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# UNIT 10    AGRARIAN TRANSFORMATION AND LAND REFORMS

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## 10.1 INTRODUCTION

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India has witnessed enormous agrarian transformation in the post-independence period. This has occurred due to the policies introduced by the state, which included land reforms, community development programmes, Green Revolution and several welfare schemes. As a result of the agrarian transformation a set of new classes have emerged in rural society, while old groups or classes have either disappeared or have got transformed. The agrarian transformation has affected politics in India to a significant extent. This unit discusses the agrarian transformation in India and reasons for this transformation including the impact of land reforms.

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## 10.2 LAND REFORMS

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### 10.2.1 Zamindari Abolition

The first attempt to bring about the agrarian transformation was by the implementation of land reforms by states in India. Immediately after independence zamindari abolition bills or land tenure legislations were introduced in a number of states as UP, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Madras and Assam. Land reforms in India may be divided into two phases. The first phase of land reforms started almost immediately after independence. It focused on institutional reforms and lasted till the early sixties, aimed at abolition of the intermediaries like zamindars and jagirdars. It provided ownership of land to the tenants or the security of tenure to tenants, reduction in rents and conferment of ownership rights on tenants. Another feature of this phase of land reforms was ceilings on landholdings. Apart from achieving these goals, the land reforms of this

phase also aimed at community development programmes and cooperatives. The origin of the second phase can be traced to the middle of late sixties. This phase marked the beginning of the Green Revolution in India. Green Revolution attempted to introduce technological changes in certain states of the country, where favourable conditions for such change existed. Some of these states were Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. It introduced HYV (High Yielding Varieties of Seeds), new technology like tractors and irrigation facilities, etc. The main focus of the second phase has been technological reforms. The land reforms i.e., zamindari abolition and Green Revolution have brought tremendous changes in the agrarian sector. It has affected not only the ownership pattern but also impacted discernible changes in social structure, pattern of dominance and the complexion of politics. The first phase of the land reforms especially the abolition of land reforms, were result of the impact of the peasant movements in the pre-independence period. Leaders like NG Ranga and Charan Singh played very decisive role in it. The second phase of land reform were implemented by the Indian government to make India self-sufficient in food production.

A major problem faced at the time of implementation of zamindari abolition act was the absence of adequate land records. By the year 1956 the intermediaries (zamindars and jagirdars) were abolished through a peaceful democratic method without use of coercive method. Because mostly the zamindars had sided with the British during the freedom struggle so they were an isolated class. The abolition of the zamindari changed the status of nearly twenty million tenants who now became landowners. The compensation paid to the zamindars in exchange of the acquisition of estates was generally small and it varied from area to area.

The zamindari abolition Acts in different parts of the country suffered from many weaknesses. In UP the zamindars were permitted to retain land under their personal cultivation. Personal cultivation was so loosely defined that it included even those who only supervised land personally or even through a relative or provided only capital or credit. This was not in conformity with the Kumarappa Committee report on agrarian reforms. The committee appointed by the Congress Party in its report in 1949 had held that only those could be said to be doing personal cultivation that put in a minimum amount of physical labour and engaged in actual agricultural operation. To undermine the full impact of the zamindari abolition the zamindars resorted to other obstructionist technique. Various techniques were used to delay the passage of such bills by the state legislatures. Then the landlords took recourse to litigation to delay implementation of the zamindari abolition laws. The collusion between the zamindars and the bureaucracy made the implementation of zamindari abolition even more difficult. The zamindars could put resistance through all the three arms of the government executive, legislature and judiciary. In spite of all these obstructionist measures resorted to by the landlords the objective of zamindari abolition was achieved except for some pockets of Bihar within ten years of independence.

Only half of the land at the time of Independence was under zamindari system but the practice of tenancy existed even in the other half of the area, which were under the ryotwari system. Another important component of land reform—tenancy reform was also implemented not without hurdles. The legislations aiming at tenancy reforms passed by legislatures of different states and the methods of their implementation differed immensely because of different political and economic situation prevalent in different parts of the country. Apart from these differences tenancy reform legislations all over the country shared some common objectives. The manner of their implementation also led to the emergence of some broad features. These reforms aimed at three

main objectives. The first objective was to provide security of tenure to those tenants who had cultivated a piece of land without break for a fixed number of years. The exact number of years differed from region to region. Another objective of the tenancy reforms was reduction of rents paid by tenants to a just level. This ranged between one fourth to one sixth of the value of the produce of the leased land. Yet another objective of the tenancy reforms was to give to the tenants the ownership right over the land they cultivated. That is why the second plan envisaged that very small landowners could resume self-cultivation over their entire land. This provision was made to safeguard the interests of very small landowners but with the connivance of the bureaucracy it was misused by big landowners for their benefit. The big landowners transferred their lands in the name of their relatives and others to get the tag of small landowners and evict the tenants exercising the right of resumption given to small landowners. The big landowners had indulged in dilatory tactics in both the enactment and implementation of the legislations to get enough time to evict the tenants from their lands who could have benefited from the law. The thing that compounded the problems of the tenants was that most of the tenancies were oral without any records. Such tenants could not benefit from any legislation in their favour. In spite of all these limitations of tenancy legislations succeeded in providing security and even permanent occupancy rights to a substantial proportion of the tenants. The Operation Barga launched by the Left Front government of West Bengal in 1978 aimed at the objective of a time bound registration of share-croppers to give them occupancy rights and a crop division of 1:3 between the landowner and the sharecropper. A remarkable aspect of the Operation Barga experiment was that it involved the targeted beneficiaries to neutralise the negative role played by revenue officials and thus making tenancy reforms a great success.

Another important component of the land reforms in the first phase was imposition of ceilings on the size of landholdings. The objective of fixing land ceiling was linked with more equitable distribution of landholding. The idea of fixing a ceiling on landholdings and distributing the surplus land among the landless was faced with stiff opposition everywhere. It was seen as a threat to the right to property. Even the tenants who had benefited from the zamindari abolition and had become landowners opposed this next step of the land reforms. N.G. Ranga, Secretary of the Congress Parliamentary Party had sent a letter signed by hundred members of parliament criticising the idea of ceilings on landholdings to Nehru. Leaders who were not very enthusiastic about this idea dominated state legislatures. That is why they caused the delay in passing legislation for this purpose. Both the inordinate delay in the passage of such legislation and the nature of the legislation undermined its impact. It succeeded in releasing little surplus land for distribution among the landless. Ceiling laws could not deliver much because of its major shortcomings. One such shortcoming was that in India more than seventy per cent of the landholdings were less than five acres while the ceilings fixed by the states were very high. Another problem was that initially the ceilings were imposed on individuals not holdings among family members and relations and save themselves from ceiling laws. Another provision in this law was that if the size of the family was more than five members then the ceiling limit could go up at times even by hundred per cent as was the case in Bihar. The second plan recommended that certain categories of land could be exempted from ceilings. This recommendation led to most of the states giving exemptions of different kinds. These exemptions included tea, coffee and rubber plantations, farms used for cattle breeding, dairy and efficiently managed farms on which heavy investments had been made. The intention was not to hinder capitalist farming. But the idea of efficiently managed farm was so vague that it was used by very large number of landlords to get themselves declared efficient farmers and flout the provisions of the ceiling laws. Even the long delay caused

in first getting the legislation passed through state legislature and then in implementation to a very large extent defeated its purpose. The landowners used this delay to either sell their lands or transfer them in the names of family members or relatives. At times they even resorted to benami transfers. The landowners used this delay to evict the tenants from their lands. The ineffectiveness of the ceiling legislations is borne out by the fact that while the ceiling legislations were passed by most of the states by the end of 1961 till the end of 1970 not a single acre was declared surplus in large states like Bihar, Mysore, Kerala, Orissa and Rajasthan.

## **10.2.2 Cooperative Societies**

Another important component of the first phase of land reforms was to encourage setting up of the cooperative societies in agriculture. It could be termed as cooperativisation of agriculture. Many of the top leaders of the Congress Party including Nehru and Gandhi along with the leaders of the Socialist and the Communist Parties were convinced about the benefit of cooperativisation. They shared this view that it would lead to major improvement in agriculture and which would also be beneficial to the poor. Cooperativisation constituted an important component of the first phase of land reforms. But the goal of cooperativisation was also faced with the problem. Like in the case of land reforms there existed no consensus in favour of it among the peasantry. The Kumarappa committee on Agrarian Reforms set up by Congress Party in 1949 recommended that the states should be empowered to enforce the application of varying degree of cooperation for different types of farmings. The family farmers could use cooperative societies for marketing, credit and other matters.

The first five year plan recommended that small and medium farmers should be encouraged to group themselves in to cooperative farming societies. Another recommendation of the same plan was also that if majority of the occupancy tenants and landowners owning at least half of the land in a village wanted to enter into cooperative arrangement of the village land, their decision should be binding on other residents of the village also. The second five year plan declared that its objective was to provide sound foundations for the development of cooperative farming so that substantial portion of land could be cultivated on the lines of cooperative within a period of ten years.

In the field of cooperativisation China was the model because it had achieved dramatic results in agricultural production and extension of infrastructure through cooperativisation. In the middle of 1956 two Indian delegations consisting of the leaders of the cooperative movement, members of parliament bureaucrats with experience in the field of cooperatives and technical experts were sent to China to gain from their experience. The Nagpur Resolution of the Congress Party in 1959 underlined the twin needs of village panchayats and village cooperatives. This resolution also emphasised that these institutions should have enough powers and functions to discharge the functions allotted to them satisfactorily. This resolution aimed at achieving the goals of joint cooperative farming within a period of three years. The programme of cooperativisation was subjected to severe criticism both in the press and on the floor of the parliament. Apprehensions were expressed that this programme was a step towards ending private property and would lead to expropriation of the landed classes. Even senior Congress leaders like N G Ranga, C. Rajgopalachari and Charan Singh accused this programme of being totalitarian. They were of the view that Communist programmes were being imposed on India. To allay such apprehensions Nehru assured in the parliament no coercive method was going to be used to implement the

programme of cooperativisation. The strong criticism of the 1959 Nagpur resolution of the Congress Party weakened the resolve of the Congress to go ahead with the intent of the original resolution. A climb down was reflected in the Congress proposal put forward to set up service cooperatives all over the country within a period of three years and leaving the idea of setting up farm cooperatives in the cold storage. Even the objective of setting up service cooperatives did not succeed. State Congress leaders did not evince much of interest. The plan was finally abandoned in 1959. The third five year plan further watered down the objective of cooperativisation. So far as cooperative farming was concerned, it aimed at setting up ten pilot projects in every district. It also made it clear that cooperative farming had to develop through the community development movement. It could come about with cooperation in credit, marketing, distribution and processing. It is obvious that the third five year plan did not have any concrete plan of action on how to achieve the goals of cooperativisation.

The cooperative movement in India cannot be called a success. As far as joint farming was concerned two types of cooperatives had come up. The first type of cooperatives had come up to avoid the provisions of ceiling and tenancy laws. The influential members of big land holding families gave bogus membership to agricultural labours and ex-tenants to keep the management of the cooperatives in their hand flout the provisions of land ceiling and tenancy legislation and at the same time benefiting from financial assistance, improved seeds, fertilizers made available by the state. Another type of cooperative farms was where poor quality of land was made available to poor landless labour and dalits. These lands had non-existent irrigation facility. These were government sponsored cooperative farms. They lacked initiative and motivation. They proved to be an expensive affair without any commensurate returns.

Service cooperatives did not do that badly. Yet, they faced some major shortcomings. They re-enforced the hierarchical structure of the rural economy. The office bearers of these cooperatives invariably came from families that not only controlled land but also trade and money lending. By capturing the key positions in these cooperatives these influential families could corner the benefits like agricultural inputs and credits. The rural notables used the funds of the credit societies for their business and some times even for money lending. These institutions were virtually taken over by the dominant sections of villages. The benefit of these organisations was not reaching the poor in the countryside. The cooperatives insisted on giving loans against land as security. This virtually ruled out the benefit of credit to landless but enterprising farmers. The report of the All India Credit Review Committee, 1969 and the Interim Report on Credit Services for Small and Marginal farmers by the National Commission on Agriculture in 1971 confirmed the virtual exclusion of the landless and only nominal benefits reaching to small and marginal farmers. One of the major weaknesses of the Cooperative movement was bureaucratic nature of its approach to the problem. The cooperative societies resembled any other government department at state, district or block level. Even the officials of this department were amenable to pressure and influence from local notables. Another defect that plagued the cooperative credit societies was the recovery of loans. Surprisingly the defaulters were not only the poor and small farmers but also the well to do farmers.

### **10.2.3 Bhoodan Movement**

Bhoodan {land-gift} Movement launched in April 1951 by Acharya Vinoba Bhave. The purpose of this movement was to appeal to the landowning classes to donate their surplus land to the



poor. But the method adopted for this purpose by the movement was completely different from the one used in the abolition of Zamindari. Inspired by Gandhian technique the Sarvodaya Samaj of Vinoba Bhave used the ideal of non-violent method of social transformation in to Bhoodan movement. The Vinoba Bhave and his band of followers traveled through villages on foot requesting the large landowners to donate one sixth of their land as bhoodan for distribution among the landless. Although the movement claimed to be independent, yet it enjoyed the support of the Congress Party. The All India Congress Committee had urged the Congressmen to support the movement.

Vinoba Bhave's experiment of Bhoodan started in 1951 Pochampali village in the Telangana region of Andhra. The choice of Telangna was significant because that area still felt reverberation of the armed peasant revolt led by the Communist Party of India. After its considerable success in Andhra the movement shifted to the northern part of the country. In north Bhoodan was experimented in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. In its initial years this movement achieved considerable amount of success in receiving land gift and distributing them. But after the initial years of success the movement lost its vitality. A problem faced by the Bhoodan movement was that a good part of the land donated was simply not fit for cultivation. There were no takers for such land.

In 1955 Vinoba Bhave's experiment took another form, the form of gram-dan (village-gift). The idea had its origin in Gandhian belief that all the land belonged to God. This movement was launched from a village in Orissa. In gram dan villages the movement declared that all the land was owned collectively or equally. The movement was very successful in Orissa. Later on it was launched in Maharashtra, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. The movement was particularly successful in tribal areas of the country where class differentiation had not yet appeared and there was very little disparity in ownership pattern. By the sixties both bhoodan and gram-dan had come to an end.

Many critiques dismiss the movement bhoodan and gram-dan as utopian. There is another charge against the movement that it stifled class-consciousness of the poor and the landless and served as a brake on the revolutionary potential of the peasants. It seems that a proper assessment of the Bhoodan and Gramdan movement is still to be made. The remarkable thing about this movement was that it aimed at the goal of equitable distribution of land not through government legislation but through a movement involving concerned people. And it did so without use of any violent or coercive method but by appealing to the good sense of big landowners. Apart from the considerable success this movement achieved, it also succeeded in creating sufficient propaganda and agitation for redistribution of land.

#### **10.2.4 Green Revolution**

The Green Revolution has been the main plank of the second phase of the land reforms. After independence in the rural sector the main focus was on institutional reforms in agriculture. By the late fifties and early sixties benefits from land reforms was reaching its limit. Around this time Nehru realised the need of technological solutions. The New Agricultural Strategy of picking up select areas with certain natural advantages for intensive development with package programme. The Intensive Agricultural District Programme was launched in the third five year plan. This

programme picked up one district from each of the fifteen states on an experimental basis. In spite of these traces of the New Agricultural strategy the big push to it came only in the middle of the sixties. India was faced with chronic food shortage. The country had to resort to import of food grain from America under an agreement called PL480. In Bihar and UP there existed a famine like situation. In this kind of background some critical breakthrough in agricultural science showing promises of higher growth and possible solution of the food shortage launched India on the path of Green Revolution. The New Agricultural Strategy received wholehearted support from Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, Food Minister C. Subramaniam and Indira Gandhi who succeeded Shastri after his sudden death as Prime Minister.

The areas with assured irrigation and other natural and institutional advantages were provided with critical inputs like High Yielding Variety (HYV) seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Farmers in these areas were also given agricultural machinery like tractors, pumps–sets and tube–wells at convenient terms. They could avail the facility of soil testing agricultural credits and guidance from agricultural universities. Apart from providing these facilities to the farmers the government also set up an Agricultural Prices Commission in 1965. The purpose of this commission was to promise sustained remunerative price to the farmers. In this way the package of public investment, institutional credit, remunerative prices and easy availability of technological help made agriculture a profitable proposition. This New Agricultural Strategy or the Green Revolution led to phenomenal growth in agricultural production. Between 1968 to 1971 food grain production rose by 35 per cent. Very soon India buried its begging bowl image and by the 1980s emerged as a country not only with buffer food stock but also as a food supplier.

There has been a criticism of the Green Revolution that it further accentuated regional inequalities by focussing on areas that already had some advantages. Scholars like G.S. Bhalla are of the view that over a period of time the benefits of Green Revolution have gone to all agrarian classes in varying degrees. Its benefits are also no more limited to any particular region of the country only. Another charge against the Green Revolution was that it was making the rich richer and the poor even poorer. Daniel Thorner and Wolf Ladejinsky both confirm this charge. According to them while inequality increased the poor including small farmers and landless labour benefited from the Green Revolution.

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## **10.3 IMPACT OF LAND REFORMS: AGRARIAN TRANSFORMATION**

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### **10.3.1 The Kulaks**

Land reforms, especially the Zamindari abolition and Green Revolution had enormous impact on the agrarian transformation. On the one hand these accelerated the agriculture growth; on the other, entire pattern of the relations in agriculture underwent transformation. The latter was reflected in the rise of a class of economically and politically powerful groups in several parts of India. They came to be popularly known as Kulaks or rich farmers. L.H. Rudolph and Sussan Rudolph categorised them as “bullock capitalists”. These groups emerged to control the political affairs in several states, and from the 1990s they have become influential in the national politics as well. In terms of the caste composition, they belonged to the intermediary castes like Jats,

Yadavs, Lodhs, Gujars, Kurmie, etc., in Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan; Marathas in Maharashtra; Lingayats and Vokkaligas in Karnataka; and Reddies and Kammas in Andhra Pradesh. They have been identified as the OBCs in the states inhabited by them. Having become the owners of land following the Zamindari abolition, they benefited from the modern technologies and inputs through Green Revolution. The land reforms made them the most powerful groups in the agrarian society in many regions of the country. The emergence also resulted in the decline of the erstwhile dominant groups. The developments, however, did not benefit the socially and economically vulnerable groups – dalits and the lower backward classes. The welfare measures like the poverty alleviation programmes, etc. have been mainly the populist measures. Besides, these have been hampered by large scale corruption. Nevertheless, due to the spread of education, awareness and impart of the ideas of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and mass media, there has been the assertion of dalits in certain including the rural areas states like Uttar Pradesh. The emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party is an indication of this.

Kulaks or rich farmers have made their presence felt through their political parties and non-political organisations. The first example of such attempt was foundation of the Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD) by Charan Singh. In the late 1970s and 1980s – the organisation like the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) in North India, Shetkari Sangathan in Maharashtra and Karnataka Ryat Sangha in Karnataka played important role in articulating the interests of Kulaks.

### **10.3.2 The Small Farmers and Landless Labourers**

In the 1960s and 1970s large part of the country witnessed the emergence of the movement of the small farmers and landless labour. This movement started from Naxalbari in West Bengal and very soon spread to different parts of country like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa till the end of the 60s. In 1970 a land grab movement of the landless led by the Socialist Party and the Communist Party of India was witnessed in Gujarat, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar. Although these movements could not achieve much yet they succeeded in attracting the attention of the countrymen towards agrarian question. The Left front government introduced land reforms in West Bengal during its tenure. This ensured the security to the tenants and land to the tiller. In 1970 while addressing Chief Ministers conference on land reforms the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi held that the cause of discontent in the countryside was the failure of the land reforms to meet the expectation of the people in the countryside. Reduction in ceiling limits was the main proposal discussed in this conference. Most of the Chief Ministers rejected this proposal. Then this matter was referred to the Central Land Reforms Committee. This committee made quite a few recommendations in 1971. The 1972 Chief Ministers' conference approved some national guidelines for reforms in India. The national guidelines made a departure from the history of ceiling legislation in India. It reduced the ceiling limits on all categories of lands. Family, not individual was taken as unit for the purpose of ceiling. Preference was to be given to landless labourers, particularly belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in distribution of surplus lands. The compensation this time was much below the market price. The landowners again went to court and indulged in other deceitful methods to undermine the ceiling laws. Nevertheless, in the 1970s the ceiling legislation moderately succeeded in its objective of collecting and distributing surplus land. Another good thing was that the major-beneficiaries of the ceiling laws this time were the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.



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## **10.4 SUMMARY**

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In this unit we have discussed the agrarian transformation in India, which has been result of the impact of land reforms mainly the zamindari abolition and land to the tillers. The agrarian transformation is best seen in the rise of the class of Kulaks in parts of the country. The landless labourers and dalits did not benefit from these in most parts of the country. The Kulaks came to wield considerable influence in the politics of several states, and since the 1990s of the country. In some parts of country, the agrarian transformation has resulted in the increased participation of dalits in politics.

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## **10.5 EXERCISES**

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- 1) Explain the relationships between land reforms and agrarian transformation.
- 2) What were the limitations of land reforms?
- 3) Write a note on the role of Kulaks in politics.