

India's Problem— the Land Problem

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WE CANNOT develop agriculture to any considerable extent or provide the country with adequate food and raw materials because the impoverished peasants deprived of land are unable to purchase the most elementary agricultural implements and necessary fertilisers in order to do their farming.

We cannot develop our national industries and industrialise our country in a big way because the peasants constituting eighty per cent of the population are unable to buy even a minimum quantity of manufactured goods. We cannot improve the conditions of the working class because hundreds of thousands of hungry people forced by poverty to leave the countryside for towns swarm the "labour market," increase the army of unemployed, and lower the price of labour.

Thus the agricultural and peasant problems are of primary importance to the life of our country and stand as the foremost national question.

Now what we have done so far? Let us look at the "Balance Sheet" of our agrarian policies.

The legislative measures for abolishing intermediaries such as Zamindars, Jagirdars, etc., permit these intermediaries to retain big landed estates in the name of Sir, Khudkast or pannai lands, and guarantee colossal amounts of compensation to be paid to them. The abolition of these intermediary rights has not been followed by a free and automatic transfer of proprietary rights to the tillers of the soil. On the other hand, millions of tenants have been either evicted outright, both legally or illegally, or forced to purchase the land rights, paying varying prices to the landlord; thus the scores of rupees of compensation paid to big intermediaries in instalments and the vast sum of money the big landlords snatched away from peasants by selling the land rights, etc., have deprived agriculture of the badly needed capital production and have become a burden on the state.

The tenancy laws enacted for the ryotwari area provide first and foremost for the so-called right of resumption of land under the pretext of self-cultivation from the possession of cultivating tenants. The depriving of these tenants of their legitimate rights has taken away all the significance of the so-called fair rent fixation which in itself has been unfair in most cases. With the large number of loopholes left in the legislation on the one hand, and their implementation by bureaucratic authorities on the other, they have actually led to the eviction and uprooting of millions of tenants from the land, thus

throwing them into the ranks of pauperised peasants and agricultural labourers.

Coming to the much talked of legislation regarding the ceiling of land holding, these acts have been so framed as to enable the big landholders either to preserve their holding untouched or to split them up through fictitious partition among their family members in such a manner as to make the ceiling inapplicable to them. In most cases the ceiling itself is put high. Beside this, the exemption to so-called efficiently managed farms, garden lands and pasture lands, knocks the bottom out of this measure. No wonder these laws in most cases either remained on paper or produced very little land for distribution among the peasants.

The agricultural labourers with either no land or with small pieces of land, whose main livelihood is derived from selling their labour power, constitute the single biggest section in our rural life. Their ranks have been further swelled with millions of evicted tenant ruined peasants and uprooted artisans. On all India scale they form 30 to 35 per cent and in some states like Andhra, Tamilnad, Kerala, Mysore, Orissa, and Bihar, they form 50 to 55 per cent, of the peasant householders. From amongst them thousands work as farm servants under landlords and rich peasants on an annual basis. Despite the loud talk about legislation fixing their minimum wages and other amenities since 1948, practically nothing effective has been done so far to improve their living conditions and protect them from the exploitation of the landlords. The so-called minimum wages legislation which was brought about in some states after years of promise and waiting is nothing but a piece of decoration for the statute book. The scale of wages and other conditions of work prescribed in these legislations are such that they are much below the wage rate prevailing in the areas concerned and where higher rates have been fixed they have not been enforced. The vast bulk of these labourers neither possess a small house-site nor a hut to live in. Six months in the year they are either completely unemployed or under employed. Several reports of the government and semi-government agencies clearly point out that their real wages are falling, their employment days are decreasing and their indebtedness is growing.

With the rapid expansion of money economy in the rural areas, forward trading and speculative holding of food grains and other agricultural commodities has grown enormously, on the basis of expanding bank credit and otherwise. The tightening of the grip of monopolistic trading interests over agricultural produce has rapidly grown, bringing in its wake intensification of exploitation of the peasants through unequal exchange and violent fluctuations of prices. As a result the peasant is fleeced both as a seller of agricultural produce and as a purchaser of industrial goods.

Therefore, without a radical change in the living condition of our peasants, it is unthinkable that anything can change the face of our degraded rural life and unleash the productive forces in our agrarian sector.