



Rural Poverty at the time of Independence

When India became independent, the biggest challenge faced by the country was acute poverty, especially in the rural areas. It is estimated that more than half the rural population (55%) was very poor; that is, around 18.6 crore people. They did not have access to any resources like land, nor did they have education which could help them get some gainful employment. In fact, opportunities for employment were very few. The only employment open to them was the extremely low paid agricultural labourers. A very large proportion of peasants were landless. Some of them leased in lands belonging to landlords to whom they had to pay rent and do forced labour. Hunger constantly haunted them and famines and epidemics were frequent and devastating.

At the time of independence it was widely agreed that in order to end rural poverty, it was most important to give the poor access to land for cultivation. This could only be done by ending the zamindari system or landlordism. The agitations during British rule focused the attention on the problems, demands and hopes of the peasants. It was clear that the peasants wanted the government to reduce taxes and free them from the stranglehold of moneylenders and the terror of the

zamindars. They also demanded that the land should belong to the peasant who actually ploughed it. 'Land to the Tiller!' was the slogan.

- Do you think there was any other way to give gainful employment to the rural poor?
- How many acres of land does a family of four persons need to get a decent living in your area? (Give the figures separately for both irrigated and unirrigated land.)
- While the slogan 'Land to the Tiller' meant that the tenant will get the land, what will happen to the landless agricultural worker, who works for wages?

Abolition of Zamindari and other Intermediary Tenures

The law to abolish the zamindari system was passed in 1950s by all state governments. They also abolished all forms of forced labour like *begar* and *vetti*. This effectively ended one of the most important grievances of the rural masses.

Three types of control of the landlords were identified: firstly, collection of land revenue; secondly, control over cultivated land. This was further subdivided into those cultivated by recognised tenants and those lands which were under direct cultivation

of the landlords. Thirdly, control over forests and waste lands. Let us see how the Land Reform Acts addressed these issues.

i. First of all, laws were passed to end the system of revenue collection by zamindars. All land owners were to pay taxes directly to the government. Since the zamindars would lose this source of income, the government decided to compensate them by lumpsum payments. This compensation was about twenty to thirty times more than their annual income.

ii. The lands of zamindars which were cultivated by recognised tenants was taken over by the government and the tenants were declared the owners of the land. They had to pay tax directly to the government and not through any intermediaries. When the government found that it had spent a lot of money in paying compensation to zamindars, it made a rule that the tenants would be given land only if they paid some price for it. Those peasants who could pay, became the owners of the land and were freed from the burden of the landlord system. In all, about 2 to 2.5 crore tenants benefitted and became owners of the land they tilled. However, hundreds of thousands of poor peasants could not pay the price or did not have legal recognition as tenants. So, they remained landless sharecroppers or labourers and had to keep working in the fields of big peasants and former zamindars.

iii. The law also said that the zamindars would be the owners of their own *khudkasht* land which they cultivated directly either through sharecroppers or labourers. This provision actually enabled

most zamindars to retain control over most of the lands as they declared their tenants to be sharecroppers or labourers. They also evicted a large number of tenants to take over their lands for self cultivation. They used various loopholes in the law to retain control over large portion of land. This was because the Land Reform Acts did not set a limit to the amount of land a person could own.

iv. As per the new laws, the government took over the waste and forest lands held by zamindars. At that time, the zamindars tried to make the most of it by cutting down all the trees and selling them. In this way, large forest tracts were destroyed. However, the government gained control of large tracts of wastelands which it could use for development and redistribution to poor people.

- Some people feel that the land reform laws only tried to help the landlords. Do you agree with them?
- Some people feel that the land reform laws tried to transfer land and power to prosperous tenant farmers only. Do you agree with them?
- Some others feel that the laws tried to strike a balance between the interests of different rural groups in order to minimise internal conflicts. Do you agree with them?
- Who gained most and who did not gain at all? Do you think the landlords lost much?

Abolition of Jagirdari system in Telangana

In Telangana, the powerful movement of the peasants was under way when the Nizam state was merged with India. Even before Independence, in 1927, forced labour or *vetti* had been abolished but this law was not implemented. However, in areas where the Telangana armed struggle was strong, the practice was put to an end in 1948. In 1945, when the Telangana movement was beginning, the Nizam had made many laws to protect the tenants-at-will. This happened by registering them and giving them permanent rights to cultivate.

Immediately after the merger of Hyderabad state, the Nizam, who was still the head of Hyderabad government, issued a *Firman*, abolishing the *Sarf-e-Khas*, the personal freedom of the Nizam and all forms of forced labour like *vetti*. Through another *Firman* dated 15 August 1949, Jagirs (including *Samsthanams* and *Maktas*) which were like small kingdoms were abolished. The dominant sections of the cultivating communities of these jagirs got *patta* right on lands. As per the Hyderabad Jagirdar Abolition Act, large jagirs were taken over by the government within a few days. Rs.18 crores was decided as the compensation which was to be paid. Due to this Act, about 995 Jagirdars were removed and the land was given to the farmers cultivating it. Further, there was a reduction in land tax.

The new government appointed the Hyderabad Agrarian Reforms Committee primarily to look into the question of land concentration and aspects of increasing

production and also to study the aspirations of the farmers and tenants under the existing systems. The Committee made far reaching recommendations like removal of middlemen, ceiling on land ownership, taking away surplus lands from the landlords, protection to tenants etc. However, only some of its recommendations were implemented.

The famous Hyderabad Tenancy Act was passed in 1950 protecting all types of tenants. Tenants-at-will (who could be evicted at the will of the landlords) were made protected tenants. All the tenants who were in continuous possession of land for a period of six years were made protected tenants or *pattadars* after a little payment. Now they could not be evicted easily and could continue to cultivate the land for generations. Similarly, the Hyderabad Inam Lands Abolition Act was promulgated in 1955.

Bhoodan Movement

Telangana landlordism and the armed peasant rebellion caused much concern among people in the country. Sarvodaya leader Acharya Vinoba Bhave wanted to solve the problem of land concentration through peaceful means i.e. through *Bhoodan* Movement. *Bhoodan* means donating land to the landless. He wanted to take voluntary gifts of land from the landlords and donate it to the landless. On April 18, 1951 Vinoba started the *Bhoodan* Movement. It was hailed as a milestone in the history of land reforms. As part of the Sarvodaya movement Vinobaji came to Sivarampally near Hyderabad. He walked upto Pochampally

in Yadadri district. A prayer meeting was held under the *juvvi* tree near the tank. In that meeting 40 families belonging to the Scheduled Castes requested for land. During the meeting Vedire Ramachandra Reddy donated 250 acres of land in the memory of his father. The first person to receive the land was Maisaiah. Inspired by this Vinobaji took up *Bhoodan* movement and later converted into *Gramdan* movement. Vinobaji received 44 lakh acres of land as donation all over the country. However, this movement did not make any serious difference to the land problem in the country as landlords continued to hold large tracts of fertile land.



Fig 16.1 : Photos of Vinobaji, Vedire Ramachandra Reddy and Maisaiah

An amendment to the earlier Land Reform Act of 1950 was passed in 1954 which defeated the purpose of land reform by not bestowing the protected tenancy right over certain categories of cultivators. The Acts further recommended payment of crores of rupees as compensation in favour of the landlords. Thus, the independent country had to bear the cost of the dispossession of feudal system. Big buildings, cattle sheds and agricultural implements were left in possession of the erstwhile landlords. As there was no limit on land holding, thousands of acres of fertile land also remained with them as *khudkhast* lands.

Many of the laws were implemented tardily. Due to the delay in implementation, the large landlords used the situation to their best advantage. Using the loopholes in the Tenancy Act, the Zamindars regained control over the lands from the tenants. The Zamindars after abolition continued as big landlords claiming the land as their own. These lands were diverted to set up industries. For example, the Challapalli Zamindar showed 2650 acres under his sugar factory. But, eventually, they transformed as entrepreneurs in Andhra. But in Telangana, they continued their domination even into the twenty first century.

- Which sections of the peasants of Telangana gained from the various reforms? In what ways did they benefit?
- To what extent did the landless service castes benefit from these reforms?
- To what extent did the landlords loose and to what extent did they manage to protect their interests?

Land Ceiling Act, 1972-75

The Zamindari abolition did not solve the problem of land concentration. As you can see from Table 1, after the land reforms were completed in 1955-56 more than half the peasant families had less than 2 hectares of land. Big landlords still

controlled about 38% of all cultivable land in the state. A vast number of landless dalit labourers were agitating for land. Kisan Sabhas became active agitating for further land reforms. This meant that the

government should set a limit to large landholdings and take over the surplus land and redistribute it to the landless labourers and small farmers.

**Table 1 : The Structure and Distribution of Landholdings in
Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, 1956-2006**

	1955-56		1980-81		2005-06	
	Share in no. of landholdings	Share in cultivated area	Share in no. of landholdings	Share in cultivated area	Share in no. of landholdings	Share in cultivated area
Small 0-5 Acres.	58%	18%	73%	29%	83%	48%
Medium 5-25 Acres.	32%	44%	25%	52%	16%	46%
Large above 25 Acres	10%	38%	2%	19%	1%	6%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Directorate of Economics and Statistics (DES), Hyderabad.

Reading the table: Read the figures for the year 1955-56 carefully. It tells us that after the land reforms had been implemented, 58% of farmers were small farmers with less than 5 acres of land each. Even though they formed more than half of all the farmers, they had less than 20% cultivated land. On the other hand, you can see that large farmers or landlords, who made for only about 10% of the farmers, had about 38% of all cultivated land.

After the land ceiling was implemented in 1970s, notice the changes that took place. The number of small farmers who were% increased / decreased to %. Medium farmers now were less in number and controlled% more/ less land than before. Large landowners declined to less than % but still owned about % of land.

The situation was similar all over the country. Keeping this in mind, the central government initiated a second phase of land reforms to set a limit to the size of landholdings and redistributing land to the poor. Land Ceiling Acts were passed in most states for this purpose after 1972. The Land Ceiling Act was passed by the then Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council in September, 1972

which came into implementation since January, 1975.

The Act defined a family with 5 members as a unit. A family of 5 members can have a maximum of 10 to 27 acres of irrigated land and 35 to 54 acres of dryland. If a farmer had more land, it was declared surplus land to be taken over by the government. In Telangana and Andhra

Pradesh together, about 8,00,000 acres were declared surplus. Of this, 6,41,000 acres were taken over by the government and it distributed about 5,82,000 acres to about 5,40,000 families of landless and poor peasants. Actually, this was much less than what was required and what was possible. The Act could not be implemented properly due to machinations of the landlords and also lack of sufficient political determination on the part of the government.

Several landlords gave false declarations to the officers and did not reveal the real size of their excess land. Anticipating the Act, several landlords transferred their lands in the names of their close relatives, friends, and even farm servants. There were also instances where fictitious divorces were taken in law courts to show husband and wife as separate families. In this way, even those farmers who had surplus land as per the Act, protected their lands and did not show any surplus. Some of the surplus land that was taken over by the government was not fit for cultivation. If you look at Table 1, and figures for 2005-06, you can see that most of the farmers (83%) are small and they have nearly half of all cultivated land. On the other hand you will see that the number of large landlords is 1% , and the land with them is 6%. This is partly due to the fact

that most of the big landlords actually divided their holdings into small sizes and fraudulently distributed them among relatives and servants. This was more or less the situation in most of the states in India.

One of the states in which the Land Ceiling Act was more efficiently implemented was West Bengal. The West Bengal government acted with great determination and mobilized the landless and small peasants to participate in the implementation of the ceiling laws. As a result, about 12,94,000 acres of land were taken over by the government and 10,64,000 acres were distributed to about 26,51,000 families. This shows that political will can make these measures very effective and really enable the poor to get access to land resources.

- Why did the Land Ceiling Act become necessary?
- Some people think that it should have been implemented in 1950 while others feel that such a measure would have caused a lot of opposition. Discuss the two views in the class and decide which view you agree with.
- Compare the implementation of Land Ceiling Act in West Bengal and in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh and discuss how the Act could be effectively implemented.

Keywords

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|----------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| 1. Land Ceiling | 2. Jagirdari System | 3. <i>Firman</i> | 4. Tenancy Act |
| 5. <i>Bhoodan</i> movement | 6. <i>Sarf - e-khas</i> | 7. Land holding | |
| 8. <i>Begar/ Vetti</i> | 9. Compensation | | |

Improve your learning

1. When laws are passed in the Assembly, there is much discussion on it from different points of view. What would have been the different points of view regarding the Land Reform Act in 1950s? Which point of view would have been stronger?
2. What would have been the points of view in 1970s when the Land Ceiling Acts were passed?
3. Do you think the peasant women gained from these reforms in any way? Give your reasons.
4. Is vetti prevalent still in your region? If it is there, prepare a report?
5. Imagine that you are a tenant who got ownership over land when the Land Reform Act was implemented. Write down your feelings.
6. Imagine that you are a landlord at the time of the Land Reform Act. Describe your feelings and actions at that time.
7. Many people feel that the land reform actually harmed a large number of tenants-at-will. Do you agree with this view? Give reasons.
8. Though the governments made effective laws, why has the land Ceiling Act not been implemented effectively?
9. Locate Pochampally village in Nalgonda district in Telangana map.
10. Read the first paragraph under the heading 'Rural Poverty at the time of Independence' and answer the following: Have the conditions improved now? In what way?



Project:

Form groups of five students each. Discuss the experiences of elders of your area about the land ceiling. Find out whether the issue happened in that village as mentioned in the chapter. Prepare a report and submit in the class.