

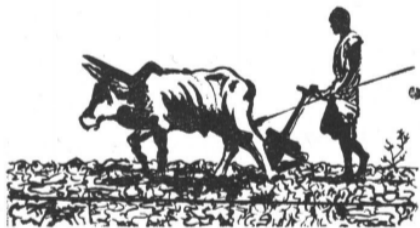
**O**FFICIALLY LAUNCHED by the Communist Party of India at Hyderabad on 13 July 1970, the "Land-Grab Movement" is still gathering momentum. To date there have been large scale occupations of lands in Assam, West Bengal, Bihar, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan. The failure after many years to put an end to absentee landlordism by legal measures has brought the CPI nationwide support for land grab. The Delhi State Youth Federation for example called for forcible occupations of lands, many of which were government owned, as well as those belonging to rich landlords and monopoly houses. Agitators up and down the country working in sympathy with the movement have conducted demonstrations and hunger strikes, while a series of encroachments have been made onto tracts of forest land, tea estates, and the "surplus" lands belonging to ex-rajahs and the like. Sometimes the take-overs have been quite peaceful affairs though more often they have involved some violence.

Land grabbing has been going on spasmodically for some four years but these recent moves have aroused interest at all levels. It has been even said that this year the Communist Party has so dramatised the problem of economic poverty that it has made the question of land a national issue. In all, some ten million people have taken part in one form or another in the agitation.

Press reports on local activities give colourful accounts of what is taking place: "The police (in Madras) arrested 2,648 Communists when it was announced that land would be forcibly occupied . . ." and in another area: "hundreds of Communist workers arrested in a midnight swoop." At Cuttack—"about 500,000 acres, most of it Government fallow land, occupied by landless peasants," and in Rajasthan, "armed gangs grab 60,000 bighas of Government land." And so it continues.

There can be little doubt suggests one reporter that the Naxalities (Maoist Communists) "have shocked the conscience of the nation into awareness of one of the more serious problems of our time . . . have built a disturbing political movement on the basis of land hunger and in doing so, have revealed its political potential."

Some officials, in Tamil Nadu for example, claim they are quite prepared to hand over surplus land to the land-



less in an orderly and constitutional way but will not tolerate violence. The Communists, however, reject these assurances. They have waited long enough, they say, for legislation and are determined to carry through

# LAND GRAB INDIA

Julia Bastian

"Who are the most deserving of the land  
should be given to whom

their land grab activities at all costs. The Land Ceiling Act, designed to dispossess the big landlords of their "surplus" land has already proved a farce. Even a land ceiling can be drafted in such legalistic terms, the Communists point out, that families may hold thousands of acres under such guises as "benami holdings."

While the Ministers and their advisors are arguing about a solution, public meetings have been banned and in some districts the police have been strengthened by bringing in hundreds of men from surrounding areas to protect croplands and other properties.

Even before independence, land reform was recognised as being the corner stone of India's economic regeneration. Yet despite constant pressure from many quarters the Government has consistently avoided reform, probably because most political support comes from the well-to-do-landowners. Neither the economic nor the humanitarian aspects of land reform have so far persuaded the Government to throw out what is clearly an ancient but iniquitous system of land tenure.

A landholding in India, however modest, ensures not only a home and a livelihood but also social status. The lot of the landless labourer becomes all the more desperate in a community where other sections are moving forward.

In 1960-61 it was estimated that 52 per cent of the rural population were living at "poverty level." By 1967-8 the poverty line had moved up to 78 per cent. According to 1969 estimates, out of a total rural population of 434 millions, 103 millions own no land at all while 135 millions operate less than five acres per family. Taken together these represent 67 per cent of the total rural population and of these, about 210 millions live near to starvation on a per capita income of less than 200 Rupees per year (£11). And the situation is growing worse.

Yet the proportion of idle land with agricultural potential is high in relation to geographical area—about one-fifth of India is uncultivated though much of it might well be put to good use.

This is why the land grab movement is moving from strength to strength. In some districts it is taking the form of small rural festivals. In West Bengal, for example, hundreds of landless countryfolk thronged the headquarters of the Peasant Action Committee. Wielding sticks and spears and led by volunteers in jaunty red caps, they formed up into gay processions, some beating

and how much land



drums, others singing, to march into the selected lands, already confiscated from a landowner under the United Front regime but not yet distributed to the peasants. The decorated ploughs drawn by bullocks appropriately festooned with flowers were set to work to plough the land and the "people's victory" was proclaimed!

The mood is not always so festive. Sometimes the land grabbing takes the form of simply hoisting the red flag over the fields in question to proclaim the property for the peasants whereupon they disperse quietly. Sometimes there are hunger strikes or peaceful demonstrations.

In other cases it is the officials themselves who have declared certain lands "surplus" before taking them over. This device throws the onus of going to court on to the deprived landowners, who know they will get little satisfaction from taking their grievance to law. In this way much new land has been "acquired" by the Government. Ironically, however, while claiming land is quick and easy, the redistribution of it among the landless is protracted and difficult. Who, indeed, are the most deserving of the landless and how much land should be given to whom?

Bureaucracy has so far failed to find a fair answer to this dilemma with the result that much of the newly acquired land is still held out of use by officialdom—pending decisions.

However desirable it may appear to redistribute land to the landless, the side effects of land grabbing cause concern to most thinking agitators. Firstly, it works against the rule of law since no one pretends that it has

any legal justification. Land grabbing—however prettily it may be conducted—always has force as its instrument and violence or threat of violence is completely unacceptable in a civilised society. Furthermore, if such "reforms" can be imposed by force by certain individuals or parties, what is to prevent others also able to muster sufficient force, from claiming to carry out their own reforms at any time, unhindered by the State or the police?

The best that can be said for the movement is that it will surely speed up State action and bring about some sort of solution to the problem. Some say the Government is not really willing or even able to carry through land reform, or to translate into action what has already been embodied long ago in legislation. The uncertainty that surrounds the issue has certainly created a situation in which neither landowner nor tenant is in any mood to set about stepping up productivity. As for the landless labourers with hopes now raised, the chances of these being fulfilled seem remote indeed.

What then is the solution? There is much talk of an urban property tax and some muddled thinking about nationalisation of land, yet no one so far has come up with a straightforward proposal of a thumping good tax on all land values throughout India—up to 100 per cent—so that only actual users would find it profitable to work their lands and pay the tax. Such an arrangement would not only help to redistribute land effectively without the Government making presents of any new titles to land, but it would also bring into use much of the idle land with agricultural potential and, broadly speaking, it would enable land prices generally to fall, both in urban as well as rural districts since, no doubt, there would be enough to satisfy the needs of the community. Furthermore, by leaving individual holdings in the control of private enterprise, it would avoid state ownership of land and its attendant disadvantages.

Such an idea should appeal to the most radical land reformers in India, of whatever political party or social strata.

### Samuel Brittan on Economic Freedom

DECADES of official propaganda have tried to make Britain's citizens believe that the balance of payments was the nation's most deep-seated problem, and that they were personally responsible for solving it. Samuel Brittan argues in *The Price of Economic Freedom*\* that this was a high-level confidence trick, and that the problem was artificially created by pegging the sterling exchange rate. The years of passing round the international begging-bowl, the

\*Macmillan 40s.

political humiliations, the travel restrictions and the distortion of every aspect of our national life by the supposed need to earn and save foreign exchange were all unnecessary. But they could easily occur again unless we cease to regard the sterling exchange rate as a prestige symbol and treat it instead as a price, which like other prices needs to change over the years.

Mr. Brittan devotes a large part of the book to discussing in question-and-answer form the worries of

politicians and businessmen about what life would be like under freer exchange rates. He covers both freely floating rates and compromise forms of flexibility in the context of actual discussions now going on in the IMF, the Common Market and elsewhere, with many historical examples.

The book is also a guide to the puzzles which many people have about trade figures, balance of payments, gold reserves and similar subjects,