property structure. Henceforth, the aim of British policy was to explore prospects of growth and development within the given institutional framework.

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11. Eric Stokes, English Utilitarians in India, OUP, 1959, pp. xii-xiii.

12. T.R. Metcalf, The Aftermath of the Revolt, India, 1857-1870, Princeton University Press, 1965, pp. 323-324.

This change in policy had its fall out in the intellectual sphere also. There was now a pronounced tendency towards restricting the scope of enquiry to selected aspects of Indian economic problem. Consequently, questions relating to the institutional structure evolved under British rule and its relation to economic backwardness were, by and large, excluded from the purview of all official enquiries and investigations.<sup>13</sup> More importantly, the Mutiny was followed by a policy of trying to appease the existing upper classes like the zamindars, taluqdars etc. in order to extend the social base of the empire. This shift in policy meant that no basic institutional changes in agriculture could be carried out.<sup>14</sup>

With the decline of official interest in the agrarian structure, the thread of agrarian research was resumed by the representatives of the emerging Indian nationalism who again pushed into prominence the land problem and land policy as major problem areas for study. This renewed concern arose out of the need for explaining the ever

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13. P.C. Joshi, op.cit., p.9.

14. Despite a series of Tenancy legislations like the Bengal Tenancy Act, the Punjab land Alienation Act etc. apparently to protect the interests of the peasantry, the government was always sensitive to the interests of the Indian aristocracy. Tenancy legislation was carefully tailored to avoid any real damage to the position of the landlord community. See Metcalf, op.cit., pp.202-203.

increasing backwardness and poverty of India under the British rule. The nationalist viewpoint on the land question was in sharp contrast to the imperial viewpoint which sought to explain India's backwardness and poverty without reference to the economic and social framework created under and by the British. It simply traced these maladies to the laziness of the people, their social customs, lack of capital and resistance to scientific farming, etc.<sup>15</sup>

The consolidation of British rule in India witnessed the integration of the Indian economy with the British and the world capitalist economy. However, this process far from initiating and releasing forces of modernisation and development, as the early nationalists had hoped it would led to its gradual transformation into a classical colony. India became the exporter of raw materials for Britain's industries and a market for British manufactured products. Growth rates of most of the sectors of the Indian economy either stagnated or declined. Large sectors of the economy - foreign trade, banking, plantations, transport, energy,

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15. Vera Anstey, The Economic Development of India, Longmans Green & Co., London, 1957, pp. 157-159. This book is a very good example of the way political predilection decisively influence the nature of problems to be studied and the method used in the analysis of the problems.

industry, etc. come under foreign control.<sup>16</sup> It was the long term consequences of these trends that the early nationalists made an effort to analyse.

Agriculture in general, and the land question in particular, emerged as a major area of enquiry for the early nationalists. The agrarian problem was the most important problem at the close of the 19th century, as it constituted the main economic activity for 80% of the Indian populace. The British sponsored changes and innovations, far from reorganising agriculture on modern capitalist lines, led to the perpetuation of semi-feudal conditions. India faced progressive ruralisation and increased dependence on land.<sup>17</sup> The increasing backwardness in agriculture was highlighted by a series of famines, the most devastating being that of 1876-78. The growing unrest during the second half of the nineteenth century, which on more than one occasion erupted into riots,<sup>18</sup> also highlighted this fact.

This new mechanism of surplus extraction and utilisation was created through the introduction of new land

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16. Bipan Chandra, The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India (hereafter referred to as Economic Nationalism), People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1982.
17. Radhakamal Mukherjee, Land Problems in India, Longmans Green and Co. Ltd., London, 1933, pp.361-362.
18. Bipan Chandra, Economic Nationalism, op.cit., pp.394-395.



systems, the heavy land revenue demand, legal and political changes, the destruction of indigenous industries, the disintegration of the union between agriculture and industry and the integration of the Indian economy into the world capitalist economy in a subservient position.<sup>19</sup> More specifically, Indian agriculture was commercialised without any change occurring in its technical base or organisation of production.<sup>20</sup>

By the 1920's then, land-lordism had become the main feature of the both the Zamindari and Ryotwari areas. Increasing sub-infeudation had enlarged the number of middlemen between the State and the peasant. High land revenue demand and rigidity in its collection had not only

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19. Bipan Chandra, "Peasantry and National Integration" in Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India, Orient Long Man Ltd., 1979, p.329.

20. For instance, Mridula Mukherjee argues that despite commercialisation, agriculture in Punjab was characterised by a general low level of cultivation leading to a fall in per capita all crop output, the investment of capital accumulated by some sections of the rural society in land purchase and land mortgage rather than in the improvement of agricultural technologies, the use of mechanised implements, fertilisers, etc., and intensification of semi-feudal semi-colonial relations i.e., an increasing concentration of land holding accompanied not by growth of large-scale farming with wage labour but by rapid increase in areas under tenancy, as well as an actual shift from rent-in-cash to rent-in-kind. See "Commercialisation and Agrarian change in pre-independence Punjab, in K.N. Raj (ed.) Commercialisation of Agriculture, Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 65-66.

expropriated the older zamindars and peasant proprietors but also produced a class which had little link with the land and was merely a rent-receiver, rather than a wealth producer. "Today he neither supplies agricultural capital nor controls forming operations".<sup>21</sup>

Further in the zamindari areas, sub-infeudation tended to separate the cultivator from a considerable share of his meagre income. Leases were merely short term affairs and oral, but even if written, they did not provide the peasant with security of tenure. In such a scheme of things - there was no place for peasant initiative or savings to innovate or improve land.<sup>22</sup>

Agricultural indebtedness was another evil inflicting Indian agriculture. The increasing adoption of the cash nexus and the rigid interpretation of the laws by the courts, provided new opportunities for enrichment to the moneylenders.<sup>23</sup>

R.P. Dutt, while attacking the views prevalent in the British official circles, that the cause for agricultural

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21. Radhakamal Mukherjee, op.cit., p.202.

22. Ibid., p.204.

23. This was especially true in the light of facts which pointed at the laws favouring the moneylenders, for instance, in Maharashtra. See, Nanavati and Anjaria, The Indian Rural Problem, The Indian Society of Agricultural Economics, op.cit., p.40.

backwardness was to be found in the acute land shortage and lack of skill and resourcefulness, strongly held that the problem arose due to the failure to use the existing cultivable area and the extremely low level of production in the cultivated area owing to the burdens imposed on the peasantry of land revenue to the Government, rent to the landlord and interest to the moneylender. He correctly analysed these burdens as the creation of imperialism and the social relations maintained by it.<sup>24</sup>

It was with these problems that the early nationalists had to contend with. The analysis of colonialism was the result of intense political and theoretical debates on almost every issue confronting the Indian economy under British colonialism. "Inevitably this analysis and a fresh conceptual framework to express it developed through gaps, omissions, inner contradictions and wide divergences among the nationalist thinkers." This is in contrast to the widely held view that there was an absence of theoretical economic analysis in the writings of the early nationalists since they had ready made economic theories available in the works of the Western economists and that the current policy problems before the Indian economy seemed so urgent and so provoking that theoretical speculation seemed to them a

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24. R.P. Dutt, India Today, PPH, 1970, pp.209-210.

matter of secondary importance.<sup>25</sup> To accept this view without any qualifications would be to deny the early nationalists their originality. To the extent that the early nationalists made indepth study of available literature on economic theories, would be acceptable to one and all. As Prof. Bipan Chandra very aptly points out:<sup>26</sup>

The nationalist intelligentsia set out to examine through the method of 'the concrete study of the concrete reality' the economic situation of the country, the nature of colonial rule and its impact on the Indian economy, and the quantitative and structural changes being brought about in it - in other words, to try and understand and analyse the causes of India's poverty, the nature of colonial exploitation and their relation to the structure of colonial economy and its inner dynamics. In this enquiry they fully utilised the historical experience of other countries as also contemporary economic theories. Gradually they developed a powerful critique of the economic condition of India and the role of British rule in its making, and of the primary or central contradiction between colonialism and the interests of the Indian people.

In the final analysis then, a critique of colonialism became the chief form of ideological struggle between the emerging national movement and the colonial authorities. This critique of colonialism, which had matured considerably by the first decades of the 20th century, was used as a

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25. Bhabatosh Dutta, Evolution of Economic Thinking in India, Dr. P.N. Banerjee Memorial Lectures, Calcutta, 1962, p.2.

26. Bipan Chandra, (ed.), Ranade's Economic Writings (hereafter REW), Gian Publishing House, New Delhi, 1990, p.ix.

weapon against the British and as a means of mobilising various sections of Indians in the later phases of national movement. Though the later nationalists, represented far greater political militancy and the need for mass mobilisation in order to overthrow the imperial yoke, they hardly made an advance over the theory posited by the moderate leaders.

## Section II.

The necessity of providing an effective critique of the 'colonial theory' led the early nationalists towards questioning the very methodology and premise which were implicit in that theory. It led them towards exploring a new methodology and new premises so as to evolve an alternative theory which tried to establish a causal nexus between the institutional structure created by the British and the phenomenon of Indian economic backwardness, including agricultural stagnation.

The early nationalists wrote on almost all the problems confronting Indian agriculture. However, of all the problems, the national leadership attached the greatest importance to the system of assessment and the pitch of land revenue. It was the land revenue policy of the Government of India, which they held as mainly responsible for the

poverty and destitution of the peasant and the backwardness of agriculture.<sup>27</sup> Land revenue policy was, in fact, one of those issues on which the entire body of nationalist leadership was firmly united.

The nationalist polemics was principally directed against the 'high pitch', 'the uncertain and fluctuating character', and the 'stringent mode of realisation' of government assessment on land. In 1881, Justice Ranade, probably for the first time, alleged that "the State's monopoly of land and its right to increase the assessment at its own discretion are the two most prominent obstacles in the way of the growth of our national prosperity".<sup>28</sup> In a similar strain R.C. Dutt stated that "in India the State virtually interferes with the accumulation of wealth from the soil, intercepts the incomes and gains of the tillers and generally adds to its land revenue demand at each recurring settlement, leaving the cultivator permanently poor".<sup>29</sup> This problem according to Dutt, stemmed partially

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27. Bipan Chandra, *Economic Nationalism*, op.cit., pp.398-399.

28. V.S. Minocha, "Ranade on the Agrarian Problem" in Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol.II, No.4, 1965, p. 361.

29. Quoted in P.C. Joshi, "Pre-Independence Thinking on Agrarian Policy", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.ix, No.8, Feb. 25, 1967.

from the inability of the British ruling class to understand the land problem in India.<sup>30</sup>

The land question in India is generally considered an intricate subject by public men in England and is therefor avoided. But the main features of the Indian system are so simple that they are easily explained and are as easily grasped. It is only necessary to remember that the land systems are different in different provinces of India and if we examine the system in each province separately, the main facts will appear exceedingly simple.

In an apology for the Pabna rioters in 1874, Dutt, writing under the name of 'Arcydae', listed the main causes to be an increase of rents and the illegal exactions by the zamindars. As a solution he suggested a reduction in government demand and the introduction of some sort of permanent settlement between the zamindars and the ryots. "This we submit will be a noble recognition of the rights of the Bengal peasantry, which have unfortunately been so long and so shamefully ignored by the British government; and this we further submit, is the only possible measure which may be calculated to prevent future disputes..."

R.C. Dutt held that the nature of land assessment was based on fallacious assumptions. The Government of India argued that the land tax in India was not a rent which consisted of the surplus produce, after paying the cost of

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30. R.C. Dutt, Famines and Land Assessments in India, Delhi, 1985, p. ix.

cultivation, but a land revenue only. Dutt on the other hand felt that land revenue was nothing but a tax on rent.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, he argued that the system of estimating the land revenue in India, by estimating the supposed gross produce of a crop and then fixing the land revenue as proportion of this was itself based on wrong assumptions. The fallacy lay in the fact that it assumed an annual produce for India which India never produced in a single year. This was because the whole of cultivable area was not cultivated every year.<sup>32</sup> The third error that he pointed at in the computation of British demand was to compare the land revenue figures in British India with the figures which the British possessed of the assessments made by the Mughal emperors. Dutt pointed out that it was often forgotten that the old figures only represented an ideal demand which was never collected in full; that it was the policy in the previous ages to fix the demand at a high figure and to collect as much of it as possible from year to year; and that to compare modern figures with the old figures was to compare collections actually made by the British with collections which were never made by the Mughal rulers.<sup>33</sup> Lastly, and most importantly, he pointed to the fact that

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31. R.C. Dutt, Peasantry of Bengal, Calcutta, 1874, p.181.

32. R.C. Dutt, Famines and Land Assessments in India, op.cit., p.95.

33. Ibid., p.97.



the whole of the Mughal revenue derived from the land was reinvested in the country itself, fructifying agriculture and the industry and flowing back to the people in one form or another, which had not been the case under the British system.<sup>34</sup>

The high pitch of land assessment, by siphoning off a large part of the cultivator's possible earnings, drained the countryside of its capital, hindered capital investment in land, and, in general, checked expenditure on agricultural improvements.<sup>35</sup> Also, heavy assessments ~~and~~ increased the intensity and frequency of famines.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, on subsistence lands, heavy assessments created starvation conditions even in normal times.<sup>37</sup> Further, the insecurity of tenure, heavy enhancements along with constant revisions and short settlements, left the Indian peasant with little incentive to invest in agriculture and enhance productivity. The result was stagnation and sometimes even decay of agriculture.<sup>38</sup> In the absence of a large scale

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34. Ibid., pp.99-100.

35. Bipan Chandra, Economic Nationalism, op.cit., p.403.

36. R.C. Dutt, Famines and Land Assessments, op.cit., P. vii. According to him in the famines of 1877, 1897 and 1899 those parts of India which had been over assessed had suffered most severely.

37. G.V. Joshi, Writings and Speeches (hereafter speeches), Arya Bhushan, Poona, 1912, p.347.

38. Bipan Chandra, op.cit., p.406.

increase in agricultural productivity, the high pitch of assessment combined with the rigidity in its collection often drove the peasants in the hands of the money lender, never to be a free man again.<sup>39</sup> Also, the stringency in the mode of revenue collection forced the peasant to sell his products at a rate lower than the prevailing market price.<sup>40</sup>

It was in the light of these facts that the moderates vehemently protested against the British claims that Indian agriculture was backward and the Indian peasant poverty stricken because they were by nature indolent and bound by fetters of caste and customs which hindered the forces of development to permeate Indian agriculture. This theory, according to them which sought to explain the backwardness of Indian agriculture by referring them all to the inherent failings of the ryot, was a strange one. In their opinion it was only as a freemen, in the full enjoyment of the privilege of a free status and living under free conditions that the Indian peasant could improve agriculture.<sup>41</sup>

The nationalist critique of the British land revenue administration highlighted the fact that the Indian leadership tried to relate the backwardness of Indian

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39. G.V. Joshi, op.cit., p.343.

40. Bipan Chandra, Economic Nationalism, op.cit., p.407.

41. G.V. Joshi, op.cit., p. 340.

agriculture to the economic basis of the institutional structure viz. the retrograde systems of land relations in India, under which the state had become the superlandlord leaving the landlords and tenants without any incentives of resources for agricultural development.<sup>42</sup> Hence, they believed the agrarian problem to be incapable of solution without a proper reform of the system of land revenue, which according to them was responsible for all evils afflicting agriculture.

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The first step that the early nationalists suggested as a remedial measure for agricultural backwardness was security of tenure. Justice Ranade, for example, was of the view that private ownership in land was essential to secure economic progress. His belief was based on the studies of the emancipation of serfs in Russia, of Prussian land legislation and of the conditions prevailing in France and other European countries.<sup>43</sup> According to him, the peasants depressed under the burden of ancestral debts, were to be enabled to get rid of them and given permanent right of ownership in the land they cultivated. He vehemently opposed those who urged that such a radical remedy could not be adopted in India because "...the Indian ryot (was) improvident, spiritless and ignorant peasant, whose...

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42. P.C. Joshi, Land Reforms, op.cit., pp.11-12

43. V.S. Minocha, op.cit., p.361.



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condition (could) never be improved."<sup>44</sup> To this Ranade retorted "...that the French peasant was not always the prudent citizen that he is now... The magic of property and of free institutions have worked all this wonderful change."<sup>45</sup> The case for peasant proprietorship could not have been put in better words.

Similarly, G.V. Joshi put forward a strong case in favour of peasant proprietorship. "...we can conceive of no more efficacious correction of the Ryot's present indifference to his own interests than such 'secure possession' of the acres he tills, and assurance of the full fruits of his toils."<sup>46</sup>

Further, they put a strong case in favour of reducing the level of land revenue to a level at which the ryot was left with a surplus for subsistence, for providing against bad seasons and for productive investment, though they could not decide unanimously the level at which the revenue should be fixed.<sup>47</sup> G.V. Joshi suggested a most radical measure which excluded all uneconomic holdings from being taxed

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44. M.G. Ranade, op.cit., p.256.

45. Ibid.

46. G.V. Joshi, op.cit., p. 346.

47. Bipan Chandra, Economic Nationalism, op.cit., pp.409-410.

since they did not generate any surplus at all.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, they demanded that the mode of collection of land revenue should be made more flexible and lenient. This they felt could be done by spreading payments over several instalments to be paid on convenient dates, and by promptly granting, as a matter of principle, large and liberal remissions in cases of scarcity and famine.<sup>49</sup> In this connection, the principle of payment of revenue in kind as a proportion of gross produce or some revised version found wide favour within the ranks of the Indian nationalists. They did not, however, press this suggestion as it was too radical a departure from the existing system of revenue assessment.<sup>50</sup>

The most important and most widely supported of the nationalists demand in the realm of agriculture was the introduction of Permanent Settlement of revenue in the temporary settled areas. The Indian National Congress took up the demand in 1889 when it passed a resolution urging the government

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48. G.V. Joshi, op.cit., pp. 480-1.

49. Bipan Chandra, Economic Nationalism, op.cit., p. 410.

50. Bipan Chandra, REW, op.cit., p. 79. Countering the argument that permanent settlement of revenue would lead to a loss of revenue, especially in case of price rise, Ranade suggested that by fixing the permanent land revenue in grain to be commuted every twenty to thirty years according to permanent changes in prices the loss of revenue could be prevented.

to take the subject of Permanent Settlement once more under consideration in view to practical action thereon, such that fixity and permanency may be given to the Government Land Revenue demand without further delay, at any rate in all fully populated and well cultivated tracts of the country.<sup>51</sup>

Hereafter, this demand was reiterated in almost all the Congress sessions.

Surprisingly, this demand of the early nationalist has come under attacks from many quarters. The demand for the extension of Permanent Settlement has been looked upon by many as the nationalist attempt to represent the interests of the zamindars at the cost of the ryot's interests. R.C. Dutt, in particular has been branded the champion of the landlords because of his persistent advocacy of Permanent Settlement of revenue. However, this is a misrepresentation of facts.

It was, R.C. Dutt who was responsible for giving the term a wider meaning and in eliciting from the Government of India, a lengthy resolution in 1902 on the Permanent Settlement. In the words of the Government itself, "the resolution is an authoritative exposition of the principles

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51. Quoted in Bipan Chandra, Economic Nationalism, op.cit., p.415.

on which the land revenue administration in India has been based in the past and by which it will be guided in the future."<sup>52</sup> This resolution also has to its credit the confusion created regarding the Permanent Settlement in order to score an upper hand over the critics of the official land revenue policy.

The Land Revenue Policy of the Indian Government, firstly identified a Permanent Settlement of revenue with the permanent settlement of 1793 in Bengal.<sup>53</sup> Secondly, in response to the criticism directed at the government for the high land revenue demand and the stringent mode of collection which was responsible for the unprecedented calamities, the British Government set out to prove that the Permanent Settlement had not saved the peasantry of Bengal from famine and that these were no grounds for the belief that the Bengal tenants were far more prosperous than their counterparts in other parts of the country.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, the resolution contended that the security and prosperity enjoyed by the tenantry of Bengal was not because of Permanent Settlement but because of the tenancy

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52. Land Revenue Policy of the Indian Government, Published by order of Governor General in Council, Calcutta, 1902, p.1.

53. Ibid., para 5.

54. Ibid., para 5 and 6.

laws passed by the Government.<sup>55</sup> In this way, the government's resolution chided Dutt for paying so much attention to zamindari interests and so little to tenant rights. Moreover, it made it very clear that there was little prospect that the Government would ever again permanently limit its revenue demand.

Many others in the British official circles objected to a permanent settlement of land revenue on the grounds that it would lead to loss of revenue especially in case of a price rise. Justice Ranade, arguing against this proposition held that the increase in agricultural production and prosperity would lead to such an increase of government's revenue from other direct and indirect taxes that it would make up any loss due to the permanent settlement. Secondly, he suggested a compromise formulae under which land revenue would be fixed in perpetuity but could be changed in cases of changes in prices.<sup>56</sup>

Many Congress leaders must have been uneasy with Lord Curzon's efforts to pose as a friend of the peasant while portraying the Congress as a champion of the privileged classes. This was probably one of the reasons that the INC gave less emphasis to Permanent Settlement after the

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55. Ibid., para 6.

56. Bipan Chandra, REW, op.cit., p 79 and p.96.



Government of India resolution.<sup>57</sup> However, it was ironic that Lord Curzon should have capitalised on Dutt's advocacy of the Permanent Settlement in order to claim that the government was defending the peasants against the zamindars. For when Dutt asked for a Permanent Settlement to be introduced in all parts of India, he was asking for the extension of the principle of permanency in revenue demand and not of zamindari settlement. He merely demanded the fixity in revenue demand in both zamindari and ryotwari areas and a permanent limitation of zamindar's claims on the tenants.<sup>58</sup>

However, this demand for the extension of Permanent Settlement in all parts of the country was not very novel. It was very much a trend of thinking that gradually took shape in the course of half a century that preceded them.

The germs of this idea was first visible in the writings of Raja Rammohan Roy. The Raja was an ardent champion of the Permanent Settlement which according to him, was advantageous both to the zamindars as well as the

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57. John R. Mclane, Indian Nationalism and the Early Indian National Congress, Princeton University Press, 1977, p.230.

58. According to him, "increase in rent should be totally disallowed with regard to all ryots, ...and a sort of Permanent Settlement should be created between ryots and zamindars", (emphasis mine) in, R.C. Dutt, Peasantry of Bengal, op.cit., p.186.

government.<sup>59</sup> Within the framework of the Permanent Settlement, however, he passionately pleaded for the amelioration of the condition of the peasants. The Raja noted that the rent the raiyat had to pay was very high: "It is considered in theory that the cultivators pay half of his produce to the landlord... this half of the produce is a very high demand upon the cultivator, after he has borne the whole expense of seed and cultivation; but in practice under the Permanent Settlement since 1793 the landholders have adopted every measure to increase the rents, by means of power put into their hands." He explained in detail how the process of rack-renting took place and how the zamindars were in a habit of farming out their estates to middlemen who were much less merciful than the zamindars.<sup>60</sup>

The remedy that the Raja suggested for the betterment of the condition of the peasants was to fix "a maximum rent to be paid by each cultivator." Another measure that he proposed was 'to reduce the rents payable by the cultivator to the landlord, by allowing to the latter a proportionate decrease...' <sup>61</sup> The most ideal course according to the Raja,

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59. Sushobhan Sarkar (ed.), Ram Mohan Roy on Indian Economy, Calcutta, 1965, p.9.

60. Ibid., p.11.

61. Asok Sen, "The Bengal Economy and Raja Ram Mohan Roy" in V.C. Joshi (ed.), Ram Mohan Roy and the Process of Modernisation, New Delhi, 1975, pp. 112-113.

was to "extend the benefit of the Permanent Settlement to the cultivators, the farmers and the labourers, in every part of the country, by requiring the proprietor to follow the example of the government in fixing a definite rent to be received from each cultivator, according to the average sum actually collected from him over the years."<sup>62</sup>

The nationalists were not unaware of the other important aspect of the agrarian problem the landlord tenant relationship, which had become an important economic and political issue by the second half of the nineteenth century. The leading elements among them like Dutt and Ranade also lent full support to the tenancy legislation undertaken by the government and vigorously pleaded for the further strengthening of the peasant rights. It may be noted that even though Justice Ranade opposed the Bengal Tenancy legislation, he fully acknowledged the urgent need for remedial legislation to help the tenancy and also justified the government's right to undertake such legislation despite the Regulations of 1793.<sup>63</sup>

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62. Bhabatosh Dutta, op.cit., pp.4-5.

63. According to him, "...there can be no doubt that the Government in its capacity as sovereign, has every right to undertake legislation intended to remove admitted and general grievances. We cannot, however, approve of the direction and spirit of the legislation embodied in the proposals." Quoted in M.G. Ranade, op.cit., pp. 296-197.

But while favouring tenancy legislation as a short term remedy to protect tenants - they opposed the Bengal Tenancy Act, The Deccan Agriculturists Relief Act (1879) and other such acts because on the one hand they did not in any way attempt to eliminate the roots of the problem and on the other, they perpetuated the old pattern of agrarian relations. On the proposed Bengal Tenancy Act Ranade was of the view that the Bill was no more than "tinkering with existing rights in the assumed interests of one class."<sup>64</sup>

The Indian nationalist leadership criticised those features of the Draft Bill (1883) which they thought were inimical to the interests of the tenants. Although they approved of the provisions which (i) extended the right of occupancy on a broad and permanent basis, (ii) made the right of occupancy inheritable and transferable, (iii) placed restrictions on the landlord's rights to enhance rent and (iv) favoured the proposal for payment of compensation to the non-occupancy ryot, in case of ejection, they adopted a sharply critical attitude towards one particular feature of the Tenancy Bill of 1883, i.e., it did nothing to check the spread of sub-infeudation and to protect the under-tenants of the occupancy ryots.<sup>65</sup>

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64. Quoted in Bipan Chandra, REW, op.cit., p. xxxix.

65. Bipan Chandra, Economic Nationalism, op.cit., pp. 446-7.

The Tenancy Bill came under sharp attack from the zamindars and the pro-zamindar lobby and the British Government in an effort to appease them, appointed a Select Committee to make changes in the Bill which would placate them. As expected, the Select Committee which comprised of prominent spokesman of the zamindars, diluted most of the provisions which had a pro-ryot and anti-landlord element in them. The whittling down of fixity of tenure, fair rent and right of free sale, was met with great opposition in the pro-ryot nationalist circles which considered the Tenancy Act a betrayal of the interests of the peasantry. In the end, however, most of the critics of the bill came round to supporting it on grounds that "something was better than nothing."<sup>66</sup>

One of the major criticisms made by Justice Ranade on the proposed Tenancy Act was that it would "result in paralysing private efforts and increasing the sense of dependence on the State as the only regulator of private rights."<sup>67</sup> He was especially critical of the provision that sought to reduce the land in personal possession of the zamindars, and to increase the land under the tenants. In contrast, he praised the Prussian land legislation for enabling old feudal lords to convert a part of their estates

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66. Ibid., p.462.

67. M.G. Ranade, op.cit., p. 281.

into large capitalist farms under their absolute unencumbered possession. As a principle he laid down : "Land gains in every way and loses nothing by being made the absolute property of the owner."<sup>68</sup>

Many of the Indian leaders suggested positive steps for the protection of the tenants. The most popular of these were the grant of legislative protection against undue enhancement of rent, rack-renting, eviction, destruction of tenant rights, etc., and the intention and strengthening of occupancy and other rights.<sup>69</sup>

The other problem to which the early nationalists drew attention to, despite their complex and ambivalent attitude towards it, was the issue of rural indebtedness.<sup>70</sup> Rural indebtedness increased rapidly during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and became one of the most acute problems of the countryside. Consequently, the exorbitant rate of interest led to a major part of peasant's income being absorbed in debt servicing, and in the large scale transfer of land to the non-cultivating moneylenders. The old ryot was, thus, being transformed into a tenant - at - will resulting in further deterioration in agriculture and of the agriculturists.

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68. Ibid., p. 278.

69. Bipan Chandra, Economic Nationalism, op.cit., pp. 483-6.

However, contrary to the British view that it was the high rates of interest charged by the moneylender that was responsible for peasant's indebtedness and poverty, the nationalists believed that the moneylender was a secondary and not the primary cause of the peasant's poverty. Ranade, while condemning the moneylenders usurious dealings and the increasing transfer of land to them, pointed out that under the existing conditions he was a necessary evil, for in the absence of an alternative source of credit, re-enabled the ryot to meet the land revenue demand. It was moreover, the British laws which had transformed him into "an unrelenting, and not infrequently, unscrupulous" individual.<sup>71</sup>

G.V. Joshi, also held similar views and pointed out that the moneylender, as every where else, was but a product of the economic situation that existed and had firm and deep roots.<sup>72</sup>

For this reason the peasant moneylender problem never became a major issue with the early nationalists. On the other hand, the major part of their attack was directed at British economic policies. However, surprisingly enough the nationalists did not even treat the landlord tenant problem

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70. Ibid., p.466.

71. Bipan Chandra, REW, op.cit., p.102.

72. G.V. Joshi, op.cit., p.347.

as a major issue nor did they provide any vigorous leadership to any anti-landlord movement or agitation in favour of the tenant's rights.<sup>73</sup> Neither did the Moderates demand zamindari abolition though they did condemn absentee landlordism vociferously. Ranade, for instance, himself held rather strong views on the subject. "In all countries, property, whether in land or other goods, must gravitate towards... that class which has more intelligence and greater foresight and practices abstinence and must slip from the hands of those who are ignorant, improvident and hopeless to stand on their own resources."<sup>74</sup>

As nation builders the early leaders needed a critique of British colonialism which would give all Indians a common interest in joining together to diminish British control over Indian affairs. However, their dilemma was to find means of addressing the problem of inequality without jeopardizing the fragile unity among the groups which supported the Congress. The landlord tenant problem was one such issue.<sup>75</sup>

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73. Bipan Chandra, *Economic Nationalism*, op.cit., p.412. Perhaps the only exception to this was the no tax campaign launched by Lokmanya Tilak in Maharashtra in 1896.

74. M.G. Ranade, op.cit., pp.325-326.

75. Walter Hauser, "The Indian National Congress and Land Policy in the Twentieth century", in Indian Economic and Social History Review, p.57.



The early nationalists showed a keen insight into the causal relationship between industrial underdevelopment and agricultural backwardness. Their analysis clearly implied that agricultural renovation was vitally dependent on industrial development and vice versa.

Justice Ranade for instance, was of the view that "while the improvement of agriculture and the development of industry should go hand in hand, in the Indian condition, the latter should be given priority." Ranade tried to explain why this priority was a necessity even in the interest of agricultural improvement. According to him, "in India, the landman ratio was so unfavourable that investment in agricultural machinery would be wasteful..." He realised that substantial technical progress in agriculture was not possible without reducing the number engaged in agriculture. Hence, he recommended that development of manufacturing industries to absorb the surplus population of agriculture.<sup>76</sup> Ranade further emphasised that "a purely agricultural economy is stagnant. People stuck to outmoded practices and prejudices. There was a general lack of enterprise and initiative." On the other hand, "commerce and manufacture if possible, are more vital in their bearing

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76. Bipan Chandra, REW, op.cit., pp.375-6.

on the education of the intelligence and skill and enterprise of the nation than agriculture."<sup>77</sup>

Subsequently, R.C. Dutt emphasised this interdependence even more sharply. In Dutt's view "because India remained mainly agricultural, it was too often assumed that the urgent necessity was to improve methods of agricultural production first before there could be any general advance." Dutt realised very clearly that many of the benefits which could be achieved by a reform of the agrarian structure could be nullified if there was not a simultaneous development in other sectors of the economy. Further, Dutt could not visualise any long term increase in agricultural productivity in rurally overpopulated India without greater measure of industrial development. He held that industries could aid the increase of agricultural production, through the expansion of demand for agricultural raw materials and indirectly by providing alternative means of occupation for the rural population.<sup>78</sup>

Thus, the early nationalists were far from considering agricultural backwardness as a sectoral problem; in their view this backwardness could not be overcome except in the perspective of Indian industrial development.

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77. Ibid., p.229.

78. Quoted in P.K. Gopalakrishnan, Growth of Economic Ideas in India., op.cit., pp. 170.

From neither the absentee and rent receiving landlords nor the "oppressed, indolent and lazy" ryots did the early nationalists expect any serious contribution towards the modernisation process. Ranade, who gave serious thought to this problem asserted that "the sure foundation of a society whether economic or political must be laid on a body of free and independent farmers."<sup>79</sup> In his view, therefore, "the establishment of land relations based on individual and independent property" were a necessity for a sound economic organisation. He further advocated the simultaneous development "of high and petty farming with the upper ten thousand of holders of large landed estates and a vast mass of peasant farmers."<sup>80</sup> In his view, the accumulation of capital and enterprise for new methods of production were to be supplied by the bigger proprietors; the existence of a dead level of small farmers all over the country, according to him, was as positive evil.<sup>81</sup>

For Ranade, an egalitarian approach was in conflict with the requirements of economic growth. He argued that in India "there is only a minority of people who monopolise all the elements of strength", while the "majority of population

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79. Bipan Chand, REW, op.cit., p.227.

80. Ibid., pp. 232-3.

81. Ibid., p.233.

are unlettered, improvident, ignorant, disunited, thriftless and poor in means". In these circumstances, it was but natural that "Power must gravitate where there is intelligence and wealth and it is a hopeless struggle to keep a poverty stricken peasantry in possession of the soil and divorce the natural union of capital and land."<sup>82</sup> In a nutshell, in Ranade's view, enterpreneurial role in agriculture was to be played by a new class of capitalist farmers and landlords having large landed estates; it was the function of the state policies to create the necessary preconditions for the purpose. Ranade criticised British agrarian policies on the ground that they thwarted this necessary transformation of Indian agriculture. He held up for approval and imitation the pattern of land ownership that had come into existence in Prussia by the middle of the 19th century.<sup>83</sup>

A perceptive diagnosis of the agrarian problem was also offered by R.C. Dutt who highlighted low productivity in agriculture as the core of the agrarian problem, the contributory causes of which, according to him, were many. Poor soils and unfavourable climate, backward technical and obsolete equipment, etc. It was, however, the agrarian structure or the institutional framework of agricultural

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82. Ibid., p.17.

83. Ibid., p.214.

production which, according to Dutt, constituted a major obstacle to economic development and welfare. This was because the agrarian structure imposed on the peasant exorbitant rents or high interest rates; it deprived the farmer the incentive or opportunity to advance and checked investment. Moreover, it offered him no security. Dutt also indicated that the land legislations in the country in certain provinces led to the prevalence of farms which were too small to be efficient units of cultivation or too large to cultivate intensively). Above all, he highlighted the role of fiscal policy as well as of the system of land revenue assessments which saw to it that nothing more than bare necessities were left to the tillers of the soil. A change of institutional framework, was, hence, a basic prerequisite for development.<sup>84</sup>

At the same time Dutt did not consider the reform of land tenure or other aspects of agrarian structure as a remedy for all the problems of agriculture. He was keenly aware of the influence of general economic conditions on the agrarian structure and of the interaction of multiple factors in the development process. He clearly stated that peasant ownership was no solution to the uneconomic size of the majority of the farms if pressure of population on the

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84. P.C. Joshi, 'Pre-Independence Thinking on Land Reforms', op.cit., pp.448-449.

land caused sub-division of farms to an extreme. The preponderance of uneconomic farms was a symptom of lack of industrial development. Similarly he emphasised that peasant ownership by itself would not promote development unless market and credit conditions were favourable.<sup>85</sup>

G.V. Joshi, like R.C. Dutt and Justice M.G. Ranade, strongly pleaded for a permanent limitation and settlement of State demand upon the land. Rejecting the oft quoted argument that the extension of a permanent settlement involved a large prospective loss of revenue, he strongly believed that "any such financial loss... would be recouped by the State a hundred times over in the assured prosperity of the peasantry as well as in the consequent increased productiveness of other sources of revenue."<sup>86</sup> Further, he held that the State demand even when settled in perpetuity should be moderate.<sup>87</sup>

Apart from reiterating the urgent demand for tenancy legislations partly as a check on unprecedented and excessive sub-letting and partly to assure the position of the undertenants,<sup>88</sup> G.V. Joshi made a strong case in favour of

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85. P.K. Gopalakrishnan, op.cit., pp.154-156.

86. G.V. Joshi, op.cit., p. 363.

87. Ibid., p.365.

88. Ibid., pp. 365-366.

industrial development and cottage industries in order to absorb the surplus population dependent on land.<sup>89</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The contribution of the early nationalists to the evolution of land policy was that they realised that the peasant was a potential force of social regeneration in an agrarian economy like India and were convinced that without raising the status of the Indian peasants, national regeneration was not possible.

They were also the first to initiate a discussion on the peasant question from the bourgeois nationalist standpoint, being very much influenced by the theory of rent propounded by Ricardo, Sismondi, Malthus and Mill. However, the availability of the works of Western economists did not mean that the early nationalists failed to see that some fundamental difference did exist between the assumptions of the classical school of Political Economy and the conditions that obtained in real life, especially in a country like India. On the other hand, what they clearly advocated was an organic integration of theory and policy. Ranade's criticism of the Ricardian School, for example, for its 'universalism' was based on his conviction that under the

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89. Ibid., 368. He especially suggested encouragement to rural industries which were labour intensive.

situation in which India was placed, it was extremely undesirable on the part of Government of India to leave everything to the individual, according to the laissez faire doctrine, which the administration in India had been taught to regard as the scientific truth.<sup>89a</sup> These theories in his view, were derived from the conditions existing in Great Britain and Indian problems and conditions were "widely divergent" from those in Britain and were closer to those in Great Continental Europe.<sup>90</sup>

R.C. Dutt, on the other hand, while writing on the Bengal peasantry categorically stated that he was not in favour of the recognition of the principle of peasant proprietorship on practical grounds, despite the legitimacy bestowed on it by Mill, Sismondi and other political economists. "...it is a question entirely different, as to whether such a system would suit the habits of the people and conditions of life as existing in Bengal."<sup>91</sup>

The early nationalists also strongly held the view that instead of a system where restrictions were placed on all agrarian classes, the new system should be based on "the principle of individual and independent property", that is,

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89a. Bipan Chandra (ed.), Ranade's Economic Writings op.cit., pp.327-328.

90. Ibid., p.345.

91. R.C. Dutt, Peasantry of Bengal, op.cit., pp.5-6.



all land should be made "the absolute property of the owner" whether the landlord or the peasant cultivator.<sup>92</sup>

On the question of peasant proprietorship the early nationalists held widely divergent views. While Justice Ranade advocated a simultaneous development of capitalist farming and peasant farming basing himself upon the experience of land legislation in Prussia, Russia and France. R.C. Dutt while advocating a basic transformation of the institutional structure as a basic pre-requisite of economic development did not consider the reform of land tenure as a remedy for all the problems inflicting Indian agriculture. Dutt, on the other hand, highlighted the influence of other general economic conditions, such as, population pressure, lack of industrial development, market and credit conditions, on the agrarian structure. G.V.Goshi, was different from Dutt and Ranade in the sense that the solution to the agrarian problem, in his view, lay in granting absolute proprietary rights to the peasants and through removal of a class of middlemen which had arisen due to the malpractices of rack-renting, sub-infeudation, etc.

Although the early nationalists did not lay out a comprehensive programme of Zamindari abolition, they

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92. See, for example. Bipan Chandra (ed.), Ranade's Economic Writings, op.cit., p.x/iii. R.C. Dutt, ibid., p.86. Also see, G.V. Joshi, op.cit., p.347.

equivocally advocated the abolition of rent receiving absentee landlords who lacked any enterprise and performed no positive economic function.<sup>93</sup> This class has to be replaced by two agrarian classes which would co-exist:

- a. a large petty peasantry which would be free of encumbrances whether of the State or the landlords; and
- b. a large class of capitalist farmers and landlords who, free from tenancy rights, etc., would provide the enterprise and capital for agricultural development.<sup>94</sup>

Despite a comprehensive and detailed analysis of Indian land problem and their solution to it, the early nationalists have often been criticised for having failed to mobilise the masses and take up the landlord - tenant issue. Although this criticism has a basis, it fails to grasp the limitation inherent in the situation itself. The initial attempts of the early nationalists was to create harmony amongst all classes and communities and this remained the primary goal of the Congress in its first twenty years. As

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93. Bipan Chandra, Economic Nationalism, op.cit., p.491. Moreover, the early nationalists believed that the abolition of any of these rights should be duly compensated.

94. Bipan Chandra (ed.), Ranade's Economic Writings, op.cit., pp.232-3.

a result, the early Congress concentrated its attention on issues which tended to unite most Indians and probably avoided many more vital issues which threatened to further divide the Indians.<sup>95</sup> The backward Indian agriculture was seen as a product of faulty British land policy. For example, the Government of India's claim that it was the usurer who was responsible for the ryot's difficulties, was countered by G.V. Joshi on the grounds that the usurer himself was a product of the economic situation created by the colonial economic policies.<sup>96</sup> The blame for the Indigo Uprising (1860) and the Pabna Riots (1873) was placed on the colonial state from whom Dutt demanded corrective steps.<sup>97</sup> On the other hand, on issues such as zamindari abolition, debt regulations, etc., the early nationalists were rather hesitant, since it would have alienated a major section of the peasantry.

This, however, was not a feature characterising the early nationalists. The later nationalists, as will be seen in the next chapter, in an attempt to forge a broad united front, faced a similar dilemma.

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95. J.R. McLane, "Peasants, Moneylenders and Nationalists at the end of the Nineteenth Century", Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol.I, No.I, July-September 1963, p.73.

96. G.V. Joshi, op.cit., p.347.

97. R.C. Dutt, Peasantry of Bengal, op.cit., pp.5-6.

CHAPTER II

**EMERGENCE OF THE AGRARIAN PROGRAMME:  
A CONFLICT OF PERCEPTIONS**

The 1920's witnessed both the entry of masses and peasants into politics as well as the democratisation of the Congress organisation.<sup>1</sup> This historical development had a major impact on the prevailing ideas on land reforms - especially because the land question had become one of the central issues on the political agenda. Essentially representing the will of the Indian people to freedom, the Congress increasingly came to realise that it must not only win freedom from the foreign yoke - but also from the exploitative economic structure which provided sustenance to such evils as parasitic landlordism, high rents and a regressive Indian agriculture. In fact, the solution of the Indian problem was directly linked with the question of the emancipation of the peasantry. The demand of national freedom had to be integrated with the task of ending peasant exploitation. The Congress had, by the 1920's reached a stage when such integration could not be further delayed. It had to be clarified that along with independence, the destruction of parasitic and wasteful feudal relations was

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1. The Nagpur session made changes in the constitution of the Congress Provincial Congress Committees were reorganised on the basis of linguistic areas. The INC was to be led by a working committee of 15 members. This enabled the Congress to function as a continuous political organisation. Also, Congress membership was thrown open to all men and women of the age of 21 on an annual subscription of 4 annas. Bipan Chandra, Amal Tripathi, Barun De, Freedom Struggle, National Book Trust, New Delhi, Sixth Edition, 1983, pp.134-135.

essential for rehabilitating the national economy and effecting a radical improvement in the condition of the peasant masses.<sup>2</sup> The peasantry had to be assured that the end of foreign rule was not to be a change of political masters only but also a fundamental change in their daily life. It had to be realised and stated that agriculture in India had ceased to be a profitable occupation and the continuation of feudal economy with its burden of rent, debt and illegal exactions had to be ended if an economic collapse was to be avoided.

However, despite the urgency of the situation, the evolution of a comprehensive agrarian programme, aimed at bringing about a fundamental structural transformation of the agrarian sector, was a slow one. The reason for this lay in the organisation of the INC itself.

The Indian National Movement was not a class movement, i.e. a movement reflecting the needs of a particular class, neither was it a movement exclusively created by a leader (Gandhi, for example) - nor was it an expression of

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2. ...the peasantry that cry loudly and pitiously for relief and our programme must deal with their present condition. Real relief can only come by a great change in the land laws and the present system of land tenure. Nehru's Presidential Address in 1929 at Lahore, quoted in Sankar Ghose, Indian National Congress Presidential Speeches : A Selection, Calcutta, 1972, pp.238-237.

disjuncted and sporadic "subaltern" activities.<sup>3</sup> Led by the Congress, it was a mass movement of far reaching proportions comprising of various levels (i.e. social, economic and cultural) and involving within its vortex heterogeneous classes and sections.<sup>4</sup> The political space, in other words, was extremely fluid, which allowed a free play of contending ideological strands.

The point of unity in this diversity was the fact that almost all of the ideologies had a sharp anti-imperialist thrust, based as they were on the material premise that there was a "central or primary contradiction between colonialism and the interests of the Indian people."<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that they were no secondary contradictions i.e., divisions and conflicts within the Indian society itself. The Congress itself was fully aware of it. It was only that the manner in which the Congress had formulated its strategy, the latter was subordinated to the "primary" task of overthrowing imperialism. This process was not entirely an easy task and called for complex "class

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3. Bipan Chandra, Long Dynamics of the Indian National Congress, Presidential Address, Indian History Congress, 46th Session, Amritsar, 27-29, December, 1989, p.36.

4. Ibid., pp.36-37.

5. Ibid., p.39.

adjustments" among the mutually antagonistic social class.<sup>6</sup> This also explains the slow evolution of comprehensive agrarian programme as the nature of commitment to agrarian reforms varied enormously among the disparate groups comprising the INC.

Within the INC, the most committed to radical agrarian reforms, including basic land reforms, were the Congress Socialists, who prior to independence, were comprised of such men as Jayaprakash Narayan, Ram Manohar Lohia and Minoo Masani. Occupying a position apart from this group - but expressing similar concern regarding the need for agrarian reforms was Jawarharlal Nehru. For many of these people, agrarian reforms had a symbolic and extended meaning, they were to be a part of a restructuring of the Indian economic, social and political systems.

There were others in the Congress fold whose beliefs were more traditional and conservative. Such men as Rajendra Prasad were representatives of these groups within the Congress. Even Gandhi, whose influence generally bridged the gap between the radicals and the conservatives, was probably ambivalent on the question of agrarian reforms. This was done, possibly, in an effort to extend the influence of the movement to all classes. "Gandhi's own

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6. Ibid., pp.38-39.



attitude was that no one class should benefit at the expense of another but all should unselfishly work together..."<sup>7</sup>

Due to these pulls and pressures of the various contending ideologies on the agrarian question, the Congress, even by the late 1920's had not established a definitive agrarian policy. The radical initiative on the question of the relationship of the peasantry to the land was captured, atleast temporarily by the Communist Party of India, which in 1930 published a "Draft Programme of Action" calling for "confiscation without compensation of all lands and estates, forests and pastures... and the (their) transference to peasant committees for use by the toiling masses of the peasantry. ...immediate confiscation of all plantations... immediate nationalisation of the whole system of irrigation, complete cancellation of all indebtedness and taxes... the peasantry and agricultural proletariat to engage in all kinds of political demonstrations and collective refusal to pay rents... refusal to pay debts and arrears to the government, the landlords and the moneylenders in any form whatsoever."<sup>8</sup>

The Congress did not respond to this Communist Programme simply because it went against the very basics of the

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7. Quoted in F. Tomasson Jannuzi, Agrarian Crisis in India, The case of Bihar, Pune, 1974, p.3.

8. Ibid., p.11.

Congress strategy. The adoption of such a radical programme would have jeopardized Congress attempts towards a "United Front" of all classes to wage the anti-colonial struggle. A programme of this nature, as is obvious, would have no doubt alienated a large section of the Indian peasantry.

Apart from the growing tide of nationalist sentiments in favour of a reorganisation of Indian agriculture within the national movement, a series of works at the level of both theorising and empirical investigations, which had its beginnings in the late 19th century, were being carried out by scholar administrators and professional economists.<sup>9</sup> The institutional framework of Indian society including land and revenue systems in general, and parasitic landlordism, heavy land revenue demand, increasing debts, rising incidence of tenancy etc., along with the British governments response to these evils in the form of a series of Acts starting from 1885, provided the backdrop for these works.

The period following the 1920's, being a period of intense and hectic political activity, saw the rise and growth of various conflicting ideological trends within the national movement, all of which had their own vision of progressive agriculture as well as ways and means of

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9. See, for example, the works of Dr. Radhakamal Mukherjee, Brij Narain, Sir M.L. Darling, Sir Manilal B. Nanavati and J.J. Anjaria.

transforming this vision into reality. Events were occurring at such a pace that at times the reader is left perplexed and confused. For reasons of clarity, therefore, this chapter has been divided into sections. Although one has attempted to keep the sequence of events within the chronological framework, there will be instances of overlapping. This, in my view, would be due to the different responses which a particular event evoked from different quarters of the national movement.<sup>10</sup>

#### SECTION - I

The early nationalists such as R.C. Dutt, M.G. Ranade, G.V. Joshi etc., as has been argued in the previous chapter, prepared the ground for questioning the very methodology and premises which were implicit in the colonial theory. The colonial theorists while analysing the causes of Indian agricultural backwardness underplayed if not ignored the question of institutional structure. The agricultural problem of India was treated mainly as a problem of population pressure on land, retrograde social institutions

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10. For example, the withdrawal of the Civil Disobedience Movement after the signing of the Gandhi - Irwin Pact in 1931 was seen by some as a tactical retreat which would give the masses "breathing time" to recuperate and gather strength for the next round of struggle. On the other hand, others saw it as a matter of betrayal since none of the peasant demands were fulfilled, neither were the lands confiscated given back to the peasants.

like caste and joint family, the lack of capital and other resistances to scientific farming.

The Moderate nationalists, on the other hand, tried to relate the backwardness of Indian agriculture to the economic basis of the institutional structure vis. the retrograde systems of land relations in India, under which the state had become the super-landlord leaving the landlords and tenants without any incentives or resources for agricultural development. They contributed insights into the interconnections and interactions between different elements of the institutional framework. They also indicated the scope as well as the limits of a land policy in tackling the evils of the institutional framework. In concrete terms, they also showed how lack of industrialisation accentuated basic evils of the agrarian structure including preponderance of tenancy and small sized holdings.

Interest in the land problem and land policy was thus a part of the emerging confrontation between the colonialist and nationalist stand points. The understanding of the relationship between Great Britain and India and of the internal class structure as conditioned by that relationship - this was an intellectual task to which not the early nationalists but their successors addressed themselves under the stimulating influence of new currents and forces in the

socio-political sphere. The idea that the roots of Indian economic backwardness lay in the subordination of the Indian economy to the larger interests of British Empire received further impetus, especially after 1918 under the impact of the anti-imperialist mass movement and the spread of marxist ideas.<sup>11</sup>

The spread of nationalist awakening to newer social classes and strata and especially to rural areas widened the social base of Indian nationalism. It heralded a new epoch challenging the upper class and urban dominance of Indian politics. It initiated a new phase of anti-imperialist mobilisation on a much wider basis including especially the Indian peasantry.

In the Moderate phase, the nationalist leadership waged an ideological struggle against the colonial authorities with the purpose of transforming colonial economic relations. The masses were seen as socially backward and politically passive, though the Moderates hoped to educate them and bring them into active politics. On the other extreme were the Extremists like Tilak, Aurobindo Ghosh, Bipin Chandra Pal and many others who had immense faith in the capacity of the masses to wage an imperialist struggle. The attempt to organise the masses especially the

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11. Bipin Chandra, Long Term Dynamics, op.cit., p.3.

peasantry into an effective anti-colonial force was in response to the constant taunts directed against the Congress organisation of representing merely the microscopic minority of the educated few - the babus - and hence, more or less ignored by the colonial authorities.<sup>12</sup> This process of widening of the social base of Indian nationalism coincided with the period when the consequences of semi-feudal exploitative relations perpetuated and fostered by colonial land policy including the revenue systems, on the pitiable condition of the Indian peasantry was coming to the fore.

To integrate the peasantry into the Indian National movement, the nationalist leadership promoted two integrative principles. Firstly, the notion that the peasantry as a single and cohesive social group, was promoted. This was done primarily with the aim of overcoming the divisions within the peasantry which otherwise could have threatened and weakened the unity of the nationalist struggle against imperialism. Also, attempt

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12. Lord Dufferin repeatedly characterised the emerging nationalist leadership as being a "microscopic minority", and indifferent and even hostile to the true interest of the masses. See "Lord Dufferin and the Character of the Indian Nationalist leadership" in Bipan Chandra, *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India*, op.cit., p.275.

was made to bring the small and ruined landlords within the fold of the Indian National movement:<sup>13</sup>

The second integrative principle was aimed at making the peasants feel part of the nation if not the nation itself. It was for this reason that peasant interests predominated in the entire national movement.<sup>14</sup> It was also for this reason that the Congress sought to keep its distance from any separate organisation of Kisans. At the Haripura Session of the Congress in 1938, it was asserted :

The Congress has already fully recognised the rights of Kisans to "organise themselves in peasant unions. Nevertheless it must be remembered that the Congress itself is in the main a kisan organisation..." While fully recognising the right of the kisans to organise kisan sabhas, the Congress cannot associate itself with any activities which are incompatible with the basic principles of the Congress and will not countenance any of the activities of those Congressmen who as members of the Kisan Sabhas help in creating an atmosphere hostile to Congress principles and policy. The Congress, therefore, calls upon provincial

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13. 'Peasantry and National Integration in Contemporary India', in ibid., p.343.

14. Ibid., pp.343-344.

Congress Committees to bear the above in mind and in pursuance of it to take suitable action wherever called for".<sup>15</sup>

This resolution generated a great deal of controversy within the Congress ranks and other organisations, which would be dealt in great detail elsewhere. Suffice it to say that this resolution coincided with the process of drifting apart of the Kisan organisations and unions from the mainstream of the national movement.<sup>16</sup>

Hence, the inter-war period was a period which witnessed attempts on the part of the nationalist leadership towards reactivising the peasantry into a powerful and an effective anti-imperialist force. Although, as has already been mentioned earlier - previous attempts had been made by the Extremists within the Congress - it was in the Gandhian phase that a better understanding and of the masses and their organisation was evolved. "It was above all Gandhi who... reached out to the masses, mobilised them on the basis of their own political activity, that is recognised that a mass movement can arise and develop and move towards

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15. AICC Papers, File No. G-6 (KW-1)/1938, p.113.

16. Sandeep Bhushan, The Politics of the Bihar Socialist Party, 1934-1942, M.Phil Dissertation, J.N.U., 1990, pp.89-90.



success only when the masses are the subjects and not objects of politics.<sup>17</sup>

The first major task which Gandhi took up in India after his return from South Africa was the work in Champaran, against indigo planters and the system they perpetuated. On the one hand, this occupation was a source of great profit to the European planters, it was equally a source of oppression and untold misery to the tenantry who made several abortive attempts to get rid of it.<sup>18</sup>

When Gandhi took upon himself to free the tenancy of the exploitative system imposed upon them, the Home Rule Agitation was at its height in India. According to Gandhi, the work which was being done in Champaran was the work which would be able to establish Home Rule. At that point of time the country perhaps did not realise the importance of the work.

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17. Bipan Chandra, Long Term Dynamics of the INC, p. 31. Although the extremist leaders like Tilak, Aurobindo Ghosh etc. recognised the potential of the role of the masses in the anti-imperialist struggle, they could never reach out to them. Tilak, for one most vigorously took up the economic demands of the peasantry. But being conscious of the need for national unity, he failed to see that the peasantry felt the burden of British imperialism primarily through the agency of the landlords and moneylenders. Therefore, his entire popular appeal was based on a purely national and cultural basis. See 'Tilak' in Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India, op.cit., pp.368-370.

18. Rajendra Prasad, Gandhi and Bihar, Hind Kitab Ltd., Bombay, 1949.

The end result of efforts made by Gandhi and other Congress Workers<sup>19</sup> was the setting up of the Champaran Agrarian Committee which had Gandhi as one of the members. The Report that was submitted to the government on 4th October 1917 had the following as its main recommendations:

- i. The tinkathia system, whether for growing indigo or any other crop, should be completely abolished;
- ii. If any agreement be executed for growing indigo it should be done on following grounds;
  - a. The agreement should be voluntary;
  - b. Its terms should not exceed 3 years;
  - c. The selection of field in which indigo was to be grown should rest with the ryots;
  - d. The rate of sale of indigo plants should be settled by ryots according to their choice;
- iii. Labour should be voluntary;
- iv. Issue of receipt for payment of each kist, etc.<sup>20</sup>

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19. Gandhi's arrival in Bihar and his activities amongst the indigo cultivators inspired many young lawyers to join the national movement. Prominent among them were Rajendra Prasad, Anugraha Narayan Singh, Mazhar-ul-Haq, Shri K.B. Sahay etc. See, Anugraha Narayan Singh, Mere Sansmaran, Kusum Prakashan, Patna, 1942, pp.10-12.

20. Rajendra Prasad, Satyagraha in Champaran - Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1949, pp. 179-180.

These recommendations of the Committee led to the passage of the Champaran Agrarian Act on the 29th of November, 1917, "...the objects of which have been described in the preamble as firstly, the settlement and determination of certain disputes which have arisen in the district of Champaran between landlords and tenants regarding certain obligations of the said tenants and secondly, to establish a system of penalties for the taking of abwab similar to the penalties which, under Section 58, of the Bengal Tenancy Act can be imposed upon a landlord who refuses or neglects to give a legal receipt for rent..."<sup>21</sup>

Another major achievement of the Champaran movement of far reaching proportions was the success with which Gandhi used the non-violent technique to extract concessions for the peasants. Before Gandhi set his foot in Champaran the tenantry of the district had at times carried on strong agitation and had sometimes attempted non-cooperation also. But the foundation of that agitation and non-cooperation was not based on non-violence. The Government and the planters, who had vast resources which they used effectively always succeeded in suppressing their agitation.<sup>22</sup>

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21. Ibid., p.190.

22. Ibid., p.viii.

Realising the ineffectiveness of violent techniques in such a situation, Gandhi instructed the Congress Workers that:<sup>23</sup>

The ryots should be instructed definitely not to use violence whether regarding their own grievances or regarding imprisonment of those who may come to assist them. But they can be and should be told that where they know they are being unjustly treated, i.e., required to plant indigo when they need not, rather than go to law, they should simply refuse to plant indigo and if for so they are imprisoned, they should suffer imprisonment.

For Gandhi, non-violence was a matter of principle, an article of faith, though he asked the people and the national movement to accept it as a matter of policy and on grounds of practical necessity.<sup>24</sup> His faith in non-violence as an effective weapon to combat British imperialism is most striking in an article published in *Young India* of 11th August, 1920:<sup>25</sup>

When there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advice violence. But there was no

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23. M.K. Gandhi, Collected Works, Vol. XXIII, Navjivan Trust, Ahmedabad, 1966, p.370.

24. For example, Hardiman argues in the case of Gujarat that non-violence was not in itself a feature of rich peasant politics. On the other hand, non-violence was a tactic preferred by the patidars who otherwise had no ideological commitment to it and often used violence on a large scale to settle land disputes and to cause the lower castes into submission. See, David Hardiman, Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat, Kheda District, 1917-34, OUP, 1981, pp. 253-254.

cowardice. Non-violence required more bravery than violence and forgiveness is more manly than punishment.

From a very practical standpoint, non-violent forms of struggle enabled the participation of the mass of the people which could not the Government, he vigourously opposed any adopted. Non-violence as a form of struggle and political behaviour was also linked to the nature of the colonial state - its semi-hegemonic and semi-democratic character. By placing the enemy morally in the wrong it exposed the coercive basis of colonial state power. In fact, in certain situations, the authorities were left in a tight spot.<sup>26</sup>

The Gandhian era, thus, imparted to the hitherto upper class dominated Indian nationalism a down to earth orientation, a deep consciousness of the chasm between the educated, nationalist elite and the illiterate peasant masses and a practical programme for rousing them from their age old passivity into active participation in the national movement. Although, as yet, the agrarian question had not come to the fore since the nationalists were still grappling

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25. Quoted in Louis Fischer, The Life of Mahatma Gandhi, Granada, 1951, p.72.

26. Sucheta Mahajan, 'British policy, Nationalist Strategy and Popular National Upsurge, 1945-6', in A.K. Gupta (ed.), Myth and Reality, Struggle for Freedom in India, 1945-47, Manohar, Delhi, 1987, pp.57-63.

with developing an anti-imperialist programme which would mobilise all sections of Indian Society around it, with the entry of Gandhi on the Indian political scene, no tax movements of the peasantry against the Government became <sup>one</sup> ~~the~~ of the most important forms of peasant participation. According to Gandhi, the question was one of principles, not merely of paying the land revenue:<sup>27</sup>

We pay because we are afraid of the government; it is this fear we wish to get rid of... The idea that I want to put into you is that there is no disloyalty in disobeying an unjust order of the government, rather it is the purest loyalty to do so...

On the other hand, the policy advocated by Gandhi on the landlord tenant problem was fundamentally different from the policy the Congress adopted on the problem of land revenue and Government taxes. While his no-tax campaigns against the British was done with the primary aim of causing embarrassment to attempt by Congressmen and others to encourage campaigns which militated against the interests of native zamindars. He categorically stated in an article in Young India (1921) under the title 'Zamindars and Ryots', that the INC did not contemplate at any stage "to deprive the zamindars of their rent"; he further explained that "the kisan movement must be confined to the improvement of the

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27. M.K. Gandhi, Speech at Dantali, 17.4.1918, in Collected Works, Vol. XIV, pp. 352-354.

status of the kisans and betterment of relations between the zamindars and the Ryots".<sup>28</sup> He depreciated all attempts to create discord between landlords and tenants and advised the tenants "to suffer rather than fight, for they had to join all forces for fighting against the most powerful zamindar, namely the Government".<sup>29</sup> Gandhi's ideas on this question were over a time to undergo substantial change in the radical direction.

However, it should not be taken to believe that Gandhi's way of thinking was accepted by one and all without any protest. After all, to try and convince oneself of kisan-zaminadar amity, on the one hand, must have been a bitter pill to swallow especially when it was widely known that the greatest ill inflicting Indian agriculture at that point of time was parasitic landlordism and other evils associated with it. On the other hand, to convince the peasantry who actually bore the brunt of this regressive system, would have been a difficult task. Nehru, for example, was convinced that Swaraj would have meaning for the masses not as a vague and undefined ideal but only in terms of freedom from the immediate burdens which crushed

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28. F.T. Jannuzi, op.cit., p.7. Also see, P.C. Joshi, "Developmental Perspectives in India: Some Reflections on Gandhi and Nehru", in B.R. Nanda and V.C. Joshi (eds.), Essays in Modern Indian History, Vikas, Delhi, 1972.

29. M.K. Gandhi, Collected Works., Vol.XIX, p. 352.

them and a socio-economic system under which they would have an opportunity to achieve social and economic progress.<sup>30</sup>

For the same reason, Nehru made concrete references to the question of Zamindari Abolition as early as in 1928 at the U.P. Political Conference, where he categorically stated:<sup>31</sup>

We in the province have to face the Zamindar and Kisan Problem. To our misfortune we have zamindars everywhere and like a blight they have prevented all healthy growth... We must, therefore, face this problem of landlordism, and if we face it what can we do with it, except to abolish it? There is no half way house...

Gandhi defended his attitude not only on tactical grounds but on the basis of a wider approach and philosophy of 'trusteeship'. He did not defend or justify the system of landlordism. In fact, he often asserted that "land and property is his who will work it". His basic difference with those who wanted the complete elimination of the system of landlordism by confiscation of land from the landlords was that the same objective could be achieved by an appeal to zamindars to divest themselves voluntarily of exclusive -

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30. Dorothy Norman, Nehru, the first sixty years, Vol.1, OUP, 1965, p.159.

31. Though the abolition of the zamindari system was never a part of the Congress programme till 1945, individual leaders occasionally referred to it. Quoted in H.D. Malviya, Land Reforms in India, Economic and Political Research Deptt., AICC, New Delhi, 1955, pp.20-21.



land ownership and declare themselves in possession of land as trustees of the peasants.<sup>32</sup> Gandhi also added that if the trustees did not accept the demands of the peasantry through a moral appeal, the peasants had to force their hands through satyagraha.

Nehru was quick to protest. At the Lahore Congress in 1929, he held that real relief to the peasantry can only come by a great change in the land laws and the basis of the present system of land. Concerning trusteeship, he strongly held the view:<sup>33</sup>

...Paternalism in industry or land is but a form of charity with all its sting and its utter incapacity to rule out the evil. The new theory of trusteeship, which some advocate, is equally barren. For trusteeship means that the power for good or evil remains with the self appointed trustee, and he may exercise it as he wills. The sole trusteeship that can be fair is the trusteeship of the nation and not an individual or a group.

However, this should not be taken to believe that Gandhi along with the Congress functioned within this framework throughout the national movement. The political mood was such that both continued to evolve in a radical direction throughout the period under study. Increasingly

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32. P.C. Joshi, "Pre-Independence Thinking on Agrarian Policy", in Economic and Political Weekly, op.cit., pp.252-253.

33. Sankar Ghose, op.cit., pp.237-238.

freedom was defined in socio-economic terms which went far beyond mere absence of foreign rule.

The Congress from its very inception had a pro-poor orientation, despite many allegations directed at it that it furthered the class interests of certain dominant sections of the Indian society.<sup>34</sup> This trend was further strengthened in the 1920's and the 1930's with the coming of Gandhi and the growth of a powerful left. This radicalisation of the Congress found full reflection in the resolutions at Faizpur, Lucknow and Karachi and a partial reflection in the economic and social reforms of the Congress Ministries, both of which will be discussed in detail elsewhere.

On the other hand, Gandhi's entire constructive programme was directed against the poverty of the rural and urban masses. In 1933, he agreed with Nehru that "without a material revision of vested interests the condition of the masses can never improve", and that "we should range

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34. Sumeet Sarkar, "Logic of Gandhian Nationalism: Civil Disobedience and the Gandhi-Irwin Pact (1930-31), in The Indian Historical Review, Vol. III, No.1, July 1976, pp.120-1, 146. For a critique of this view, see Aditya Mukherjee, "The Indian Capitalist Class : Aspects of its Economic, Political and Ideological Development in the Colonial Period," During 1927-47," in R. Thapar and S. Bhattacharya (ed.) Situating Indian History, OUP, 1986, pp.258-260.

ourselves with the progressive forces of the world."<sup>35</sup> At the end of 1937 he said :

Real socialism has been handed down to us by our ancestors who taught: "All lands belonged to Gopal, where there is the boundary line. Man is the maker of the line and he can, therefore, unmake it". Gopal literally means shepherd; it also means God. In modern language it means the State, i.e., the people...<sup>36</sup>

As late as 1942, Gandhi was talking about confiscation of land by the peasantry from the landlords and that too without compensation.<sup>37</sup>

However, till the very end the Congress, unlike the other political organisations, did not lose sight of achieving its primary objective, that of complete elimination and extinction of British imperialism and the exploitative socio-economic structure it perpetuated. There were several instances when a purely economic movement was transformed into a political one.

However, in a sense this dichotomy was inherent in the logic of Indian nationalism at that point of

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35. Quoted in Bipan Chandra, Long Term Dynamics of the INC, p.7.

36. M.K. Gandhi, Collected Works, Vol.64, p.192.

37. Louis Fischer, op.cit., p.307.

time, when colonialism was the primary enemy facing Indian society, and was not merely one among many exploiters.<sup>38</sup> To treat colonialism or the colonial state as merely one among the many surplus appropriators operating in Indian agriculture would mean missing out the structural position occupied by colonialism. This has probably been the failure of the traditional left historiography. The latter while most often recognising in theory that colonialism was the principal contradiction of Indian society, sometimes ignore this understanding in their concrete analysis.<sup>39</sup>

## SECTION II

The period 1931 to 1937 witnessed a palatable radicalisation of the Congress agrarian programme which reflected a changed historical situation occurring from the phenomenal increase in the workers and especially peasant activity. The development in the late 1920's and 1930's of

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38. In the course of the peasant movement in U.P. in the 1920's, Gandhi and Nehru, and the Oudh and U.P. Kisan sabhas preached anti-landlordism and restraint in the same breath. In volatile situations they interfered to pacify the peasants and were critical of peasant excesses. Even Baba Ramchandra, the most well known peasant leader at this juncture preached zamindar - kisan amity at the height of peasant fury. See Majid. H. Siddiqui, Agrarian unrest in Northern India, U.P., 1918-1922, Vikas, 1978.

39. For a more detailed discussion, See Mridula Mukherjee, Peasants, Peasant Movements and the Indian National Movement, Mimeo, Centre for Historical Studies, J.N.U., 1987.

a powerful left wing group also contributed to a general radicalisation of the national movement. With the emergence of these forces on the political scene, the goal of political independence acquired a clearer and sharper social and economic content, although the need for it was felt in the early 1920's. Socialist ideas acquired roots in the Indian soil with Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose as its staunchest exponents. The Communist Party of India, on the other hand, founded in 1925 initially called upon all its members "to enroll themselves as members of the Congress, ...cooperate with all other radical nationalists, and make an effort to transform the Congress into a more radical mass based organisation."<sup>40</sup>

The 'main form of political work by early Communists was to organise peasant and workers' parties and work through them. 1928 saw the emergence of an All India Workers' and Peasants' Parties (WPP). The objective of the WPP's, initially was to work within the Congress and independently organise the worker's and peasants' in organisations to enable first the achievement of complete independence and ultimately of socialism.<sup>41</sup> As a result of

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40. Quoted in Bipan Chandra, "The Rise of the Left Wing", in Bipan Chandra, et.al., India's Struggle for Independence, 1857-1947, op.cit., pp.301-302.

41. See Aditya Mukherjee, "The Workers' and Peasant Parties, 1926-1930: An Aspect of Communism in India", in Bipan Chandra (ed.), The Indian Left: Critical Appraisals, New Delhi, 1983.

increasing influence of the Left in the Indian National Movement, politically and ideologically. Indian nationalism was given a powerful push "towards vital social changes".<sup>42</sup>

All this left an impact on the character of the Congress all over India. This changed character of the Congress found reflection for the first time in the resolution on the Fundamental Rights and Duties at Karachi Congress in 1931. This resolution also included, for the first time, the economic programme of the INC:

"Political Freedom must include real economic freedom of the starving millions".<sup>43</sup>

This was the object with which the resolution was passed. As far as agriculture was concerned, three broad issues were outlined :

- i. Acceptance of the right to private property;
- ii. relief of Agricultural indebtedness and control of usury; and
- iii. reform of the system of land tenure and land revenue.<sup>44</sup>

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42. Bipan Chandra, et.al., op.cit., p.309.

43. AICC Papers, File No. G-87/1931, p.17.

44. ibid., pp.17-18.

So far as the relief of agricultural indebtedness was concerned, the way in which this had to be done was not clear. The passage of the Rural Insolvency Act on the lines suggested in the reports of the Royal Commission of Agriculture, was suggested. Besides that no other concrete step was suggested.<sup>45</sup>

The reform in the system of land tenure and revenue was to be brought about in several ways. This was to be done through :

- i. exemption of rent in case of uneconomic holdings;
- ii. Substantial reduction of rent and revenue in case of other small estates;
- iii. Adequate relief to holders of small estates affected by exemption or reduction of rent; and
- iv. imposition of a graded tax on net incomes from land above a reasonable minimum.<sup>46</sup>

Attention was also drawn to the evil of subdivision and fragmentation of agricultural holdings in the country. Any attempt to relieve the cultivator in this connection would be of no avail unless it was accompanied by a measure

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45. Ibid., p.18.

46. AICC Papers, File No. P11/1938, pp.329-380.

calculated to increase the size of the holding to a somewhat larger level, so that economic and profitable cultivation might be possible i.e. measures for the prevention of further fragmentation, on the one hand, and consolidation, on the other, was called for, if the peasantry was to enjoy the benefits of the proposed relief. Such measures, it was realised, were fraught with great difficulties and could result in some unemployment, for which adequate provisions were to be made <sup>47</sup>

So far as the fourth measure was concerned, it meant that the incomes from agriculture should be brought under the operation of income tax with relevant changes. This measure, which had been suggested by various economists created a general furore amongst the zamindars of Bengal.<sup>48</sup>

Again, although some of these measures proposed were intended to bring about a better distribution of national wealth, the fundamental basis of modern capitalistic organisation of society, namely the right to private property was accepted. Therefore, they held that ".... while the impetus to production implied in the exclusive right to enjoy the fruits is, therefore, retained, efforts will be made to minimise the undesirable consequences of

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47. AICC Papers, File No. G-87/1931, pp.18-19.

48. Ibid.



such a system, by various measures of control, relief, taxation and especially to distribute the total wealth more equitably." In this general aim, the Congress programme did not differ materially from the policy of most modern countries, which though based on the capitalistic form of organisation, did attempt in various ways to remove the anomalies of undue concentration.<sup>49</sup>

These resolutions were duly confirmed by the All India Congress Committee (henceforth AICC), in its meeting held in Bombay in August 1931.

The Lucknow Congress in April 1936 declared that:<sup>50</sup>

This Congress is of the opinion that the most important and urgent problem of the country is the appalling poverty, unemployment & indebtedness of the peasantry fundamentally due to the antiquated & repressive land tenure and revenue systems and intensified in recent years by the great slump in prices of agricultural produce. The final solution of the problem inevitably involves the removal of British imperialistic exploitation, a thorough change of the land tenure & revenue systems and a recognition by the state of its duty to provide work for the rural unemployed masses. In view, however of the fact that agrarian conditions and land tenure and revenue systems differ in the various provinces, it is desirable to consult the Provincial Congress Committees and also such peasant organisations as the Working Committee thinks fit in the drawing up of a full all-India agrarian programme, as well as a programme for each province.

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49. Ibid., p.19. Even socialist countries have largely retained private property in land though extreme concentration and landlordism was done away with.

50. Home Political 36.1, p.6.

Keeping in view these issues, the Congress called upon each Provincial Congress Committee to make recommendations with particular regard to :

- i. Freedom of organisation of agricultural labourers and peasant.
- ii. Safeguarding the interests of the peasants where there were intermediaries between the state and themselves.
- iii. Just and fair relief of agricultural indebtedness, including arrears of rent & revenue.
- iv. Emancipation of peasants from feudal and semi-feudal levies.
- v. Substantial reduction in rent & revenue.
- vi. A just allotment of state expenditure for social, economic and cultural amenities of the villages.
- vii. Freedom from oppression and harassment at the hands of Government officials & landlords.
- viii. Fostering of industries for relieving rural unemployment.<sup>51</sup>

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51. Ibid., pp.5-6.

At this juncture, it would be interesting to point out Nehru's views as the President of this session on agrarian reforms especially since it reflects his leftist leanings which were at its height in this period. He put his commitment to socialism in clear, unequivocal and passionate words in his Presidential Address:<sup>52</sup>

I am convinced that the only key to the solution of the world's problems and India's problems lies in socialism, and when I use this word I do so not in a vague humanitarian way but in the scientific, economic sense... I see no way of ending the poverty, the vast unemployment, the degradation, and the subjection of Indian people, except through socialism. That involves vast and revolutionary changes in our political & social structure... That means the ending of private property, except in a restricted sense, and the replacement of the present profit system by a higher ideal of cooperative service.

Although these ideas were never really incorporated in the Congress agrarian programme, it was a step forward in the right direction. Also, Nehru as the first Prime Minister of independent India did experiment with the idea of organising agriculture on cooperative lines. That it failed is another story altogether.<sup>53</sup>

The Faizpur Session of the Congress in December 1936, saw the evolution of a comprehensive agrarian programme in

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52. Nehru, Selected Works, Vol.VII, pp.190-191.

53. Wolf Ladjinsky, "Agrarian Reform in India" in Louis.J. Walinsky (ed.), Agrarian Reforms: An Unfinished Business, OUP, 1977.

which almost all maladies inflicting Indian agriculture were dealt with. Apart from reiterating its objective of eliminating British imperialistic exploitation and a radical change in the repressive and antiquated land tenure and revenue systems, it suggested certain other steps:

- i. Rent and revenue should be readjusted having regard to present conditions and there should be substantial reduction in both.
- ii. Uneconomic holdings should be exempted from rent or land tax.
- iii. Agricultural incomes should be assessed to income tax like all other incomes, on a progressive scale, subject to a prescribed minimum.
- iv. Canal and other irrigation rates should be substantially lowered.
- v. All feudal dues and levies and forced labour should be abolished, and demands other than rent should be made illegal.
- vi. Fixity of tenure with heritable rights along with the right to build houses & plant trees should be provided for all tenants.
- vii. An effort should be made to introduce cooperative farming.

- viii. The crushing burden of rural debt should be removed. Special tribunals should be appointed to inquire into this and all debts, which are unconscionable or beyond the capacity of the peasants to pay should be liquidated. Meanwhile, a moratorium should be declared & steps should be taken to provide cheap credit facilities.
- ix. Arrears of rent for previous years should generally be wiped out.
- x. Common pasture lands should be provided, and the rights of the people in tanks, wells, ponds, forests and the like recognised, and on encroachment none of these rights should be permitted.
- xi. Arrears of rents should be recoverable in the same manner as civil debts and not by ejection.
- xii. There should be statutory provision for securing a living wage and suitable working conditions for agricultural labourers.
- xiii. Peasant unions should be recognised.<sup>54</sup>

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54. AICC Papers, File No. G-85(ii)/1936, pp.117-118.

The Faizpur session of December 1936 had been held in the midst of campaigning for the elections, though no formal decision had yet been taken on the question of council entry.<sup>55</sup> At this point a brief discussion on the question of council entry would be interesting.

The Parliamentary Committee Report on constitutional reform released in 1934 indicated that the British government was determined to act on its own initiative and no amount of opposition from within India would make it change its proposals. Thus it was that by 1935 when the Government of India Act was announced there was considerable confusion in the Congress policy.<sup>56</sup> The fact that they would oppose the Act (there was much to be opposed) was clear from the very beginning. The differences arose over the nature of opposition.

It was agreed that Congress candidates would stand for election in the legislatures on a Congress mandate only - there still remained the thorny problem of office acceptance and this proved to be the most thorny and controversial issue. With the "official" Congress leaders urging the advantages of office acceptance as a means to working the

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55. Visalakshi Menon, National Movement, Congress Ministries and Imperial Policy, U.P. 1937-39, M.Phil Dissertation, J.N.U., 1981, p.17.

56. Ibid., pp.17-19.

constitution for the benefit of the masses and the Socialists vehemently denouncing this proposal as reactionary & calling for its total rejection created quite a confusion in the Congress circles.<sup>57</sup>

This confusion was clearly evident in the Lucknow session of the INC. It was agreed, however despite the opposition that elections would be contested as a part of a general policy of "Wrecking the Act" and advancing the national cause. Gandhi remarked in August 1938.

The Congress has entered upon office not to work the Act in the manner expected by the framers but to hasten the day of substituting it by a genuine Act of India's own coining.<sup>58</sup>

The Election Manifesto released reiterated the position taken by the Congress at the Karachi session in 1931, that "it stands for the system of land tenure, revenue and rent and an equitable adjustment of the burden on agricultural land; giving immediate relief to the smaller peasantry by a substantial reduction of agricultural rent and revenue paid by them exempting uneconomic holdings from payment of rent and revenue".<sup>59</sup>

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57. Sandeep Bhushan, op.cit., pp.68-70.

58. Gandhi, Collected Works, Vol.69, p.226.

59. AICC Papers, File p11/1938, pp.331-332.

The Election results, declared in January 1937, showed that the Congress had fared rather well and was in a position to form ministries in seven provinces out of eleven provinces.

In February 1937, the resolutions passed by the Working Committee in Wardha suggested that the Congress members should push forward the programme enunciated in the Election Manifesto and the Congress agrarian programmes. In particular, they were asked to work towards:

- i. Substantial reduction in rent and revenue.
- ii. Assessment of income tax on a progressive scale on agricultural incomes subject to a prescribed minimum.
- iii. Fixity of tenure.
- iv. Relief from the burden of rural debt and arrears of rent and revenue.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, it was with considerable hope of annulling the 1935 Act and successfully implementing its other programmes, that the Congress entered the legislatures in July 1937.

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60. Ibid.



### SECTION III

The period 1937 to 1939 represents one of the most complex and interesting conjunctures in nationalist politics. It was during this period that the Congress was a protest movement as well as the local administration in provinces. This was also the period when the Congress claims to hegemony was seriously challenged by various political groups and sections such as the kisan sabha which along with some trade union activists emerged as a left wing opposition to the Congress ministries in some provinces and challenged the notion that the Congress championed the cause of the peasantry.<sup>61</sup>

There were the three facets to the Ministry's activity once it entered the legislatures. Firstly, they attempted to wreck the legislature, thus showing up the inadequacy of a partial transfer of power. Another was to generate public enthusiasm by passing such legislations as would involve the masses. Finally, it was hoped that by being receptive to the demands of the people, the Congress ministries would be able to show up the difference between alien government which functioned by excluding the needs and demands of the people and a nationalist regime.<sup>62</sup>

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61. Sandeep Bhushan, op.cit., pp.74-123.

62. Bipan Chandra, Long Term Dynamics, op.cit., pp.22-23.

In view of the fact that the INC was committed through its election manifesto, to the abolition of intermediaries between the peasant and the state, it found it necessary to accelerate the pace of this removal in a systematic and planned manner to render their reappearance simply impossible. This was especially in view of the fact that these intermediaries were found under various guises and names in every part of the country, including the Ryotwari provinces.<sup>63</sup>

It was also categorically stated that this abolition of intermediaries was meant merely as a stepping stone for a planned agricultural economy.<sup>64</sup>

Keeping this in mind, the AICC directed the Working Committee to appoint a committee of such persons who could take a keen interest in the matter. Also, the AICC decided that the provincial Congress Committees should be asked to send their schemes for the abolition of the Zamindari system.

The Election Manifesto, however, categorically stated that:

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63. AICC Papers, File No. 6/1933, pp.11-12.

64. Ibid., p.29.

- i. the abolition of intermediaries should stop short of abolishing tenants-in-chief.<sup>65</sup>
- ii. the right of such intermediaries should be acquired on payment of equitable compensation.<sup>66</sup>

Compensation was to be paid on the following considerations :

- i. The ensuring of a reasonable livelihood to the expropriated intermediaries.
- ii. The amount of increased income that they have acquired in the past.
- iii. The ability of the State to shoulder the financial burden.<sup>67</sup>

Apart from the fact that the peasantry in India urgently needed some specific economic relief, the general economic welfare of the masses also required immediate

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65. These were fixed rate tenants who used to sublet their lands. Apart from the fact that these subleases were always on a temporary basis and had never been recognised as conferring any sort of occupancy rights on the sublessee, any decision to oust the tenant in chief and put the sub-lessee in his place would have caused tremendous distress to the sub-tenants because the tenants-in-chief would have then made every effort to throw them out. ibid., p.7.

66. Ibid., p.6.

67. Ibid., pp.25-27.

attention. The fundamental problem, it was felt, was the need to increase the purchasing power of the people, especially the peasantry. The solution of that problem was conditional upon the transfer of the ownership of land from the non-producing rent receiver to the cultivator. However, pending that radical change, it was suggested, that there should be a substantial reduction in rent.<sup>68</sup>

However, it soon became apparent that Ministerial activity had its limitations. This fact becomes clearer, when one looks at the actual implementation of the Congress agrarian programme in the provinces where they had been asked to form the ministries.

In Bihar, the Tenancy Amendment Bill was passed in 1937, which aimed at reduction of high rents, prevention of extortion of abwabs and non-grant of receipts.

In 1938, the Restoration of Bakasht lands and reduction of Arrears of Rent Bill was passed. While the landlords succeeded in their demand for speedy disposal of rent suits, power to distrain crops and sell the tenant holding for arrears, the concession to tenants in terms of rent reduction and Bakasht legislation were hemmed in by conditions. This greatly reduced the effectiveness of the

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68. In a memorandum submitted by M.N. Roy, ibid., File No. 17/1938, p.145.

legislation as it resulted in an expensive and protracted legislation.<sup>69</sup>

In the United Provinces, the situation was seemingly different. In order to maintain the anti-imperialist front, the Congress members did invite the zamindars to cooperate, but when the zamindars opposed the Congress suggestions, they were left to fend for themselves.<sup>70</sup>

In 1938, U.P. Tenancy Bill and the U.P. Agricultural produce Markets Bill was passed. However, pursuing its declared policy on the agrarian front was not so easy. Provisions of the tenancy Bill revealed that it was only certain sections of the peasantry that stood to gain by it. The interests of the sub-tenants and agricultural labourers had been overlooked. Thus, the claims of the INC organisation to represent all sections of the peasantry was delimited and narrowed in the context of electoral politics and legislative activity.<sup>71</sup>

Also, there were no tangible results on the debt front. Finally a Bill entitled the U.P. Agricultural and Workmen Redemption Bill was introduced in April 1939. This

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69. Vinita Damodaran, Office Acceptance and some Aspects of Congress Ministry in Bihar, 1937-39, M.Phil Dissertation, J.N.U., 1981, pp.176-181.

70. Visalakshi Menon, op.cit., p.75.

71. Ibid., pp.77-82.

Bill was able to tackle the problem of debt only partially.<sup>72</sup>

Again in July 1939, the Regulation of Agricultural Credit Bill and the Moneylender's Bill was enacted. The latter was aimed at controlling money-lending by providing for its registration and licensing of professional money-lenders, for the cancellation of licence on grounds of fraud etc. and giving only to duly licensed moneylenders access to courts for the recovery of their debts.

However, the implementation of this bill was only partially successful. Moneylenders, on the whole, were pro-congress. The Congress, in order to circumvent any blocking of the Tenancy Bill, tried to woo them by going slow on the debt regulation.<sup>73</sup>

On the other hand, the Congress Ministry in Orissa came to respond to the pre-dominant agrarian tensions in the rural areas by initiating a distinct agrarian programme which was quite popular in nature. This attempt by the

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72. The provisions of this bill related to the debt which had been incurred before January 1, 1938 and provided for the reduction in the rate of interest. However, this bill did not comprehend the paying capacity of the debtor. Ibid., p.84.

73. Ibid., pp.85-86.

Ministry was in tune with the agrarian programme envisaged by Nehru in 1937.<sup>74</sup>

Between 1937 and 1938, three bills were passed. The Madras Estates Land (Orissa Amendment Act) Bill passed in 1937 remained a controversial issue till the Ministry resignation despite the Ministry's vigorous campaign for securing assent to the bill.<sup>75</sup>

IN 1937, the Orissa Tenancy (Amendment) Bill was introduced which also created considerable furor amongst the landowning classes. However, the bill was passed in May 1938 rejecting the amendment proposed by the opposition that "temporary settled estates be excluded from the operation of the Bill."<sup>76</sup>

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74. C.P. Nanda, Civil Disobedience to Congress Ministry : A Case Study of Orissa 1930-37, M.Phil, J.N.U., 1981, p.203.

75. The Bill was specifically meant for those area which had been annexed to Orissa from Madras Provinces in 1936. In this area the zamindars charged high rents from the tenants as per the provision of the Madras Estate Land Act 1908. The zamindars extracted half of the gross produce while in the Ryotwari areas - the rate was 50% of the net produce. Thus, the bill proposed to lower the rent to that of the nearest Ryotwari areas for similar lands with similar advantages. Ibid., p.205.

76. The Bill aimed at :

- i. the abolition of mutation fee;
- ii. giving tenants the right to cut trees;
- iii. Reducing the rate of interest on arrears of rent from 12.5% - 6% etc. ibid., pp.205-206.

In Madras, a committee of legislature with T. Prakasam, the Revenue Minister, as the Chairman, was appointed to inquire into the conditions of the peasants in areas under the Permanent Settlement. The Madras Estate Land Enquiry Committee took the view that in the areas under Permanent Settlement, the ryot and not the zamindar was the owner of the land. Therefore, it recommended that the level of rent prevailing when the settlement was made in 1802 should be restored.<sup>77</sup>

In March 1938, the Agriculturist Debt Relief Act was passed. This was meant not only for controlling moneylending but also to give relief to indebted agriculturists by scaling down their debts. Debt conciliation Boards were to be set up and fifty lakhs of rupees was to be kept aside to be given as loans to the agriculturists to pay off these debts.<sup>78</sup>

In Bombay, both the chambers of Legislature passed a bill authorising the government to purchase the lands

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77. Nanavati and Anjaria, The Indian Rural Problem, op.cit., p.136-137. The Committee further suggested that the rates of land revenue fixed in the year previous to the Permanent Settlement should constitute fair and equitable rates of assessment. Also, permanent patterns with rates of land revenue fixed permanently should be granted by the landlords to the ryots.

78. N.N. Mitra, Indian Annual Register, Jan-June, Vol.I, Classic Press, Calcutta, 1938, p.175.



confiscated during the Civil Disobedience movement and return the same to the original owners or their heirs without occupancy charges. This Bill came to be known as the Forfeited Land Bill.<sup>79</sup>

An emergency measure, by way of moratorium was taken to protect the small agriculturists for a period of one year.<sup>80</sup>

In 1938, a bill to provide for the protection of tenants in the province of Bombay, was introduced in the legislative Assembly which came to be called the Bombay Tenancy Act. Going by the provisions of the bill, a person was deemed to be a protected tenant in respect of any land if :

- i. he has held such a land as a tenant continuously for a period of not less than six years immediately proceeding the first day of January 1938;
- ii. he has cultivated such land personally during the aforesaid period; and
- iii. such land is situated in an alienated village or a village held on Khoti or taluqdari tenure.<sup>81</sup>

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79. Ibid., p.234.

80. Ibid., p.233.

81. AICC Papers, File No. p.11/1938, pp.335-336.

Also, any person who held any land continuously for a period of not less than six years immediately preceding the first day of April 1937 but who was evicted from such land on or after such date and who fulfilled the conditions specified in clauses (ii) & (iii) was also deemed to be a protected tenant.<sup>82</sup>

However, things were not as simple as they seemed. Things became rather difficult for the Congress Ministries, especially in Bihar and the United Provinces when two contending forces in the agrarian scene took up arms against the Congress (though for different seasons).

The All India Kisan Sabha (henceforth AIKS) accused the INC of having sold out to the zamindars. This fact assumed enormous proportions in the case of Bihar.<sup>83</sup>

The accession of the Congress to office, exacerbated the tension between the right and the left wing of the INC. While the right wing was echoing the all India policy of forming a broad united front of all classes, the left wing led by the Congress Socialists opposed this formulation

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82. Ibid., p.340. Also, a protected tenant who had made an improvement on the land held by him shall on eviction be entitled to compensation for such improvement.

83. Arvind N. Das, Agrarian Unrest and Socio-Economic Change, 1900-1980, New Delhi, 1983, pp.150-152.

(though never openly; it was always implicit in their proclamation) and were fiercely anti-zamindar. This mutual suspicion and antagonism was heightened by the Congress-Zamindar pact.<sup>84</sup>

In our period of study, the duel between the Socialists and the Sabhaites on the one hand, and the BPC perceived by the Socialists and Sabhaites as pro-zamindar, on the other got sharper with the Reora Satyagraha. Not only did Jayaprakash Narayan and Ganga Sharan Singh, support the movement by their presence, but also got the Council of Action of the Bihar unit of CSP to issue a statement saying that "the party lends its full support to the Reora struggle" and declared that "the whole responsibility of forcing the kisans to this course lies on the zamindars and the government authorities."<sup>85</sup>

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84. The Searchlight, Jan. 14, 1939. The main terms of the Congress Zamindar agreement were :

- a. Tenants' land auctioned for the inability to pay rent was not to revert back to the peasants;
- b. Arrears of rent - the original promise of scaling down arrears by 50% was dropped;
- c. On the crucial issue of bakasht land which had become bakasht after 1929, kisans will have to pay 50% of the decretal amount. Bakasht land in possession of zamindars will not revert to the tenants even on payment of decretal sum, etc.

85. Ibid., Jan. 17, 1939.

The AICC, as has already been mentioned, reacting to these opposing forces categorically denounced the kisan sabha and declared in 1938 at the Haripura session that the "Congress itself in the main is a kisan organisation".<sup>86</sup>

This stand of the AICC did not go unnoticed and there were reactions from all over the country reiterating their acceptance of the rights of the peasants to organise themselves in their class organisations which they saw not only as a means for the emancipation of the down trodden peasantry but also for National Independence.<sup>87</sup>

In the United Provinces, on the other hand, the opposition emerged from the side of the zamindars.<sup>88</sup> The

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86. See Section II of this chapter.

87. Shri Minoo Masani writing from Bombay expressed concern at the growing tensions between the Kisan Sabhas and the Congress. He, however, reiterated his acceptance of the right of the peasants to organise themselves in their class organisations and hoped that members of the Congress Committees and kisan sabhas would try their best to avoid any drifting apart which would weaken the joint front against imperialism.

P. Sunddrayya and A. Satyanarayana, on the other hand, expressed jubilation at the peasant struggle in Bihar and U.P. and strongly disapproved of the decisions of the Congress Committees.

Dr. M. Ahraf and Z.A. Ahmed, from U.P., categorically stated that the formation of kisan sabhas and the active participation in them by Congressmen was not inconsistent with the declared policy of the Congress. AICC Papers, File No. G-6 (KWI)/1938, pp.57-59.

88. The Pioneer, October 30, 1937, p.1.

assumption of office by the INC and their attempts at implementing their declared agrarian policy created widespread fear within the zamindari class. Zamindar organisations and associations mushroomed all over the country especially between 1937-38. The already established 'sabhas' gave a call to the unorganised zamindars to form zamindar associations in every district and tehsil.<sup>89</sup>

The basic aim of these sabhas was to draw the attention of the AICC "to their policy to protect the rights of every class and community of the Indian population." They considered slogans of 'abolition of zamindari' a malicious propoganda against a class who in no way could be held responsible for fault of others. These preachings, according to them, "would lead to anarchy on the countryside and rupture between the kisan and zamindar may become a serious problem later on."<sup>90</sup>

IN the same vein, it was stressed in the presidential address that the interests of the large and small zamindars were identical and their protection lay in the whole community standing together to resist the present "insidious attempt to divide and rule". Referring at length to the

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89. AICC Papers, File No. C-6/1938, p.1.

90. In a letter to the Secretary AICC, Allahabad by one B. Beni Prasad Tandon, Secretary to the Allhabad District Zamindar Sabha, dated 29th January, 1938, ibid., p.15.

sacrifices made by the landlords for the tenants and their contribution to the social and economic welfare of the province, the president emphasised that the Government must not aim directly or indirectly at the destruction of the Zamindari system.<sup>91</sup>

There were others who felt that the proposed tenancy bill would not serve the objectives of increasing the productivity of land and the income of the cultivator. On the one hand, while the proposed bill would place restrictions on the rights of landlord in respect of lands which they cultivated through tenants of six years by hindering individual enterprise, on the other, the government should not interfere with the fundamental relationship between the tenant and the landlord. According to them, whenever the tenant felt that the contracted rent was unreasonable, he could move the court (which of course was equally harassing), for redressal of grievances. Hence, any tenancy legislation without consultations with the landlord would not only alienate the sympathies and good will of the landlord class it was also bound to create tensions between the two sections of the peasantry.<sup>92</sup>

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91. Ibid., p.6.

92. Ibid., pp.7-9.

The Ministry period soon reflected the constraints of working within the colonial framework and it soon became apparent that for implementing far reaching agrarian reforms India must attain sovereignty. Nehru echoing this widespread opinion had stated in August 1937:<sup>93</sup>

The agrarian question is, of course, linked with the industrial problem... that again is linked up with the question of social services... thereby becoming in fact a many sided problem, each part of which is interlocked with the other, thus necessitating joint and planned action on a big scale, ... which can obviously not take place unless people at the back of it have complete political and economic power and not obstructed<sup>94</sup> by big vested interests both foreign and Indian.

With objective, of formulating comprehensive economic programme the National Planning Committee was constituted in 1938, under the chairmanship of Jawaharlal Nehru with a view to draw up a plan for national economic development. The work of the committee was greatly hampered by the outbreak of World War II, the threat to India's own safety and the hectic march of political events. The work was finally resumed in 1945 and the report published in 1946.

The 'Land Policy, Agricultural labour and Insurance' sub-committee was appointed to deal with inter alia the following :

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93. Quoted in H.D. Malaviya, op.cit., pp.68-69.

94. Report of the NPC, K.T. Shah (ed.) Vora Co. Publishers Limited, Bombay, 1948.

- i. The use and ownership of land and their effects on cultivation and social stratification;
- ii. measures to be suggested for agrarian reform with a view to bring about an equitable distribution of land resources and their effective utilisation for the maximum benefit of the country;
- iii. land policy and legislation concerned therewith, including the size of economic holdings to be supported;
- iv. land revenue including Permanent agricultural rent and other customary dues on cesses and charges, legislation affecting tenure of land, inheritance, alienation of agricultural land by sale to non-agricultural classes;
- v. rural indebtedness in relation to land policy;
- vi. agricultural labour, including wages, hours of work, conditions of employment, efficiency of labour and legislation affecting the same.<sup>95</sup>

The Interim Report of this sub-committee suggested measures regarding ownership of land, land revenue,

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95. Land Policy, Agricultural labour and Insurance  
K.T.Shah (ed.), NPC Series, Vora and Co. Publishers  
Ltd., Bombay, 1948, p.2.



Agricultural debt and cultivation of land. This is not the place to reproduce the lengthy interim report. However, to put it very briefly, regarding

- i. Ownership of land the committee was of the view that ownership in all forms of natural wealth must belong to and vest absolutely in the people of India collectively. This meant that there must be no rights of inheritance, no transfer, sale, alienation, mortgagee lease, or any agreement of sub-infendation or usufructury management by individual holder. Also, it was suggested that private property was to be abolished and compulsory cooperation and collectivisation introduced.<sup>96</sup>
- ii. Regarding Land Revenue, the sub-committee suggested that during the transition period, no tax, rent or land revenue demand should be made in respect of any piece of land which was so small or the gross produce so slight that the whole of it if left to the cultivator for his own use would not be sufficient. Also, pending the complete socialisation of all forms of natural wealth,

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96. AICC Papers, File G-9-23 (KW-5)/1940, p.35.

97. Ibid., pp.37-39.

lands held by zamindars, taluqdars etc. should be taxed at a sharply progressive rate as regards the produce or income derived from a the same."

iii. Regarding Agriculturists' Debts, the sub-committee held that since all unproductive debts were "immoral" and that since it was impossible to distinguish between productive and unproductive debts, they must be liquidated. All debts of more than ten years standing at the time the necessary legislation was passed should be deemed null and void. No debt, unless it was registered before a provincial or district or village debt registration Council, and carried an interest rate higher than 6% was allowed to be enforced by law;<sup>98</sup>

iv. Cultivation of land was to be organised progressively as a collective or cooperative enterprise. Individualist, improvident, uneconomic, fragmentary or unprogressive cultivation was to be eliminated in this way within a limited period.<sup>99</sup>

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98. Ibid., pp.41-43.

99. Ibid., pp.43-45.

It would be interesting to point out that this juncture, that the Indian capitalist class held almost similar views regarding cooperative farming. They favoured cooperative farming since on the one hand, it increased the size of the holding (which in the period under discussion was not more than 3 acres and normally scattered in tiny fragments). In order to introduce cooperative farming on a large scale, they were not even averse to the idea of introducing an element of compulsion.<sup>100</sup>

Collectivisation was justified on grounds of making cultivation economic. According to the interim report, more settlement of land had made economic cultivation impossible. Apart from nationalising land and restructuring agriculture as a public enterprise, eliminating the profit motive, it was also suggested that a systematic and scientific attempt should be made to define an economic holding.<sup>101</sup>

However, some members of the sub-committee did not agree with the view expressed in the report regarding collective ownership of land and abolition of succession and inheritance. Radhakamal Mukherjee, the prominent economist,

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100. See Purshottam Das, Thakurdas and others, A Plan of Economic Development for India, pts I & II, Penguin, 1945, pp.36-37.

101. K.T. Shah (ed.), Land Policy... pp.21-24.

was one of them. In his view, individual, heritable peasant ownership should form the goal of land policy in India. Nationalisation or collective ownership in his view was incompatible with the heavy population pressure and could not produce medium agricultural yields under the peculiar conditions of Indian farming which excluded the use of large scale machinery adopted in Russia;<sup>102</sup>

The magic of property in peasant proprietorship and incentive of labour in joint family agricultural enterprise... are not merely indispensable social assets conducive to social peace and mitigation of class antagonisms, but are also valuable economic assets so far as they elicit strenuous family toil and collaboration in small holdings.

Hence, agricultural land should belong to the State, but it should be divided into economic holdings in the possession of peasant farms who would be responsible for its intensive cultivation. With this end in view, Dr. Mukherjee urged the extension outside Bengal (where fixity of tenure and protection against enhancement of rental was established as a result of Tenancy laws since 1859) to the vast majority of tenants who, otherwise, had no inducement to make improvement of their holdings.<sup>103</sup>

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102. Note of Dissent, R.K. Mukherjee on the Indian Report of the sub-committee on Land Policy in K.T. Shah (ed.) Land Policy ...Appendix 1, op.cit., p.61.

103. A note by Dr. R.K. Mukherjee, to Prof. K.T. Shah, Chairman, Land Policy Sub Committee, NPC in AICC Papers, F.No. G-23 (KW-5)/1940, p.9.

He criticised the undue extension of Sir<sup>104</sup> lands in recent years which had led to a decline in protected tenancy. He estimated that Sir area had expanded almost ten fold and 25% in Agra and 39% in Oudh had been let out to the tenants which called for a drastic restriction of subletting of Sir and occupancy areas.<sup>105</sup> Also, protective tenancy legislation was called for in the Ryotwari provinces which had been witnessing the emergence of absentee landlordism and unprotected tenancy.<sup>106</sup>

Dr. Mukherjee also stressed on the need of fixation of Normal profits and size of economic holdings. Normal profits, according to him, could be fixed by :

- i. progressive taxation of holdings which were larger than the economic cultivation unit as in Russia, France and England; and
- ii. Exemption of uneconomic holdings from taxation and from sale on account of moneylender's decree (this step was suggested first by Dr. Mukherjee himself before the Indian Taxation Enquiry Committee and

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104. Sir originally signified the subsistence family farm till it had degenerated into a special preserve of the landlords in which tenants became insecure and victims of rack renting, ibid., p.10.

105. Note on the Coordination of Land Policy in the Different Provinces, in K.T. Shah (ed.) Land Policy... Appendix, iv, pp.101-103.

incorporated in the Bengal Agriculturists Debtor's Act which exempted one acre of their holding from sale. This was intended to prevent the cultivator from drifting into the position of landless labourers.<sup>107</sup>

The demand for exemption of uneconomic holdings from taxation was justified on the following grounds:

- i. The cultivator proprietor or a tenant of an uneconomic holding consumes all the produce of his fields and has to supplement it by wages of his labour. With the decay of rural industries, he was left with no alternative;
- ii. The rise in prices of agricultural produce does not benefit him;
- iii. Rent and revenue on undersized holdings were responsible for the gradual transfer of holdings from agriculturists to moneylenders or the middle class who had other sources of income.<sup>108</sup>

Dr. Mukherjee suggested that the state after systematic regional enquiries should find out the size of

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106. Ibid., pp.110-112.

107. AICC Papers, File No. G-23(KW-5)/1940, pp.10-12.

108. Ibid., pp.21-23.

the economic holding. Its extent must be such that a family of an average size could obtain its subsistence by cultivating it with average skill and labour. By law, the Government should adopt compulsory operations so as to establish an area suitable for normal small farming.<sup>109</sup>

Regarding agricultural labour, he suggested certain measures on whose basis a comprehensive policy could be formulated :

- i. A programme of restripment and constitution of economic family holdings removed from the sphere of buying and selling as in the larger European countries was to be initiated. Also, mortgage and sub-letting was to be prohibited;
- ii. Strict measures against the prevention of peasant proprietorship from degenerating into an inferior landlordism that may exploit the landless labourers, were to be introduced;
- iii. Collective farming societies were to be established in villages wherever the landless population formed a considerable section of the total population;
- iv. agriculture labour unions were to be organised in the countryside and legislation for minimum wage

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109. Ibid., pp.11-13.

and regulations of working hours and conditions were to be initiated;

v. more land was to be brought under cultivation.<sup>110</sup>

Despite these suggestions the interim report of the sub-committee was adopted without almost any changes.<sup>111</sup>

The report of the National Planning Committee was the most radical policy resolution ever adopted in India. Although the members of the committee were greatly influenced by the Russian experience, the peculiar character of Indian agrarian problem was never lost sight of. The report which was finally released was as 'radical' as any communist programme could hope to be.

Soon after the resolutions of the National Planning Committee were published, the Election Manifesto of the Congress was issued in 1946 which was very specific on the question of land tenure. It categorically stated:<sup>112</sup>

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110. Agricultural Labour Policy, By R.K. Mukherjee in K.T. Shah (ed.) Land Policy... Appendix VII, pp.125-130.
111. See the Draft Resolutions Based on the Report of the Land Policy, Agricultural Labour and Insurance sub-committee in AICC Papers, File No.C-9-23(KW-5)/1940. pp.59-69.
112. Quoted in H.D. Malaviya, Land Reforms in India, Economic and Political Research Department, AICC, New Delhi, 1954, pp.70-71.



Though poverty is widespread in India, it is essentially a rural problem, caused by over pressure on land and lack of other wealth producing operations. India under British rule has been progressively ruralised many of her avenues of work and employment closed and a vast mass of the population thrown on the land, which has undergone continuous fragmentation, till a very large number of holdings have become uneconomic. It is essential, therefore, that the problem of land should be dealt with in all its aspects. Agriculture has to be improved on scientific lines and industry has to be developed rapidly... so as not only to produce wealth but also to absorb people from the land. In particular, cottage industries have to be encouraged, both as a whole time and part time occupation. Landless labour should have the opportunity of work offered to them and be absorbed in agriculture or industry.

With this aim in mind, the steps that were suggested included abolition of intermediate with compensation, fixation of rent, consolidation of scattered holdings etc. Apart from this, regarding the pattern of the future rural economy, the Manifesto stated:<sup>113</sup>

...while individualist farming on peasant proprietorship should continue, progressive agriculture as well as the creation of new social values and incentives require some system of cooperative farming suited to Indian conditions. Any such change can, however, be made only with the good will and agreement of the peasantry concerned. It is desirable, therefore, that experimental cooperative farms should be organised with state help in various parts of India. There should also be large state farms for demonstrative and experimental purpose.

A far cry from the recommendations of the National Planning Committee.

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113. AICC Papers, F.No.16/1933, pp. 29-31.

The newly formed independent Government of India set up a Economic Programme Committee in November 1947, which gave top priority to the question of economic freedom in general, and agrarian reforms in particular, which stated<sup>114</sup>

Political independence having been achieved, the Indian National Congress must address itself to the next great task, namely the establishment of real democracy... based on social justice and equality... land with its mineral resources and all other means of production must belong to and be regulated by the community as a whole, in its own economic interests.

On the question of ways and means of effecting a change in the system of land tenure, the Committee suggested:<sup>115</sup>

- i. All intermediaries between the tiller and the state should be eliminated and all middlemen should be replaced by non-profit making agencies such as cooperative;
- ii. Land should be held for use and as a source of employment. The use of lands of those who are either non-cultivating landholders or otherwise

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114. AICC Papers, F.No. Ed-7/1947-48, p.126.

115. H.D. Malaviya, op.cit., pp. 78-80. These recommendations were formulated after an intense discussion on agricultural economy amongst the members of the Committee consisting of Pt. Nehru (Chairman), M.Azad, Gulzarilal Nanda, J.P. Narain, Prof. N.G. Ranga, Shri Shankar Rao Deo and Achyut Patwardhan.

unable for any period to exercise the right of cultivating them, must come to rest in the village cooperative community for genuine cultivation. In the case of minors and the physically incapacitated, share of the produce of the land should be given to them.

- iii. The maximum size of holding should be fixed. The surplus land over such a maximum should be acquired and placed at the disposal of the village cooperatives. Small holdings should be consolidated and steps taken to prevent further fragmentation.
- iv. Suitable machinery should be created for conciliation and mutual assistance between landless and landholding peasants.
- v. Creation of statutory village panchayat with well defined powers and adequate financial resources.

Numerous sub-committees were formed and discussions carried out to prepare a comprehensive All-India agrarian programme. The issues that were discussed included ways and means of increasing the yield of agricultural land by intensive cultivation, of ensuring the benefit of improved yields goes to peasant, of achieving a certain uniformity in

the land systems and of improving generally the economic condition of the rural population.<sup>116</sup>

This general commitment to land reforms found concrete expression in the proposals put forward by the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee, appointed in December 1947, which shall be dealt with extensively in the next Chapter. The Committee was set up with a view "to examine and make recommendations about agrarian reforms...."<sup>117</sup>

The Congress stand on the land question, thus, was not purely an agro-economic question. It was above all a political question geared towards the overwhelmingly political goal of attaining Swaraj. In concrete terms it envisaged carrying the myriad classes and sections against Imperialism towards Swaraj. This in turn implied not succumbing to the demands of any class, whether it be the bourgeoisie, peasantry or the proletariat. This clearly demarcated them from the Communists and the Kisan Sabha which were envisaging Swaraj in terms of Socialism, one way or the other. This is obviously not to deny the fact that

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116. Apart from the Economic Programmes Committee, the Revenue Ministers' Conference on 15th and 16th December 1947, and a meeting of the Agricultural Sub-Committee with Prof. N.G. Ranga, as the Convener, was held on 4th and 5th January 1948. AICC Papers, File No. ED-7 (P.I.)/1947-48, pp.24, 26 & 38.

117. Congress Agrarian..., op.cit., p.4.

the overarching ideology was that of the bourgeoisie; and was eloquently reflected in the nature of the post-colonial state.

From the standpoint of land question, the burden of this strategy meant that the Congress, despite the groundswell pressure of peasant and trade union activities in the 1930's could not simply agree to their demands (especially on the zamindari question in the case of the latter) as this would have alienated the middle classes (which had tangible links with land) as well as the substantial landholding classes. The land question therefore, in the Congress scheme, was situated, albeit uncomfortably within the overall strategy of a broad anti-imperialist United Front.

CHAPTER III

**LAND REFORMS IN POST-INDEPENDENT INDIA:  
INSTITUTIONAL V/S TECHNOLOGICAL REFORMS**

In a country, like India, which derived its main source of income from agriculture and on which eighty per cent of the population was dependent for its livelihood, the question of land reforms was bound to occupy a prominent place in the political and intellectual sphere. Throughout the national movement, beginning from 1885, land question remained a major issue of debate between the Indian nationalists and the British Colonial authorities. While the British concern with agriculture centered around revenue extraction, the Indian nationalists approached the problem of agrarian reconstruction from the wider perspective of modernisation of a semi-feudal and colonial society.

It is, therefore, obvious that the land question continued to dominate the minds of the Indian leadership. In the years immediately following Independence, in its various pronouncements and resolutions, the policies indicated above were reiterated by the Central leadership and the state governments were called upon to expedite land reforms.

The history of land reforms in the post-independence period is replete with twists and turns ranging from the early attempts to protect the cultivators rights in the land to the "land to the tiller" idea to "cooperativization" of

agriculture and back to such fundamentals as security of tenure and controlled rents.<sup>1</sup>

The agrarian society, despite the changes introduced just prior to independence remained powerfully dominated by big feudal and semi-feudal landowners. "It remained hidebound and restricted by traditional customs, social habits and modes of thinking."<sup>2</sup> It continued as a constantly crisis ridden system having no scope for the generation of new productive forces. Agricultural production was very low marked by backward technique and colossal wastage of labour and diversion of agricultural surplus into non-productive channels.<sup>3</sup> George Blyn's study of agricultural output, availability and productivity in India from 1891-1947 confirms this. His study reveals that during the reference period, aggregate food grain production increased at a meager average rate of 0.11% per year, while the population during the entire period increased at the annual rate of 0.67%.

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1. Daniel Thorner, "Dantwala on the Agrarian Prospect in India", Economic Weekly, Vol. IX, No. 23, June 1957.
  2. Govt. of India, National Commission on Agriculture, 1976, Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation Deptt. of Agriculture, New Delhi, 1977.
  3. See George Blyn, Agricultural Trends in India, 1891-1947: Output, Availability and Productivity. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966, pp.96 and 337.



A strong public opinion, therefore, crystallized to the effect that these conditions were the main hurdles in the path of national economic regeneration. The attainment of national freedom created the essential preconditions for restructuring the agrarian economy and putting it on the path of progress and accelerated development.

The stress in this chapter is on a few underlying principles of agrarian reform : the conditions which give rise to reform, India's attempts to deal with the problem since independence and the success or failure of this implementation. Above all, the emphasis is on the fact that the complex and diverse Indian tenurial system was one of the elements that inhibit agricultural productivity. Any consideration of this problem involves such basic questions as to who owns or does not own the land, the conditions under which land is held by those who do not own the land, how the productivity is shared, etc.

India was in need of agrarian reforms. This fact, as has already been mentioned, was recognised by the early nationalists who held British institutions responsible for agricultural backwardness and stagnation. This trend continued throughout the national movement and the formation of Congress Ministries in 1937 actually saw land reforms being introduced as a major economic programme. By 1939,

Tenancy Acts had been enacted in the United Provinces, Madras, Bombay, Bihar, etc. However, it was not until 1947, when the State emerged as an independent political force that land reform programmes could be pursued more comprehensively. The question that now arises is: why was it that agrarian reforms emerged as a major area of concern in the years immediately following independence? Also, what was the nature of the programme that the Indian State devised and adopted to revitalise a retrogressive socio-economic set up?

The answer to the first question can be found in the agrarian structure itself which was characterised by pressure on land that was scarce and yet concentrated in relatively few hands. A commission set up by the independent Government of India recognised that intermediary tenures like zamindaris, jagirs and inams, which were semi-feudal in nature and had been super-imposed on the traditional class of peasant cultivators prevailed in respect of over 40% of the area in pre-independence India. Apart from the creation of this parasitic class which had little to contribute to agriculture, the British practice of draining away a major portion of surplus from agriculture for fulfilling the demands of the British imperial system resulted in, inter-alia, negligible capital investment in each unit of land, inadequate irrigation facilities and

dependence upon nature, low yields but high rents, accelerated rural indebtedness and usurious practices.<sup>4</sup>

Further, the commission pointed out that rents, whether paid in cash or kind, exceeded more than 50% of the crop, but rents as high as 60%-70% was not a rarity.<sup>5</sup> In Punjab, for example, prior to independence, in the prevailing share-cropping areas, the landlord's share went up to 80% of the crops.<sup>6</sup> This implied that investment in rackrenting or landlordism was far more profitable than investment in capitalist farming.

In the zamindari areas, sub-infeudation or successive grades of intermediary or tenure holders between the landlord and the actual cultivator also tended to separate the latter from a considerable share of his meager income. The landlord's participation in the agricultural process was more often than not merely that of collector of rents and whatever other exactions he chose to impose upon the tenant. Leases were merely short term affairs and oral and even if written, they did not provide the peasant with security of tenure. In such a scheme of things, there was no place for peasant initiative or savings to innovate or improve the

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4. National Commission on Agriculture, op.cit., p.679.

5. Ibid., p.680.

6. H.D. Malaviya, op.cit., pp.201-202.

land.<sup>7</sup> This was because any surplus production resulting from improvements in land or farming technique instead of accruing to the peasants was appropriated by the landlord class.

The other drawback from which Indian agriculture suffered and which actually proved to be an obstacle in agricultural development was that of fragmentation of most of the operated holdings which were already small. At least 63% of the holdings were less than 5 acres each and about 40% of these were less than 2.5 acres each.<sup>8</sup>

It was within this context that a comprehensive set of land reforms were enacted.

However, there were other compulsions and motivations that underlay this commitment to land reforms.

The legacy of the early nationalists who provided an effective economic critique of British imperialism and the growing radicalisation of the Indian national movement with the growth of the Left and especially the Kisan Sabha movements, as has been discussed in the previous two

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7. Wolf Ladjinsky, "Agrarian Reform in India", op.cit., pp.370-371.

8. Sunder Singh, Consolidation of Holdings, Planning Commission, 1957, pp.1-2.

chapters, was best reflected in its economic programme.<sup>9</sup> Also, at the verge of independence India witnessed a growing agrarian unrest in several parts of the country (e.g. the Telangana and the Tebhaga movements). This was reflected in the widespread tenant landlord conflict which threatened to undermine the very stability of the newly established Indian State.<sup>10</sup>

Concern regarding the threat to political stability also arose from the vast economic disparities between the haves and the have nots. In India, the overwhelming population was dependent upon land and land system prevalent was itself one of the main sources of socio-economic justice. Therefore, any advance towards a just order was inconceivable without a reorganisation of the land system.<sup>11</sup>

Also, a critical situation had been created by chronic stagnation of agriculture - a problem which aggravated not only the problem of feeding an increasing population but also thwarted the process of rapid industrialization. The Indian leadership was forced to recognise the close

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9. In Bihar, for example, the right wing which was the dominant force in the Congress was forced to pass the anti-zamindari bill, though temporarily, under the mounting pressure of the forces generated by the Kisan Sabha movement. For a more detailed discussion, see Sandeep Bhushan, op.cit., pp.170.
10. P.C. Joshi, "Land Reforms in India and Pakistan", EPW, Vol. V, No.52, Dec. 26, 1970, pp. A145-A147.

interdependence of agrarian regeneration and renovation. Hence, agricultural planning constituted an integral part of overall planning with land reforms being given special priority.<sup>12</sup>

This general commitment to land reforms found concrete expression in the proposals put forward by the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee (or the Kumarappa Committee) which had been appointed in December 1947 "to examine and make recommendations about agrarian reforms...". The agrarian reforms committee in its report, strongly asserted that "without comprehensive reforms in the country's land system there cannot be any lasting improvement in agricultural production."<sup>13</sup>

Among the recommendations made by the Committee for comprehensive reforms in the system, the following were the most crucial :

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11. P.C. Joshi, Land Reforms in India, op.cit., p.52.
  12. The continued concentration of power and resources in the hands of rural rich hampers the expansion of rural markets which in turns inhibits industrialisation. See Kamal Narayan Kabra, "Land Reforms, Industrialisation, and Private enterprise : Some Linkages and their Implications" in A Report on Seminar on Economic Policy Option, 24-25, September, Indian Institute of Public Admn., pp.1-5.
  13. AICC, Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee Report, 1948, p.7.

1. The Committee was of the view that "in the agrarian system of India, there is no place for intermediary and land must belong to the tiller..." Consequently, as the first step it proposed that "in future subletting of land will be prohibited except in case of widows and other disabled persons".<sup>14</sup>
2. During the period of transition, however, the Committee recommended "a set of rights for actual tillers who had been cultivating land continuously for a period of six years would automatically get full occupancy rights. In the case of others, the committee recommended, "...the owner may have the option upto a certain period, to resume the holdings for personal cultivation."<sup>15</sup>
3. The Committee recommended definite safeguards against resumption by landowners. "Only those who put in a minimum amount of physical labour and participate in the actual agricultural operations would be deemed to cultivate the land personally. The owner will have the option to resume holding

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14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., pp.7-8.

to the extent to which it is necessary to make his self-cultivated holding economic. However, he may resume more land, upto a maximum prescribed, if thereby he does not decrease the tenants holding below the economic."<sup>16</sup>

4. The Committee further recommended that the tenant should have the right to purchase holding (acquired by the State from the landlords) at a reasonable price determined by a regional Land Tribunal (approx. 40% of the market value). In this, he was to be assisted by a suitable financial agency in purchasing the holding.<sup>17</sup>

5. The next crucial step recommended imposition of ceilings keeping in mind the limited supply of land in relation to the number of people seeking it. Secondly, it recommended a relatively low limit for agricultural holding due to "the present technique of cultivation, the managerial capacity and financial resources."<sup>18</sup>

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16. Ibid., p.8.

17. Ibid., pp.8-9.

18. Ibid., p.11.



6. In support of this proposal, the report further stated: "the optimum size of a farm is related to technique used and our effort should be to find gainful employment for as many as possible on land till industries develop to absorb the surplus population, the technique which may be generally used in agriculture is only better ploughs and bullocks with occasional assistance of tractors and other mechanised devices, whatever needed."<sup>19</sup>

It is clear that in the Committee's view large scale mechanisation was neither possible nor desirable. The main reliance for agricultural improvements was to be placed on labour intensive methods supplemented by discriminatory use of mechanical devices, preferably the non-labour displacing variety.

7. Finally, on one of most crucial and controversial questions, viz. the pattern of agricultural economy, the committee recommended a "composite pattern of individual farming assisted by cooperative organisation, cooperative joint farming, collective and state farming." It

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19. Ibid., p.16.



recommended "restricted form of family farming for holdings between the basic and optimum size." Family farming was suggested for the "basic" in the hope that the provision of multipurpose cooperative societies would reduce to a very extent, the inefficiency involved in the farming of uneconomic units."

Individual farming was not to be allowed on holdings which were smaller than basic holdings. This was so because there was a limit below which family farming even with all cooperative aids ceased to be economic. On the other hand, they were to be brought under a scheme of cooperative farming.

The Committee also suggested that peasant farming or capitalist farming was to be avoided on reclaimed land where collective farms with landless labourers should be organised.<sup>20</sup>

The Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee was one of the most radical policy documents of the Congress in as much as its recommendations approximated to a very

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20. Ibid., p.27.

large extent to the objective of "land to the tiller" and the abolition of non-cultivating interests from land.<sup>21</sup>

A tenant was defined by the committee as a person lawfully cultivating any land belonging to another person, if such land was not personally cultivated by the owner and if such person was :

- i. Not a member of the owner's family; or
- ii. Not a crop sharer or a hired labourer; or
- iii. Not a mortgage in possession.<sup>22</sup>

The above definition of the tenant covered the vast masses of cultivating interests including those having the weakest position like the Adhiars in Assam and Orissa, Bargadars in West Bengal, Sikims in U.P. and Bihar, Warmadars in Madras and Kamins in Punjab. It is evident that the Committee's recommendations if implemented would extend security and protection to the vast masses of tenants.<sup>23</sup>

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21. P.C. Joshi, 'Land Reforms in India', in A.R. Desai (ed.), Rural Sociology, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1969, p.456.
  22. Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee Report, op.cit., pp.28-29.
  23. P.C. Joshi, 'Land Reforms in India', op.cit., p.456.

During the years 1947-49, the Government had to concentrate all their energies and attention to the post partition problems. But during all these years it was felt more and more that land reform in order to be fruitful and effective in the task of economic regeneration of India, must be integrated with the National Development Plan. Accordingly, the Congress Working Committee in January 1950, after a careful appraisal of the economic situation of the country recommended the immediate appointment of a National Planning Commission under the auspices of the Indian Government. On the appointment of the National Planning Commission, the Congress Working Committee appointed an Economic Planning Sub-Committee with Pt. Govind Ballabh Pant as Chairman to draw up an immediate five year programme.

The resolution on 'Agriculture and Agrarian reforms' adopted by the Conference said :

Agriculture will remain in a state of flux so long as the structure and pattern of rural economy does not become clear and definite. It is, therefore, necessary to shorten the period of transition by expediting the abolition of zamindari and malguzari system by paying bonds. Provisions should be made for fixity of tenure to the tiller. Sub-letting, even if allowed, should be for a period of just less than five years and for regulated rates of rent.

This comprehensive resolution also referred to the problems of food production, irrigation, reclamation and conservation of soil, development of cooperation and cooperative farming. It said that "special efforts should

be made to organise cooperatives for uneconomic holdings." On the problem of agricultural labour, it felt :<sup>24</sup>

...Special attention should be given to the organisation of agricultural labour for the betterment of their condition. Agrestic serfdom should be made a cognizable offence... Debts of the agricultural labour should be sealed down and whenever found inequitable, wiped out. High priority should be given to provision of house sites for agricultural labour and to the removal of disabilities attached to the present house sites.

However, the evidence that comes to light in the following years, once this blue-print was translated into a full fledged policy and implemented in various states shows several shortcomings. Although substantial gains were made regarding certain clauses in certain states, the dominant rural classes on the whole managed to evade these laws and exploit the loopholes in the implementation mechanism.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, some laws which critically depended upon people's participation for their successful implementation also failed.<sup>26</sup>

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24. Quoted in D. Malaviya, op.cit., pp.88-91.

25. Daniel Thorner, Agrarian Prospect in India, Delhi University Press, 1956, p.20.

26. For example, E. Andre Beteille in his study of a Tanjore village, points at the lack of organisation amongst the peasantry which acts as a serious constraint on further changes in the agrarian system. See, Andre Beteille. Caste Class and Power, California University Press, India, 1958, p.199. Similarly Daniel Thorner in his study on Andhra Pradesh observes: "In the State of Andhra peasant organisation in the prosperous zones appears to have been more effective than in other states". Daniel Thorner Agrarian Prospect in India, op.cit., p.53.

## SECTION - I

Soon after independence, the planning process was initiated in 1951 under the leadership of Nehru, to take care of the severe damage to the Indian economy caused by war, famine (1943), and partition of the country (1947). The avowed aim now was of accelerating the growth of the economy, uplifting the poor, and bringing about equality in income. Also, Nehru was a firm believer in industrialisation and modernisation and was of the view that rapid industrialization alone could develop India and enable its population to have a higher living standard. The architects of Five Year Plans also appreciated that "production of an agricultural surplus (was) the key to industrialization".<sup>27</sup> However, scarce resources and foreign exchange reserves permitted only marginal investment in yield increasing output.<sup>28</sup>

In the initial years of planning the ever riding ideological goal of a "socialistic pattern of society" ruled out concentration of these inputs into the more favoured

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27. P.C. Mahalolnobis, Talks on Planning, Bombay, 1961, p.95.

28. Francine, R. Frankel, "India's New Strategy of Agricultural Development", in The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. XXVIII, No.4. August, 1969, p.705.

areas of the country where they could be expected to bring the greatest increases in agricultural production. Instead, the planners devised a strategy of agricultural development to actively involve some sixty million peasant cultivators in the difficult task of increasing yields through the application of labour intensive technology. The crux of the approach was the promise of social reform held out by large scale initiatives for institutional change. Hence, highest priority was assigned to the rapid implementation of land reforms.<sup>29</sup>

At this juncture, it is essential to point out that India's developmental planning was greatly influenced by the Soviet experience of which the planners were themselves not unaware of. This was the cause for the widespread view that the planners were principally thinking in the terms of extracting 'surplus' from agriculture for financing industrial development which had been the case in Soviet Union. (In Russia industrialization was to be financed at the cost of agriculture in the absence of external sources of resource mobilisation).<sup>30a</sup> In India, on the contrary,

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29. Ibid.

30. See Sukhamoy Chakravarty, Development Planning, the Indian Experience, OUP, 1987, pp.20-21.

30a. For a detailed discussion of the Russian model, see Ashok Mitra, Terms of Trade and Class Relations, Rupa and Co., Calcutta, 1977, pp.64-68.

what was effectively done was to treat agriculture as a 'bargain sector' i.e. a sector with large unexploited potential which could provide the requisite surplus with relatively low investment and in a comparatively short time.<sup>30b</sup> They were aware that major institutional changes were required in order to realise the production potential of agriculture and reorganise it on progressive lines. It is on this latter dimension that hopes were placed for bringing about the envisaged increase in agricultural output, particularly by those, who like Nehru, saw cooperative farming as the ultimate solution.<sup>31</sup>

Land Reforms policy was concretised at the topmost governmental level for the first time in the First Five Year Plan. The land reforms envisaged by the Indian planners assumed certain basic structural changes in the rural countryside by way of :-

- i. Abolition of intermediaries;
- ii. Tenancy reforms designed to
  - a. Scale down rents to  $\frac{1}{4}$  or  $\frac{1}{5}$  of the produce;

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30b. Despite the emphasis on heavy industrialisation in the Second Plan, resources were to be mobilised from all the sectors of the economy including agriculture and from external sources. See Sukhamoy Chakravarty, op.cit., OUP, 1987, pp.20-21.

31. Ibid., p.21.



- b. give tenants permanent rights subject to the landlord's right to resume a minimum holding for his personal cultivation within a limited time;
- iii. Fixing of ceilings;
- iv. reorganisation of agriculture including the consolidation of holdings, the prevention of fragmentation and development of cooperative village management and cooperative farming.<sup>32</sup>

While emphasising the primary importance of the abolition of zamindari in bringing about major structural changes, it is necessary to remember that in India, it affected in the main the distribution of the total agricultural product and not the size and organisation of the units of agricultural production. The abolition of zamindars could place confidence in the erstwhile tenants, give them hope and most probably reduce the share of agricultural produce with which he had to part in terms of revenue or rent, which in turn would increase his returns in investment leading to greater improvement and innovation; but it would not alter the size or shape of his holding. It was conceived of essentially as establishing a direct

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32. Planning Commission, First Five Year Plan, 1951, pp.185-6.

relation between the actual tiller of the soil and the State.<sup>33</sup>

Tenancy reform or tenancy legislation had a much wider scope of operation than legislation for the abolition of intermediaries. Apart from securing for the tenant a larger share in the product of land he cultivated, it also aimed at expansion of owner cultivation.<sup>34</sup>

The fixing of ceilings, on the other hand, was likely to effect the size of the unit of agricultural production much more directly than either the abolition of intermediaries or tenancy reform, (with reference only to acquisition of additional land in future). This would act as a restraint on the activities of the persons, who in the absence of such legislation might have increased the size of their holdings above the ceiling limit. The state also took over surplus land with the purpose of redistribution amongst the tillers.<sup>35</sup>

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33. D.R. Gadgil, "Land Reform", Presidential Address. The Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics, Vol. X, No.2, April-June, 1955, p.11.

34. Dandekar and Rath, Poverty in India, Sangam Press Ltd., Pune, 1971, p.69.

35. D.R. Gadgil, op.cit., p.12.

Consolidation, as practiced in India affected powerfully the internal organisation of a holding though not usually its total size. The process of consolidation could lead to some saving in the land surface used for such purposes as boundaries and roads and could thus enable formation of a pool of land for specific common purposes. But the saving effected in this way was not likely to yield substantial acreage for distribution among existing holders.<sup>36</sup>

It is clear from the above account, that the programme of agrarian reform devised by the post-independent Indian state did not bear to any significant extent on the structure and size of the unit of agricultural production, excepting attempts at consolidation. Also, the land reform measures in India did not basically aim at redistribution of land but a redistribution of agricultural income, if effectively implemented.

## SECTION - II

In most of the available writings it is fashionable to view the attempts at the implementation of land reforms as a major failure. While the general thrust of the conclusion

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36. Ibid., p.13.

is broadly true, they fail to qualify their arguments, with the manifold complexities inherent in the agrarian structure which had hindered if not precluded fruition of the land reform measures, since the 1950's. The broad failure of these measures also suggest that popular agrarian forces have at large been weak. In areas where peasant organisation has been much stronger, the state has been compelled to initiate radical land reform measures and more important, their implementation has been more successful.

On the other hand, towards the end of 1960's, there was a widespread opinion at the governmental level and some academic circles that a considerable progress in land reforms had gradually and imperceptibly transformed the semi-feudal agrarian structure of pre-independence India into a large peasant economy. The claims for the progress in land reforms were as follows:<sup>37</sup>

- i. Zamindars, jagirdars, inams and other intermediary tenures had been practically abolished - bringing twenty million tenants into direct relation with the State and making available to the State governments surplus of land for redistribution.

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37. National Commission on Agriculture, op.cit.

- ii. Complete security of tenure had been ensured in U.P. and in the Union Territory of Delhi, in West Bengal in respect of under-raiyats (other than bargadars) and in Rajasthan in respect of a minimum holding having a net annual income of Rs.1200.
- iii. In Gujarat, Kerala, Jammu and Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Mysore, Orissa and Tripura security of tenure was subject to landlord's right to resume land for personal cultivation in specified cases. The period in which resumptions could be exercised had, however, expired in most cases.
- iv. About 3 million tenants and share-croppers had acquired ownership of more than seven million acres of land.
- v. Laws imposing ceiling on agricultural holdings were enacted in almost all the states between 1958 and 1962 and over 2.3 million acres of land had been declared surplus. The state governments took possession of about 1.6 million acres of land on which landless labourers and uneconomic holders were settled.

Attempts were also made to make us believe that some of the more patent blemishes of agrarian sector had been removed and that agrarian structure had become more rationale and equitable.

It is true that land reform measures like abolition of intermediaries and tenancy reforms shed away some of the feudal characteristics of the agrarian relations in India and thereby some better off sections of the peasantry had been relieved off their feudal burdens.<sup>38</sup> A change took place in the rural property structure. Some of the landlords having loose connections with their land had been eliminated, while some of the erstwhile absentee landlords came back to the village.<sup>39</sup> Acquisition of proprietary rights by the tenants in their land encouraged them to take to agriculture more seriously than when the land was in the hands of the intermediaries. Infact, in the late 50's and 60's, a major change that took place was that agricultural land passed more and more to those who had been cultivating the lands of their employers as tenants.<sup>40</sup>

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38. Subas Chattopadhyaya, "Class Nature of Land Reforms since Independence," Social Scientist, Vol. 2, No.4, 1973.

39. Daniel Thorner, Agrarian Prospect in India, op.cit., p.10.

40. Ladejinsky, op.cit., p.277.

On the other hand, one can see a sharp increase, of about 60%, in the proportion of agricultural labourers. While this has been an all India phenomena, the largest relative rise has occurred in the fastest growing areas, eg. Punjab, Haryana, Western Uttar Pradesh etc.<sup>41</sup> These are definitely substantial changes and highlight capitalist development in Indian agriculture.

However, the proposition that the agrarian structure had become more rationale and equitable is questionable. Changes have taken place but the benefits of this change seems to have affected only certain sections of the peasantry. The attempt in the following sections will be to study these very changes and its impact on various sections of the peasantry.

#### IIa

The only clause of the land reform programme to be effectively implemented was the abolition of intermediaries. The state took away from them the right to collect rents on land which they themselves did not cultivate. They were also relieved of the responsibility for paying land revenue on such lands. Since the rents that they had been

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41. Utsa Patnaik, Peasant Class Differentiation : A Study in Method with reference to Haryana, OUP, 1987 p.159.  
The percentage has increased from 24.04 to 37.79.

collecting from the peasants was much higher than the revenue they had been paying, they lost a great deal of income. For this loss, they were ensured compensation, which was based on "the net income of the intermediary at the time of acquisition of rights by the State". Compensation was to stretch over a period of ten years and was payable in cash or in kind.<sup>42</sup>

However, these measures were assailed on two major grounds :

- i. The high rates of compensation led to wastage of capital resources as the bulk of the compensation was either frittered away in consumption or spent on buying urban property, etc. and only a very small percent of it was recycled to step up agricultural production.<sup>43</sup>
- ii. Despite the fact that many tenants had acquired lands following the zamindari abolition, the faulty content of laws had itself led to widespread eviction of tenants. In brief, the major loopholes of the law were the recommendations that allowed the landlords, small

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42. Ladejinsky, op.cit., p.377.

43. National Commission on Agriculture, op.cit., p.679.



as well as large to retain all their unlet land (i.e. those under personal cultivation) and the very definition of a cultivator.<sup>44</sup>

On the eve of Zamindari abolition, the unlet 'sir' and 'khudkasht' lands in U.P. amounted to 6 million acres while let 'sir' and 'khudkasht' land totalled only 1.1 million acres.<sup>45</sup> Apparently, this would imply that tenant farming in U.P. was marginal. However, this was not the case. In fact, what was happening was that once the reform was in the air, the zamindars made alternative arrangements for themselves. The long delays in the passage of the bill till it became a law, made it possible for the landlords to decrease the number of claimants for rights in the land by evicting tenants or shifting them to the status of farmhands or agricultural labourers.<sup>46</sup> In Bombay, the number of 'protected' tenants declined from 1.7 to 1.3 million or by 20% in the 1950's.<sup>47</sup> In Hyderabad, the number declined by 57% between 1951 and 1955.<sup>48</sup>

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44. Daniel Thorner, "Land Reforms in India", Indian Economic Journal, Vol. II, No.1, July, 1954.
45. Ladejinsky, op.cit., p.303.
46. Daniel Thorner, "Land Reforms in India", op.cit., p.30.
47. M.L. Dantwala and C.H. Shah, Evaluation of Land Reforms, University of Bombay, 1971.
48. A.M. Khusro, Economic and Social Effects of Jagirdari Abolition and Land Reforms in Hyderabad, Osmania University Press, Hyderabad, 1958.

The other major loophole was the manner in which a 'cultivator' was defined. Four criteria were listed for consideration in defining just who was a cultivator :

- i. Performance of all or some of the manual task;
- ii. Providing the capital and credit, including working capital;
- iii. Management or supervision of the agricultural operations;
- iv. Running the risk of loss.<sup>49</sup>

This definition had major flaws. Firstly, an absentee landlord who simply paid the revenue and collected the rents, performing none of the functions listed above was adjudged not to be a cultivator. At the other extreme, an ordinary tenant who paid the rent in cash and cultivated his holding by his own labour and with the help of his family labour, was declared a cultivator. The real difficulty lay with categories in between these two extremes.

Secondly, it would appear that the actual performance of all or some of its manual tasks of cultivation could not by itself be treated as necessary or indispensable. The

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49. Ladejinsky, op.cit., p.304.

reason for this was that "it is not possible to define the minimum of manual labour."<sup>50</sup> If the performance of manual operations was imposed as an essential condition, a large number of such men, would be excluded from the definition of a 'cultivator'.<sup>51</sup>

Tenancy legislation also proved to be an abject failure and on the whole failed to achieve its objectives. "Judged by the amount of land purchased by tenants and the number of tenants who have been able to acquire ownership rights, the step can be said to have produced no significant results."<sup>52</sup> The reasons for its failure can be partly ascribed to the limitations of the resumption scheme which limits the tenant's right to purchase land as well as the land purchase scheme.

In U.P., for example, the tenants could buy Bhumidari rights (i.e. proprietary rights) by making a capital payment of ten times the former annual rent. As a concession, the Bhumindars were required to pay only 50% of the rent they used to pay to the landlord. However, the capital required

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50. CARC, op.cit., p. 24.

51. Ladejinsky, op.cit., p. 305.

52. Planning Commission, Second Five Year Plan, 1956, p. 176.

to purchase these occupancy rights was so large that most of the tenants were not able to do so.<sup>53</sup>

Over and above all this, all those tenants who refused or were not able to acquire bhumidari rights, their land revenue was increased by  $\frac{1}{3}$ .<sup>54</sup>

The Panel on Land Reforms set up in 1955 analysing the causes for the failure in the implementation process, identified them as many and complex.

Firstly, in the Committee's view the ideas of land reforms were themselves fast undergoing a change. What appeared to be a measure of substantial change today, became insufficient at some later date. And in the absence of a clear conception of the final goal of land reform measures, changes were bound to be made in the law with a view to satisfy the immediate pressures. These changes occurred with such rapidity, that enforcement of law suffered considerably.<sup>55</sup>

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53. Daniel Thorner, "Land Reforms in India", op.cit., .31.

54. Paul Brass, "Division in the Congress and the rise of Agrarian Interests and Issues in U.P. Politics, 1952-77" in John. R. Wood (ed.) State Politics in Contemporary India, Crisis or Continuity, Westview Press, London, 1984, pp.27-29.

55. Planning Commission, 'Report of the Committee on Tenancy Reform' in Reports of the Committees of the Panel of Land Reforms, Govt. of India, 1959, p.37.

Secondly, gaps were left in laws which rendered them largely ineffective. For example, a landlord was permitted to eject a tenant to resume land for personal cultivation. The idea was to enable a bonafide cultivator to return to the land, but in the absence of a proper definition of personal cultivation, absentee landlords living in distant towns were able to resume land from tenants and get them cultivated by hired labour or through crop sharing.<sup>56</sup>

Further, though a restriction was imposed in many states on the extent to which a landlord may resume land, no provision was made for the demarcation of the resumable areas as distinct from the non-resumable one. Also, in many states, there was no limit on the quantity of land which could be resumed.<sup>57</sup> Thus, though the landlord's right of resumption was limited to an extent, he was able to exercise an undue influence over all tenants which added to his bargaining power and rendered the law ineffective.<sup>58</sup>

Thirdly, in an attempt to balance meticulously, the interests of the owners and tenants, the provisions of the law, in a number of states became so complex that the bulk

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56. Ibid. Also see National Commission on Agriculture, op.cit., p.681.

57. Daniel Thorner, "Land Reform in India," op.cit., p.30.

58. "Report of the Committee on Tenancy Reforms", op.cit., pp.37-38.

of the peasantry found it difficult to understand them. After the enactment of the law, it was generally left to the tenants and the landlords to take advantage of the new legislation and no organised effort was made to make the tenants understand the law and to ensure that they take advantage of it.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, even where tenants were aware of their rights, they were too weak economically and socially to insist on their rights. Hence, if land reform measures was to be made effective, they had to be made simple and behind them there had to be an administrative support to counteract the effects of socio-economic weaknesses.<sup>60</sup>

Keeping these facts in mind, the committee on Tenancy Reforms made the following recommendations :

- i. stay of ejection of tenants and restoration of tenants ejected in recent years;
- ii. conferment of security of tenure and reduction of rent to the level of 1/6 of the produce;
- iii. bringing the tenants into direct relationship with the state and enabling them to acquire full ownership rights;

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59. Ibid., p.38.

60. Ibid., pp.38-39.

- iv. eliminating multiplicity of tenure and rationalising the rights and obligations of the landowners;
- v. utilising the village panchayat increasingly as the agency for the enforcement of the measures of land reforms.<sup>61</sup>

It is obvious from the observations of the committee as to the reasons for the failure of land reforms that apart from the loopholes in the legislations itself the State did not have a clear conception of its land reform goals. Moreover, ignorance and lack of organisation amongst the rural poor hindered the effective implementation of land reform measures. Field studies conducted by academicians like A.M. Khusro, Andre Beteille, G. Parthasarthy, are all testimonies to this fact. While Thorner attributed the socio-economic change in the prosperous zones of Andhra Pradesh to 'peasant organisation',<sup>62</sup> Khusro ascribes this change to a degree of consciousness amongst the peasantry.<sup>63</sup>

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61. Ibid., p.175.

62. Daniel Thorner, Agrarian Prospect, op.cit., p.52.

63. A.M. Khusro, op.cit., p.330.

## II.b. A Government Sponsored Study Admitted:

"The imposition of ceiling on agricultural holdings in India is a case of incoherent policy imperfect legislation and inefficient legislation. In the context of the socio-economic conditions obtaining in the country, there is a strong case for radical redistribution of land."<sup>64</sup>

The ceiling laws, despite various amendments, failed miserably to solve the problem of generating 'surplus' land for the purpose of redistribution amongst the tenants and the landless labourers. The landlords through bogus transfers managed to conceal surplus land. This is evident from the steep fall in the availability of surplus land from the estimated 17.5 lakh acres in 1957 to 1.15 lakh acres in 1964 to less than a lakh acre is after 1970.<sup>65</sup>

In the First Five Year Plan, the broad objectives of the land policy is found in these words:

- i. "increase in agricultural production represented the highest priority in planning over the next five years; and

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64. P.S. Appu, Ceiling on Agricultural Holdings, Ministry of Agriculture, Govt. of India, 1972, p.1.

65. Wolf Ladejinsky, "Land Ceilings and Land Reforms" in EPW, Annual No., Vol.VIII, 1972.



ii. agricultural economy was to be diversified and was to be brought to a much higher level of efficiency."<sup>66</sup>

The accent was on increased production. Little economic justification was found for imposing ceiling on agricultural holdings. The First Plan considered "small and uneconomic holdings" as the root cause of many difficulties in the way of agricultural development. Having made that diagnosis, it was only logical that the plan did not recommend any rigid ceiling on agricultural holdings, for the natural consequence of such a step would have been the creation of numerous new uneconomic holdings<sup>67</sup> (though one wonders how? If ceiling was high enough and aimed at very big landlords, owning thousands of acres, then it would not have led to the emergence of uneconomic holdings).

The Panel on Land Reforms (1955) set up committees to examine and report on different aspects of land reform. One such committee reported on the "size of the holdings". The Committee unanimously accepted the principle that there should be an absolute limit to the amount of land which any individual might hold and gave the following justification:

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66. First Five Year Plan, op.cit., p.99.

67. P.S. Appu, op.cit., pp.1-2.

- i. Meeting the widespread desire to possess land;
- ii. reducing glaring inequalities in ownership and use of land;
- iii. reducing inequalities in agricultural incomes; and
- iv. enlarging the sphere of self employment."<sup>68</sup>

The consensus of opinion in the committee was in favour of the ceiling being fixed at three times the family holding.<sup>69</sup>

The other recommendations of the Committee was about the payment of compensation, exemption from ceiling and distribution of surplus land. Regarding compensation, the committee advised that "the amount in no case be more than 25% of the market value and should not exceed (inclusive of interest charges) the aggregate of the increase in land revenue for twenty years."<sup>70</sup>

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68. Committee of the Panel on Land Reforms, op.cit., p.99.

69. Ibid., p.101. Family holding was defined as land held by an average family of five persons which brings a gross income of Rs. 1600/p.a. or a net income of Rs. 1200/p.a. and is not less than one plough unit, i.e., an area of land which could be cultivated by one pair of bullocks or if the soil was inferior with two pairs.

70. Ibid., p.104.

The Committee favoured exemption of plantations of tea, coffee and rubber, existing orchards, bonafide cattle breeding, dairy and wool raising farms from the ceiling law. It was, however, against exemption of sugarcane farms. The exemptions were justified by the committee on the following grounds :

- i. in undertakings like plantations, industrial and agricultural work had to be closely integrated;
- ii. in certain specialised branches of agriculture investment had to be made on a long term basis and several years elapse before the output could be realised.
- iii. it was thought that in safeguarding efficiently managed farms which consisted of compact farms on which heavy investment had been made, risk in fall of production should be avoided.<sup>71</sup>

Regarding distribution of the surplus land, the committee could not come to an agreed conclusion.

The Second Five Year Plan did not fully endorse the views of the Committees. The departures made in the plan

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71. Planning Commission, Third Five Year Plan, 1961, p.231.

tended to make the policy flexible and to some extent even vague.

The objectives of land policy in the Second Plan were two fold :

- i. to remove such impediments upon agricultural production as arise from agrarian structure;
- ii. to create conditions for evolving as speedily as possible, an agrarian economy with high levels of efficiency and productivity.<sup>72</sup>

Again, as in the First Plan, the emphasis was on increased production. The imposition of ceiling was not recognised as a increase that would promote agricultural production. Social justice was the sole justification for ceilings. "In the condition of India, large disparities in the distribution of wealth and income are inconsistent with economic progress in any sector... For building up a progressive rural economy, it is essential that disparities in the ownership of land should be greatly reduced."<sup>73</sup>

Having given this justification, the Plan, however, pointed out, "in view of the existing pattern of

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72. Second Five Year Plan, op.cit., p. 178.

73. Ibid., p.178-9.

distribution and size of agricultural holdings, redistribution of land in excess of ceiling may yield relatively limited results."<sup>74</sup>

In the context of priorities fixed in the Second Plan, particularly bearing in mind the ambitious programmes of industrialisation and taking into account the steady increase in population, the main goal of the agrarian policy was to meet the increasing requirements for raw materials and food. Social justice and desire to build up a cooperative rural economy was naturally given up.<sup>75</sup>

Regarding redistribution of surplus land, the recommendation was that preference should be given to tenants displaced as a result of resumption by landlords, farmers with uneconomic holdings and landless labourers. What should be the interse priority among them was not spelt out, nor was it indicated if there should be an upper limit to the area of land to be allotted to each individual. It was, however, indicated that as far as possible settlement should be made on cooperative lines.<sup>76</sup>

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74. Ibid.

75. P.S. Appu, op.cit., pp.7-8.

76. Second Five Year Plan, op.cit., p.180.

Also, the plan gave no firm recommendations about the principles to be followed in the payment of compensation. The suggestion of the committee was ignored. It was left to the state governments to decide the matter in the light of local conditions.<sup>77</sup>

The Third Five Year Plan simply reiterated what had been stated in the Second Plan. The twin objects of land reform continued to be :

- i. removal of such impediments to increase in agricultural production as arise from the agrarian structure inherited from the past; and
- ii. elimination of all elements of agrarian and social injustice within the agrarian system, to provide security for the tiller of the soil and assure equality of status and opportunity to all sections of rural population.<sup>78</sup>

By the time, the Third Five Year Plan drew to a close, realisation seems to have dawned upon the planners that institutional reforms in the agrarian sectors had on the whole failed. In 1966, a Seminar on Land Reforms was held

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77. Ibid.

78. Third Five Year Plan, op.cit., p.220.

under the auspices of the Research Programmes Division of the Planning Commission. The objective of the Seminar was to bring together the planners, the policy implementers and the research directors in order to review the progress made in the implementation of land reforms and suggested ways for accelerating the process.<sup>79</sup>

The main recommendations of the seminar were :

- i. Need to reaffirm "land to the tiller" as the basic principle of land reforms - the most important psychological stimulus for maximising agricultural production;
- ii. Need to plug loopholes or gaps left in land reform studies;
- iii. Need for better education of the tenants on the benefits of tenancy laws - on their active role to achieve those benefits and training of lower revenue officials;
- iv. More vigorous and systematic efforts for maintaining land records;

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79. Planning Commission, Seminar on Land Reforms, Proceedings and Papers, Socio-Economic Research division, 1966.

- v. Need for conferring certain minimum rights on the tenants;
- vi. Need of an official agency interposing between the tenants and the owners to collect rent; and
- vii. Need of further studies on land reforms, etc.<sup>80</sup>

It is surprising that as early as 1966, even in the government circles, it was no secret that the ceilings programme was in great trouble. Yet, it did no more than reiterate the stand taken in the Second Plan, repeating the familiar arguments why limitation on holding was essential.

Wolf Ladjinsky has pointed out many striking features of the Plans vis-a-vis the ceilings. According to him, where as the agricultural part of the Plans aimed at increasing productivity, the ceilings were never aimed to the same end. On the other hand, the justification given for advocating the ceilings rested on ideological grounds i.e., public interest and social justice. More importantly, by constantly reiterating that this programme could not yield much excess land, it showed its own lack of confidence in the measure.<sup>81</sup>

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80. Ibid., pp.37-41.

81. Ladejinsky, 'Land Ceilings and Land Reforms' op.cit., p.402.



. There are who justify the declining interest in ceilings in official circles on the grounds that "the problem of poverty cannot be solved by redistribution of land to everyone who needs it."<sup>82</sup> Also, the implementation of ceilings would not only increase the number of uneconomic, non-viable holdings but also nullify the major impetus which the technological advances had provided to agricultural development.<sup>83</sup>

However, it should be remembered that the purpose of land reforms in the Indian context has not been to provide land to every landless. On the other hand, it aimed at ameliorating the conditions of the rural poor, and land ceiling was merely a part of this overall approach.

The ceiling question gave rise to more debate than any other land reform issue. It did suggest tampering with private property rights. In the initial years of land reform legislation, ceiling was justified primarily on grounds of "social justice". However, the emphasis on increased productivity in order to finance industrialisation and meet the needs of increasing population, ceiling

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82. V. DanadeKar and N. Rath, Poverty in India, op.cit., 1971, p.86.

83. Ibid., p.82 and p.88.

imposition was relegated to the back ground, (although the State's commitment to ceiling legislation continued to echo throughout the first twenty years of Indian Planning).

## II C

India's answer to fragmentation was consolidation that involved amalgamation and redistribution of the fragmented land so as to reduce the number of plots in the holdings, thus making them more compact.

Consolidation in India that began in the middle of the 19th century was very slow since it was to be carried out on a voluntary basis, whereby all villagers had to agree to the scheme. Compulsion was gradually introduced so that consolidation became obligatory for a village. Detailed and exact data on consolidation are not readily available. However, by the end of the Second Plan, about 30 million acres had been consolidated. The target for the Third Plan was 31 million acres; of this 15 million acres had been consolidated during the first two years.<sup>84</sup>

This was definitely a considerable achievement considering the extremely difficult technical, economic and human problems which accompanied them. Punjab accounted for

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84. Planning Commission, Third Five Year Plan, Mid-Term Appraisal, Govt. of India, 1963, p.96.

almost half of the total consolidated land followed by Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.<sup>85</sup>

A major weakness of the programme, however, was that consolidation was done without taking effective steps to ensure security of tenure despite the recommendations in the Second Five Year Plan that the area to be resumed should be declared within a certain period and should be demarcated in advance.<sup>86</sup> As a result, consolidation of holdings often led to large scale ejection of insecure tenants, and helped the land owners in getting rid of the tenants.<sup>87</sup>

#### II d

Cooperative joint farming deserves mention, not because of the significant degree of acceptance it had attained in post-independent India but because of the ideological pre-occupation with the question of peasant proprietorship versus farm cooperatives, and the gulf between official intention and the peasant's attitude towards the intention.

Small scale farming was rejected in favour of large scale farming on grounds of efficiency. This was despite

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85. Ladjinsky, *Agrarian Reform in India*; op.cit., p.373.

86. *Third Five Year Plan*, op.cit., pp.224-225.

87. Ladejinsky, *Agrarian Reforms in India*, op.cit., p.320.

the case argued strongly by Dr. Radhakamal Mukherjee and Brig Narain in favour of small scale peasant farming.<sup>88</sup> The latter was justified on grounds of providing fuller employment to the landless and give substance to the idea of social justice. The Third Plan, although ambiguous regarding cooperative farming stated that "...once the stage of cooperative village management is reached... the distinction between those who own lose much of its significance."<sup>89</sup> Cooperatives would also make better use of available and borrowed resources and create a better technological base and provide a good surplus, normally not available from small scale, individual producers.

As to the main features of a cooperative farm, the most essential were,

- i. pooling of land and centralized management;
- ii. retention of proprietary rights and land;
- iii. ownership dividends in addition to remuneration and heavy financial assistance to ensure the success of such farms.<sup>90</sup>

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88. Peasant farming tends to promote better utilisation of existing labour force, to increase output perhead, increase the volume of savings and for a more equal distribution of income. For a detailed discussion of the advantages of peasant farming, See D. Warriner, Economics of Peasant Farming, OUP, 1939, pp.140-160.

89. Third Five Year Plan, op.cit., pp.96-97.

90. Ladejinsky, Agrarian Reforms in India, op.cit., pp.320

Two other points may be noted; firstly that cooperative farming were to be confined to the sector of palpably uneconomic farms and secondly limit was to be imposed on the maximum size of the cooperative farms.<sup>91</sup>

Subsequently, the state policy seems to have deviated from both these recommendations as evidenced by the First and Second Five Year Plans.

Regarding cooperative farming, the recommendations of the Ist Plan was:<sup>92</sup>

...for reasons, it is important that small and medium farms in particular should be encouraged and assisted to group themselves voluntarily into cooperative farming societies. This area under a cooperative farm should not exceed the prescribed minimum. It is perhaps not necessary to prescribe a maximum for cooperative farming society.

This gave way to a rather bold and ambitious view in the Second Five Year Plan, there was yet no clear cut vision of cooperative farming. The Plan recommended:<sup>93</sup>

The main task during the Second Plan is to take such essential steps as will provide sound foundations for the development of cooperative farming so that over a period of ten years or so a substantial proportion of agricultural lands are cultivated on cooperative lines.

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91. Ibid., pp.321-322.

92. First Five Year Plan, op.cit., pp.100-101.

93. Second Five Year Plan, op.cit., pp.68-69.

In the plan recommendations there was no qualification regarding restricting the cooperative pattern to the small holders. A presumption, therefore, arose that the entire agrarian economy would be converted into cooperative farming. Even when attention was pointedly drawn towards such an implication, no clarification was thought to be necessary on the plea that after all the development of cooperative farming was to be on a voluntary basis and, therefore, those who did not want to join could keep away.<sup>94</sup>

During the Second Plan, a Working Group was appointed in 1959 "to help in the formulation of an Action Programme on cooperative joint farming". The Working Group recommended:

- i. Efforts should be directed to promote spontaneous growth of cooperatives;
- ii. No coercion compulsion was to be used for a part of the rural community to join a cooperative; and
- iii. States which have already enacted such legislation should not enforce them and early action should be taken to repeal such laws.<sup>95</sup>

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94. Dandekar and Rath, op.cit., p.4.

95. India, Ministry of Community Development. and Cooperation, Report of the Working Group on Cooperative Farming, Vol.1, 1959, p.49. .pl63

The Third Five Year Plan mindful of the fact that not much had been accomplished during the First and Second Plans, was much more cautious. As a matter of fact, the Plan stated "In the main, cooperative farming has to grow out of success of the general agricultural effort through the community development movement, the progress of cooperative credit, marketing, distribution and processing, the growth of rural industry and the fulfillment of the objective of land reform."<sup>96</sup>

Despite the official rhetoric, the fact that numerically the cooperatives were far below anything anticipated by the planners was important, for it revealed the premature expectations and the lack of response on the part of the farmers.

The character of the membership of the majority of the cooperatives that came into being shed much light on this point. Contrary to expectations, it was not the small or medium farmers who found their way into the cooperatives. The greater part of the membership was a mixture of fairly large owners and a larger number of agricultural labourers, tenants and ex-tenants who were invited to join for two reasons:

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96. Third Five Year Plan, op.cit., p.96.

- i. to attain the minimum prescribed membership; and
- ii. to provide the requisite labour force.<sup>97</sup>

Some who pooled their lands were absentee and often the resident owner too did not participate in the cultivation either. The agricultural labour did the work for a stipulated wage rate which did not exceed the village wage rate. Their advantage lay in a longer period of employment but they were not really members of cooperative farms - they represented the "bogus membership."<sup>98</sup>

A landowner, on the other hand, organised a cooperative in order to:

- i. get financial assistance from the government to readily available inputs and facilitate paying off old debts;
- ii. to evade some of the provisions of tenancy laws.<sup>99</sup>

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97. D.R. Gadgil, "Towards a cooperative Commonwealth" in Writing and Speeches of Prof. D.G. Gadgil on Cooperation, Orient Long Mann, 1975, p.32.

98. Gunnar Myrdal, Asian Drama, An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations, Penguin, 1971, pp. 227-228. A basic element in the general lack of success of Indian Cooperative farming, according to him, was the failure to change the structure of land ownership.

99. Ibid., p.230.



## II E

In 1969, the Chief Minister's Conference on Land Reforms very emphatically stated the failure of land reform measures. "These measures", it was pointed out, "had been affecting only the land tenure structure, i.e., rights in ownership and possession of land, unrelated to the objectives and programmes of agricultural production... Consequently, the impact of the measures of land reforms, to the extent they were implemented, on the productive effort has not been of great significance." Further "the piecemeal manner in which such measures were undertaken leaving loopholes in the legislative provisions and their implementation permitted evasions and kept these measures far away from the objective aimed at".<sup>100</sup>

Hence, "in the absence of a common social direction of land reform and other agricultural programmes, i.e. strengthening the social, economic and political status of the rural people, ...land reform measures, even where their implementation is feasible, has proved to be only a eyewash. It is necessary to design and implement a progressive land reform policy as an integral part of a comprehensive

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100. Chief Minister's Conference on Land Reforms, op.cit., p.38.

approach, involving the strengthening of the institutional framework, services and supply of inputs."<sup>101</sup>

The issue of devising an adequate strategy for agrarian transformation in India which was raised sharply at the time of the Second Plan, suffered from a number of basic misconceptions. Firstly even when the need for land reforms was recognised, the issue was being discussed more as administrative measures and not as a struggle against the powerfully entrenched vested interests.<sup>102</sup> It is a fact that the stimulus to land legislation provided by extra-parliamentary forms of action for land reforms was one of the most important aspects of India's agrarian history since independence; a fact recognised both by the Government and radical political leaders. P. Sundaryya, a veteran communist leader noted that the sweep and momentum of land legislation during the early years of India can be partly attributed to the shock Telangana administered to the political elite and landed interests.<sup>103</sup> Similarly, the rise of Naxalism and the threat posed by it in the late 60's was one of the main factors responsible for the sense of

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101. Ibid., p.39.

102. Chief Minister's Conference on Land Reforms, op.cit.

103. P. Sundarraya, Telangana's People Struggle and Its lessons, CPI, Calcutta, 1972, p.3.

urgency with which the question of land reforms was revived.<sup>104</sup> ✓

Secondly, it was argued that the social endeavours were planned without taking cognizance of serious inequalities and class divisions existing within rural India.<sup>105</sup> ✓

Finally, although it was correctly assumed that industrialisation was impossible without a basic transformation of agriculture, the means devised were so ambitious and the planners so over-optimistic that they almost missed out on the constraints within which Indian agriculture was operating with its conventional input-output basis and deep seated social stratification.<sup>106</sup>

The fall out of this was that the professed line of institutional reform as against the technology oriented change never really took off. As a result, in order to overcome agricultural stagnation, land reform was pushed into the back ground and was denied its role in transforming

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104. Research and Policy Division, Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India, The Causes and Nature of Current Agrarian Tension, N.D., 1969. The report underlined the unsatisfactory nature of the agrarian structure as the main cause of agrarian tension and called for urgent attention to land reforms in the interest of the rural poor.

105. ~~Su~~namoy Chakravarty, op.cit., p.21.

106. Ibid.

the obsolete agrarian structure, even at the level of principle. Emphasis was now shifted towards technological modernisation.

#### SECTION IV

By the spring of 1966, it was abundantly clear that the Third Plan was a failure. One major reason for this was the lagging growth rates in agriculture which had become a serious limiting factor in the overall rate of economic advance as early as 1958.<sup>107</sup>

As a result in 1964, the planners announced a "fresh considerations of the assumptions, methods and techniques as well as the machinery of planning and plan implementation in the field of agriculture."<sup>108</sup>

The new strategy advanced stood in striking contrast to the basic assumptions of the past policies. Whereas, the older approach had relied mainly on more intensive utilisation of traditional inputs, for example, reclamation of cultivable wasteland and the more efficient application of underemployed labour, the new approach urged the utmost

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107. Ibid., pp.22-23. The two successive monsoon failures in 1965 and 1967 led to catastrophic decline in food production. Food grain production declined from 89 million tonnes in 1964/5 to 65 m.t. in 1965/6. Also see Francine R. Frankel, op.cit., p.693.

108. Planning Commission. Memorandum of the Fourth Five Year Plan, New Delhi, 1964, p.694.

importance of "applying scientific techniques and knowledge of the agricultural production at all stages."<sup>109</sup>

Moreover, in order to realise the new technological potentialities in agriculture, the Ministry argued for concessions in ideological goals which were focussed on bridging the inequalities in the rural areas. They pointed out that the policy of all India coverage under the Community Development Programme was causing scarce inputs to be diluted below the critical level needed to achieve significant increases in output i.e., they emphasised concentration of improved inputs in irrigated areas.<sup>110</sup>

The other aspect of this new agricultural strategy was that cultivators should be provided with economic incentives to adopt new practices. This required not only new initiatives in providing cheap agricultural credit for the majority of the poor farmers, but also a reversal of the past priorities in the formulation of a price policy, from a pre-occupation with providing low cost food grains for the urban poor to a firm commitment to "renumerative and incentive prices to make the production process reasonably safe for the farmers".<sup>111</sup>

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109. Francine. R. Frankel, op.cit., p.694.

110. Ibid.

111. Subramanyam, New Agricultural Strategy in a Socialist Society, (Mimeo) Planning Commission, p.5.

Thus, the talk of broadly transforming agriculture through institutional reforms and harnessing the labour of the peasantry yielded to a strategy of development based on private incentives to the 'first class farmers' who were far more efficient and successful, in better endowed areas, such as Punjab, Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh."<sup>112</sup>

The new agricultural policy comprised the following set of measures:

- i. a shift in emphasis from 'major' to 'minor' irrigation works, which implied largely a shift from publicly financed large irrigation pump sets;
- ii. adequate provision of 'credit' to those who were considered to be credit worthy, which in effect meant the large farmers;
- iii. an alteration in the input base of agriculture, which meant an increase in the rate of fertiliser consumption along with commercial sources of energy, such as electricity and diesel oil; and
- iv. development of fertiliser sensitive varieties of grams.<sup>113</sup>

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112. Daniel Thorner, op.cit., pp.34-35. Also see S. Chakravarty, op.cit., p. 24. According to him, it was openly admitted to bet on the strong in order to revive agricultural production.

113. Ibid., pp.24-25.

Although the adoption of this strategy had certain beneficial effects in terms of stepping up yields especially of wheat production and it being, not only land saving but also labour absorbing, yet the strategy has its shortcomings.<sup>114</sup>

The Green revolution did not lead to the type of labour displacement from agriculture which was predicted by some, mostly radical, economists. In fact, the increase in capital intensity in Indian agriculture, helped to achieve an increase in output per unit of land as well as agricultural worker, in the face of severe land constraint and rising agricultural population.

The widespread belief in official circles in India that the only feasible as well as surest way of improving the economic conditions of the weaker sections of the rural population through faster agricultural growth by adopting the technology oriented path has not only not done much good but has further worsened the conditions of certain sections of the agrarian sector especially the agricultural labourers.

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114. Wolf Ladejensky, 'How Green is the Green Revolution?' in EPW, Vol. VIII, No.54, Dec.29, 1973. Also see, S.S.Acharya, 'Green Revn in Farm Employment', Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics, Vol.VIII, No.54, Dec. 29, 1973.

Between 1960-61 and 1967-68, figures show that real wage rate does not seem to have gone up; if anything, there seems to have been a slight decline inspite of the fact that agricultural production grew by 60%.<sup>115</sup> ✓

Also, though there was a definite increase in the output of certain crops especially wheat, this rise in production of food grains barely kept ahead of population growth rates.<sup>115A</sup> Moreover, there was tremendous geographical concentration of the major increase in agricultural productivity.<sup>115B</sup> As a result of this, their share in total consumption declined.<sup>116</sup>

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115. Pranab Bardhan, 'Green Revn and Agricultural Labourers' in Charan D. Wadwa (ed.) Some Problems of India's Economic Policy, Tata McGraw Hill Publishing Company Ltd. New Delhi, 1977, p.539.

115A. Over the period 1962-65 to 1970-73, 212 districts showed positive growth rates of agricultural output, while 70 districts showed negative growth rates. Notwithstanding the numbers, districts covering more than half the area of the country have agricultural growth rates below 1.5% - well below the rate of population growth. See G.S. Bhalla and Y.K. Alagh, 'Spatial Pattern of Levels and Growth of Agricultural output in India', in A Report on Seminar..., IIPA, New Delhi, 24-25, Sept. 1977, pp.9-10.

115B. Nearly 2/3 of the area under rice has had either a negative rate of growth of output or one below the rate of population growth. By way of contrast the vast majority of wheat growing areas engaged substantial positive rates of growth. See Shiela Bhalla, Agricultural Growth: Performance. The Rate of Institutional and Infrastructural Factors, Impact and Prospect, in ibid.

116. Ibid., p.546.



An interesting feature of the Tenancy legislation in post-independent India had been the ban placed on any fresh 'leasing out' of land for regular rent. At the time of independence, nearly 35.7% of the total cultivated area in the country was under tenancy cultivation. This figure decreased to 20.3% in 1953-54, 11.6% in 1971-72 and 3.1% in 1976-77, partly because of the conferment of ownership rights on the tenants and partly as a result of eviction of the tenants.<sup>117</sup> But as agricultural census figures are based on land records and a large number of underhand tenants and unrecorded tenants are still existing, the above figures are largely under reported.<sup>118</sup> However, what is important is that this trend had finally emerged in the agrarian sector.

However, here what is even more interesting is the entrance of many large farmers as tenants in the lease market. While in the pre-independence period, mainly the poor and the needy leased in land from the landowners, the post-independence period saw a large number of medium and even big landholders going for 'leasing in' in a major way.

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117. Haque and Sirohi, Land Reforms since Independence, pp.133-134.

118. Amit Bhaduri, 'Agricultural backwardness under Semi Feudalism', Economic Journal, Vol.83, March 1973.

At the all India level, medium and large farms together (4-10 hectares and above ten hectares) amounted for nearly 40% of the total leased in area in 1970-71).<sup>119</sup> On the other hand, this trend while representing forces of capitalism in Indian agriculture created problems for the small farmer who wished to augment his holding. On the contrary, the big farmers desirous of leasing in land seemed to be doing so with remarkable impurity.<sup>120</sup>

This evidence, though scanty, challenges the assumption that is taken for granted by the policy makers and politicians, that distribution is a direct and natural consequence to growth and although in the first instance development benefits the propertied classes, it subsequently improves the situation of those classes that are largely or wholly dependent on the sale of their labour. Thus, while the Green Revolution increased output, it conferred more than proportionate benefits to better off farmers in the infra-structurally better endowed regions. It certainly broke the stagnation, which had assumed worrying dimensions, but it did so at the cost of increased polarization within the countryside. Poverty has anything but disappeared, even

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119. Haque and Sirohi, op.cit., pp.134-135.

120. V.S. Vyas, 'Tenancy in a Dynamic Setting in EPW, Vol.IV, No.26, June, 1970.

though the peasantry in the Green Revolution areas, are much better off than the peasantry in areas where Green Revolution is yet to take place.<sup>121</sup>

The results of such a policy were reflected in the acute accentuation of the unevenness existing at the beginning of such plans. The Fourth Plan admitted the existence of these structural imbalances and suggested that the solution would come through 'filtration' rather than a planned attack on the problem areas. The Fourth Plan's perception of the problem may be discerned in the following:<sup>121a</sup>

There remains, however, the very large scale of landless labour having no productive base and depending for its livelihood on wage employment. Programmes can be thought of for turning them into producers as through animal husbandry enterprise or by distribution of land. There are obvious limitations to possibilities in these directions. In the main, this class must be looked after by the provision of large employment opportunities. In the long run this will happen as a result of the process of accelerated development as is taking place in some areas of intensive economic activity within the country.

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121. While the Green Revolution may have affected production levels favourably in several cases, only in Punjab and Thailand is there evidence of a reduction in poverty, and even there the reduction was not particularly notable. Quoted in S. Chakravarty, op.cit., p.96.

121a. Planning Commission, Fourth Five Year Plan, 1970, p.132.

## CONCLUSION

Post-independent India witnessed a major effort on the part of the Indian State to effect agrarian reconstruction and organise Indian agriculture on progressive lines. The key to this reconstruction in the view of the planners lay in institutional reforms, which included tenancy legislations, ceiling laws, consolidation and cooperative farming. The effective implementation of these land reform provisions were to remove the vestiges of semi-feudal agriculture, and release forces of capitalism in agriculture.

Underlying these provisions was also the redistributive aspect. The land reform measures with the exception of ceiling legislation were to bring about a redistribution of agricultural income if not a redistribution of agricultural land. Such redistribution it was believed would not necessarily lead to an increase in productivity but was still considered worthwhile because of the social and political benefits which would accrue from it. However, despite this commitment to social justice and equality in the incomes, no clearly laid out strategy could be discerned in any one of the Plan documents.

The initial optimism which had prevailed in the official circles in the initial years of the planning

process disappeared overtime. There was a growing realisation that the land reform measures had fallen short of their stated objections. Various Committees and seminars were organised and studies were conducted to explain this lapse. The absence of a clearly defined objective of land reform on the part of the Indian state was conspicuous in these studies. Over and above, land reforms is a state subject. The centre merely lays down the broad parameters within which these legislations were to be enacted. However, the aims and objectives were so vague and ambiguous that these laws were easily evaded.

Moreover, the lack of participation and organisation of the peasantry in the process of implementation created its own problems. Despite the suggestions made by the Government sponsored committees to involve village panchayats in making land reform implementation a success, the suggestions seem to have fallen on deaf ears. Land reforms continued to be enacted from above in most of the states. Wherever this was not the case and the peasantry played an effective role as a pressure group, land reform measures seems to have yielded results as in Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, etc.

The end of the Third Plan saw a radical shift in agrarian reforms. The failure of the Indian economy to generate adequate agricultural surplus to finance economic

development and feed its ever increasing populace, forced the Indian planners to adopt a technology oriented growth strategy in favour of institutional reforms to enhance productivity. From now on, agricultural productivity was to receive priority over other aims.

CHAPTER IV

**CONFLICT OF IDEAS AND IDEOLOGIES:  
A CRITIQUE OF THE CONGRESS AGRARIAN REFORMS PROGRAMME**

## Chapter IV

...Agriculture is now virtually the only remaining source of national wealth of India... but what the British Government... takes as land tax at the present day sometimes approximates to the whole of the economic rent... This... paralysis agriculture, prevents savings and keeps the tiller of the soil in a state of poverty and indebtedness... In India the state virtually interferes with the accumulation of wealth from the soil, intercepts the gains of the tillers... leaving the cultivators permanently poor... In India, the state has fostered, no new industries and revived no old industries for the people... In one shape or another all that could be raised in India by an excessive taxation flowed to Europe, after paying for a starved administration... Verily the moisture of India blesses and fertilizers other lands.

This, then in a nutshell, was the legacy of British rule, which India inherited in 1947 with all the fibres and foundations of its society destroyed, its village economy disrupted and substituted by the parasitic landowner and moneylender - a gift of British land and taxation policy.

In the preceding chapters we have seen the gradual evolution of ideas that emerged in opposition to the British land policy with the aim of resurrecting Indian agriculture from its pitiable condition in which the British had left it. From the very beginning, as can be seen from the evidence provided, to reach a broad consensus on the nature of a programme to reform the land tenure system, had been a

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1. R.C. Dutt, Economic History of India, Vol.I, London, 1901, pp. viii-ix.



difficult task. However, the very presence of a common enemy - British imperialism - provided all political organisations at least a direction in which to move - the direction being the elimination of colonial rule.

Second, the need to carry as many sections of the Indian society with the Indian national movement against British rule made the task of a consensus on the nature of the agrarian programme, very difficult. However, all were united on one issue - the elimination of feudalism and feudal landlords from Indian agriculture.

The land reform programme adopted by the Indian government soon after independence was a product of years of debates and discussions on the question and was greatly influenced by the experiences of other countries, especially China and Soviet Russia.

Many individuals and political organisations, from the very beginning had been wary of the approach adopted to put the country on a path of rapid economic development and raise the standard of living of the mass of the people. Their fears were often not unfounded and were based on concrete economic analysis of the situation. The experiences, a few years later, revealed that economic freedom was not a logical corollary of political freedom, as the early planners had expected. A search for new ideas and plans thus began.

This chapter is an attempt to study the major critique of the Congress agrarian programme put forward by alternative currents in Indian politics both on the right and the left. These ideas contributed a great deal to the nature of India's economic development and deserve detailed mention.

### Section-I

The 'left' critique to be discussed in this section basically seeks to assess the views of the Communist Party of India.

The chief political task of the Communist party of India immediately after independence, was the destruction of feudal relations of production - which broadly was also the aim of Indian National Congress, since its inception. However, while the Congress had envisaged the development of Indian agriculture within the bourgeois democratic framework the means suggested by the Communists were radically different from that of other political organisations.

First, the most important task before the leaders, according to the CPI, was one of extricating India from the world capitalist path striking out a new path based on the experiences of China and Russia.<sup>2</sup>

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2. B.T. Ranadive, India's Economic Crisis and its solution, December, 1947, PPH, p.2.

Logically what followed from this was a call for nationalisation of the entire economy. Anything less than this according to them, would mean a reimposition of colonial rule.<sup>3</sup>

Second, the elimination of feudalism in agriculture, according to them, could be achieved only through a 'People's War' on the lines of the Telangana, led by the working class.<sup>4</sup> In such a situation, the CPI, according to them, had a crucial role to play in terms of raising the consciousness of the people through education and mobilising the widely dispersed peasant movements into one.<sup>5</sup>

These means were suggested with the basic aim of expropriation of land from the feudal lords and its distribution amongst the actual tillers.

The U.P. Zamindari Abolition Committee Report which was the first report on the agrarian question in India after independence, was met with strong protests from within the Communist circles.

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3. Ibid., pp.3-4.

4. Land to the Tillers and Power to the Working Masses! Resolution adopted at IInd congress, CPI, 1948, pp.11-12.

5. Ibid., p.16.

The Report of the Zamindari Abolition Committee of the United Provinces Government... once more serves to underline the utter hypocrisy of the promise made by the Congress leaders to the trusted and expectant peasantry of the country. It lays bare the real character of the Congress Governments land policy which is nothing but opening the land and the tiller to the exploitation of the capital and adjusting feudal land relations to suit this purpose. The Report is perhaps the biggest hoax perpetrated on the peasant since the establishment of the Congress.

The Report was rejected on the following grounds:

- i. In their view, in the name of abolition of zamindari, what was actually happening was the purchase by the government of the proprietary rights from the feudal landlords by paying a huge compensation. Since this compensation was to be paid out of the land rent, the Communists felt that the peasants would have only changed their masters.<sup>7</sup>
- ii. The Report contended that since the results achieved by redistribution of land would not be commensurate with the discontent and hardship resulting from it, no maximum limit should be placed on the maximum area held in cultivation either by a landlord or a tenant. This, to the

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6. V.M. Kaul, Analysis of the U.P. Zamindari Abolition Report, Bombay, July, 1949, CPI Publication, p.1.

7. Ibid., pp.2-3.

communists, implied that the Report was favourable to the landlords and not the tenants and agricultural labourers.<sup>8</sup>

iii. They were also critical of the article that required payment of ten times of rentals for acquiring Bhumidari rights.<sup>9</sup>

iv. The zamindari abolition did not give the peasantry even the meagre rent relief recommended in the report of the Committee. Also, rents on uneconomic holdings were not canceled as contained in the Karachi resolution of the Congress.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the system of Kankut<sup>11</sup> continued to prevail.

v. The provision for abolition of zamindari with compensation, according to them, had no historical, political and moral justification since these landlords were the creation of British

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8. Ibid., pp.25-26.

9. Shankar Dayal Tiwari, Zamindari Unmulan, Politico-Economic study series, No.2, UPPC of CPI, 1952, p.4. Also see, P.C. Joshi, U.P. Zamindari Abolition, Political Economic study series, No.4, CPI, 1952, pp.6-7.

10. Ibid., pp.15-17.

11. Shankar Dayal Tiwari, op.cit., p.10.

administration and provided the social base for British rule in India. On the other hand, the provision for compensation would not only not end exploitation but the compensation given would not even be reinvested in agriculture.<sup>12</sup>

vi. Regarding cooperative farming, the Committee had suggested the pooling in of all the uneconomic holdings in a village. Given the current recommendations any ten Bhumidars or Sirdars, possessing more than 30 acres of land could start a cooperative farm. However, the feeling that far from servicing the interests of peasants - the Congress Government was preparing a new base for feudal exploitation was widespread in Communist circles.<sup>13</sup> They held that it was not a cooperative of equal tenure holders that the Congress Government had proposed. The landlords, the tenants, the sub-tenants and landless, all were incorporated into a single system. The owners were to get dividends, the workers were to get wages and the management was to be carried out by a privileged bureaucracy. Such an organisation

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12. P.C. Joshi, op.cit., p.15 and p.22.

13. Shankar Dayal Tiwari, op.cit., p.26.

was opposed to the basic principles of a cooperative which by definition is an organisation of equal partners for mutual aid.<sup>13A</sup>

Hence, the understanding of the communists was that:<sup>14</sup>

Under the Zamindari Abolition Act, ..., no section of the peasantry gets any extra land, nor any section of the landlord, however large their holdings lose any portion of their huge holdings. The position of both the landlord and the peasants vis-a-vis the land in their possession remains exactly what it was before the Act. A land legislation that retains the status quo, as it existed under British rule is called the Abolition of Zamindari... A grosser example of demagoguery will be hard to find.

In the light of the above facts, it was felt that the foremost task before the kisan movement was to run a mass explanatory campaign among the peasantry exposing the true nature of the Zamindari abolition act on the basis of its actual provisions and their consequences and rally the peasantry for the realisation of the following demands :

- a. Free Bhumidari rights for all;

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13A. Bhowani Sen, Agrarian Crisis in India, PPH, Bombay, 1952, p.53. However, in the entire communist thinking nowhere has the concept of private property been explicitly challenged. Despite their criticism of cooperative farming in India, their view does not challenge the provision which recognises the proprietary rights of the members of the cooperatives.

14. P.C. Joshi, op.cit., p.6.

- b. Liquidation of all rents on uneconomic holdings and replacement of present system of feudal rents by steeply graduated agricultural income tax;
- c. Prevention of falsification of record of rents;
- d. Village panchayat to collect rents;
- e. Landlords possessing lands above thirty acres not to join cooperatives;
- f. Fallow land to be distributed only to cooperatives of landless or uneconomic holders;
- g. Revival of kisan sabhas, etc.<sup>15</sup>

The Bombay Fragmentation (Prevention) and Consolidation of Holding Act was published by the Bombay Congress Ministry in August 1946 and placed before the Legislature in February 1947. The Bill met with a storm of protests and even the legislative committee appointed by the MPCC demanded that it should be withdrawn or alternately modified radically.

It was felt that it was a measure for the expropriation of the peasantry of the province as the 'standard area' provided for in the bill was fixed at 5

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15. Ibid., pp.48-50.



acres. In view of the fact that the total number of holdings in the province was about 20 lakhs, out of which nearly fifty per cent was below 5 acres each, the bill amounted to a compulsory liquidation of the fragments and transfer of land from the peasants to sowcars and rich farmer capitalists.<sup>16</sup> According to S.S. More, a member of the MPCC, "... whether the measure will succeed in making agriculture profitable is problematical... Merely by putting restriction on the alienation of small pieces of land we cannot relieve this harmful and pauperising pressure on land. The real remedy is to start industrialization and create alternative channels of employment".<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, although the Communists realised that extremely small holdings and fragmented farms were no doubt a hindrance to prosperous agriculture, the problem, in their view could not be solved by liquidating poor peasant farms. As an alternative, they suggested nationalisation of the big landlords lands without compensation, their distribution among the poor peasants and landless agricultural labourers and expansion of industry so as to remove the growing pressure on land. To their mind, to base agricultural development on the expropriation, starvation

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16. S.A. Dange, Land Fragments and our Farmers, Speech on the Bombay Assembly, March 22, 1947, PPH. Preface.

17. Ibid., p.1.

and unemployment of the majority of cultivators, on the one hand, and the further enrichment of the idle rich - the rural bourgeoisie, was no solution to the problem.<sup>18</sup>

The Communist Party, also included among its demands, for agrarian reform;

- a. a ceiling to be fixed on the ownership and possession of lands by any person;
- b. surplus land held by anybody should be taken over and distributed among the landless; and
- c. Waste lands should be distributed.<sup>19</sup>

Their principle grudge against the Congress government was that although they accepted this programme in principle they hedged this acceptance of the "principle of land distribution" by a series of conditions which enabled the landlord to keep as much land as possible.<sup>20</sup>

The Communist Party also took a very serious view of the eviction drive launched by the landlords and wanted a total ban on these evictions, along with a review of the

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18. Ibid., pp.5-6.

19. EMS Namboodripad, Agrarian Reforms: A study of the Congress and Communist Approaches, Dec. 1956, CPI, p.6.

20. Ibid., p.7.

recent eviction proceedings with a view to restore the evicted tenants to the lands which they had been formerly holding. Further, it demanded that the provisions made in the various tenancy legislations allowing landlords to evict their tenants in the name of "resuming their lands for personal cultivation should be drastically revised."<sup>21</sup>

These faulty legislations, according to the Communist spokesman, were a consequence of different approaches applied in solving the agrarian crisis affecting post-independent India. While the Congress was more concerned with the effectiveness of the plough i.e., looked upon the crisis as a technological problem, the communists main concern was the man behind the plough.<sup>22</sup> They were critical of the Congress for their indifference regarding the ownership of land - whether it belonged to the peasant or the landless. This was despite the validity of the proposition that :

- i. agricultural productivity increases when land was given to the peasants which had been amply demonstrated in the Soviet Union and the Chinese People's Republic; and

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21. Ibid., pp.7-8.

22. Bhowari Sen, op.cit., pp.20-21.

ii. that feudal tenure was incompatible with national progress.<sup>23</sup>

The government emphasis on increasing productivity in order to overcome the economic crisis immediately after independence meant, "an increase in output of the essential consumption goods in the immediate future..." However, "a large and early increase in consumption and an increased rate of capital formation cannot go together."

The Communists were critical of this approach which set investment against consumption since, according to them, in real reform both go together and the bankruptcy of the suggested reform was that there was a contradiction between the two.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, real land reform was urgently needed with its emphasis on redistribution of land to the peasants without any payment of compensation. This opposition to payment of compensation was based on the grounds that, what was brought and sold was not land, but a legal right to collect a part of the produce as rent or interest. It was this separation between right of ownership and right of cultivation that was sought to be ended by the slogan "Land to the Tiller". It

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23. Ibid., pp.22-23.

24. Ibid., pp.49-50.

was this separation, according to them, that would end when landlordism was abolished without compensation.<sup>25</sup>

At this juncture, it would be interesting and a fruitful exercise to look at the views of E.M.S. Namboodripad, who was not only critical of 1948 stand adopted by the CPI which he defined as "crude leftism"<sup>26</sup> but also blamed the communists who far from rousing the entire peasantry against the Congress government, actually handed over the rich peasants to the Congress by suggesting that he stood to gain by these reforms.<sup>27</sup>

Despite correcting this crude "leftism" in May 1950 Central Committee Meeting, it was remarkable, according to him, that in the course of discussion as to the degree of capitalism in agriculture, the question raised and answered was whether and how far capitalism was growing in agriculture, it being assumed that if it was actually growing, it should be fought atleast next to feudalism. "Nobody had the vaguest idea that capitalism was an advance over feudalism." The Central Committee, in his view, could

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25. EMS Namboodripad, Agrarian Reforms., op.cit., pp.26-27.

26. The 1948 CPI stand held that the land reform measures had not gone far enough and, secondly that it represented a capitalist solution to the agrarian crisis.

27. E.M.S. Namboodripad, On the Agrarian Question in India, op.cit., pp.25-26.

not accept and apply the lessons of the Chinese Revolution, which through its agrarian reforms was carrying out a policy of deliberately building a rich peasant economy which meant nothing but promoting capitalism in agriculture.<sup>28</sup>

The important point about these reforms, according to him, was not that they facilitated the "growth of capitalism" in certain limited spheres of agriculture but that they prevented the same in a large part of the country. For while it gave enough land to the landlord to transform himself into a capitalist farmer, and it also enabled the well to do farmer who could pay for it to get land with full proprietary rights and use it for purposes of applying modern technology of cultivation, saddled the overwhelmingly majority of peasants with such heavy burdens that they would be in no position to introduce new agricultural practices.<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, the theory, propounded by the CPI, on "the growth of capitalism" in agriculture was, according to him, particularly dangerous because instead of the real enemy i.e., the rent receiving landlord and the interest receiving usurer, it concentrated fire against the capitalist, whose growth, if true, was a factor of progress in the development of the forces of production.<sup>30</sup>

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28. Ibid., pp.26-27.

29. Ibid., p.36.

30. Ibid., pp.36-37.

However, he did point out certain factors that were working against the landlord and well to do peasants from turning into capitalist farmers. These were:

- i. Meagre advances in agricultural technology accompanied by a disproportionate rise in the taxes on the agrarian sector;
- ii. Fluctuations in prices; and
- iii. Payments of huge amounts to acquire full proprietary rights.<sup>31</sup>

This analysis of the Communist Party stemmed from the assumption that the bourgeois in India was collaborationist and sold-out (exemplified by the Congress) and hence incapable of affecting an anti-feudal revolution.<sup>31A</sup> In their view the Congress was essentially perpetuating and reinforcing feudalism in agriculture. To them the Congress

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31. Ibid., p.39.

31A. The Communists had been consistent in their assessment of the Congress as a bourgeois organisation throughout the national movement. Even when they urged the formation of a United Front in the 1930's there was no basic revision in their stand vis-a-vis the Congress. Their basic assumption continued to be that the basic bourgeois character of the Congress leadership needed to be exposed. See Bhagwan Josh, 'Understanding Indian Communist; A Survey of Approaches to the Study of the Communist Movement in India' in Situating Indian History, op.cit., pp.302-303.

agrarian reforms programme seemed to be an eye-wash, which far from implementing the objective of 'land to the tiller', was pro-landlord.<sup>31B</sup> As a remedial measure, the left proposed nationalisation of land belonging to the feudal landlords without any sort of compensation being paid to them. This vision of the communists was largely coloured by the experiences in the Soviet Union where land was forcibly expropriated from the kulaks. This kind of an analysis which did not take into account the peculiarities of the Indian economy, was not only unhistorical but also fundamentally affected the prospects of the Communist Movement.

A divergent view as articulated by EMS Namboodripad emerged from within the Communist Party which strongly believed that this analysis of the Indian agrarian problem had adversely affected the course of the communist movement by handing over the rich peasants to the Congress, and thus needed to be corrected.

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31B. This assessment of the Congress agrarian reforms programme stemmed from the Communist Party's assumption that there had really not been any real transfer of power and the Congress had made a treacherous compromise with imperialism, in alliance with the landlords, the princes and the big bourgeois. See Bipan Chandra, "A strategy in Crisis: The CPI debate, 1955-56", in Critical Left Appraisals, op.cit.



He was also critical of the current Communist stand which far from viewing capitalist development in agriculture as an advance over feudalism, gave a call for checking its growth. EMS Namboodripad, was critical of the reforms initiated by the Congress on the grounds that it prevented the growth of capitalism in a large part of the country.

## Section II

This section will essentially deal with the 'right' critique of the Congress agrarian programme that emerged in post-independent India. The first sub-section will deal with the 'rural bourgeois' point of view epitomised by Charan Singh. In the second sub-section an attempt will be made to highlight the 'capitalist' view point.

In the years of 1967-69, there was a major division in the post-independent history of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh. The Bharatiya Kranti Dal of Charan Singh was formed and the Congress base in the countryside was severely damaged.

In the 1969 elections, the Bharatiya Kranti Dal won 21% of the seats. As a consequence, agrarian issues and interests became more central than they had been during the Nehru period and it became necessary for the competing political forces to pay closer attention to the distinct

interests of different classes in the North Indian countryside.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout the first twenty years of Congress dominance in U.P. Politics, Charan Singh consistently attacked the emphasis on heavy industry in Indian Planning and spoke on behalf of the values of village life, peasant economy and rural democracy.<sup>32</sup>

In the first post-independent government in U.P. Charan Singh in the capacity of the Minister of Revenue was the principle architect of the government's major price of Zamindari abolition. He attempted to establish in place of the old and complicated system of land tenures, a uniform pattern of land ownership based on our ideal of peasant proprietorship on personally cultivated holdings of moderate but economic size.<sup>33</sup>

His ideal of a developed society was based on a prosperous agricultural economy, in which the peasant

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31. Paul Brass, "Division in the Congress and the Rise of Agrarian Interests and Issues in U.P. Politics - 1952-77" in John R. Wood (ed.). State Politics in contemporary India, Crisis or continuity, West view Press, London, 1984, p.22.

32. Ibid., pp.22-23.

33. S.K. Goyal, "Approach to Agrarian Structure: The Policy options" in Seminar on Economic Policy Options, IIPA, 24-25, Sept. 1977, pp.1-2.

proprietors would be the leading class. Also, resources would not be taken away from the agricultural sector for the sake of projects that would benefit the urban sector primarily, but rather the development of urban industrial sector would depend upon increasing the prosperity of the peasantry and hence, the purchasing power of the peasantry.<sup>34</sup>

What should be the future pattern of the Indian agrarian structure? The future agrarian structures according to him, should ensure:

- i. Maximum production of wealth or eradication of poverty;<sup>35</sup>
- ii. Provision of full employment.
- iii. Equitable distribution of wealth and avoidance of undue disparities in income; and
- iv. Strengthening of democratic trends.<sup>36</sup>

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34. Paul Brass, op.cit., pp.29-30.

35. The Objective assumes that enhancement of agricultural wealth would not be equally shared but the gains of development would somehow flow in favour of the poorest, resulting in eradication of poverty.

36. Charan Singh, India's Poverty and Its solution, Asia Publishing House, N.D., 1964, p.33.

Joint Farming X-Rayed: The Problem and its solution, published in 1959 provides us with useful insights into Charan Singh's perceptions on land reforms. This work was written in response to the Nagpur resolution of the Congress which stood for establishment of large scale cooperative farms in India as a means of solving India's agrarian problem. Charan Singh not only attacked the concept, but provided a positive statement and proposal backed by statistical evidence, for an economic development strategy for India based upon agriculture rather than industrial growth and defended of the system of peasant proprietorship as the most suitable form of social organisation to achieve both the economic goals of development and political goals of democracy.<sup>37</sup> As a result, he criticised every form of large scale mechanised farming.

His criticism was based on three premises:

- i. capital intensive industries was an inappropriate strategy for India as:
  - a. large scale enterprises produce less per unit of capital invested than small enterprises;  
and

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37. Paul Brass, Op.cit., pp.30-31.

b. it will throw out of work those who are already employed.<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, he proposed a capital intensive strategy for agriculture in India, but without large machinery. In his view, with a growing population, income or output per head would ordinarily rise only if the rate of growth of capital, or of improvements in agriculture, or of both is greater than the rate of growth in population.<sup>39</sup> He strongly believed that industrialisation in India must not and cannot be based on the exploitation of existing agricultural resources but must be preceded by "a revolution in agricultural production - a technological revolution which would ensure far greater production per-acre than today. Therefore, he was critical of the priorities given to industrialisation in the Second Five Year Plan.<sup>40</sup>

ii. The second premise was implicit in the first. He argued that as land in India was an inelastic

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38. Charan Singh, op.cit., p.257.

39. Ibid., p.229.

40. Ibid., pp.250-1.

factor of production, it must be used in such a way as to bring the greatest return possible and to provide "a living to the maximum number of people."<sup>41</sup> Capital investment, thus, should be of the nature that are both land augmenting and labour intensive with the emphasis an increased production per acre. Having said this he emphasised one general rule. According to him, none should be allowed to hold an area of land which, under its particular technique of farming, is beyond the capacity of an average man or worker to manage, and none possess less than area below which how-so-much labour may be applied to it, land will not produce more per-acre."<sup>42</sup>

- iii. The most effective use of India's land and the solution of economic problems, according to Charan Singh, lay "in an economy of small farms operated by animal or ... manual power."<sup>43</sup> He held that the aim of agricultural policy in India should not be institutional reform through joint farming, but the provision to the farmer of technological and

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41. Ibid., pp.33-34.

42. Quoted in S.K. Goyal, op.cit., pp.3-4.

43. Charan Singh, op.cit., p.19.

technical improvements, namely "water, manure, improved seeds, pesticides and better farming practices in general."<sup>44</sup> He was, however, not in favour of chemical fertilizers and tractors and heavy machinery. While he rejected the former on the grounds that it was a poor substitute for organic manure, the latter in his view, increased output per worker and not per acre.<sup>45</sup>

- vi. In spite of large disparities in operational holdings, Charan Singh argued:<sup>46</sup>

...the belief that distribution of surplus land available on imposition of ceilings was going to solve the problem of Harijans, the landless or the marginal farmers and thus remove poverty of the rural society to any appreciable degree, has proved a delusion. However, the ceilings that might be fixed, the acreage that could be available for distribution, was too little to go around for all those who may need it or even a substantial section of them.

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44. Ibid., p.63.

45. Ibid., p.260.

46. Quoted in S.K. Goyal, op.cit., p.13.

For the same reason, he was critical of the ruling party and policy makers' obsession with the notion of land ceilings, "such that the idea of land reform is almost exhausted by that one concept. At the same time he was critical of the criteria used to determine the floor and the ceiling - the criteria being a family holding. This was not acceptable to him since this definition of a family holding suggested by the Planning commission had three determinants viz. income, size of the family and its cultivating capacity, which in his view were not satisfactory.

Income from land could not be a reliable guide since that would depend upon the type of farming, the locality and the ability of the farmer. Also, it is likely to differ with the quantity of production and with prices and so many other factors that were beyond an individual's control.

On the other hand, he suggested, that a family holding may be defined solely with reference to the area that an average family could fully exploit.<sup>46A</sup>

It is, thus, obvious that Charan Singh had no predilection towards a policy of land redistribution. He, however, agreed to land redistribution in areas where

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46A. Charan Singh, op.cit., p.125.



percentage of agricultural labour to cultivators was high. It was this adverse ratio that he considered responsible for emergence of communism in Kerala, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Tamil Nadu.<sup>47</sup>

The question that now arises is: How would Charan Singh, thesis meet the four aims he placed before himself for evolving a new agrarian structure? His aims were to ensure maximum production, full employment, equitable distribution and strengthening of democracy.

As far as the first objective of achieving highest productivity per acre is concerned resulting in maximum agricultural production, it is obvious that without changing the pattern of land holdings one could not achieve this aim (unless one could substitute labour by capital at a massive scale). Larger farms could give higher marketed surplus and provide more net return to the large farmers individually. But this would certainly not result in highest per acre productivity.<sup>48</sup> There could be prosperity but not in the sense of eradication of poverty.

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47. Ibid., p.14.

48. Doreen Warriner, Land Reform in Principle and practice, Clarendon Press, 1969, pp.374,379. She argues that although agrarian reforms are not a necessary and sufficient condition for economic development. It is important from the point of view for improving the socio-economic conditons of the under privilaged.

The second objective of full employment was defeated, the moment one wished to leave large holdings undisturbed. The per acre input of labour requirements would be lesser on two counts:

- i. the rigidities of village wage structure would not leave incentive for large farmers to employ labour beyond a point; and
- ii. with a desire to avoid all possible labour disputes large farmers would opt for mechanisation and labour saving implements.<sup>49</sup>

In brief, Charan Singh's thesis, if implemented, would succeed in providing full employment to the bigger and well to do farmers, and push most of the marginal farmers and landless labourers to the non-agricultural sector.<sup>50</sup>

- iii. The third aim of reducing inequalities does not get any place in Charan Singh's proposed agrarian structure. In fact, he pleads for continuance of the system and shed the obsession that Indian planners have suffered from. In fact, he dealt very firmly with the land grab movement" of the CPI and SSP in 1970.<sup>51</sup>

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49. S.K. Goyal, op.cit., pp.15-16.

50. Charan Singh, op.cit., pp.185-186.

51. Paul Brass, op.cit., p.37.

iv. The objective of making democracy a success would be possible, in his view, in an economy of small farms. This was because small farms would not only produce more wealth and provide more employment but also remove glaring disparities from land which would provide the most secure base for democracy (p.128).

Charan Singh's thesis, despite all its novelty, centered around one particular segment of the peasantry i.e. the rich peasantry or the Bhumidars. In his tenure as the Revenue Minister of Uttar Pradesh, he went to the extent of proposing a remission of land revenue paid by the bhumidars, to one third of the amount they had been originally paying to the Zamindars. On the other hand, his suggestions in no way take into account the plight of those tenants who were unable to purchase proprietary rights or the agricultural labourers. One sometimes wonders how the twin objectives of equitable distribution of income and strengthening of the democratic trends could be achieved if measures suggested by him would have been translated in practice.

The Bombay Plan (1944-45) which reflected the views of a wide-cross section of the Indian capitalist class like Purushottam Das Thakurdas, J.R.D. Tata, G.D. Birla, John Mathai, etc. had suggested a programme of comprehensive reforms in agriculture with a view to eliminate the feudal

and semi-feudal tendencies in Indian agriculture. Some of the changes suggested by them were as follows:

- i. Abolish tenancy and Zamindari in favour of peasant proprietorship. This was to be done by introducing ryotwari tenure in zamindari areas.
- ii. Cooperativization was to be introduced in order to:
  - a. eliminate usury and the usurer;
  - b. secure remunerative prices for the peasant;
  - c. finance the liquidation of agricultural debts; and
  - d. to meet the problem of uneconomic holdings.
- iii. Minimum agricultural wages were to be fixed and agricultural income tax was to be introduced on a graduated scale, and if possible, with an exemption limit; and finally
- iv. Technological inputs were to be introduced and popularized through model farms, in order to enhance productivity.<sup>52</sup>

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52. Aditya Mukherjee, "The Indian Capitalist Class, op.cit., pp. 258-259.

In 1964, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), founded in 1927, held a seminar in order to review agricultural development and economic progress. A special committee was set up in order to review agricultural policy and land reforms, with Dr. Panjab Rao. S. Deshmukh, President of Bharat Krishak Samaj, as the Chairman.

The committee, after reviewing the progress in the field of agricultural policy came to the conclusion that on account of differences in the type of land, the character of the peasantry and its material background, as also the lack of homogeneity and uniformity in the implementation of rural development programme, the success of the agrarian policy had widely differed from state to state and from area to area within the state.<sup>53</sup>

The committee recalled that the Planning Commission had recommended to State governments that certain types of farms like cane farms should be exempted from ceiling legislation. The recommendations had not been uniformly followed by State governments and in certain states even efficient modern farms run by sugar industries had not escaped, the threat of ceiling law. The committee felt that

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53. FICCI, Seminar for Agricultural Development and Economic Progress, August, 28-29, 1964, p.30.

such farms had not only attained a very high level of yield per acre but also served as model farms. In this light the committee recommended that government should review the policy and modify it on a production oriented basis.<sup>54</sup>

On the other hand, the committee was of the view that since the land released as a result of ceiling imposition was meagre and inconsequential, the essential aim of agricultural policy in general and land reforms in particular should be to improve conditions of production and encourage management of agricultural land on a basis similar to the organisation of industries.<sup>55</sup>

The committee was critical of the governments consolidation programme which, according to them, had been halting and slow that often lands had to be left fallow.<sup>56</sup>

Regarding community development projects the committee felt that emphasis in the programme was defective. They suggested that instead of spreading resources thinly over a wide area, the orientation should be far more intensive. Also, it recommended that the community development projects

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54. Ibid., p.34.

55. Ibid., pp.31-32.

56. Ibid., p.32.

should not operate in isolation, as was the case, but must form a part and parcel of the agricultural administration.<sup>57</sup>

Shri S.L. Kriloskar, Vice President of the FICCI, felt that despite the fact in an agrarian nation like ours where agriculture was the key to economic development, it had not received the critical importance and adequate attention that it deserved.<sup>58</sup> He felt that agriculture in order to overcome the economic crisis should be operated like industry, not in the sense of being more capital intensive, but in the sense of being ruled by a spirit of entrepreneurship and motive to take the maximum gain from available resources. The available cultivable land, according to him, should be used with greatest economy and with such means as would step up productivity rapidly. Also, the outlook of the farmers was to be transformed so as to make 'change' acceptable and improvement to be sought for.<sup>59</sup>

Sri C. Subramanian, Minister for Food and Agriculture, felt that the failure of Indian agriculture was mainly due to the shortfalls in the implementation of policies and

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57. Ibid., pp.32-33.

58. Ibid., p.1.

59. Ibid., pp.5-6.

programmes for which the Indian agricultural administration had to be held responsible. However, he realised that it would be fool-hardy to expect that any movement for modernising agriculture could be handled by the government exclusively. This, according to him, had to become a large mass movement in which all agencies of government and the public including organised industry and trade had to play a substantial role.<sup>60</sup> Otherwise, "agriculture would never get into a self sustaining stage and would definitely remain stuck to the ground".

Thus it is clear that even the Indian capitalist class realised the urgent need for land reforms with the aim of undermining the feudal and semi-feudal tendencies in Indian agriculture, and making it a profitable enterprise. This trend had been obvious even prior to independence. The Bombay Plan was one such document in which the reform of the land tenure system was given due weightage. The major ideas put forward in this plan ranged from zamindari abolition and tenancy reforms to cooperativization, which was quite similar to the ideas on agrarian reforms posited by the Congress. It is clear, then, that contrary to the criticisms directed at the Indian capitalist class for having feudal links in Marxist writings, they were proposing

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60. Ibid., p.12.



measures which would progressively usher in capitalist and peasant farming. The fact that the measure suggested by them did not take the landless agricultural labourers in account, was not because of their feudal links but because they were a bourgeoisie propertied class.<sup>61</sup> In the seminar organised by FICCI in 1964, this point was made even more sharply. This seminar was an attempt towards success the presence of land reforms in post-independent India. The basic thrust of the seminar was whether reforms in the land tenure system had contributed towards enhancing agricultural productivity. It was from this vantage point that land reform measures of the Indian government was assessed.

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61. For a detailed discussion, see Aditya Mukherjee, "The Indian Capitalist Class...", op.cit., pp.258-60.

CONCLUSION

## C O N C L U S I O N

The attempt in this dissertation has been to study the evolution of ideas on land reforms.

Land reforms in India was initiated with the larger aim of modernising the Indian economy which was in complete shambles prior to independence. Agriculture was probably the worst affected. Land revenue had been the major source of income of the British in India and agriculture a major source of 'surplus' extraction. Had agriculture been organised on progressive lines, and proper reforms, both institutional and technological, initiated, Indian agriculture would not have been in a state which it was in when colonialism made its exist from India. The failure of the colonial State to undertake any major reforms in the agrarian sector led to stagnation and decline in productivity. Indian economy fast lost its self-sufficiency and came to occupy a subordinate position vis-a-vis the British economy. These demands on the Indian economy consequently led to its transformation into a classical colony whereby India became a major exporter of raw materials and food grains to meet the rapidly increasing demands of British industries and a market for British industrial products. This transformation reflected the decline in Indian industries and increasing dependence on agriculture.

At the close of the 19th century therefore the agrarian problem was perhaps the most important problem confronting the Indian economy.

At this point it would be interesting to point out, that the British administrators in the initial phase of their conquest, imbued with a spirit of 'civilizing mission' did try to interfere with the traditional land and revenue systems. However, this tendency was shortlived and post mutiny era witnessed a reversal of this policy. The British administrators preferred to follow a policy of non interference and status quo maintenance. The pronounced tendency now was towards restricting the scope of enquiry to such selected aspects as did not lead towards a sharp critique of British policies. The most significant example of this shift was the Report of the Royal Commission on Agriculture (1928). The Commission was appointed to make recommendation for the improvement of agriculture and to promote the welfare and prosperity of the rural population. The scope of enquiry of this commission was however, limited by its terms of reference which directed the commission 'not to make recommendations regarding the existing system of land ownership and tenancy or of assessment of land revenue and irrigation changes<sup>1</sup>. It was the representatives of

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1. Report of the Royal Commission in Agriculture, op.cit., p.3.

emerging Indian nationalism who addressed themselves to this task.

The early nationalists, unlike the British, studied almost all aspects of the Indian rural problem. Land problem and land policy (including revenue policy) were proposed as crucial problem areas for intellectual enquiry by the early nationalists.

Unlike the British counterparts, who excluded from the purview of all official enquiry and investigations questions relating to the institutional structure evolved under British rule, the early nationalists tried to establish a causal nexus between the institutional structure created by the British and the phenomenon of Indian backwardness including agricultural backwardness.

The early nationalists were not merely critical of the role of colonialism in perpetuating and reinforcing economic backwardness but provided an alternative model for India's economic development including agricultural development.

The early nationalists were staunch upholders of the concept of private property. They strongly believed that unless proprietary rights were conferred on all those who tilled the land, the psychological stimulus to make agriculture a profitable enterprise could not be provided. Peasants proprietorship, thus, was the crux of the institutional reforms suggested by the early nationalists.

The early nationalists took a holistic view of the economic problems confronting the Indian economy. For them agricultural backwardness was not a merely sectoral problem but was inextricably linked to industrial growth. Unless new avenues were created to absorb the surplus population, the progressive ruralisation of the Indian economy and the excessive dependence on land could not be averted.

However, for the Moderates land problem and land policy remained an intellectual exercise. Despite having established a direct relation between the colonial state and agricultural backwardness, they failed to mobilise the masses around any major issue. This limitation was perhaps inherent in the situation itself. The effort to create a united public opinion forced them to take up only those issues which in no way would alienate any section of the Indian society. As a result ever while they were well aware of the evils arising out of the existence of parasitic feudal landlordism, they never voiced the demand for abolition of the Zamindari system (although this demand was implicit in the concept of peasant proprietorship). The later nationalists also faced a somewhat similar dilemma, especially in the 1920s and 1930s which saw an unprecedented rise in the peasant activities and it was not until 1945 that the demand for Zamindari abolition was proposed.

The late 1920s and 1930s witnessed the entry of masses on the Indian political scene. Apart from the democratisation of the Congress organisation a large number of peasant organisations and trade unions were organised. Major movements were launched which centred around peasant problems especially after the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi from South Africa. This new trend in Indian politics not only instilled a new sense of confidence amongst the Indian peasantry but also made them feel a part of the Indian nation.

However, it was not until 1931 at the Karachi session that the Indian National Congress formulated a comprehensive agrarian programme. From then onwards agrarian question acquired prominence in the overall Congress programme of combating imperialism.

The later nationalists like their predecessors were confronted with a somewhat similar dilemma of formulating a programme which could carry different sections of the Indian society against British imperialism towards Swaraj. However their basic task was often more difficult for them than their precedesors, especially in the wake of the formation of the Communist Party of India, the All India Kisan Sabha, The Congress Socialist Party, etc. who identified themselves with the peasantry and its demands and were strongly critical of the Congress position on the land question.

Even within the Congress with its diverse ideological strands there were dissensions. Jawaharlal Nehru for one strongly believed that political freedom without economic freedom made little sense. With the same objective, he proposed the abolition of Zamindari as early as in 1928 at the U.P. Political Conference. His most radical phase was however in the latter part of the 1930s when as the president of the Faizpur session, he proposed socialisation of land, as had been the case in Soviet Russia. However, the compulsions of a broad unified anti-imperialist front always brought him back into the Congress fold.

The Congress stand on the land question, thus was not purely on agro-economic consideration. It was above all a political question geared towards attaining Swaraj. However, Swaraj did not constitute merely political freedom but also had an economic content. For the peasantry, above all, Swaraj broadly signified freedom from feudal burdens and reforms in the agricultural institution.

This emphasis on economic freedom was best reflected in the 1937-1939 Ministry period when numerous agrarian legislations were enacted with the primary aim of emancipation of the peasantry from its depressed state. Despite the failure of the Ministry period to initiate radical agrarian legislations, partly due to its functioning within the colonial state and mainly because of the



compulsions of a broad united anti-imperialist front, the experience of this period left an everlasting mark on the Congress Agrarian programme. The urgent need to remove the blemishes of feudalism in agriculture continued to echo throughout the national movement.

This commitment to land reforms found reflection in Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee Report (1948) and the Economic Programmes Sub-committee (1950), immediately after independence. Land reforms constituted a major component of India's agricultural planning and aimed at changes in the rural institutional structure through such legislations as zamindari abolition with compensation, tenancy reforms, ceiling imposition and consolidation of fragmented holdings.

These institutional reforms in agriculture were initiated with the primary objective of introducing capitalism in agriculture. This had been the legacy of the Indian National Movement. The Moderates were the first to initiate a discussion on the peasant question from a bourgeois nationalist standpoint. This trend continued throughout the national movement. It was precisely for this reason that the Congress did not respond to the Communist Agrarian Programme of 1930 which aimed at a radical redistribution of land through militant mobilisation and expropriation of zamindar's lands. For a similar reason, the suggestions of the National Planning Committee which

were published in 1945, and which was as radical as any Communist Programme could hope to be, was never taken into account while formulating the land reform measures in independent India.

While the institutional reforms were initiated with the primary aim of reorganising agriculture on progressive lines and conferring proprietary rights on actual tillers, the failure of the Indian state to involve the peasantry in the implementation process, prevented the measures from taking off' at a scale the state had hoped. Despite the suggestions and recommendations made by the government sponsored committees, the academicians, etc. to prevent the land reform measures from getting diluted by the vested interests entrenched in the countryside, these suggestions were largely ignored.

The 1960's marked a watershed in Indian agriculture. The failure of the institutional reforms to enhance agricultural productivity to meet the demands of industrialisation and the increasing populace forced the Indian planners to adopt a new technology package which included increasing use of fertilisers, high yielding variety seeds, etc.

The new policy marked a notable shift in the perception of what constituted the crucial constraint in the agrarian

sector. Earlier theorist had maintained that the absence of knowledge of appropriate agricultural practice along with the maintenance of an obsolete social structure prevented increases in agricultural production. Land reform was considered very important, atleast in principle. The new strategy seemed to deny the critical importance of land reform even on the level of principle. Instead emphasis was shifted towards technological modernisation. The prevalent view in official circles was that it was essential to bet on the strong' if the rate of agricultural production was to be revived. It was believed that this increase in growth would gradually trickle down' to the poorer sections of the peasantry.

This is not the occasion to get into this discussion of whether increased growth rates in agriculture was followed by distribution or not. Suffice it to say that the benefits of the increased output through the Green Revolution strategy conferred benefits to the better off sections of the peasantry in the infrastructurally better endowed regions.

The planners had travelled a long way from the stated objectives of social justice and equity to an ever increasing emphasis on enhancing agricultural productivity.

India's attempt at effecting institutional reforms in the agrarian sector in the post-independent period has been a subject of many studies, both at home and abroad. This is not the place to evaluate these studies which largely center around the success or failure of land reform legislations at the level of implementation. However, it is crucial to point out the fact that the norms by which these attempts are judged has generally been tempered not by an appreciation of what was possible but by the experiences of other countries, be it China or Soviet Russia (without taking the specificities of the Indian situation into account). This is especially true of the left historiography. The observations made in chapter four clearly demonstrate that an almost nihilistic criticism of the Congress and its agrarian programme most certainly stemmed from the left's blinkered understanding of the Congress-led national movement. This position soon become axiomatic in the left tradition and was unilaterally carried on in the post-independence period.

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