

Land Reforms (III): Ceiling and the Bhoodan Movement

Land Ceilings

A major plank of the land reform effort in India was the imposition of ceilings on the size of landholdings, with the objective of making land distribution more equitable. On this question, however, societal consensus was weak, if not non-existent, and that was reflected in the extreme difficulty in implementing this programme with even a reasonable degree of success.

The All India Kisan Sabha had supported the demand for a maximum limit of landownership of 25 acres per landholder in 1946. The Congress, perhaps for the first time, officially introduced the notion of land ceiling soon after independence. In November 1947, the AICC appointed a committee, which drew up the economic programme of the Congress. The committee headed by Jawaharlal Nehru had recommended, 'The maximum size of holdings should be fixed. The surplus land over such a maximum should be acquired and placed at the disposal of the village cooperatives.'¹ Similarly, the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee, chaired by J.C. Kumarappa, which submitted its report in July 1949, also recommended a ceiling on landholding which was to be three times the size of an economic holding. (An economic holding was defined as that which would give a reasonable standard of living to the cultivator and provide full employment to a family of normal size and at least to a pair of bullocks.)

The First Plan (1951–56) too expressed itself 'in favour of the principle that there should be an upper limit to the amount of land that an individual may hold'. Though the Plan broadly accepted the upper limit suggested by the Kumarappa Committee as 'fair', it was nevertheless stated that the exact upper limit was to be 'fixed by each State, having regard to its own agrarian history and its present problems'. Moreover, it was stated, 'The census of land holding and cultivation, which it is proposed to hold during 1953, will give the data relevant to this decision.' Clearly, there was no immediate programme of implementing ceilings and the First Plan anticipated that 'two to three years would be necessary' to even undertake the necessary survey and set up a machinery which would enforce ceiling legislation effectively.²

It was a matter of no surprise, therefore, that despite the early statements of intentions and recommendations, not much progress on the question of ceilings occurred in the initial years after independence. This was recognized by the Congress, and the AICC in its session in Agra in 1953 urged, 'The State Governments should take immediate steps in regard to collection of requisite land data and the fixation of ceilings on land holdings, with a view to redistribute the land, as far as possible, among landless workers.'³ This position was reiterated repeatedly by the CWC and the AICC over the next few years. In 1957 the Standing Committee of National Development Council (NDC) adopted a decision to complete the imposition of ceilings in the few states where such legislation had been passed by the end of 1960 and decided that other states should pass such legislation by 1958–59 (The NDC was created in 1952. It was a forum where all the chief

ministers of the states would assemble, under the chairmanship of Nehru, to discuss critical issues relating to development.)

In the meantime, opposition to ceilings was building up in large parts of the country, in the Press, in parliament, in the state legislatures and even within the Congress party. A threat to the right to private property was perceived by the rural landowners as well as urban interests. Matters came to a head at the Nagpur session of the Indian National Congress in January 1959. Despite opposition from prominent Congressmen at the AICC and the Subjects Committee meeting preceding the open session, the Nagpur Congress (January 1959) passed a resolution stating that 'in order to remove uncertainty regarding land reforms and give stability to the farmer, ceilings should be fixed on existing and future holdings and legislation to this effect . . . should be completed in all States by the end of 1959'. Further, the land declared surplus, that is, above ceiling limits, was to 'vest in the panchayats . . . and (be) managed through cooperatives consisting of landless labourers'.⁴

A wave of criticism was to follow in the months after the Nagpur session. N.G. Ranga, secretary of the Congress parliamentary party who had already, in December 1958, sent to Nehru a letter signed by a hundred Congress MPs, critiquing the idea of ceilings, resigned from the Congress in February 1959. The Nagpur Resolution contributed considerably towards the consolidation of the right-wing forces both in the rural and urban sectors of the country. N.G. Ranga and C. Rajagopalachari, alarmed at the moves towards land ceilings and threats of compulsory cooperativization, now joined hands with Minoo Masani, an important leader of the Forum for Free Enterprise which campaigned against the threat of nationalization and the public sector swamping the private sector, to form the Swatantra party in June 1959, with Ranga as president. The campaigners and beneficiaries of zamindari abolition, the tenants who had now become landowners, also ranged themselves against the next step in land reform, an attempt at redistribution of land-ownership through imposition of land ceilings.

The opponents of the ceilings legislation were, however, to have their real victory at the state level, as it was the states which had to formulate and implement the legislation. The state legislatures, which met shortly after the Nagpur session, showed no haste in implementing the Nagpur Resolution. The ceilings issue thus dragged on and most states passed the enabling legislation only by the end of 1961, that is, nearly fourteen years after the idea was officially mooted.

Weaknesses in Land Ceiling Legislation

The long delay, as well as the nature of the legislation, ensured that the ceilings would have a very muted impact, releasing little surplus land for redistribution. By and large the ceiling laws in most states had certain major shortcomings. First, in a situation where more than 70 per cent of landholdings in India were under 5 acres, the ceiling fixed on existing holdings by the states were very high. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, it varied from 27 to 312 acres (depending on the class of land), Assam 50 acres, Kerala 15 to 37.5 acres, Punjab 30 to 60 acres, West Bengal 25 acres, Maharashtra 18 to 126 acres and so on. Moreover, in most states, initially, the ceilings were

imposed on individual and not family holdings, enabling landowners to divide up their holdings 'notionally' in the names of relatives merely to avoid the ceiling. Further, in many states the ceiling could be raised, for example, by 67 per cent in Kerala, 90 per cent in Madhya Pradesh, 100 per cent in Bihar, Madras and Maharashtra, 140 per cent in Tripura and so on, if the size of the family of the landholder exceeded five. Andhra Pradesh had no limit, allowing 6 to 72 acres (depending on the nature of land) per 'extra' member of the family. Very few landed families would have holdings that exceeded these liberal limits. Only in some states, where very few holdings exceeded the ceiling limit such as Jammu and Kashmir, West Bengal, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab, no allowance was made for the size of the family.

Second, a large number of exemptions to the ceiling limits were permitted by most states following the Second Plan recommendations that certain categories of land could be exempted from ceilings. These were tea, coffee and rubber plantations, orchards, specialized farms engaged in cattle breeding, dairying, wool raising, etc., sugarcane farms operated by sugar factories and efficiently managed farms on which heavy investments had been made.⁵ The intention was clearly to promote and certainly not hinder progressive or capitalist farming done on a large scale, while at the same time ending absentee landlordism indulged in by large landowners through tenants and sharecroppers.

However, the exemptions were often carried to absurd limits with Tamil Nadu reportedly permitting twenty-six kinds of exemptions. In any case, criteria such as 'efficiently managed farm' were sufficiently vague for large numbers of landholders to evade the ceilings by simply getting themselves declared 'efficient'. Similarly, exemption to land held by cooperatives, as proposed by the Madras government, was open to great misuse with landlords transferring their lands to bogus cooperatives. On the other hand, however, the ceiling laws led to at least some landowners shifting to direct 'efficient' farming in order to avoid alienation of their lands.

Finally, the long delay in bringing in ceiling legislation to a large extent defeated its purpose. The large landowners had enough time to either sell their excess lands, or make mala fide transfers in the names of relatives and even make benami transfers. Further, the landowners also resorted to mass eviction of tenants, resuming their lands at least up to the ceiling limit, and claiming, often falsely, to have shifted to progressive farming under their direct supervision. Thus, by the time the ceiling legislations were in place, there were barely any holdings left above the ceiling and consequently little surplus land became available for redistribution. This was recognized by the Congress leadership and the Third Plan also admitted it.

In fact, despite the ceiling legislations which were passed by most states by 1961, till the end of 1970 not a single acre was declared surplus in large states like Bihar, Mysore, Kerala, Orissa and Rajasthan. In Andhra Pradesh, a mere 1,400 acres was declared surplus but no land was distributed. Only in Jammu and Kashmir were ceiling laws fully implemented and by the middle of 1955 about 230,000 acres of surplus land had been handed over to tenants and landless labourers, that too without having to pay any compensation. However, taking India as whole, only 2.4 million acres was declared surplus by the end of 1970, and the area distributed constituted only about half the surplus land, constituting a mere 0.3 per cent of the total cultivated land of India.

The dismal record in using ceiling legislation for a more equitable distribution of land combined with a sharply increasing polarization in the countryside since the mid-1960s called for a new initiative in land reform. The Indian countryside saw the growing consolidation of the owner cultivator/rich peasant interests (similar to what the Rudolfs call 'Bullock capitalists') and their finding a distinct political voice in formations such as the BKD (formed by Charan Singh after he brought down the C.B. Gupta-led Congress government in Uttar Pradesh in 1967). The BKD later merged with Swatantra and other parties to become BLD in 1974 and the BLD was the principal component of the Janata Party which came to power in 1977, after the Emergency, bringing the strong influence of the owner cultivator/rich peasant interests, which was hitherto felt mainly at the state level, to the central or national level.

In the wake of the political and economic crisis of the mid-1960s, inflation, devaluation, the Indo-Pak war, and so on, there emerged a strong strand of agrarian radicalism in large parts of the country. The Naxalite movement led by the CPI (ML) peaked in West Bengal and parts of Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Bihar towards the end of the 1960s. The year 1970, and in some cases like in West Bengal the preceding few years, saw a widespread 'land grab' movement by the landless in many parts of the country under the leadership of the Communist and Socialist parties. Disturbances were reported from Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal in 1969-70. The total amount of land seized was not very significant and most of it was government wasteland, land taken over by the government but not distributed, and to some extent homestead land. The movement was effectively suppressed. About 20,000 political activists were arrested. However, despite the very limited success in land seizure and the quick suppression of the movement, on the whole the movement had a significant symbolic effect. The nation's attention was drawn dramatically to the agrarian question.

This was the context in which the second spurt of land reform efforts was to occur in the 1960s and early 1970s. The Land Reform Implementation Committee of the National Development Council met in June 1964 and made sustained efforts to put pressure on the chief ministers to plug the loopholes in the land reform legislations and implement them effectively. With the political shift of Indira Gandhi to the left in the late 1960s, particularly after 1969, these efforts received a further momentum. At a land reform conference of the chief ministers called by her in September 1970, she forcefully argued that social discontent and violence in the countryside had erupted because:⁶

The land reform measures implemented have failed to match the legitimate expectations which were first fostered among millions of cultivators during the national movement . . . In short, we have yet to create institutional conditions which would enable small farmers, tenants, and landless labourers to share in the agricultural New Deal.

Reduction of ceiling limits was one of the main issues discussed at the conference with most of the chief ministers rejecting such a proposal outright. The matter was referred to the Central Land Reforms Committee, which was to look into this and other contentious issues that emerged at the conference. In August 1971, the committee made a series of recommendations including a

substantial reduction in the ceiling limits, withdrawal of exemptions such as those in favour of 'efficient' or mechanized farms and making ceilings applicable to the family as a unit and not to individuals as was the case in most states.

The Congress, now further strengthened after the electoral victories of 1971 and 1972, was able to get the chief ministers' conference held in July 1972 to approve new national guidelines following months of bitter opposition. The new guidelines were based essentially on the August 1971 recommendations of the Central Land Reforms Committee. Some of the important features of the July 1972 guidelines, which marked a break in the history of ceiling legislation in India, were:

(i). The ceiling for double-cropped perennially irrigated land was to be within the range of 10-18 acres, it was 27 acres for single-cropped land and 54 acres for inferior dry lands.

(ii). A ceiling was to be applicable to a family as a unit of five members (husband, wife and three minor children). Additional land per additional member could be permitted for families which exceeded this number but up to a maximum limit of double the ceiling for the five-member unit.

(iii). In the distribution of surplus land, priority was to be given to landless agricultural workers, particularly those belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

(iv). Compensation payable for surplus land was to be fixed well below market price so as to be within the capacity of the new allottees.

Following the 1972 guidelines most states (barring some northeastern states and Goa which had no ceiling laws) passed revised ceiling legislation, lowering the ceiling limits within the range prescribed in the guidelines. Resistance to the ceiling laws and efforts to evade the ceiling continued in a variety of ways. A common method was to seek judicial intervention on a number of grounds. Hundreds of thousands of ceiling cases were filed in courts all over the country. One estimate mentions 500,000 pending cases in Andhra Pradesh alone!

In an attempt to stem this menace the government got the 34th Amendment to the constitution passed in parliament in August 1974, getting most of the revised ceiling laws included in the Ninth Schedule of the constitution so that they could not be challenged on constitutional grounds.

While the renewed effort of the 1970s did lead to some progress in surplus land being redistributed, the overall results were still far from satisfactory. As a result of the ceiling laws of the 1970s, an additional area of about 2.27 million acres of land was distributed by the early 1980s, but, quite symptomatic of the entire effort at ceiling reform, an estimated 32.25 million acres of land was wilfully dispersed to avoid ceilings.

Nevertheless, by March 1985, 7.2 million acres was declared surplus out of which 4.3 million acres was distributed to about 3.3 million beneficiaries. Moreover, more than half, 54.6 per cent of the beneficiaries, were members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes who received about 43.6 per cent of the area distributed. The objective set out in the 1947 economic programme of the Congress, of distributing surplus lands to village cooperatives or of even using such lands to start new cooperatives did not achieve any success. Out of the land declared surplus

but not distributed, nearly 1.6 million acres was under litigation.

There was wide regional variation in the implementation of ceiling laws, with the states where greater political mobilization of the targeted beneficiaries occurred, or where greater political will was shown by the government, achieving a much higher level of success. For example, it is estimated that West Bengal, which had only less than 3 per cent of the cultivated area in India, contributed about a quarter of the total land declared surplus under ceiling laws all over India.

By the middle of 1992, the area declared surplus was 7.3 million acres (it was 2.4 million acres in 1970) and the area distributed was about 5 million acres (it was 1.2 million acres in 1970) and the beneficiaries numbered about 4.7 million. The increase in the number of beneficiaries particularly between 1985 and 1992 was far greater than the increase in area distributed, 1.4 million beneficiaries and 0.1 million acres respectively. This suggests that the new beneficiaries would be receiving only tiny plots or homestead lands.

Thus, while there was a distinct improvement after 1972, yet, the total area declared surplus that could be distributed among the landless constituted only about 2 per cent of the cultivated area. Again, while it is true that more than 4.5 million people, mostly landless, did receive some land (however poor its quality and however small the size of the holding), the inequities in Indian agriculture, which the ceiling laws were intended to address, persisted to a very large extent.

An important impact of the ceiling laws, and perhaps in the long run the most critical one, was that it killed the land market and prevented an increasing concentration in landholdings through de-peasantization. As the eminent scholar of Indian agriculture and policy-maker C.H. Hanumantha Rao put it, 'The law discouraged concentration of landownership beyond the ceiling level and thus prevented the possible dispossession of numerous small and marginal holders which would probably have occurred through a competitive process in the land market in the absence of a ceiling on landholdings.'⁷

Also, though the opportunity to acquire large areas of surplus lands for redistribution was missed because of defective and delayed ceiling laws, in the long run the high population growth and the rapid subdivision of large holdings over several generations (in the absence of the practice of primogeniture for inheritance in India) led automatically to little land remaining over the ceiling limits. In fact, the number of holdings and the area operated under the category of large holdings, 25 acres or above (even 15 acres and above) kept falling in the decades since independence right up to the 1990s. Except in certain small pockets in the country, very large landholdings of the semi-feudal type are now things of the past. Inequality among landowners was no longer a key issue, as landholding was not very skewed any more. By one estimate, by 1976-77 nearly 97 per cent of the operated holdings were below 25 acres and 87 per cent of the holdings were below 10 acres.⁸ The problem of the landless or the near landless, who it is estimated constituted nearly half the agricultural population, still required urgent attention.

However, any further attempt at land redistribution through lowering of ceilings does not appear to be politically feasible or even economically viable. Given the adverse land-man ratio in India and particularly given (unlike many other countries with similar ratios) the fact that a very high proportion of the population continues to be dependent on agriculture (nearly 67 per

cent of the total workforce was engaged in agriculture in 1991) and that consequently the number of potential competitors for land is very large, any attempt to further reduce ceilings to provide land for landless labourers would vastly increase the number of uneconomic and unviable holdings. Also, it would range the entire, now politically very important, landowning classes, powerfully mobilized under the 'new farmers' movement, against any regime which tried to do so. As an eminent radical journalist said to us recently, 'Only a Pol Pot can try to do land redistribution on the basis of land to the tiller today.'

Perhaps the only viable programme left for the landless was the one which has been to some extent taken up in recent years, of distributing homestead lands or even just home sites, ensuring the payment of minimum wages, as well as providing security of tenure and fair rents to sharecroppers and tenants.⁹ Other answers are to be found in increasing off-farm employment in rural areas, in increasing animal husbandry and other activities associated with cultivation but not requiring land.

The Bhoodan Movement

Bhoodan was an attempt at land reform, at bringing about institutional changes in agriculture, like land redistribution through a movement and not simply through government legislation. Eminent Gandhian constructive worker Acharya Vinoba Bhave drew upon Gandhian techniques and ideas such as constructive work and trusteeship to launch this movement in the early 1950s. Unfortunately, its revolutionary potential has generally been missed.

Vinoba Bhave organized an all-India federation of constructive workers, the Sarvodaya Samaj, which was to take up the task of a non-violent social transformation in the country. He and his followers were to do padayatra (walk on foot from village to village) to persuade the larger landowners to donate at least one-sixth of their lands as bhoodan or 'land-gift' for distribution among the landless and the land poor. The target was to get as donation 50 million acres, which was one-sixth of the 300 million acres of cultivable land in India. The idea was that each average family of five should give up to one-sixth of their land accepting the poor landless man as a member of the family.

The movement, though independent of the government, had the support of the Congress, with the AICC urging Congressmen to participate in it actively. Eminent former Congressman and a prominent leader of the Praja Socialist Party, Jayaprakash Narayan withdrew from active politics to join the Bhoodan movement in 1953.

Vinoba received the first donation of land on 18 April 1951 in the village of Pochampalli in the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh, where the reverberations of the Communist Party-led armed peasant revolt were still being felt. In less than three months he had covered about 200 villages in this region and received 12,200 acres as donation. The movement then spread to the North, particularly Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. In the initial years the movement achieved a considerable degree of success, receiving over 4 million acres of land as donation by March 1956. After this the movement lost momentum and very little new land was received as donations.

Also, a substantial part of the **land donated was unfit for cultivation or under litigation**. Perhaps this was one reason why out of the nearly 4.5 million acres of Bhoodan land available **only about 654,000 acres was actually distributed among 200,000 families by the end of 1957**. By early 1961, about 872,000 acres of land had been distributed.

Meanwhile, **towards the end of 1955**, the movement took a new form, that of **Gramdan or 'donation of village'**. Again taking off from the Gandhian notion that all land belonged to 'Gopal' or God, in Gramdan villages the movement declared that all land was owned collectively or equally, as it did not belong to any one individual. **The movement started in Orissa and was most successful there**. By the end of 1960 there were more than 4,500 Gramdan villages out of which 1,946 were in Orissa, 603 in Maharashtra, 543 in Kerala, 483 in Andhra Pradesh and about 250 in Madras. It has been argued that this movement was successful mainly in villages where class differentiation had not yet emerged and there was little if any disparity in ownership of land or other property, such as those inhabited by certain tribal communities. Vinoba is said to have picked such villages for this movement.

By the 1960s the Bhoodan/Gramdan movement had lost its elan despite its considerable initial promise. Its creative potential essentially remained unutilized. The programme, however, appeared to drag on indefinitely, essentially forgotten but for rude reminders such as the **Bihar government decision of June 1999 to dissolve the State Bhoodan Committee for its inability to distribute even half the Bhoodan land available over the past thirty-eight years!**¹⁰

A proper assessment of the movement particularly its potential is still to be made. It has been too easily dismissed as not only 'Utopian' but also as being reactionary, class collaborationist and aimed at preventing class struggle. As one historian of agrarian reforms in India put it, its purpose was to 'serve as a brake on the revolutionary struggle of the peasants'.¹¹ This is not surprising as far more successful movements led by Gandhiji continue to be wrongly characterized in this fashion by some sections for having based themselves on similar principles.

There were, however, some very significant aspects of the Bhoodan movement that need to be noted. First, the very fact that it was one of the **very few attempts after independence to bring about land reform through a movement** and not through government legislation from the top is in itself very significant. Second, **the potential of the movement was enormous, based as it was on the idea of trusteeship or that all land belonged to God**. If the landlords failed to behave as trustees or as 'equal' sharers of property, then a satyagraha, in the Gandhian mould, could be launched against them. This, for example, was precisely what the Tamil Nadu Sarvodaya leaders proposed to do in 1961: 'Start satyagraha against landlords who refused to cooperate in Gramdan villages and went back on their promises to donate land'.¹² There were some including a section of Socialists influenced by Gandhian thought and practice (many of them were in the PSP in the early 1950s) who wanted to realize the revolutionary potential of the notion of trusteeship and of constructive work through the technique of satyagraha by launching mass civil disobedience against injustice. The Sarvodaya Samaj, however, on the whole failed to make this transition: to build an active large-scale mass movement that would generate irresistible pressure for social transformation in large parts of the country.

Yet, the movement made a significant contribution by creating a moral ambience, an atmosphere, which, while putting pressure on the landlords, created conditions favourable to the landless. This was recognized even by the noted Communist leader E.M.S. Namboodiripad. Citing an article by Namboodiripad titled 'Sarvodaya and Communism', Kotovsky wrote:¹³

the Bhoodan and Gramdan movement . . . has . . . to a certain extent stimulated political and other activity by the peasant masses and has created a favourable atmosphere for political propaganda and agitation for redistribution of the land, for abolition of private ownership of land and for the development of agricultural producers' cooperatives.

This, ironically, is perhaps the best appreciation of the significance of the Bhoodan movement coming from those who have been its major critics.