

NOTE

THE LAND QUESTION

Bharat Dogra writes :

If the most important causes of the persistence of large-scale poverty in rural India are carefully identified, then the following two factors will certainly emerge at the top —

- (i) the failure to effectively carry out land redistribution to benefit the landless rural poor; and
- (ii) the displacement of a very large number of villagers by mega projects or due to other reasons.

Therefore, to reduce rural poverty as well as the discontent arising from it, is important to speed up land dis-tribution among the landless (or nearly landless) rural poor as well as to take steps to minimise displacement.

As past experience has clearly indicated, these issues cannot be promoted unless there is a strong national institutional set-up with adequate legal powers to support these issues on a continuing basis. This is particularly true in the present-day condition when there are strong lobbies working in the opposite direction of sabotaging land-reform and promoting displacement-causing mega projects.

This National Commission should have branches in all states and it should be adequately funded by the Central Government. Some of the main tasks of this Commission will be to—

1. Speed up the implementation of existing laws and schemes for land-distribution among the poor.
2. Ensure that the landless households which get land are actually able to cultivate this land.
3. Promote the mobilisation and organisation of these households so that they are able to protect their land rights.
4. Establishing linkages of land distribution effort with employment guarantee scheme, other rural employment schemes, watershed development etc.
5. Suggesting amendments in existing laws or enactment of new laws and schemes so that more land can become available to the poor for cultivation.
6. Ensuring that all rural poor have homestead land.
7. Monitoring all cases of alienation of land among tribals and ensuring that tribal households can get back their land as early as possible.
8. Inter-acting with the forest dept. to promote pro-poor attitudes, policies, rules and laws concerning forests, wild life, parks and sanctuaries.
9. Preparing a plan on how the existing wild life protection effort can be improved and made more comprehensive without displacing any people.
10. Examining all projects causing significant levels of displacement with the aim of minimising displacement as much as possible. The Commission will be in a position to say that the displacement caused by some projects of low priority is unacceptable and so land should not be given to these projects at all. In other cases it will recommend how displacement can be minimised and satisfactory rehabilitation can be ensured.

11. Prepare laws, policies and schemes to ensure that displacement is minimized and displaced persons get justice.

12. Take steps to prevent forced sale of peasant land caused by indebtedness, and promote overall steps to strengthen small peasant farming.

The list can no doubt be extended, but the basic idea is that this Commission should be able to promote land distribution among the rural poor and to protect villagers from displacement. □□□