3 RURAL AND AGRARIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

– The idea of Indian village and village studies
– Agrarian social structure - evolution of land tenure system, land reforms.

WHAT IS SOCIAL STRUCTURE?

Human world is composed of individuals. Individuals interact with one another for the fulfilment of their needs. In this process, they occupy certain statues and roles in social life with accompanying rights and obligations. Their social behaviour is patterned and gets associated with certain norms and values which provide them guidance in social interaction. There emerge various social units, such as, groups, community, associations and institutions in society as product of social intercourse in human life.

In this scenario, social structure is conceived as the pattern of inter-related statuses and roles found in a society, constituting a relatively stable set of social relations. It is the organized pattern of the inter-related rights and obligations of persons and groups in a system of interaction.

RURAL SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN INDIA

India is a country of ancient civilization that goes back to the Indus Valley Civilization which flourished during the third millennium B.C. Since then except for a brief interlude during the Rig-Vedic period when the urban centres were overrun, rural and urban centres have co-existed in India.

Rural and urban centres share some common facets of life. They show interdependence especially in the spheres of economy, urban-ward migration, townsmen or city dwellers' dependence on villages for various products (e.g., food-grains, milk, vegetables and raw materials for industry) and increasing dependence of villagers on towns for manufactured goods and market. Despite this interdependence between the two there are certain distinctive features which separate them from each other in terms of their size, demographic composition, cultural moorings and style of life, economy, employment and social relations. We find that the size of village population is small and density of population is low in comparison with towns and cities. India is rightly called a country of villages. Moreover, about 75 per cent of the total population lives in villages. Further, rural life is characterized by direct relationship of people to nature i.e., land, animal and plant life. Agriculture is their main occupation. For example, in India agriculture provides livelihood to about 60 per cent of the labour force.

Long enduring rural social institutions in India are **Family, Kinship, Caste, Class and Village**. They have millennia old historical roots and structures. They encompass the entire field of life –

social, economic, political and cultural – of the rural people. The complexity of social norms and values, statuses and roles, rights and obligations is reflected in them. Here we will discuss **the idea of Indian village and village study**. Other components will be discussed in other sections.

VILLAGE occupies an important place in the social and cultural landscape of contemporary India. Notwithstanding India's significant industrialization over the last five or six decades, and a considerable increase in its urban population, a large majority of Indians continue to live in its more than five lakh villages and remain dependent on agriculture, directly or indirectly. According to the 2001 Census, rural India accounted for nearly 72 per cent of India's total population. Similarly, though the share of agriculture has come down to around one-fourth of the total national income, nearly half of India's working population is directly employed in the agricultural sector.

Apart from it being an important demographic and structural reality characterizing contemporary India, village has also been an important ideological category, a category through which India has often been imagined and imaged in modern times. The village has been seen as the ultimate signifier of the "authentic native life", a place where one could see, observe and "realize" India and develop an understanding of the way local people organize their social relationships and belief systems. As **Andre Beteille** writes, 'the village was not merely a place where people lived; it had a design in which were reflected the basic values of Indian civilization'. Institutional patterns of the Indian "village communities" and its cultural values where supposed to be an example of what in the twentieth century came to be known as the "traditional society".

IDEA OF INDIAN VILLAGE

In the beginning, the studies by Maine, Metcalfe, and Baden-Powell gave an exaggerated notion of village autonomy. The Indian society was portrayed as a 'closed' and 'isolated' system. In a report of the select Committee of House of Commons, Charles Metcalfe depicted the Indian village as a monolithic, atomistic and unchanging entity. He observed: "The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything that they want within themselves and almost independent of any foreign relations". Further, he stated that 'wars pass over it, regimes come and go, but the village as a society always emerges 'unchanged, unshaken, and self- sufficient'.

Though one may find detailed references to village life in ancient and medieval times, it was during the British colonial rule that an image of the Indian village was constructed by the colonial administrators that was to have far reaching implications – ideological as well as political for the way Indian society was to be imagined in the times to come.

Recent historical, anthropological and sociological studies have, however, shown that Indian village was hardly ever a republic. It was never self-sufficient. It has links with the wider society. **Migration, village exogamy, movement, inter-village economy and caste links and religious pilgrimage** were prevalent in the past, connecting the village with the neighbouring villages and the wider society. Moreover, new forces of modernization in the modern period augmented inter-village and rural-urban interaction.

But, as pointed by Mandelbaum and Orenstein, despite increasing external linkages village is still a fundamental social unit. People living in a village have a feeling of common identity. They have intra-village ties at familial, caste and class levels in social, economic, political and cultural domains. In fact, village life is characterized by reciprocity, cooperation, dominance and competition.

Not all colonial administrators shared Metcalfe's assessment of the Indian village. It never became the most popular and influential representation of India. The Indian village, in the

colonial discourse, was a self-sufficient community, with communal ownership of land and was marked by a functional integration of various occupational groups. Things as diverse as stagnation, simplicity and social harmony were attributed to the village which was taken to be the basic unit of Indian civilization. 'Each village was an inner world, a traditional community, self-sufficient in its economy, patriarchal in its governance, surrounded by an outer one other hostile villages and despotic governments'.

In many ways, even **in the nationalist discourse**, the idea of village as a representative of authentic native life was derived from the same kind of imagination. Though Gandhi was careful enough not to glorify the decaying village of British India, he nevertheless celebrated the so-called simplicity and authenticity of village life, an image largely derived from colonial representations of the Indian village. The decadence of the village was seen as a result of colonial rule and therefore village reconstruction was, along with political independence, an important process for recovery of the lost self.

In the **post-Independence India** also 'village' has continued to be treated as the basic unit of Indian society. Among the academic traditions, the studies of village have perhaps been the most popular among the sociologists and social anthropologists working on India. They carried-out a large number of studies focusing on the social and cultural life of the village in India. Most of these studies were published during the decades 1950s and 1960s. These "village studies" played an important role in giving respectability to the disciplines of sociology and social in India.

Generally basing their accounts on first-hand fieldwork, carried out mostly in a single village, social anthropologists focused on the structures of social relationships, institutional patterns, beliefs and value systems of the rural people. The publication of these studies also marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of Indian social sciences. They showed, for the first time, the relevance of a fieldwork based understanding of Indian society, or what came to be known as "field-view" of the India, different from the then dominant "book-view" of India, developed by Indologists and orientalists.

What was the Context of Village Studies in India?

During 1950s and 1960s the new interest in the village social life was a direct offshoot of the newly emerged interest in the study of the peasantry in the Western academy. Emergence of the so-called "new states" following decolonization during the post-war period had an important influence on research priorities in the social sciences. The most significant feature of the newly emerged 'third world' countries was the dependence of large proportions of their populations on a stagnant agrarian sector. Thus, apart from industrialization, the main agenda for the new political regimes was the transformation of their "backward" and stagnant agrarian economy. Though the strategies and priorities differed, 'modernization' and 'development' became common programmes in most of the Third World countries.

Understanding the prevailing structures of agrarian relations and working out ways and means of transforming them were recognized as the most important priorities within development studies. It was in this context that the concept of 'peasantry' found currency in the discipline of sociology. At a time when primitive tribes were either in the process of disappearing or had already disappeared, the "discovery" of the peasantry provided a new lease of life to the discipline of sociology.

The **Village Community** was identified as the social foundation of the peasant economy in Asia. It is quite easy to see this connection between the Redfieldian notion of 'peasant studies' and the Indian 'village studies'. The single most poplar concept used by the sociologists studying the Indian village was Robert Redfield's notion of 'little community'. Among the first works on the

subject, **Village India: Studies in the Little Community** edited by M. Marriot was brought out under the direct supervision of Redfield.

Having found a relevant subject matter in the village, social anthropologists initiated field studies in the early 1950s. During October 1951 and May 1954 the Economic and Political Weekly published a number of short essays providing brief accounts of individual villages that were being studied by different anthropologists. These essays were later put together by **M.N. Srinivas** in the form of a book with the title India's Villages. Interestingly, the first volume of Rural Profiles by **D.N. Majumdar** also appeared in 1955. **S.C. Dube** also published his full length study of a village near Hyderabad, Indian Village in the same year.

IMPORTANCE OF VILLAGE STUDIES IN INDIA

- **To prepare a profile of village India, provide authentic and scientific account of traditional social order and there transformation :** In the emerging intellectual and political environment during the post-war period, sociologists and saw themselves playing an important role in providing authentic and scientific account of the "traditional social order", the transformation of which had become a global concern. Many of the village monographs emerged directly from the projects carried-out by sociologists for development agencies.
- **Evaluation of rural reconstruction programme : Lewis** was appointed by the Ford Foundation in India to work with the Programmed Evaluation Organization of the Planning Commission to help in developing a scheme for the objective evaluation of the rural reconstruction porogramme. According to Lewis, who studied a village near Delhi, the main concern of there study were what the villagers felt about need of housing, education, health, land consolidation programme and newly created panchayats.
- **To assist economists in planning process: Majumdar** has stated the importance of village studies in the following words, "sociologists, unlike his economist counterpart, saw the village 'in the context of the cultural life lived by the people' and the way 'rural life was inter-locked and interdependent' which 'baffled social engineers as it could not be geared to landed economy. It was here that the economists needed the assistance of sociologists and anthropologists".
- **According to M.N. Srinivas**, the sociologists viewed their perspective as being "superior" because they alone studied village community as a whole. Their knowledge and approach provided an indispensable background for the proper interpretation of data on any single aspect of rural life. Their approach provided a much-needed corrective to the partial approach of the economist, political scientist and social worker.
- **For qualitative analysis of economic growth :** According to Epstein while economists used quantitative techniques and their method was "more scientific"; the sociological approach had its own advantages. Sociological studies provided qualitative analysis. The method of sociology required that its practitioners selected 'a small universe which could be studied intensively for a long period of time to analyze its intricate system of social reactions'.
- **Study of historical continuity and stability of village : Hoebel** has stated that the village and its hamlets represented "India in microcosm". For **Srinivas**, they 'were invaluable observation-centres where sociologist could study in detail social processes and problems to be found occurring in great parts of India'. **Dasgupta** has stated that 'Villages were supposedly close to people, their life, livelihood and culture' and they were 'a focal point of reference for

individual prestige and identification'. As 'an important administrative and social unit, the village profoundly influenced the behaviour pattern of its inhabitants'. Villages were supposed to have been around for 'hundreds of years', having 'survived years of wars, making and breaking up of empires, famines, floods and other natural disasters'. This perceived 'historical continuity and stability of villages' strengthened the case for village studies.

However not all sociologists were involved with development programmes. Most of them saw there work in professional terms. **Srinivas** argued that 'the anthropologist has intimate and first hand knowledge of one or two societies and he can place his understanding at the disposal of the planner. He may in some cases even be able to anticipate the kind of reception a particular administrative measure may have. But he cannot lay down policy because it is a result of certain decisions about right and wrong'. Thus maintaining a "safe" distance from the political agencies was seen to be necessary because, unlike economics, social anthropology did not have a theoretical grounding that could help them become applied sciences.

DEFINING FEATURES OF INDIAN VILLAGE

The Indian village had a considerable degree of diversity. This diversity was both internal as well as external. The village was internally differentiated in diverse groupings and had a complex structure of social relationships and institutional arrangements. There were also different kinds of villages in different parts of the country. Even within a particular region of the country, not all villages were alike.

The stereotypical image of the Indian village as a self-sufficient community was contested by anthropological studies. **Beteille**, for example, argued 'at least as far back in time as living memory went, there was no reason to believe that the village was fully self-sufficient in the economic sphere. Similarly **Srinivas** too contested the colonial notion of the Indian village being a completely self-sufficient republic. The village, he argued, 'was always a part of a wider entity.

The fact that the village interacted with the outside world did not mean it did not have a design of its own or could not be studied as a representative unit of Indian social life. While villages had horizontal ties, it was the vertical ties within the village that governed much of the life of an average person in the village.

Village provided an important source of identity to its residents. Different scholars placed different emphasis on how significant the village identity was when compared to other sources of identification, such as those of caste, class or locality.

Srinivas argued that individuals in his village had a sense of identification with their village and an insult to oneself, one's wife, or one's family.

Dube argued that though Indian villages vary greatly in their internal structure organization their ethos and world-view, and in their life-ways and thought-ways, on account of variety of factors village communities all over the Indian sub-continent had a number of common features

The village settlement, as a unit of social organization, represented a kind of solidarity which was different from that of the kin, the caste and the class. Each village was a distinct entity, had some individual mores and usages, and possessed a corporate unity.

Different castes and communities inhabiting the village were integrated in its economic, social and ritual pattern by ties of mutual and reciprocal obligations sanctioned and sustained by general accepted conventions.

Notwithstanding the existence of groups and factions inside the settlement, people of the village could, and did face the outside world as an organized, compact whole.

Though the later studies were much more elaborate and contained long descriptions of different forms of social inequalities and differences

in the rural society, many of them continued to use the framework of reciprocity particularly while conceptualizing 'unity' of the village the way **Srinivas and Dube or earlier Wiser** did. Some of the anthropologists explicitly contested the unity thesis while others qualified their arguments by recognizing the conflicts within the village and the ties that villagers had with the outside world. For instance, **Paul Hilbert** in his study of a south Indian village, although arguing that the caste system provided a source of stability to the village, also underlined the fact that 'deep seated cleavages underlie the apparent unity of the village and fragmented it into numerous social groups'. Similarly, Beteille had argued that his study of village 'Sripuram as a whole constituted a unit in a physical sense and to a much lesser extent, in the social sense'.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE VILLAGE: CASTE, CLASS AND GENDER

Caste

Caste and hierarchy have long been seen as the distinctive and defining features of the Indian society. It was during the colonial period that caste was, for the first time, theorized in modern sociological language. The colonial administrators also gathered extensive ethnographic details and wrote detailed accounts of the way systems of caste distinctions and hierarchies worked in different parts of the sub-continent. Social anthropology in the post-independence India continued with a similar approach that saw caste as the most important and distinctive feature of Indian society. While caste was a concrete structure that guided social relationships in the Indian village, hierarchy was its ideology.

An individual in caste society lived in a hierarchical world. Not only were the people divided into higher or lower groups, their food, their dresses, ornaments, customs and manners were all ranked in an order of hierarchy. Anthropologist invariably invoked the Varna system of hierarchy which divided the Hindu society into five major categories. The first three, viz., Brahmins (the priests or men of learning), Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors) and Vaishya (traders) were regarded as dvijas or the twice born. The fourth category was that of Shudras, composed of numerous occupational castes that were regarded as relatively 'clean' and were not classed as "untouchables". In the fifth major category were placed all the untouchable castes. According to Dube the Hindus all over India, accepted this classification.

The legitimate occupations to be followed by people in these major categories were defined by tradition. Within each category there were several sub-groups (jati or castes), which could be arranged in a hierarchical order within them. According to **Dube**, despite a general framework, there were considerable variations in different regions where several socially autonomous castes, each fitting into one of the five major divisions, were otherwise practically independent in there socio-religious sphere of life.

According to **Majumdar**, Caste divisions determined and decided all social relations. Most scholars saw caste as a closed system where 'entry into a social status was a function of heredity and individual achievement, personal quality or wealth had, according to the strict traditional prescription, no say in determining the social status'. However, **Srinivas** is of the view that, there were some who admitted that the way caste operated at the local level was 'radically different from that expressed in the Varna scheme. Mutual rank was uncertain and this stemmed from the fact that mobility was possible in caste'.

Dube identified six factors that contributed towards the status differentiation in the village community of Shamirpet: *religion and caste; landownership; wealth; position in government service and village organization; age; and distinctive personality traits*. Attempts to claim a higher ritual status through, what Srinivas called sanskritisation, was not a simple process. It could not be achieved only through rituals and lifestyle imitation. The group had to also negotiate it at the local power structure. Similarly, stressing

secular factors, Dube pointed to the manner in which the caste panchayats of the lower or the menial castes worked as unions to secure their employment and strengthen their bargaining power vis-a-vis the land owning dominant castes.

However, a large majority of them viewed caste system as working within the framework of jajmani system and bound together different castes living in the village or a cluster of villages in enduring and pervasive relationships.

Land and Class

As is evident from the above discussion, the social sociologists studying India during the fifties and sixties generally worked in the framework of caste. The manner in which social science disciplines developed in India, class and land came to be seen as the concerns of economists. However, since sociologists advocated a prospective that studied "small communities" in holistic terms, agriculture and the social relations of production on land also found a place in the village monographs.

While some of them directly focused on economic life as one of the central research questions, most saw it as an aspect of the caste and occupational structure of the village. Land relations to them reflected the same patterns of hierarchy as those present in the caste system. **Srinivas** has argued that 'There was a certain amount of overlap between the twin hierarchies of caste and land. The richer landowners generally came from such high castes as Brahmins and Lingayats while the Harijans contributed a substantial number of landless labourers. In contrast to the wealthier household, the poor one was almost invisible'.

Some others underlined the primacy of land over all other factors in determining social hierarchy in the village. Comparing a Brahmin dominated village with a Jat dominated village, **Oscar Lewis** argued that 'While the landowners are generally of higher caste in Indian villages, it is their position as landowners, rather than caste membership per se, which gives them status and power. However, despite such references to the crucial significance of land ownership in vil social life, village studies did not explore details of agrarian social structures in diffe regions of the country. Caste, family, kinship religion remained their primary focus.

Gender Differences

Most village studies looked at gen relations within the framework of the house and participation of women in work. These st highlighted the division of labour within the fa and the overall dominance that men enjoyed the public sphere. Women, particularly among upper castes, were confined within the four of the house. According to **Srinivas** 'the soc world of the woman was synonymous wit household and kinship group while the m inhabited a more heterogeneous world'. Comp to men in the Central Indian village studied **Mayer** 'women had less chance to meet peo from other parts of the village. The village provided a meeting place for all women of Harijan castes, and the opportunity for gos But there was a limit to the time that busy wom could stand and talk while they drew their w and afterwards they must return home, where occasions for talking to people outside their household were limited to meeting with o women of the street'. **Dube** in his study of Telangana village observed that women secluded from the activities of the public so 'It was considered a mark of respectability women if they walked with their eyes down

Dube further mentions that the rules patriarchy were clearly laid out. After caste, ge was the most important factor that governed division of labour in the village. Masculine feminine pursuits were clearly distinguis Writing on similar lines about his village in same region **Srinivas** pointed out that the sets of occupations were not only separated also seen as unequal. 'It was the man exercised control over the domestic economy made the annual grain-payments at harvest to members of the artisan and servicing castes

had worked for him during the year. The dominant male view' thought of women as being incapable of understanding what went on outside the domestic wall' (Srinivas).

Men also had a near complete control over women's sexuality. In the monogamous family, popular among most groups in India, 'a man could play ground but not so a woman. A man's sense of private property in his wife's genital organs was as profound as in his ancestral land. And just as, traditionally, a wife lacked any right to land she lacked an exclusive right to her husband's sexual prowess. Polygyny and concubinage were both evidence of her lack of such rights. Men and women were separate and unequal.

Patriarchy and male dominance were legitimate norms. Dube has stated that 'according to the traditional norms of the society a husband is expected to be an authoritative figure whose will should always dominate the domestic scene. As the head of the household he should demand respect and obedience from his wife and children. The wife should regard him as her 'master' and should 'serve him faithfully'.

CONCLUSION

The studies of Indian villages carried out by social anthropologists during the 1950s and 1960s were undoubtedly an important landmark in the history of Indian social sciences. Even though the primary focus of these studies was on the social and ritual life of the village people, there are enough references that can be useful pointers towards an understanding of the political and economic life in the rural society of India during the first two decades of independent India.

More importantly, these studies helped in contesting the dominant stereotype of the Indian village made popular by the colonial administrators. The detailed descriptive accounts of village life constructed after prolonged field-works carried out, in most cases, entirely by the anthropologists themselves convincingly proved how Indian villages were not 'isolated communities'. Village studies showed that India's villages had been well integrated into the broader economy and society of the region even before the colonial rule introduced new agrarian legislation. They also pointed to the regional differences in the way social village life was organized in different parts of the country.

Social anthropological studies also offered an alternative to the dominant "book-view" of India constructed by Indologists and orientalists from the Hindu scriptures. The "field-view" presented in the village monographs not only contested the assumptions of Indology but also convincingly showed with the help of empirical data as to how the idealized model of the Varna system as theorized in Hindu scriptures did not match with the concrete realities of village life. While caste was an important institution in the Indian village and most studies foregrounded caste differences, over other differences, empirical studies showed that it was not a completely closed and rigidly defined system. Caste statuses were also not exclusively determined by one's position in the ritual hierarchy and that there were many grey and contestable areas within the system. It was from the village studies that the concepts like sanskritisation, dominant caste, segmental structures, harmonic and disharmonic systems emerged.

However, village studies were also constrained by a number of factors. The method of participant observation that was the main strength of these studies also imposed certain limitations on the fieldworkers, which eventually proved critical in shaping the image they produced of the Indian village. Doing participant observation required a measure of acceptability of the field worker in the village that he/she chose to study. In a differentiated social context, it was obviously easy to approach the village through the dominant sections. However, this choice proved to be of more than just a strategic value. The anxiety of the anthropologist to get accepted in the village as a member of the "community" made their accounts of the village life conservative in orientation.

It also limited their access to the dominant groups in the local society. They chose to avoid asking all those questions or approaching those subordinate groups, which they thought, could offend the dominant interests in the village. The choices made by individual anthropologists as regard to how they were going to negotiate their own relationship with the village significantly influenced the kind of data they could gather about village life. Unlike the "tribal communities", the conventional subject matter of social anthropology, Indian villages were not only internally differentiated much more than the tribes they also had well articulated world views. Different sections of the village society had different perspectives on what the village was. Though most of the sociologists were aware of this, they did not do much to resolve this problem. On the contrary, most of them consciously chose to identify themselves with the dominant caste groups in the village, which apart from making their stay in the village relatively easy, limited their access to the world-view of the upper castes and made them suspect among the lower castes.

Apart form the method of participant observation and the anxiety about being accepted in rural society that made the sociologists produce a conservative account of the rural social relations, the received theoretical perspectives and the professional traditions dominant within the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology during the time of village studies also had their influences on these scholars. Sociologists during the decades of fifties and sixties generally focused on the structures rather than changes. This preoccupation made them look for the sources that reproduced social order in the village and to ignore conflict and the possible sources of social transformation.

AGRARIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Defining Agrarian Social Structure

Agrarian social structure refers to all those settlements and groupings of people who earn their livelihood primarily by cultivating land and by carrying out related activities like animal husbandry. Agricultural production or cultivation is obviously an economic activity. However, like all other economic activities, agricultural production is carried out in a framework of social relationships. Those involved in cultivation of land also interact with each other in different social capacities. Some may self-cultivate the lands they own while others may employ wage labourers or give their land to tenants and sharecroppers. Not only do they interact with each other but they also have to regularly interact with various other categories of people who provide them different types of services required for cultivation of land. For example, in the old system of jajmani relations in the Indian countryside, those who owned and cultivated land had do depend for various services required at different stages of cultivation on the members of different caste groups.

All these interactions are carried out in an institutional set-up. The most important aspects of this social or institutional framework of agriculture are the patterns of land ownership and the nature of relationships among those who own or possess land and those who cultivate the lands. Agricultural practices and the land ownership patterns in a given society evolve historically over a long period of time. Those who own land invariably command a considerable degree of power and prestige in the rural society. It is these sets of relationships among the owners of land those who provide various forms of services to the land-owning groups that we call the agrarian class structure.

Agrarian social structure in a given society evolves over a long period of time. It is shaped historically by different socio-economic and political factors. These historical factors vary from region to region. Thus, though one can use the concept of class to make sense of agrarian structures in different contexts, the empirical realities vary from region to region.

The traditional Indian "rural communities" and the agrarian social structures were organized within the framework of "jajmani system". This was a peculiarly Indian phenomenon. The different caste groups in the traditional Indian village were divided between jajmans (the patrons) and the kamins (the menials). The jajmans were those caste groups who owned and cultivated lands. The kamins provided different kinds of services to the jajmans. While the kamins were obliged to work for the jajmans, the latter were required to pay a share from the farm produce to their kamins. The relationship was based on a system of reciprocal exchange.

However, those who participated in this system of reciprocal exchange did not do so on equal footings. Those who belonged to the upper castes and owned land were obviously more powerful than those who came from the menial caste groups. The structure of agrarian relations organized within the framework of jajmani reinforced the inequalities of the caste system. The caste system, in turn, provided legitimacy to the unequal land relations.

Over the years the jajmani system has disintegrated and rural society has experienced profound changes in its social structure. The agrarian class structure has also changed. These changes have been produced by a large number of factors.

EVOLUTION OF LAND TENURE SYSTEM

The agrarian policies of the British colonial rulers are regarded as among the most important factors responsible for introducing changes in the agrarian structure of the sub-continent. In order to maximize their incomes from land (which was collected from the cultivators in the form of land revenue), they introduced some basic changes in the property relations in the Indian countryside. These agrarian policies of the colonial rulers had far reaching consequences. In Bengal and Bihar, in parts of Chennai and United Province they conferred full ownership rights over the erstwhile zamindars that were only tax collecting intermediaries during the earlier regimes. The vast majority of peasants who had been actually cultivating land became tenants of the new landlords. Similarly, they demanded revenues in the form of a fixed amount of cash rather than as a share from what was produced on the land. Thus, even when bad weather destroyed the crop; the peasants were forced to pay the land revenue.

These changes led to serious indebtedness among the peasantry. They were forced to mortgage their land in order to meet the revenue demands. In the long run it led to peasants loosing their lands to moneylenders and big landowners. The big landowners and moneylenders emerged as a dominant class in the countryside while the ordinary peasants suffered. In the new agrarian class structure that emerged during the colonial rule, peasants had no motivation to improve their lands and work hard. As a result the agricultural production declined.

LAND REFORMS

The nationalist leadership during the struggle for freedom had mobilized peasantry on the promise that once the county was liberated from colonial rule, they would introduce changes in the land relations. This process was initiated immediately after independence. The central government directed the state governments to pass "land reform legislations" that would abolish the intermediary landlords, the zamindars, and grant the ownership rights to the actual tillers of the land. Some legislation was to also grant security to the tenants. The states also fixed an upper ceiling on the holding size of land that a single household could possess. The surplus land was to be surrendered to the state and was to be redistributed among those who had no land.

The term land reform has been used both in narrow and in a broad sense. In the narrow and generally accepted sense land reform means redistribution of rights in land for the benefit of small farmers and landless people. This concept of land reform refers to its simplest element commonly found in all land reform policies. On the other hand, in a broad sense land reform is

understood to means any reform is understood to mean any improvement in the institutions of land system and agricultural organization. This understanding of land reform suggests that land reform measures should go not only for redistribution of land but also undertake other measures to improve conditions of agriculture. The United Nations has accepted this notion of land reform. The UN definition says that the ideal land reform programme is an integrated programme of measures designed to eliminate obstacles to economic and social development arising out of defects in the agrarian structure.

In the present context also, by land reforms we mean all those measures which have been undertaken in India by the government to remove structural obstacles in the agrarian system.

Objectives of Land Reform

There are no universal motives behind land reforms but some common objectives may be found everywhere :

- Social justice and economic equality are the major objectives behind land reforms. The ideal of equality has become part of people's consciousness in the modern world. Particularly in a traditional hierarchical society, the idea of equality has emerged as a revolutionary force. It also subsumes the elimination of the worst forms of discrimination and poverty. The ideology of equality and social justice has been expressed in terms of programmes like land reforms and poverty alleviation.
- Secondly, nationalism has been another motivation behind land reforms. Most of the developing countries in the world gained independence mainly after the Second World War. Thus, the achievement or national independence has been associated with the removal of institutional structures created during the colonial rule. Such structures may include the ownership of large estates by persons of alien nationality or various forms of land tenures imposed under the colonial rule. The abolition of zamindari in India is an outstanding example. Zamindari, a form of land settlement established during the British rule was a symbol of colonial exploitation. Naturally, it was always a target for the leaders of India's freedom struggle. Accordingly, its abolition became the goal of the first phase of land reform measures after independence.
- Thirdly, the urge for democracy in contemporary world is another factor behind land reform programes. The idea of democracy has become a moving force in political power. The goal of liberty and justice can be achieved only in a democratic society. In this manner, even the poor and the deprived express, their grievances and articulate their demands in a democratic way. Thus an environment for reforms is created.
- Finally, land reform is taken as a means to increase productivity of land. It is thus considered one of the key issues in economic development in agricultural societies. It has been adopted as central programme for agricultural development. The basic issues of agrarian reorganization are resolved through effective implementation of land reform measures.

LAND REFORMS IN INDIA

Land reforms in India got underway both in political factors as well as in organizational mobilization of peasantry. The political factors were associated first with British rule and later with the growth of nationalism. It created a situation in which undertaking land reform measures became a compulsion for the government. Thus, some agrarian legislations which attempt to protect the rights of tenants date back to the middle of the nineteenth century.

The poverty of the people and extreme exploitation of the peasantry by zamindars and moneylenders attracted the attention of political leaders during the freedom struggle. It became an important plank of the programme of the Indian National Congress. A major programme of agrarian

reform was presented in 1936 at Jawaharlal Nehru's initiative and Mahatma Gandhi's approval. In his presidential address at Faizpur Session of the Congress, Nehru asked for "the removal of intermediaries between the cultivator and State" after which "cooperative or collective farming must follow."

Almost around the same time, pressure was being created by the increasing number of peasant struggles in different parts of the country. The All India Kisan Sabha in its meeting at Lucknow in 1936 demanded the abolition of Zamindari, occupancy rights for tenant's redistribution of cultivable waste land to landless labourers and others. In fact, between 1920 and 1946 several peasant organizations emerged which expressed the grievances of the middle and poor peasant. The Kisan Sabha Movement led by Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, the Kheda Agitation of 1918, the Bardoli Satyagrah of 1928, and the Tebhaga Movement of 1946-47 in Bengal were some of the major peasant struggles of the pre-Independence days. Agrarian discontent and injustice had spread throughout the country. These grievances were expressed in widespread conflicts between peasants and landlords. But if seen in the context of their goals, these peasant struggles produced positive results. The pressure created by the long drawn struggles compelled the Government to work out plans for the redressal of the complaints of peasants. In this sense, independence assumed historical importance for the land reform programmes that began just after the independence.

Shortly after the independence ample emphasis was put on land reforms as part of the national policy to transform iniquitous agrarian structure. The strategy adopted was to introduce land reforms through land legislation. It was broadly indicated by the Government of India and enacted by the state legislatures:

The primary objectives of land reforms after Independence were :

- to remove motivational and other impediments which arise from the agrarian structure inherited from the past, and
- to eliminate all elements of exploitation and social justice within the agrarian system so as to ensure equality of status and opportunity to all sections of the population.

Programmes of action to achieve these objectives :

- The abolition of all forms of intermediaries between the state and the tiller of the soil.
- Conferment of ownership rights on the cultivating tenants in the land held under their possession.
- Imposition of ceiling on agricultural land holdings.
- consolidation of holdings with a view to making easier the application of modern techniques of agriculture,
- Rationalization of the record of rights in land.

Abolition of Intermediaries

The British rulers introduced three major forms of land settlements – Zamindari, Raiyatwari and Mahalwari – to gain maximum revenue from land. Under the Zamindari system the rights of property in land were given to the local rent gatherers. These persons were called Zamindars and belonged generally to the upper castes of the community. This new settlement turned the actual cultivators into tenants. This structural change in the land system created a class of intermediary between the State and the actual tillers of the soil. Under the Raiyatwari system no intermediary owners were recognized. The actual tillers of the soil were given transferable rights in their lands. But under this system also influential Raiyats emerged as powerful landholders. In the Mahalwari settlement, too, a class of intermediaries had emerged.

These intermediaries had no interest in land management and improvement. Moreover, while the Zamindars were required to pay a fixed amount of revenue to the Government, there was no limit on collections from the actual cultivators. Numerous illegal cesses were imposed from time to time. The Zamindari system allowed a high level

of absenteeism. Thus, the system was not only unjust but it was also characterized by acute economic exploitation and social oppression.

It was against this background that abolition of intermediary interests became the first target of land reforms during the early years of the independence. This measure, undertaken all over the country, essentially sought removal of all intermediaries Like Zamindari, Jagirdari and others. It brought cultivators into direct relationship with the State. It conferred permanent rights in land to these actual cultivators. Accordingly, by 1954-55 almost all States abolished intermediary tenures through several land reform legislations. The abolition of intermediary tenures represents a remarkable transition to a modern agrarian structure.

Tenancy reform

Use and occupancy of land of another person on a rental basis is known as tenancy. Tenancy in land has been a widespread practice in different parts of the country. Different forms of tenancy such as the share cropping system, the fixed-kind produce system, the fixed-cash practice have existed both in the Zamindari and Raiyatwari settled areas. Under the system, the small farmers and landless people lease-in-land for cultivation from rich landowners. These landless cultivators pay rent in kind produce or cash to the landowners in return for land. They are known as tenants (local names are: Adhiars in Assam, Baragadars in West Bengal, Bataidars in Bihar, Warmadars in Tamil Nadu, Kamins in Punjab etc.). These tenants have weak socio-economic position and lack security and protection. They may be evicted any time by the landowners. Thus, they have been tenants-at-will for all practical purposes.

In view of large scale prevalence of tenancy, reforms were introduced to rationalize the rights and obligations of various classes of tenants. Tenancy reforms laid emphasis on three major aspects of the problem:

- regulation of rent;
- security of tenure; and
- right of purchase for the tenants.

These steps have been taken to improve the condition of cultivating tenants. They have been protected against rack-renting through the regulation of rent. Security of tenure for tenants has regulated eviction from land by the landowners. The tenants have also been conferred ownership rights over the lands cultivated by them as tenants. Over 124.22 lakh tenants have got their rights protected over an area of 156.30 lakh acres till September 2000.

Ceiling on Landholdings

The basic objective of fixation of ceiling on landholdings is to acquire land above a certain level from the present landholders for its distribution among the landless. It is primarily a redistributive measure based on the principle of socio-economic justice. The disparity in landownership in India is a well-known fact. While nearly one-fourth of rural households have no land at all, there were a large number of landholders owning thousands of acres each on the eve of independence. Thus, fixation of ceiling on agricultural holdings has been used as a means to correct this imbalance.

Legislations imposing ceiling on landholdings formed the second phase of land reform package in the independent India. This process began during the Second Five Year Plan in most states. Almost all the states have legislations restricting the size of holdings which a person or family can own. However, the permissible size varies according to the quality of land. Acquisition of land in excess of the ceiling is prohibited. Land rendered surplus to the ceiling is taken over by the state and distributed among the weaker sections of the community.

Though land ceiling laws have been passed within the broader framework suggested by the Central Government, there are differences among various state laws. In all the Acts there are a variety of exemptions from the ceiling. The ceilings

fixed are also different. While in most states, the ceilings fixed are vary high, in others ample scope is left for manipulation by the landowners. The process of taking possession of surplus land its distribution among the landless is, rather slow.

The total quantum of land declared surplus in the entire country since inception till September 2000 is 73.49 lakh acres. Out of this, only about 64.84 lakh acres have been taken possession of and 52.99 lakh acres have been distributed. The total number of beneficiaries of this scheme in the country is 55.10 lakh, of whom 36 per cent belong to the Scheduled Castes and 15 per cent to the Scheduled Tribes.

Consolidation of Holdings

The fragmentation of landholdings has been an important impediment in agricultural development. Most holdings are not only small but also widely scattered. Thus, legislative measures for consolidation of holdings have been undertaken in most of the states. Major focus has been on the consolidation of the land of a holder at one or two places for enabling them to make better use of resources. Attempts have also been made to take measures for consolidation in the command areas of major irrigation projects.

Land Records

The record of rights in land has been faulty and unsatisfactory. The availability of correct and up-to-date records has always been a problem. It is in view of this that updating of land records has now been made a part of land reform measures.

Nonetheless several states have initiated the process of updating the land records through revisional surveys and settlements. Steps have also been taken to computerize these records. A centrally-sponsored Scheme on Computerization of Land Records has been launched with a view to remove the problems inherent in the manual system of maintenance and updating of land records.

CRITICS

However, progress in this respect has been poor. The Five Year Plan documents say that "in several States, information regarding tenants, sub-tenants and crop-sharers has not been obtained yet." It has further been highlighted that large areas of the country still do not have up-to-date land records. The main reason behind this has been strong opposition of big landowners.

Though the legislations were passed by all the states, only in some cases they produced desired effects. It has been argued that only in those parts of the country where peasants were politically mobilized that the land reforms could be effectively implemented. While the zamindari system was abolished in most parts, the ceiling legislations had very little effect.

CONCLUSION

Despite many loopholes, apart from increasing productivity of land, these changes have transformed the social framework of the Indian agriculture. Agriculture in most parts of India is now carried out on commercial lines. The old structure of jajmani relations has more or less completely disintegrated, giving way to more formalized arrangements among the cultivators and those who work for them. Some scholars have these changes indicate that capitalist form of production is developing in agriculture and a new class structure is emerging in the Indian countryside.

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