

# Land Reforms Today

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After independence India's land-reforms efforts started with the aim of helping landless farm toilers to become small peasants owning small plots of farmland. Seventy years later one can see that this effort did not succeed - the achievements are so small as to be negligible. On the reverse side, there is a much more massive drive to turn small peasants into landless workers. This is perhaps the biggest tragedy of India's agricultural experience that the noble aim of helping the landless to become farmers got reversed into the harsh reality of turning farmers into landless workers.

Therefore any comprehensive land-reforms effort should include both these essential components - providing land to landless peasants and protecting land rights of existing farmers.

Land reforms should be put in the forefront of the efforts to reduce poverty, promote sustainable development of rural areas and to bring enduring peace and justice to the people. For this the following action plan may be recommended.

What is urgently needed is comprehensive plan to distribute at least 50 million acres of land to about 25 million landless and near landless peasant households in the country (about 2.5 acres of land each to entire landless peasants and about 1.5 acres of land each to those marginal peasants who already have some land) over the next decade. To make this a reality

- (i) Launch a time-bound effective drive to ensure that wherever land pattas have been given to the poor, they should be able to occupy the land and cultivate it.
- (ii) Similarly launch a drive to ensure that the distribution of remaining bhoodan land should be speeded up.
- (iii) Initiate a special drive to ensure that ceiling land identified but not yet distributed among the poor can reach them.
- (iv) Bring necessary amendments, in land reform (including land ceiling) laws to make available more land for the rural poor.
- (v) Apply irrigated land ceilings in irrigated areas to get more land for the poor.
- (vi) Legislation recently introduced to provide land rights to tribals in disputed areas is welcome. However several tribals and other poor farmers involved in disputes with the forest department will be left out of the scope of this legislation. In such cases efforts should be made to involve such people in tree-farming schemes so that the objective of increasing tree-cover can be reconciled with protecting the livelihood of these people and no evictions are necessary.
- (vii) All cases to tribal land alienation should be resolved speedily so that the land of tribals is restored to them.
- (viii) Groups of landless and rural poor should be mobilised to identify additional land that can be made available to them in and near their villages.
- (ix) Encroachments by the rich on community land/government land should be removed strictly so that this land becomes available for community use and for the poor.
- (x) Reclamation of cultivable wastelands should be speeded up, preferably by providing rights and resources to groups of the rural poor themselves.
- (xi) Legislation to curb farm land ownership by urban rich and absentee landowners should be enacted.

- (xii) Homestead land with full legal rights, preferably with some space for kitchen gardens, should be assured to all rural poor households.

### **PREVENTING LOSS OF FARMLAND**

- (i) As far as possible, fertile farmland should not be acquired for non-agricultural uses.
- (ii) When this cannot be avoided, alternative land should be provided to displaced peasants by developing cultivable wastelands and in other ways, (with additional compensation for resettlement). Dam evictors can be given a part of newly irrigated land (which will have lower ceiling).
- (iii) Land of any small peasant should not be auctioned to pay debts, or for other reasons.
- (iv) Inexpensive technologies based on better use of local resources should be encouraged to reduce economic losses of vulnerable farmers.
- (v) Spread of liquor shops, gambling and dowry system in villages should be checked,
- (vi) Overall better resources for small farmers and for rural health.
- (vii) Existing wild life laws should be changed to involve people in wild-life protection instead of displacing them from protected areas.
- (viii) Equal land rights for women and giving them a greater say in rural programmes.

### **POVERTY ALLEVIATION AND LAND REFORMS**

In particular efforts should be made to link up the rural employment guarantee scheme with land reforms so that maximum soil and water conservation benefits and irrigation benefits can be provided to more vulnerable and poorer farmers, particularly first generation farmers or beneficiaries of land distribution effort. Watershed Development Programme should pay special attention to meeting the needs of these farmers. Increasing tree-cover and improving pasture land should be emphasised.

Special attention should be given to evolving inexpensive sustainable technologies which can give good results for low-resource farmers cultivating about 2 acres of land. Mixed farming systems and organic farming should be encouraged. Cottage industries particularly khadi should be encouraged. Mahatma Gandhi's objective of making villages as self-reliant as possible should be emphasised.

### **TRANSPARENCY**

A better and more transparent system of land records should be built so that villagers can easily access land records.

Various efforts, including setting up a commission, should be initiated so that the real land situation of villages can be obtained and identification of land for weaker sections becomes easier.

A high-power National Commission for Promotion of Land Distribution and Protection from Displacement should be created at the centre with branches in all states. This should have wide-ranging, legally well-established powers to monitor and speed up land distribution among the rural poor as per the existing laws and schemes. In addition this Commission will also suggest to the Government how the existing laws can be amended or new laws can be enacted to remove any impediments in making available more land to the landless and near landless people in villages. Another task of this Commission will be

to minimise displacement as much as possible, and to ensure satisfactory rehabilitation of all displaced persons. The Commission will have the powers to disapprove any large-scale displacement if it is found to be unjustified, and to suggest alternative proposals which can minimise displacement! ✍✍✍