



Role of Land Reforms in Eradicating Land Inequalities in Rural India

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ABSTRACT

Land is an ultimate unit of production and its redistribution has implications for reducing poverty, access to agricultural inputs and benefits from the technology led interventions such as green revolution. The distribution of land was highly unequal during the British rule. The government of India since independence has given adequate focus on land policy in most of the every five-year plans. Subsequently, most of the states enacted legislations along with revisions from time to time for abolishing of intermediary tenures, fixing the ceiling limits, consolidating the land, etc. The fact remains that there were wide variations in the implementation of land reforms across the states resulting in wider variations in the distribution of surplus land to poor landless households. The study also points that at India level, land inequalities have decreased, but only a few states such as Odisha, West Bengal, and Kerala were able to implement the land reforms successfully resulting in the decline in land inequalities. Thus, the success of land reform lies in educating, persuasion of large land holders and compelling them to cooperate through coercion, which requires a strong government political will and a bureaucracy with the commitment to achieve the desired results.

Keywords

Agriculture, land reforms, inequality, Gini Coefficient, land ownership, rural India

JEL Codes

D63, Q15, P11, P25

BACKGROUND

Agriculture and allied activities still constitute a crucial sector of the Indian economy. Though its contribution to the overall Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has fallen from about 30 percent in 1990-91 to 13.9 percent in 2013-14, a trend that is expected in the development process of any economy, agriculture sector still forms the backbone of development. About 49 percent of the total workforce is employed in the farm sector for its sustenance (Singla and Kaur, 2015 and Anonymous, 2013-14). Among all the factors of production, land is ultimate unit of production as its quantity and quality determines the level of production. But, the fact remains that there exist widespread inequalities in ownership of land in India. In 2010-11, marginal and small farmers accounted for 85.01 per cent of the operational holdings and 45 per cent of the operated area as against 0.70 per cent large holdings with a share of 10.59 per cent in the operated area. The semi-medium and medium operational holding constitute about 14 percent with the operated area as

high as about 45 percent (Anonymous, 2010-11).

Land plays an immense role in an agrarian society as it has the dual role in rural India. Apart from its value as a productive factor, land ownership gives the guarantee in credit markets, security during natural hazards and social status. Even those who control land tend to have a disproportionate influence over other rural institutions including labour and credit markets. In India, many households own some land, but in holdings that are so small or unproductive that their owners obtain a greater share of their livelihoods from their own labour than from their own land (Mearns, 1999 and Rawal, 2008). Further, the fragmented nature of land holdings lead to sub-optimal usage of factor inputs and to lower overall returns to land. The factors contributing to this could be losses due to extra travel time, wasted space along borders, inadequate monitoring and the inability to use certain types of machinery such as harvesters (Jha *et al.*, 2005). While India's agrarian systems have not prevented the poor from taking advantage of new opportunities presented by the

Green Revolution, the gains from technological innovation remain unequally distributed between those with access to land, water and inputs and those without. More equitable distribution of operational land holdings would create more equal pattern of demand, which in turn would enhance growth in the rural non-farm sector and remove some of the biases in credit, marketing and research institutions that arise from the unequal distribution of assets and power.

Land reforms were also introduced with the twin objectives of achieving social equity and ensuring economic growth. The land reforms were built around three broad types of land revenue system (zamindari system, ryotwari system and mahalwari system) in India under British rule. Under the Zamindari system, Jagirdars were declared proprietors of the land on condition of fixed revenue payments to the British regime. Peasants were transformed into tenant farmers and rents were collected by serried ranks of intermediaries below the level of Zamindars. This system prevailed over most of North India and covered around 57 per cent of the total area cultivated. The other major system was the Ryotwari system, introduced in Madras in 1792 and in Bombay in 1817-18. In this case, individual cultivators that is, Raiyats were recognized as proprietors of their land with rights to sub-let, mortgage and transfer their land by gift or sale. Their tenure of land was secure so long as revenue payments were made directly to the collectors of the colonial administration. The Ryotwari system held influence over most of South India. Jaipur and Jodhpur in Rajasthan also fell under Ryotwari system. The third

type of system was the Mahalwari system, in which revenue settlements were made with entire villages as collective units. Peasant farmers contributed shares of the total revenue demand for the village in proportion to their respective holdings. The state was initially entitled to as much as 83 per cent of gross produce in revenue, although this was later lowered to 66 per cent. The Mahalwari system was introduced between 1820 and 1840 in combined Punjab. This type of tenure system was much less extensive and accounted for about 5 percent of the cultivated area (Bandyopadhyay, 1993; Mearns, 1999; Venkatasubramanian, 2013). A lot of research work has been done to study the after effects of land reforms and inequality in land distribution. Sharma (1994) has analysed how the concentration of owned and operational land has changed over time. The reliability and accuracy of estimates of the distribution of ownership holdings and extent of landlessness by NSSO has also been questioned (Rawal, 2008) and examined the household ownership of land holdings to determine the pattern of land distribution and tenancy among different groups as shown by NSSO (Sharma, 2007).

This paper extensively focuses on the various other aspects, such as interstate comparison in the operational land holding, inequalities of the land holding among the social groups and variation among the interstate. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 scrutinizes the objectives of land reforms during the five-year plan and legislation of implementation of land reforms among the different states of India. Section 3 empirically analyses the status of operational holdings and operated

Table 1: Major objectives of Land Reform in Five Year Plan

Plan period	Objective of Land Reform
First Plan (1951-56)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 To enhance the productivity of land by improving the economic conditions of farmers and tenants so that they may have the interest to invest in and improve agriculture. 2 To ensure distributive justice and to create an egalitarian society by eliminating all forms of exploitation. 3 To create a system of peasant proprietorship with the motto of land to the tiller. 4 To create the demand of consumer goods transfer the incomes of the few to numerous.
Second Plan (1956-61)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 To remove the hurdles in the way of agricultural production and to evolve an agrarian economy conducive of high levels of efficiency and productivity. 2 To eliminate social inequality
Third Plan (1961-66)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 For the optimum utilisation of land- redistribution of ownership holdings and reorganising operational holdings. It has also aimed at providing security to tenure, fixation of rents and conferment of ownership.
Fourth Plan (1969-74)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Lowering of ceiling to 28 acres of wet land and 54 acres of unirrigated land. 2 A change over to family rather than the individual as the unit for determining land holdings lowered ceiling for a family of five. 3 Fewer exemptions from ceilings. 4 Retrospective application of the law for declaring benami transactions null and void. 5 No scope to move the court on ground of infringement of fundamental rights.
Seventh Plan (1985-90)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Several States passed the Consolidation of Holdings Act.

Source: Venkatasubramanian, 2013

area in different regions, and among the weaker sections and categories of farmers. Section 4 concludes the entire study with some policy suggestions.

Implementation of Land Reforms

In India, land holdings which are considered as a source of social power are distributed in a highly unequal manner. To get secure access to land for the poor and landless, land reform policies were implemented to benefit poorer section of society since independence. Land reform is described as the redistribution of land from the rich to the poor. The purpose of land reforms is the efficient use of the scarce land resource, redistributing agricultural land in favour of the less privileged class in general and cultivating class in particular. The centre government was committed to land reforms and consequently laws were passed by all the state governments during the fifties with the affirmed aim of abolishing landlordism, distributing land through the imposition of ceilings, protection of tenants and consolidation of land-holdings. In the decades following independence, India passed a significant body of land reform legislation. The 1949 constitution left the adoption and implementation of land and tenancy reforms to state governments which led to much variation in the execution of these reforms across states and over time. As the redistribution not only reduces poverty, but it also protects the small landholders from the chains of landlordism as a part of the democratic revolution (Bakshi, 2008). Thus,

the main aim of land reforms was to ensure land access to backwards social classes and made them free from social and economic oppression. But, due to various reasons such as delay in enacting land laws, malafide transfer of land to their family members, lack of social consciousness among tenants, uncultivable nature of surplus land, absence of land records and lack of uniformity in land reforms laws in throughout the state lead to unsuccessful implementation and variations in effective implementation of land reforms across different states.

Implementation of Land Reforms in Different States

The perusal of Table 2 shows the objectives of state-wise legislations and the years of amendment associated with the land reforms. Soon after the independence, the Government appointed Kumarappa Committee to prepare suitable land policy in India. Following the recommendations of Kumarappa Committee, all the states of India enacted legislations reforms for the abolition of intermediary tenures in India which existing during the British rule (Bandyopadhyay, 2008). Such legislations were amended from time to time to ensure the equitable distribution of land although the nature of these legislations varied from state to state. For example, legislation was passed to abolish the intermediary tenures and imposed the ceilings on land holdings in West Bengal and Jammu and Kashmir, on the contrary, for the personal cultivation there was no limit set and intermediaries were allowed to

Table 2: State-wise legislation on ceiling of land holdings

States	Acts	Date	Objective	Amendments
Bihar	Fixation of Ceiling Area and Acquisition of Surplus Land, 1960	1961	Fair and equitable distribution	1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1978, 1982, and 1987
Andhra Pradesh	Ceiling of Agriculture Holding, 1973	01.01.1975	Ceiling on agriculture land holding to Nil ameliorate the poor	
Haryana	Ceiling on Land Holdings Act, 1972	22.12.1972	Equitable distribution	1976 and 1977
Himachal Pradesh	Ceiling on Land Holdings, Acquisition and Disposal of Surplus Area 1972	1972	Equitable distribution	Nil
J&K.	Agrarian Reforms Act 1976	1976	Transfer of land to tillers	Nil
Karnataka	The Karnataka Land Reforms Act 1961	05.01.1962	Legislative reforms	1965-68, 1970, 1972-74, 1976-77, 1979-80, 1982-83, 1985-86, 1990-92, 1995-96, 1998, 2001, 2003-05 and 2015
Kerala	Land Reform Act 1963	1963	Comprehensive legislation with regard to land reforms	1964, 1969, 1971 1972, 1976 1978, 1981 and 1989.
Madhya Pradesh	The Madhya Pradesh Ceiling on Agricultural Holdings Act, 1960	15.11.1961	Equitable distribution	1974,1976,1994 and 1989
Odisha	The Orissa Land Reforms Act, 1960	1961	Land tenures reforms	1965, 1966, 1967, 1969,1970, 1974, 1975, 1976, and 1989
Punjab	The Punjab Land Reforms Act, 1972-73		To replace the Punjab Land Reforms Ordinance, 1973	Nil
Tamil Nadu	Tamil Nadu Land Reforms (Fixation of Ceiling on Land) Act, 1961	06.04.1960	To reduce the disparity in the ownership of the agricultural land	1970-72, 1974-75, 1978-1979, 1980-82, 1984, 1986-89
West Bengal	The West Bengal Land Reforms Act., 1955	30.03.1958	To reform the law relating to land tenure	1965-66, 1969, 1972-77, 1980-81, 1986, 1989-91

Sources: Compiled from the various state legislations

possess the land in other states. Various states such as Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh banned the leasing out of land except the special categories which include disability, etc. whereas Kerala completely banned the leasing out of the land with no exception. While few states which include West Bengal, Odisha, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh and to some extent Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat and Haryana did not banned the leasing out of the land. It was estimated that during 2005, the governments had distributed 1 per cent of India's agricultural land that benefitted only 4 percent of rural, particularly among the few states that include West Bengal, Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala, and Assam. Moreover, West Bengal has given the right of 15.6 million acres of land (5 per cent of agricultural land) to 12.4 million tenants that comprises of around 5 percent households (Mander, 2013).

Structure of Operational Holdings

The average size of operational holdings in India has diminished progressively from 2.28 ha in 1970-71 to 1.55 ha in 1990-91 to 1.15 ha in 2010-11 (Table 3). As per Agriculture Census 2010-11, the proportion of marginal holdings (area less than 1 ha) has increased from 61.6 percent in 1995-96 to 67.09 percent in 2010-11. This is followed by about 17.91 percent of small holdings (1-2 ha.), about 14.29 percent medium holdings (more

Table 3: Average size of holdings as per different Agriculture Census

Census	Average land holding (ha)
1970-71	2.28
1975-76	2.00
1980-81	1.84
1985-86	1.69
1990-91	1.55
1995-96	1.41
2000-01	1.33
2005-06	1.23
2010-11	1.15

Source: Department of Agriculture and Cooperation, Agricultural Census, Ministry of Agriculture

than 2 to less than 10 ha.) and less than 1 percent large holdings (10 ha. and above) (Anonymous, 2014).

The perusal of Table 4 explains the change in pattern of operational holdings of households from 1970-71 to 2010-11 in India. Over a period of time, the percentage of marginal farmers has increased from 50.98 per cent in 1970-71 to 67.1 per cent in 2010-11. The percentage of small, semi-medium, medium and large farmers has decreased throughout the period. In 2010-11, only 0.70 per cent of large farmers have 10.6 per cent operated land. On the other hand, marginal and small farmers

Table 4: Number of operational holdings and operated Area

Category	1970-71	1980-81	1990-91	2000-01	2010-11
(000 ha)					
<i>Operation holdings</i>					
Marginal	36200 (50.98)	50122 (56.39)	63389 (59.44)	75408 (62.88)	92826 (67.10)
Small	13432 (18.92)	16072 (18.08)	20092 (18.84)	22695 (18.92)	24779 (17.91)
Semi-medium	10681 (15.04)	12455 (14.01)	13923 (13.06)	14021 (11.69)	13896 (10.04)
Medium	7932 (11.17)	8068 (9.08)	7580 (7.11)	6577 (5.48)	5875 (4.25)
Large	2766 (3.90)	2166 (2.44)	1654 (1.55)	1230 (1.03)	973 (0.70)
Coefficient of Variation	90.92	105.82	114.89	124.48	135.6
<i>Area Operated</i>					
Marginal	14599 (9.00)	19735 (12.05)	24894 (14.65)	29814 (18.70)	35908 (22.50)
Small	19282 (11.90)	23169 (14.14)	28827 (16.97)	32139 (20.16)	35244 (22.08)
Semi-medium	29999 (18.50)	34645 (21.16)	38375 (22.60)	38193 (23.95)	37705 (23.62)
Medium	48234 (29.74)	48543 (29.63)	44752 (26.35)	38217 (23.97)	33828 (21.20)
Large	50064 (30.86)	37705 (23.02)	33002 (19.43)	21072 (13.22)	16907 (10.60)

Source: Agriculture Census, 2010-11
Figures in parentheses are percentage.

constituted 85.01 per cent of operational holdings with only 44.58 per cent operated area. Thus, there is movement of all others categories of farmers towards the marginal farmers. The results of the coefficient of variations among the different categories of the farmers explicates that the inequality among the farmers has been consistently increased from 1970-71 to 2010-11.

The results presented in Table 5 presents the average area in hectare owned by per household and percentage of landless households among the major states of India for the period of 1992, 2003 and 2013. During 2013, West Bengal has the lowest (0.174 ha) and Rajasthan has the highest (1.483 ha) average area owned per household. Most of the states which include Kerala, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh reported an average area owned per household was less than the national average (0.592 ha). The states of Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab show increasing trends in the number of landless households. They had increased by 11.8 percent, 10.4 percent and 5.9 percent in 1992 to 15.93 per cent, 14.39 per cent and 6.84 percent for the states of Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab respectively in 2013 at all India level. But, the level of the percentage of landless households decreased from 11.3

Table 5: State-wise average size of ownership holdings and percentage of landless households

States/UTs	Average area (ha) owned per household			Percentage of landless households		
	1992	2003	2013	1992	2003	2013
Andhra Pradesh	0.78	0.62	0.49	11.8	14.33	15.93
Arunachal Pradesh	1.44	1.173	1.33	NA	21.59	13.8
Assam	0.7	0.551	0.631	13.4	8.05	7.42
Bihar	0.64	0.376	0.242	8.6	7.6	5.33
Gujarat	1.38	1.016	0.804	16.3	13.6	12.5
Haryana	1.41	0.833	0.764	3.7	9.21	1.05
Himachal Pradesh	0.79	0.56	0.397	10.4	15	14.23
Jammu & Kashmir	0.99	0.794	0.432	2.8	3.29	3.06
Karnataka	1.39	0.979	0.851	10	14.09	10.22
Kerala	0.3	0.234	0.209	8.4	4.8	9.35
Madhya Pradesh	1.74	1.31	1.122	15.2	12.05	5.56
Maharashtra	1.59	1.021	0.903	19.6	17.66	12.84
Odisha	0.74	0.483	0.38	13.8	9.56	5.39
Punjab	1.1	0.838	0.632	5.9	4.57	6.84
Rajasthan	2.66	2.077	1.483	6.4	5.65	3.89
Sikkim	1.02	0.447	0.345	NA	30.67	39.48
Tamil Nadu	0.41	0.338	0.348	17.9	16.55	8.84
Tripura	0.4	0.259	0.334	NA	8.69	2.56
Uttar Pradesh	0.83	0.618	0.493	4.9	3.82	3.32
West Bengal	0.46	0.295	0.174	11	6.15	6.55
All India	1.01	0.725	0.592	11.3	10.04	7.41

Source: NSSO 70th Round report on Household Ownership and Operational Holdings in India, 2013

percent in 1992 to 7.41 per cent in 2013. Andhra Pradesh has the highest percentage with 15.93 per cent and Haryana has lowest 1.05 percent in landless households among the major Indian states during 2013.

Table 6 present the percentage of households, total land owned, the percentage of land owned, the average area owned by per households and Gini coefficient of each social group in India during the year 2013. The analysis revealed that the schedule caste constituted 20.06 per cent of population among the farm class but control only 9.23 percent of land area in India, while the others

Table 6: Gini's Coefficient and Distribution of Land Owned per Household by Social Group during 2013

Indicators	ST	SC	OBC	Others	All
Percentage of households	11.89	20.06	44.82	23.23	100.00
Estimated total area of land owned (mha)	12.062	8.528	42.190	29.588	92.369
Percentage area of land owned	13.06	9.23	45.68	32.03	100.00
Average area (ha) owned per household	0.650	0.272	0.603	0.816	0.592
Gini's coefficient of concentration in ownership holdings for each social group					
Gini's coefficient	0.62	0.75	0.71	0.70	0.72

Source: NSSO 70th Round report on Household Ownership and Operational Holdings in India, 2013

constituted 23.23 percent of total population and had 32.03 percent of land area which indicates the greater sign of inequality between backwards class (lower cast) and rich class (upper cast). The average area owned by schedule castes are lowest among all the social groups whereas highest in others. The results of the Gini's coefficient also explained that a very high inequality among the schedule caste with the value of 0.75 followed by OBC.

Table 7 presents the Gini's Coefficient in the distribution of operational holdings among the major states of India for the period of 1970-71 to 2012-13. The results of the Gini's coefficient explicate a very high inequality among all concerned states. Over the period, the Gini's Coefficient concentration explains that most of the states which include Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Kerala, Odisha, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal have fallen sharply. This fallen movement of the Gini's

Table 7: Changes in Gini's Coefficient on the Size Distribution of Operational Holdings

State	1970-71	1981-82	1991-92	2002-03	2012-13
Andhra Pradesh	0.58	0.57	0.53	0.54	0.45
Assam	0.39	0.46	0.41	0.37	0.35
Bihar	0.51	0.53	0.52	0.42	0.38
Gujarat	0.52	0.54	0.57	0.61	0.52
Haryana	0.44	0.57	0.65	0.67	0.59
Karnataka	0.51	0.56	0.58	0.54	0.51
Kerala	0.48	0.45	0.39	0.35	0.34
Madhya Pradesh	0.51	0.52	0.53	0.53	0.51
Maharashtra	0.51	0.57	0.57	0.53	0.51
Odisha	0.47	0.5	0.46	0.38	0.32
Punjab	0.39	0.68	0.69	0.71	0.67
Rajasthan	0.59	0.55	0.59	0.61	0.57
Tamil Nadu	0.48	0.55	0.53	0.51	0.48
Uttar Pradesh	0.47	0.52	0.49	0.45	0.44
West Bengal	0.43	0.49	0.43	0.31	0.22
All India	0.57	0.59	0.59	0.56	0.52

Source: NSSO 70th Round report on Household Ownership and Operational Holdings in India, 2013

coefficient reveals that these states tend to move toward the equality over the period.

On the other hand, the Gini's coefficient for the Haryana and Punjab has increased over the period which explains that inequality arises in these states. For the states of Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu the Gini's coefficient remains constant over the period, but the value of coefficient more or less remain around 0.50 that also shows a sign of inequality among these states. But for all India level, the value of Gini's coefficient has sharply decline from 0.57 in 1970-71 to 0.52 in 2012-13.

CONCLUSIONS

The inequality faced by the agricultural community concerning access to essential economic resources such

as land remained a reality in rural India. The marginal and small farmers constituting about 85 per cent of holdings have access to only 44 per cent of the operated area during 2010-11, which indicates that the land access is highly unequally distributed in India. The state-wise analysis also reveals that in the Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab, the percentage of landless farmers has been consistently increasing and the average area owned per household has been decreasing over the period of time. The coefficient of variations among the various categories of farmers for the major states of India also reveals that inequality in the ownership in many states of India has been consistently increasing. Moreover, the inequalities in the ownership of land is not merely found among the various regions of India, rather the various social group have also unequal distribution of land, for example the Gini coefficient results indicates that the schedule caste having very low land and the others except schedule tribes and other backward classes owned a greater proportion of land.

The Gini's coefficient for the major states of India also explained a very high concentration of inequality in the land ownership as most of the states having more than 0.50 Gini's coefficient values throughout the study period. In this scenario of inequality of land holding, the Government should implement and encourage some special programmes which are targeting to increase the agricultural productivity especially in areas that wield low land holdings. Moreover, the land reforms model of the states which includes Assam, Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal, and Kerala having low Gini's coefficient should be implemented by the other states having high inequalities in the distribution of land. As India is characterized by a tradition of inequality and exploitation of the poor, the land reform measures can be successful only if the poor is motivated through education and persuasion and the rich should be compelled to cooperate through coercion, it certainly requires a government with strong political will and a bureaucracy with commitment to achieve the desired results.

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