CHAPTER-II

LAND REFORMS : AN OVERVIEW

The concept of Land Reforms has varied over the time according to the functions performed by the land itself. Apart from being a source of production, the land has always been considered a status symbol, a store of value and wealth and a source of social and political influence.

Historically, Land Reform meant reforms of the tenure system or redistribution of the land ownership rights. With the passage of time, the concept has been broadened to include the role of land and agriculture in the process of development. Reforms have always been considered a problem-solving mechanism, usually introduced on government initiative or in response to internal or external pressures to resolve or prevent an economic, social or political crisis. Some countries have tried to implement Land Reforms to defeat the imperialism and put an end to foreign exploitation and others have tried to free peasants from subjugation. Most commonly proclaimed objective of Land Reforms is to abolish feudalism, which usually means disappropriaing the landlords with a view to transferring lands to tillers.

All Land Reforms, by and large, emphasize the need to improve the peasant's socio-economic conditions. To achieve this objective, sometimes, government try to redistribute income and wealth in favour of peasants. Thereafter, all the
efforts are directed to encourage agricultural progress by means of Agrarian Reforms so as to ameliorate the conditions of the peasants.

The recorded history of Reforms begins with the Greeks in 6th century B.C. Thereafter, Romans initiated Reforms in 2nd century B.C. Land in ancient Athens was held in perpetuity by the tribe or clan with individual holdings periodically relocated in keeping with multiple emerging variables; the size of the family, population increase, expansion of trade, growth of money economy etc. The peasants could secure loans by surrendering their rights to the products of the land as “Sale with the option of redemption.” Lacking other employment, the debtor continued to cultivate the land as sixth partner, delivering five-sixth of the products to the creditor and retaining the rest for himself.

There had been a debate among historians whether the Indian feudalism was compatible with European feudalism or not. So, it is important to have a glance of European feudalism and the reforms which took place in these countries from time to time in order to see the similarities and differences in-between.

Land Reform in Britain:

The total land area of Great Britain is 22.7 million hectares, of which 4.9 million hectares or about 21 percent is cultivable land. In view of the fact that only a small proportion of British population has been dependent on
agriculture in its recent history, there has been a steady movement away from agricultural activities by its agriculturists. It was because of this steady movement that agricultural population declined from 12.45 percent in 1881 to 5.69 percent in 1931.

From time to time different Acts, like 'Small Holdings Act 1862', were passed, which sought to check the large-scale emigration of agricultural workers to cities and towns by enabling them to own a plot of land. It was the state which provided the capital to purchase the land at a low rate of interest. But the Act failed to achieve this goal and only 790 acres of land were acquired between 1892 and 1906. Therefore, the 'Small Holdings and Allotments Act of 1908', was passed making it obligatory on the part of the county councils and country boroughs to persuade the prospective tillers to engage themselves on plots offered to them. Fifty acres was the limit fixed by the Act, and the distinctive feature of it was that, if loss was actually incurred, one half of the loss was to be borne by the ministry. Thirteen thousand farms with an average size of 14 acres each were established between 1908 and 1918.

After World War I there was an abnormal rise in the value of land. Taking cognizance of the same, Government passed the 'Land Settlement (Facilities) Act, 1919', which empowered country councils and the Board of Agriculture to acquire land, either by sale or by lease for the creation of small holdings in exchange for permanent annuities. Under this Act, 254,520 acres were acquired by the councils and
boroughs and over 16.5 thousand holdings with an average size of 16 acres each were created.

It was only in 1926, that the 'Small Holdings and Allotments Act' was passed which replaced all earlier acts. It empowered the local bodies to provide holdings, with the approval of the ministry and further stipulated that 75 percent of the annual losses incurred thereof be mandatorily contributed by the ministry. Upto 1932, 30,814 acres of land were acquired under the Act and 1274 holdings were established.

Great Britain, has always been historically speaking predominantly a country of capitalist landlords and large estates. The concentration of property has never been looked down upon in Great Britain. British landlord, has rendered valuable services to his country at the time of the Industrial Revolution by investing capital in drainage and land reclamation and thus making possible for the food supply to keep pace with the increase in population. It was this characteristic of enlightened landlordism, which made the British landlords distinct from their counterparts in Europe. Secondly, British agriculturalists have always undertaken agricultural operations with a view to sell their produce in the national and international markets. They were not just producing for themselves and for their families. In view of these macro-agricultural considerations, Small-Scale farming never became popular among the farming community itself. Thirdly, the interest of British public in farming as a
business proposition was considerably reduced because of various outlets for investment in and out-side Great Britain.

The agriculturist in Great Britain has never been keen for the ownership of land, and it is precisely because of this reason that two thirds of the land till recent past remained under the landlord-tenant system. As Mr Orwin points out, "there is not, and never has been in England, any manifestation of a land-hunger expressed by the desire of ownership. The tenancy system which threw upon the landlord the task of equipping and maintaining the holding in return not for a fixed payable by way of interest in the form of rent, but for a sum which could be adjusted, from time to time, according to the profitableness of farming, has proved it to be so much to the interest of the tenant class of farmers in this country that the 'magic of ownership' is no magic to them."

The system of capitalist farming worked smoothly in England until the agricultural depression of the 'eighties and nineties' of the 19th century. Landlord's confidence was shaken by the depression and they refused to accept agricultural land as a profitable investment. It was the consequence of this depression that farming system was disturbed. Tenants were served with quit notices which led to insistent demand for state intervention. In order to build a healthy contractual relationship between tenants and landlords. The above mentioned acts along with others tried to define the rights and status of tenants. The Act of 1883
formed the basis of the present status of British tenants. This Act contained three important provisions:

i. The outgoing tenant was entitled to compensation even if he had accepted conditions to the contrary in his contract.

ii. The basis of compensation was changed from 'Costless Depreciation' to the 'actual value of the improvement to an incoming tenant'; this provision was in the interest of both, the incoming tenant and the landlord since in the later case, they would be called upon to pay for the actual balance of the improvement effected by the outgoing tenants.

iii. The act provided for arbitration in case the landlord and the tenant could not come to an agreement as to the amount of compensation.

Though the 'Small Holdings Movement' had only a limited success in Great Britain, yet, England, a country of Capitalist farming and one which may be ranked among the most conservative countries of Europe from the view point of Land Reforms, has taken sufficient safeguards against exploitation of the tenancy by the landlords and adopted a number of measures to ensure agricultural progress. The world war -II which seriously threatened the food supply of Great Britain has led to the formulation of a more progressive agricultural policy for the utilization of the land resources.
British agriculture has largely been dominated by landlordism, which has helped in mechanization of agriculture. But one must always keep in mind that the large-scale farming in Great Britain was not the outcome of any particular agricultural policy on the part of the state, but a product of economic forces during the Industrial Revolution of 18th and 19th centuries. During the middle of the 18th century more than fifty percent of the farmers in England owned the land they cultivated. But after the introduction of 'New Agriculture' which called for large-scale investments in land, the farmers were over-burdened by debts of the agriculture. The depression during Napoleonic wars led to a new class of farmers usually known as 'Gentle men Farmers' who began to bid for land both for profit and for social distinction and thus raised land-values to unprecedented heights. All these factor's led to a gradual transfer of land from the cultivating to the non-cultivating ones until, by the end of the 19th century practically all the farmers in England had become tenants. But Britain is the only country which has an enlightened class of landlords who have realized the fundamental truth about agriculture that on the contentment of the tiller depends the prosperity of agriculture and in turn, their own.

**Land Reform in France:**

Of the 55 million hectares of national territory of France, 23 million hectares are cultivated and 12 million hectares are under permanent meadow and pasture. About 46 percent of the cultivated area are under cereals and 25
percent under fodder crops other than cereals (Indian Society of Agricultural Economics. 1946:9). Agriculture occupies a more important place in the national economy of France than that of England as, despite a steady decline in the dependence on agriculture since the beginning of 20th century, the agricultural population constituted as much as 35 percent of the total population in 1931. Nearly three fourths of the agricultural holdings were under 10 hectares and represented over one-fifth of the total area. Medium-sized holdings between 10 to 100 hectares constitute nearly a quarter of the total number, about 62 percent of the area being accounted for by these undertakings. Large estates, almost of the English type, cover 16 percent of the area but they number less than 1 percent of the total number of holdings. The major problem which faced the country was not of settling people on land but that of increasing the size of holdings which were excessively small. Nor was the problem of improving the conditions of tenancy so imminent, owing to the predominance of owner cultivation farmers. The table below gives us an idea of the changes in the size of holdings during 1920's.
The above table shows how the size of small holdings i.e. 1 hectare and below 10 hectare fell in number in 1929 and covered less area in comparison to 1892. The law of succession was also modified to minimize the chances of the fragmentation of land.

**Land Reforms in Germany:**

The natural conditions of Germany are unfavorable to agricultural production as compared to those in other countries of western and southern Europe. Entire South and most of the South-west of the country being of hilly or mountainous character, nearly 28 per cent of the area of the country is under forest cover. Climatic conditions determine the utilization of land, and on the whole, the quality of soil is poor. Out of the total land area of 47 million hectares, 20.2 million hectares or 43 percent of the total is cultivated.

The German land system stands in between the system in England and France. For example, eastern Germany before its reunification was a region of large estates, while in
western Germany small holdings predominated. In general, the unit of operation, as in France, was small but the evil of sub-division was checked by legislation as in England. 90 per cent of the cultivated land was the private property of the farmers. Owners mostly cultivate these farms by themselves.

Agrarian Reforms in Germany dates back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The most modern phase of this policy began in the later part of the 19th century when attention was directed towards abolition of feudalism and several systems of servitude as well as to endow the farmers with free ownership of land and economic freedom. Some crucial laws were passed in 1850 towards this end; the objectives of these measures being abolition of villeinage and other feudal tenures, substitution of free ownership of peasant farmers and removal of all charges imposed by the feudal forms of tenure. There was another factor which encouraged Land Settlement the increase in the population which had fallen low as a result of wars. Another compulsion to reinforce this policy at the end of 19th century was to put a check to the exodus of labourers from certain provinces. It was only after World War I, that Germany pursued the policy of land settlement more rigorously with a view to establishing balance between agriculture and industry. The "Land Settlement Act of 1919" outlined the principles for the acquisition of land and for the organisation of settlement. The emphasis was to make the farmer self-sufficient. The Act provided both for establishing new undertakings and for enlarging un-economic holdings. Over a million hectares
were opened for settlement between 1919 and 1933. About 77 percent of this land came from large private estates of more than 100 hectares, 10.4 percent from estates less than 100 hectares, 9 percent, from public bodies and 3.6 percent from marshy and waste land reclaimed. As a result 62,371 new undertakings were established and 104,621 existing undertakings were enlarged (Indian Society of Agricultural Economics, Op.cit.: 25). The aim was to establish fewer small holdings and a large number of farms between 10 to 20 hectares which were considered most suitable for the peasant family.

The distribution of undertakings according to size in 1933 was as is shown by the figures given in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size (hectares)</th>
<th>No. of Undertaking</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 2</td>
<td>945,666</td>
<td>30.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From 2 to 5</td>
<td>831,417</td>
<td>27.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From 5 to 20</td>
<td>1,048,954</td>
<td>34.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From 20 to 100</td>
<td>231,013</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 100</td>
<td>18,404</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3,075,454</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** The Indian Society of Agricultural Economics, Bombay, 1946, p. 27.

To encourage the preservation of economic holdings, important laws were passed to prevent division of property through inheritance and breaking up of unduly large estates. The enactment of land-inheritance law in 1933 made all agricultural properties which were large enough
to support a peasant family eligible to become, "in-herited free-holds". The object of this law was to help the owner in perpetuating the family size holdings in the hands of a qualified member of his descendants. These holdings were required generally to be not less than 18 acres and not more than 125 acres in size, though the actual limits varied from region to region. The distinctive part of this Act was that once a holding was declared 'freehold' it could not be divided but had to be bequeathed generally according to primogeniture inheritance rights. A list of "next-in-line" was sought from the bequeathed. The sons and daughters were entitled to vocational education and dowry upon marriage respectively but did not share the property; in case they failed to get any other means of support, they could return to farm. The producing capacity of the holdings was taken into consideration while deciding the claims of the other heirs so that the burden on the successor to the estate was not more than what the farmer was capable of bearing. In case the farm was managed badly, it was passed on to the "next-in-line". This legislation brought into existence an entirely new system of land tenure in which family holdings were prevented from being lost by heir owners. It was estimated that 54 percent of the agricultural land in Germany fulfilled the conditions of independent family size farms. By 1939 about 700,000 of these holdings had availed of the law and become hereditary peasant holdings.
Agrarian Revolution in Russia:

In the pre-revolutionary period, Russian agriculture was in a very depressed condition. 30.5 per cent land was owned by upper class cultivators, 7 percent by middle class and 30.5 percent of the land was owned by large estate proprietors whose holdings averaged 2,566 ha. in size. The remaining 32 percent of the land was cultivated by the mass of ruined peasants who were oppressed by semi-feudal exploitation (Indian Society of Agricultural Economics. 1964:94).

The November Revolution of 1917 was an attempt to overthrow landlordism and it did succeed in bringing about considerable parceling of land among the poor and middle peasantry. It was partly due to the government's determination to oust capitalism in all spheres of economic activity. It was also actuated by the strong desire of the government to go in for gigantic industrialization whose success greatly depended on well-developed agriculture. The government proclaimed in 1928 that the land was the property of the U.S.S.R. and not of the independent republics. In pursuit of the political goals emanating from such a commitment, millions of peasant farms were replaced by smaller number of collective farms, which in turn were placed under the control of a still fewer number of state organizations called the 'machine tractor stations'. The first and second five year plan was the time when large farms, were owned and operated by the state. Farmers
were violently forced into collectivism which rapidly changed the agrarian structure. Those farmers who opposed this move were disposed of their property completely. Attention was concentrated on increasing crop acreage and yields, and it was during second five year plan that Russia materially reduced her dependence on the U.S.A. by increasing her own production.

But these radical Reforms did not run smooth. The farmers resented having to surrender their possession, particularly the livestock which was the chief mobile capital. The opposition was so intense that they destroyed the livestock or abandoned them to starvation as a result of which more than 50 percent of horses, 44 percent of cattle, 66 percent of the sheep and goats and 43 percent of the pigs were destroyed. The resistance of the farmers led to acute shortage of beef, milk and dairy products. Furthermore, there were not enough tractors on hand to replace the lost livestock power.

It was only towards the end of second five year plan that it was realized that total adherence to collectivism had not increased the production. So, there was a reversion from the strict collectivism and a number of decrees were passed, to the effect that kolkhoz could now hold land and members had now right to own, manage and operate individual property. It had a healthy effect on the morale of the peasantry and on the agricultural production as well. And the third five-year plan (1938-42) mainly devoted itself
to the maximization of food for the people and of raw materials for the industry and totally ignored the institutional question of collectivism.

In a collective farm, the farmers in a district threw all their property, land, live-stock and implements into a common pool, and elected a committee of management presided over by a chairman who managed the working of the farm. Sir John Russel,4 while commenting on the states restrictions on farmers' says:

"The distinctive feature of Russian Agriculture is that it is definitely planned by the central Authority; it is not left to the farmer's judgement of what is likely to be most profitable. The central Authority decides that certain quantities of the various agricultural products are required and allocates to each of the constituent Republics its share in the production. A counter plan may be put foreword, but ultimately agreement is reached. Each government then allocates to the Regional Head of the Agricultural Departments through the Regional commissions (Ministers) the share of each region in the work; and each Regional Head allocates shares to the District Heads of Departments....."
However the results of this collectivism were insignificant and the price was heavy. The food situation in the country worsened in the early period. Collectivism had also overlooked the significance of human element which was most important factor in agriculture. The other major problem was that machines were not adjusted to the needs and convenience of farmers, but all agriculture and particularly the whole of land tenure was reshaped for the convenient use of machines. In the process, the interests of millions of farmers were neglected and the system failed to yield any radical breakthrough in agricultural production.

Land Reforms in India:

In India the ruling establishment has always deemed itself entitled to a certain portion of the produce of every acre of land. All governments in India have considered themselves entitled to a share of the produce, collected either directly or through any agency of rent collectors (Sarkar Bikram 1989:10). Even the Moghal emperors in their heydays admitted the right of occupier’s or cultivators to retain everything after paying a share of the produce to the Government.

Contemporaneously, landholders occupy an influential place in terms of exercise of political and economic power. The claims of those privileged groups, who own or hold land against the demands of those who
want to share this privilege, form an important component in the history of Land Reforms. In economic terms, Land Reforms aim at not only for greater equality and social justice but also at providing an incentive to the owners and tillers for increasing agricultural efficiency leading to increased production. The exploitation of one section of society by another causing under-utilization of manpower and inefficient use of land tends to adversely affect production. But, a property structure based on egalitarianism, providing opportunities for self-development to all sections of producers and ensuring the maximum utilization of both land and manpower increases production and raises the agrarian economy to higher levels. Agrarian Reforms are, therefore, considered a major structural transformation. As observed by an eminent economist J.K. Galbraith, "A land reform is a revolutionary step, it passes power, property and status from one group to another". However, it is an obvious fact that, those who have linkages with the political power-holders and vested interest in the perpetuation of the existing agrarian structure and property relations, have a negative attitude towards Agrarian Reforms. Therefore, state backing for the enforcement of Agrarian Reforms is essential. That is why Indira Gandhi in 1980, then Prime Minister of India, observed, "Land Reforms is the most crucial test, which our political system must pass in order to survive".

Ancient Land System:
Historians differ in their opinion so far as the exact nature of land system in Ancient India is concerned. According to Bhowani Sen, land was the property of the king, as such of the State. There are others like Baden-Powell and Radha Kumud Mukherjee who hold the view that private property in land existed in India even in the vedic period. But majority of them recognize the existence of communal ownership of land in the early village communities. The self-sufficient villages as the basic unit of agriculture and industry, existed for centuries in India despite political upheavals and dynastic changes. Sir Charles Metcalfe while describing ancient Indian villages notes:

"The village communities are little republics having nearly everything that they want within themselves and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last within themselves where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds revolution: Hindu, Pathan, Moghul, Maratha, Sikh, English are all masters in turn; but the village communities remain the same" (cf. Desai, A.R., 1966:7-8).

The peasant family enjoyed traditional hereditary right to cultivate and possess land. The king in the Hindu
system was entitled to a share of the peasant's produce, not as the owner of the land, but as the protector of his subjects. The Manusmriti maintains that "land is the property of him who cuts away the wood or who tilled and cleared it" (Sen Bhowani, 1962:37). But it should never be assumed that the village community enjoyed unfettered right to cultivate the land falling within its jurisdiction.

The land settlements were made with the village community, which was held collectively responsible for the payment of a share of the entire produce of the village (Thakur, D., 1988:21). There were some areas where there was no communal possession of land. For example, in Bengal, there was individual ownership of land, subject to payment of king's share and periodic or occasional payment of a share of the produce to the village chief or the headman.

**Medieval System**

Both Hindu and Mohammedan jurists agree in maintaining that the king had no proprietary rights in land beyond a definite share of its produce, in medieval period. Most Muhammadan authorities agree that the person who first cultivates wasteland becomes the ipso facto owner of the soil. The Muslim rulers by and large kept the revenue system of Hindus intact, which does not mean that there were no modifications. Muslim rulers did modify the revenue system, but the marked changes in
the land revenue system were introduced during Sher Shah’s rule. It was during his reign that measurement of land in ‘bighas’ was introduced. With the passage of time, Sher Shah’s reforms became the basis of Akbar’s land revenue policy with the difference that Akbar proceeded to convert grain rents assessed by Sher Shah into cash rents based on the average price prevailing in different places. The state’s share of produce had been increased from one-sixth to one third in Akbar’s time and generally to a half during Aurangzeb’s reign. but the position of the cultivators during this period was substantially the same as that in the Hindu period (Guha, A.C., 1915:18)

Most of the historians maintain that the system of Sher Shah and Akbar prevailed without any major change till the British assumed power in Bengal. However, one should not lose sight of the fact, that in the later period of the Mughal land system i.e., in the middle of the seventeenth century, we see the emergence of superiority of both Zamindar and aristocratic classes over the village communities. After the death of Aurangzeb there was not only decline in central authority but, increase in internal turmoil. Therefore, direct assessment and collection of revenue became increasingly difficult. The shadow emperors of Delhi were left with few choices. They decided to enter into contract for a fixed sum of revenue with local influential elements, which saved all the trouble of local control. This class subsequently posed as proprietors of
land under the name of Zamindars. This class in the initial stage was interested in the revenue, later on their interests included the proprietorship.

During Mughal period the right of a feudal landlord could be obtained from the Emperor on the promise to pay a stipulated revenue. It was an instrument created by Akbar to maintain the authority and power of the imperial throne as a weapon against disintegration. The East Indian Company's decisive step was to assume the Zamindari rights over the estates of all provinces from the provincial governors who had become virtually independent because of decline in Delhi-rule. These estates were Calcutta, Govindpur and Sutarati. This process continued until Robert Clive secured from Emperor Shah Alam the Dewani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa for the East India Company. Not only were peasants and cultivators subjected to inhuman torture and extortion but at times even Zamindars were maltreated to realize the revenue. Edmund Burke noted:

"The peasants were left little else than their families and bodies. The families were disposed of. It is known observation that those who have the fewest of all other worldly enjoyment are the most tenderly attached to their children and wives. The most tender parents sold their children at markets. The most fondly jealous husbands sold their wives. The tyranny of
Hastings extinguished every sentiment of father, son, brother and husband. I come now to the last stage miseries: every thing visible and edible was seized and sold. Nothing but the bodies remained” (cf. D. Thakur, 1988:7-8).

Jawahar Lal Nehru is also worth quoting in this regard:

“The British governors, themselves representing the English landlord class, introduced something resembling the English system in India. At first they appointed revenue-farmers for short terms, that is persons who were made responsible for the collection of the revenue or land tax and payment of it to the Government. Later these revenue farmers developed into landlords. The village community was deprived of all control over the land and its produce; what had always been considered as the chief interest and concern of that community now became the private property of the newly created landowner...... A new class, the owners of land, appeared; a class created by, and therefore to a large extent identified with, the British government. The break-up of the old system created new problems and probably the beginnings of Hindu-Moslem problem can be traced to it. The landlord system was first
introduced in Bengal and Bihar where big landowners were created under the system known as the Permanent Settlement. It was later realized that this was not advantageous to the state as the land revenue had been fixed and could not be enhanced. Fresh settlements in other parts of India were therefore made for a period only and enhancement in revenue took place from time to time......Big landowners were created by the British after their own English pattern, chiefly because it was far easier to deal with a few individuals than with a vast peasantry. The objective was to collect as much money in the shape of revenue, and as speedily, as possible. If an owner failed at a stipulated time he was immediately pushed out and another took his place. It was also considered necessary to create a class whose interests were identified with the British" (Nehru Jawaharlal 1946: 303-304).

The Permanent Settlement created a permanent cleavage in the society. Under this new set-up, three distinct classes in India's countryside emerged. The landlords, the peasants and the agricultural labourers. A hierarchy of social structure with Zamindars at the top and the cultivating tenants at the bottom with several grades of intermediaries in between them became the marked
feature of the Permanent Settlement. The immediate fall out of the Permanent Settlement was rise in absentee and non-cultivating owners and a decline in cultivating owners and tenants. During the decade (1921-1931); the number of non-cultivating landlords increased from 3.7 million in 1921 to 4.1 million in 1931. At the same time the number of cultivators decreased from 74.6 million in 1921 to 65.5 million in 1931, resulting in the increase of agricultural labourers from 21.7 million in 1921 to 33.5 million in 1931 (Thakur, D., 1988:15-16).

The demand for a radical Agrarian Reform involving redistribution of land ownership seems to have been raised first in our country during the thirties of the past century. In 1939, the National Planning Committee on land policy expressed itself against the continuance of large landholders having the right “to appropriate and manage lands above the size of economic holdings that cannot be directly cultivated by their families without importing hired labour, or without sub-letting”. Dr. Radha Kamal Mukherjee, a member of the committee, made a forceful case for imposition of ceiling on land holdings.

The Congress Party as a whole and its leadership in particular was aware of the plight of the tenants all over the country. That is why All India Congress Committee in its “Quit India” resolution adopted on 8th of August 1942, stated: “the power when it comes would belong to the toilers in fields, factories and elsewhere”. In view of the
same it was immediately after the country got independence that the President of Indian National Congress appointed an Agrarian Reforms Committee in December 1947. The report of the committee which was published in July, 1949, recommended imposition of ceiling on land holdings and one of the reasons adduced by them in favour of this recommendation was that, "under the present techniques of cultivation and the managerial capacity and financial resources of an average cultivator in India, the optimum size of a holding has to be fairly low". The committee defined personal cultivation and occupancy rights. If a tiller had continuously cultivated a plot of land for a period of six years, it cannot be resumed by the owner for personal cultivation even within the ceilings prescribed. Only those who put in a minimum amount of physical labour and participate in actual agricultural operations were defined as personal cultivators. This was the period when Land Reforms were being debated in United Nations also. United Nations at its fifth session on 20th November 1950, adopted a resolution which recommended that the Secretary General prepare "..... an analysis of the degree to which unsatisfactory forms of agrarian structure and, in particular, systems of land tenure, in the under developed countries and territories impede economic development ....." and further requested:..... "the Economic and Social Council to consider the analysis referred to above and to prepare
recommendations to the General Assembly ...... paying special attention to such measures as, institution of appropriate Land Reforms and promotion of family owned and operated farms ......." A report was prepared and published by the Department of Economics Affairs of the United Nations in 1951. Some of the highlights of the report are as follows:

"Tenancy is a feature of land tenure system in many under-developed countries.... Tenancy is of course, not in itself an unsatisfactory form of tenure, where rents are not excessive and where security of tenure is safeguarded by legislation. But these conditions, generally speaking, are lacking in under-developed countries, where tenancy systems are characterized by exorbitant rent charges and lack of security of tenure..... In India, the rights are defined by legislation, but the actual cultivators in many cases, share-croppers, enjoy no such legal protection"

The report further mention that the tenancy system is a powerful obstacle to economic development, in three ways:
i. The tenant has little incentive to increase his output, since a large share in any such increase will accrue to the landowner, who has incurred no part of its cost.

ii. The high share of the produce taken by the landowner may leave the peasant with a bare subsistence minimum, with no margin for investment.

iii. Wealth is held in the form of land, and that the accumulation of capital does not lead to productive investment.

In such conditions, it is important to emphasize that the existence of large-scale property ownership does not secure any of the advantages of large-scale operation or investment. The leaders of the Indian National Congress felt that in view of these conditions, Land Reforms need to be carried out with added zeal and commitment.

The redistribution of land ownership involves a change in status, which may lead to an improvement in the cultivator's income, and so raise his standard of living. The increase in income may enable the cultivator to invest and subsequently may increase the production. However, the success of Land Reforms continued to haunt the Congress leadership even in mid-seventies: In pursuance of the same, a two day conference on Land Reforms was held by the AICC on August 18 & 19, 1976, in the
Constitution Club, New Delhi. The conference was attended by the Chief Ministers and Revenue Ministers of different states besides the concerned Minister of the Central Government. In the opening remarks Shri D.K. Borooah, the then Congress President said:

"One method of implementing socialism, which is basically a philosophy of social and economic equality, is to introduce social justice in our land system. As we all know, we have a land system, which is based on social inequality and injustice. It is not today that we have become aware of it. It was part and parcel of our struggle for freedom. We had decided that on attainment of independence, our cultivators, the landless agriculturists and the tenants would receive security fair play and equality of treatment...... We have received reports from different states which are being processed and considered. This will show as to what are the hardships in the way of implementation. I will mention one or two things that have been highlighted. One of them is that this ceiling Act, the declaration of assets under the ceiling Act has not been implemented to the extent it
should have been. The congress working committee therefore decided that in this matter the congressmen at all levels, particularly those congressmen who held offices in the Organization or Legislature or in the Government should come forward and declare their assets first. A substantial number of reports have come, which is indicative of the facts that congressmen have responded to it in a very gracious manner and in a very patriotic manner and, I am sure, all congressmen holding offices at different levels will declare their assets truthfully and all the surplus land would be made available for distribution to those who need it” (Zaidi, A.M. (ed.), 1985:95-96)

Shri Jagjivan Ram addressing the Conference, said:

"Land in our country is not only a means of production, but it also clothes the owner, with some respectability. Whether it is marriage negotiations or whether it is standing surety in the court, the question that is asked how much land he possesses. His income may be much larger than the income from land: still, if he does not have land, the court will not
accept his surety, therefore, land is not only a means of production, but it gives a certain amount of respectability to the owner. Hence, the desire on the part of the rural community who work in agriculture but do not possess land, to have some land. It may be a small area, but even this small area clothes the owner with some respectability" (Zaidi, A.M., Op.cit.:103).

Jagjivan Ram further tried to highlight the diverse land relations in the country. He said that the Eastern India was having a set of relations, which would be very difficult for our friends in Punjab or Maharashtra to understand, because in Punjab or Haryana, when we talk of landlord, it means the cultivator. But when we talk of landlord in Bengal or Assam or Orissa, it does not mean the cultivator but it means the person who collected land revenue from the cultivators. Even the Ryotwari areas like Maharashtra and Punjab, there were big farmers who sublet their land and realized rent for that area either in cash or in kind. In Bihar, Orissa, Assam and West Bengal, payment of land revenue could be made either in cash or in kind. Payment in kind was related to the yield in the field, and that always led to disputes and was like slavery for the farmers. The Congress undertook the agitation for conversion of payment into cash from kind. Jagjivan Ram further elaborated in his remarks that the productivity of
land increases if cultivated by owners of the land. In this connection he gave example of Western U.P. and Eastern U.P. In western U.P. by tradition everybody who owns land works on the field, whereas in Eastern U.P. that is not case. The productivity of Western U.P. is greater than that of Eastern U.P. He further talked about the constitutional amendments in view of the intervention by the law courts.

But despite all these efforts Land Reforms in India never became a success. Madhu Dandvate while discussing 'Land Reforms in Free India' argued:

"Land Reforms were introduced in various states in different stages in a faltering way. The laws for security of tenure enacted in several states were the preliminary steps towards Land Reforms. Even these modest steps came in the wake of powerful Kisan agitations. If after the enactment of these laws the tenants could not derive adequate benefits from these laws, it was because in many areas the necessary campaign was not launched to make the tenants conscious of the new right and protection that were available to them as a result of new land legislation. In addition, some of the loopholes left in the laws were unscrupulously exploited by the landlords. In states like Bihar, Uttar
Pradesh, etc. the Zamindari system was at its worst and inequality in agricultural holdings was most pronounced. The abolition of Zamindari was, therefore, a focal point in the agitation and struggle of the Kisan in these northern states. However, the abolition of 'Zamindari' did not put an end to all the sources of exploitation of the poor peasants and the landless. The crucial question was ceiling on agricultural holdings and equitable redistribution of surplus land after the implementation of these laws. The attitude of various state Governments to the problem of low ceiling has always been lukewarm. The composition of state legislatures, the existence of a strong rich farmers lobby and the strategic position the rich agriculturists occupied both in political as well as economic life in the rural sector, made the formulation as well as implementation of radical Land Reforms very difficult" (Mainstream, 1972-73, Vol. 1:31-33).

The following table shows the extent of inequalities that exist in the operational holdings. Estimated Number
of Operational Holdings and Area Operated by Size of Holdings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Holdings (hectares)</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Area Operated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Million</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>39.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>18.00</td>
<td>35.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 &amp; Above</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It is evident that redistribution of surplus land after introducing the lowering of land ceiling laws will reduce inequalities and offer more incentive to the small peasants, landless, Harijans and Adivasis to augment agricultural production since they will have a stake in production.

Prof. G.S. Bhalla while commenting on the implementation of Land Reforms notes:

"An evaluation of the implementation of Land Reforms would suggest that the
stated objectives were only partially realized. Land Reforms were fairly successful with regard to the objective of abolition of intermediaries in most parts of India. As a result as many as 220 million tenants were brought in direct contact with the state and Rs. 670 crore worth of compensation was to be paid to the ex-intermediaries of which nearly half had been paid by the beginning of the Fifth Five Year Plan. It is, however, notable that in many parts of the country, the landlords with the connivance of the local bureaucracy were able to resume land for self-cultivation by ejecting a large number of tenants. In states like Bihar, Orissa, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal, landlords managed to keep very large holding because of their power and influence. In general, the level of success of 'Zamindari' abolition depended on the strength of the peasant movement. In spite of these failures, the legislation on abolition of intermediaries was fairly well implemented, except in the states mentioned above. One important consequence of the abolition of
intermediaries was that the extent of tenancy declined considerably and self-cultivation became the dominant mode of production in most parts of India. At the all India level, percentage of area under tenancy declined from nearly one fifth of total operated area in 1953-54 to one tenth by 1960-61.”

The legislation regarding imposition of ceilings on land holding failed miserably due to loopholes in law and large scale connivance of the surplus farmers with revenue administration, lack of will power of policy makers and relative weakness of the peasant movement. Consequently, the pattern of land distribution has remained extremely skewed and has not undergone any significant change.

The land distribution was extremely skewed to begin with in early fifties (1953-54). Marginal and small cultivators with less than 2 hectares constituted 60 percent of all cultivating households but accounted for only 15.4 percent of operated area. By 1981-82, the proportion of marginal and small farmers had increased to 75.3 percent although the area under their cultivation now constitutes 28.1 percent of total area. The phenomenal increase in the proportion of marginal and small farmers along with landless labour in the emerging agrarian structure in India has very serious and significant implications. The legislation regarding security of tenure to
the tenants and determination of fair rents has also remained more or less on paper except in Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala and now in West Bengal. In actual practice, tenants hardly enjoy any security and it is the market forces that determine the terms of tenancy. With the emergence of self-cultivation as the dominant mode of production in most parts of India, many of the institutional constraints have been removed and conditions created for the growth of agriculture albeit on capitalist lines.

Generally speaking, the main objectives of Land Reforms in India were to attain just relationship among the agricultural population by altering rural socio-economic structure and to improve the utilization of land. As Griffin K., in his book 'the Political Economy of Agrarian Change' observes: 'in rural areas the most important means of production is land, and the only way to ensure access to it is to own it'. It is widely believed that of all Land Reform programmes, land redistribution is the most important because the most serious agrarian problem in the developing countries is inequality of landownership. This inequality of landownership not only affects the basic agrarian change, but everything proves ephemeral, including security of tenure and makes rent reduction measures extremely difficult to enforce. The role of government is of paramount importance in the entire process of Land Reforms, because, at a deeper level the land tenure problems are basically power problems, and
power encompasses all the three spheres, economic, social and political.

The Recommendations of the Central Land Reforms Committee, 1971:

Unlike 1950's thinking in 1970's on the question of land ceilings was obviously more purposeful and some lessons appear to have been learned from the past. Many loopholes have been sought to be plugged in the new approach. Firstly, ceilings were recommended at a lower range of land size, namely 10 acres of best lands to 54 acres of worst lands. Secondly, they were fixed on family basis instead of individual basis, with some provision for lifting up the ceiling with additions to family size. Moreover, numerous exemptions were sought to be done away with compensation. The Committee, recommended a range of 10 to 18 acres for ceiling on perennially irrigated best lands and a range of 10 to 54 acres for ceiling from the best to the worst lands with some provision for the uplifting of the ceiling for additional family members. Thus in terms of land and land alone these new suggestions appear to be more rigorous and stiffer than the past legislation. Meanwhile, as agricultural yields have risen in more than half of India, thanks to application of higher technology, better seeds, more input use and some institutional change, it does not appear that the present ceilings are any stiffer than the ceilings of the 1950's in terms of the real income received by the landholders.
Agriculture has been absorbing an overwhelmingly large proportion of the country's population. Approximately 82.7 per cent of its people lived in about 5,58,089 villages scattered over the sub-continent. Of these, at the time of British withdrawal from India, 22.2 per cent were owner cultivators, 27.2 per cent were tenants, 30.4 per cent were agricultural labourers, and 20.2 per cent were non-agriculturists. The social pattern of the village communities was influenced in many important ways by the traditional system of agriculture. There were widespread disparities in the ownership of land. Holdings below one acre formed about 17 per cent and covered 1 per cent of the total agricultural land. Those between 1 and 2.5 acres constituted 21 per cent and covered 4.5 percent of the land under cultivation. Holdings between 2.5 to 5 acres were 21 percent and covered 9.9 percent of the total area. As such 59 percent of the holdings were in the range of 5 acres or less. The average size of holdings for the country was about 7.5 acres, but about 71 percent holdings were below this average. 16 percent of the holdings were in the 10-25 acres group, 32.5 per cent of the area and 5.6 per cent were in 25 acres and above group, accounting for about 34 per cent of the area (Lamba, S.K., 1986:106).

The forms of land ownership differed in various parts of the country. There were three main systems of land tenure – the Ryotwari, in which there were no intermediary
between the owner cultivator and the state; the Zamindari in which the land was cultivated by tenants, but owned by the Zamindars who functioned as an intermediary between the cultivator and the state; and Mahalwari in which the entire land, though cultivated separately by individual families, was owned jointly by the entire village community which was collectively responsible for the payment of land revenue to the state. Over 40 percent of the land was owned by intermediaries who often had certain sub-intermediaries also. The table below gives position of pre-independence land tenurial system (1937-38).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System</th>
<th>Area (in crore acres)</th>
<th>In percent</th>
<th>Areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zamindari</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Bengal, Bihar, A.P, UP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahalwari</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>M.P., U.P., Punjab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryotwari</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Parts of M.P.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The main characteristics of agrarian setup inherited by independent India included absentee landlordism, exploitation of tenant because of high rents and insecurity of tenure, inequitable distribution of land and small and fragmented land holdings. Highlighting the concentration of land in a few hands, Chester Bowls wrote about the state of Hyderabad under the regime of Nizam:

"The princely domain of his Exalted Highness, the Nizam of Hyderabad,
extended over an area as large as France. His own crown lands and those of his aristocrats; Amir of Paigah, the 'Raja' of Samastanas 'Zagis'. 'Zamindars' and 'Deshmukhs' accounted for one third of his vast domain in which more than two million poverty stricken peasants struggled to earn their living. It was feudal structure in which no more than few thousand families controlled almost all the wealth of the state” (Lamba, S.K., Op.cit: 107).

The pre-reform Indian agriculture had a large class of poor peasants and landless labourers. The demands for change were made in pre-independence period. The All India Kisan Sabha with N.G. Ranga as president in its first meeting held in Lucknow in 1936 drafted All India Kisan Manifesto articulating the demands of small land owners, tenants and landless labourers. “Minimum demands' advanced by the Manifesto included abolition of Zamindari tenures without compensation, abolition of all debts, redistribution of cultivable wastelands vested in government to subsistence farmers and landless labourers graduated income tax in royatwari areas with exemption for all families earning less than 500 annually, occupancy rights for tenants, cheap credit, seeds and fertilizers etc. At Nehru's initiative and with Gandhiji's approval a far-
reaching programme of Agrarian Reforms was presented at Faizpur session of Congress in 1936. It became part of Congress, Election Manifesto in 1937. In his presidential address Nehru asked for “removal of intermediaries between the cultivator and state” after which “co-operative or collective forming must follow”.

On August 8, 1947, U.P. assembly decided to abolish the Zamindari system. The more specific objectives of the Land Reforms were expressed in many ways. One of the objectives was to give fixity to tenure and rent and confer occupancy rights on the tenant. A more radical aim was to abolish absentee landlordism including intermediaries altogether.

The First Five-Year Plan made significant redistribution of land and some degree of change from individual to co-operative pattern of economic activity an integral part of the programme of agricultural development. It endorsed the recommendation of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee to establish a ceiling of three times the family-holdings both for direct cultivation by owners and land that could be resumed from tenants-at-will for personal cultivation.

The importance of Land Reforms from the point of view of general economic development was also recognized. In his letter dated August 5, 1954 to chief Ministers, Nehru observed:
"The whole policy of Land Reforms apart from removing the burden of the actual tiller, was to spread the income from land more evenly among the peasantry and thus give them the purchasing power. In this way the internal market would expand and the productive forces of the country would grow".

Abolition of Intermediaries was the first step in Land Reforms and one of the earliest programmes of Land Reforms to be implemented. After independence all states with heavy concentration of Zamindari tenure, like West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Orissa, U.P., Rajasthan and Hyderabad took a lead in enacting Reform Laws, completing legislative work from 1949 upto 1952. The abolition of intermediary tenures brought more than 20 million tenants into direct relationship with the state. Despite delaying tactics and a host of devices to retain more land than allowed, the largest semi-feudal landlords— the Zamindars, the Jagirdars, and the absentee non-cultivating landlords who had been allied of the British and the bulwark of the princes were finally administered an irreparable blow by recourse to Land Reforms.

Tenancy Reform to fix rent and period of tenancy was also a record of failures. The legislated rents during fifties varied from 1/5<sup>th</sup> of the gross produce in some states to 1/4<sup>th</sup> in some others states. The minimum period of lease
was from 5 to 10 years. In Bombay and Hyderabad states legislation provided for the category of protected tenant whereas in Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu it did not. Many state legislation's fell short of the recommendations of the Planning Commission.

As regards the third aspect, viz. Ceiling in landholding, though a recommendation was made in favour of ceiling by the first Five-Year Plan, yet hardly any state enacted the requisite legislation. It was initiated only in second Five-Year Plan. But Congress Party bosses in the States argue against radical ceiling in the name of productivity. The principle of imposing ceiling on landholding was first announced in 1953; detailed recommendations were not made until 1956; most states did not pass legislation till 1960-61. The landowners thus had a period of seven to eight years to arrange partition or transfer of holdings. Thus ceiling legislation of the fifties and sixties was described as a great hoax perpetuated on the land hungry tenants and labourers of India. Spurious co-operative farms also came up to evade the ceiling legislation. Poor peasants, landless labourers, village artisans and craftsmen gained very little from Land Reforms. In the early fifties, there was massive eviction of tenants in the name of personal cultivation. Traditional share cropping continued to exist on an extensive scale while new and insidious forms of disguised tenancies began to emerge.
To bring the size of all farms below 1-hectare up to a minimum of one hectare, a ceiling of 4 hectares would provide enough land. A ceiling of 10 hectares size level would permit 50 per cent of landholdings below 1 hectare to rise to the same size level. However, on the whole it could be said that there was not enough land to go around to remove poverty of the landless through re-distribution of land.

References:

1. The Indian Society of Agricultural Economics, Agrarian Reforms in Western Countries, Bombay, Vora; 1946. PP. 11-12.


3. Ibid., p. 96.

4. Ibid.
