

Land reforms have been widely regarded all over the world as an important source of reducing rural inequality and poverty. How far do you think they have been able to achieve?

Introduction

Land reforms have been one of the important land policy initiatives in India that have brought a fundamental change in the entire approach towards development.

- Land Reforms: Indian Context
- Several important issues confronted the policy-makers.
- Land was concentrated in the hands of a few and there was a proliferation of intermediaries who had no vested interest in self-cultivation.
- Leasing out land was a common practice.
- The tenancy contracts were expropriative in nature and tenant exploitation was ubiquitous.
- Land records were in extremely bad shape giving rise to a mass of litigation.
- It is ironic that the Supreme Court of India in 1989 commented that the revenue records are not legal documents of title (Wadhwa, 1989).
- This is a sad commentary on the land records of the country.
- It is against this background that land policy has been shaped in India.
- While land-reform legislation remained active, land policies in more recent decades have focused less on land reform and more on land development and administration.
- Land policy in India has undergone broadly four phases since Independence.
- The first and longest phase (1950 - 72) consisted of land reforms that included three major efforts: abolition of the intermediaries, tenancy reform, and the redistribution of land using land ceilings.
- The abolition of intermediaries was relatively successful, but tenancy reform and land ceilings met with less success.
- The second phase (1972 - 85) shifted attention to bringing uncultivated land under cultivation.

- The third phase (1985 - 95) increased attention towards water and soil conservation through the Watershed Development, Drought-Prone Area Development (DPAP) and Desert-Area Development Programmes (DADP).
- A central government Waste land Development Agency was established to focus on wasteland and degraded land. Some of the land policy from this phase continued beyond its final year.
- The fourth and current phase of policy (1995 onwards) centres on debates about the necessity to continue with land legislation and efforts to improve land revenue administration and, in particular, clarity in land records.

Initial Challenges

- The delay in imposing these ceilings by the states rendered the legislation's ineffective.
- Also, initially ceilings were imposed on individual holdings and not family holdings so landlords could transfer land to relatives.
- The ceilings in some states were abnormally high up to 300 acres. Which made very few exemptions possible.
- The ceiling acts were also stalled by legal petitions filed against the government by the landowners.
- This forced the central government to put the land ceiling legislations under the 9th schedule to make them immune from judicial scrutiny.
- However, the problem of land fragmentation also emerged and un-economical holdings became common.
- There are still many small and marginal farmers in India who pray to the clutches of moneylenders and continue to remain indebted.
- The rich peasant - landlord class had now gained political foothold and was capable of stalling reforms or diluting them to suit their interests.
- This also led to clashes with Naxalbari movement which saw land grabbing incidents in the West Bengal, Orissa regions.
- Although the incidents were few and could be suppressed but they brought to attention the plight of the landless and the gravity of the situation.

Shifting dynamics of Challenges

- Decline of about 2 million ha in the net area sown over the past decade + Food security.
- Highly uneven land distribution + Computerization of land records.
- Enhanced demand of agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes, such as infrastructure development, industrialization, and urbanization, as well as tribal lands in hills and forests for mining, mega projects, and industries.
- Displacement of people in the hills and forests caused by development projects.
- Shifting Economic Imperatives + Maintaining Ecological Balance
Preserving Human Diversity + Complexities of Common Property Regimes.

Advantages

- Rational use of Resources - Cap on Land Ceiling + Land possession (register all tenancy arrangements)
- Raising Production Level - incentives
- Removal of Exploitation - by redistributing agricultural land in favour of less privileged class of farmers and also by improving the terms and conditions for possessing land for cultivation by actual tillers and abolition of intermediaries.
- Social Welfare - to end social injustice through equitable distribution of income + by imposing ceiling on land holdings and also by acquiring ceiling surplus land.
- Planned Development - planned development of agricultural sector on long term basis.
- Raising the Standard of Living - through re- distributive packages and programmes
Developing cooperative farming.
- Tribal protection by ensuring their traditional land is not taken over by outsiders.

Conclusion

- Seeing the magnitude of the problem of land inequality, the Indian government had initiated land reforms programmes soon after Independence which were subsequently adopted in different states.
- While the programmes succeeded in a few states, they largely failed in most.
- Land reform had a significant and positive impact on income growth and accumulation of human and physical capital.

- Land reforms have been widely regarded all over world as an important source of reducing rural inequality and poverty.
- But it is difficult empirically to segregate the influence of the changes in land policy on poverty, environmental management, sustainability and production, but available studies indicate that land-reform measures have had a significant impact on equity and poverty.
- In recent years, the government's land policy interventions have focused on the correction and computerization of land records, improving the land survey process, and improving land quality through the reclamation of degraded wasteland and forests.
- Land reform implementation is almost thinning out as a priority.
- However, it remains extremely important to keep land reforms on the agenda of rural development and change.
- The key areas for future land policy action should include absolutely legalizing the tenancy market, contract farming, and watershed and wasteland development to assume greater significance.
- Future research should be directed towards establishing the institutional framework to fit these issues into a broader policy-making process