

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, about 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 is 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 attention on the problems, demands and hopes of the peasants. It was clear that the peasants wanted the government to reduce tax 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 of giving 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 landlord's control 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

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Andhra Region

The Madras Estate Bill came into force in 1950 (Andhra was then a part of Madras Presidency). As per this Act the Zamindars and *Inamdars* were paid a compensation of Rs. 15.5 crores in total and the land under them was given to the tenants who were cultivating it. In the Andhra region land passed to considerable extent, into the hands of better off cultivating castes. In due course they become powerful in politics and business too. On the other hand the labouring and service castes did not benefit from the land reforms.

However, the Act still did not affect the ryotwari holders who virtually functioned as landlords. It only abolished zamindari system where it existed in some pockets.

Abolition of Jagirdari system in Telangana

In the Telangana region, 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 laws to protect tenants-at-will. This provided for 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 also all forms of forced labour like *vetti*. Through another *Firman* dated 15 August 1949 Jagirs (including *Samasthanams* 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, 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 to primarily 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 tenants who were in continuous possession of land for 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

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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 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 *khudkash* 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 loop-holes in the law to retain control over large portion of land. This was because the Land Reform Acts did not set 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. All the same, the government got 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?

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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 a mile stone in the history of land reforms. As part of the Sarvodaya movement Vinobaji came to Sivarampally near Hyderabad. He walked upto Pochampally in Nalgonda 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.

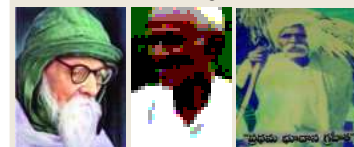


Fig 16.1 : Photos of Vinobaji, Vedire Ramachandra Reddy and Maisaiah

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 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 agriculture implements were left in the possession of the erstwhile landlords. As there was no limit on land holding, thousands of acres of fertile land also remained with them as *khudkash* lands.

Many of the laws were implemented tardily. Due to the delay in implementation the large landlords used it to their best advantage. Using the loop holes 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 setup industries. For example, the Challapalli Zamindar showed 2650 acres under his sugar factory. But eventually they transformed as entrepreneurs in Andhra. But in

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Telangana they continued their domination 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 surplus land and redistribute it to the landless labourers and small farmers.

Table 1 : The Structure and Distribution of Landholdings in 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 0-2 hect.	58%	18%	73%	29%	83%	48%
Medium 2-10 hect.	32%	44%	25%	52%	16%	46%
Large 10 above hect.	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 2 hectares of land each. Even though they formed more than half of all farmers, they had less than 20% of cultivated land. On the other hand you can see that large farmers or landlords who were only about 10% of the farmers had about 38% of all cultivated land.

After the land ceiling was implemented in 1970s see 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 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 Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council in September, 1972 which came into implementation since January, 1975.

The Act defined family with 5 members as a unit. A family of 5 members can have 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 Andhra Pradesh about 8,00,000 acres were declared surplus. Of this 6,41,000 acres were taken over by the government which 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 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 at the figures for 2005-06 you can see that most of the farmers (83%) are small and they have about nearly half of all cultivated land. On the other hand you will see that the number of large landlords is less than 1% and the land with them is less than 6%. This is partly due to the fact that most of the big landlords actually divided their holdings into small size 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 us that political will can make these measures very effective and really enable 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 Andhra Pradesh and discuss how the Act could be effectively implemented.

Key words

1. Land Ceiling
2. Jagirdari System
3. *Firman*
5. *Bhoodan* movement
6. *Sarf-e-khas*
7. *Maktas*
9. *Begar/Vetti*
10. Compensation
11. *Khudkhast*
5. Tenancy Act
8. Land holding

Improve your learning

1. When laws are passed in the Asembly, 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. Why was the end to *vetti* important for all kinds of peasants? What would the landlords have done to cultivate their lands now?
5. Imagine you are a tenant who got ownership over land when the Land reform Act was implemented. Write down your feelings.
6. Imagine 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. Why was the Land Ceiling Act not implemented effectively even though the government tried to make effective laws?
9. Why do you think the spirit of *Bhoodan* did not help to end landlordism and get land to the tiller?
10. Imagine yourself to be Maisaiah who received the first *bhoodan* land. Describe your feelings about the prayer meeting in which you got the land.
11. Locate Pochampally village in Nalgonda district in A.P. map.
12. Read the first paragraph under heading 'Rural Poverty at the time of Independence' and answer the following: Are the conditions improved now? In what way?

Project:

Form a group of five students. Discuss the experiences of elders in your area about the land ceiling. Know whether the issue happen in that village as mention in the lesson. Prepare a report and submit to the class.