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Man and His Land By V. G. PETERSON

FORTY-SIX per cent of the world's people, inhabiting fifty per cent of the earth's surface, live in underdeveloped countries; that is, in countries where more than half the gainfully occupied males are engaged in farming, hunting and forestry. For millions of people in these lands, life is a struggle against starvation and the problem now before the United Nations is how to improve their conditions and thereby gain their confidence in the "democracies." Unless they succeed, and quickly, the Communists with their promise, "You shall own the land you till," will win them over completely.

Many evils contribute towards a country's inability to progress beyond a peasant-agricultural economy, and these vary from country to country. But all underdeveloped countries suffer in common from their bad land tenure systems.

In India, where less than a third of the farmers own the land they cultivate, the system is rooted in antiquity. Landlords were unknown for centuries because, under the old Hindu law, "the field is the property of the man that cultivates it." But, under the Moguls that law was forgotten and there grew up in India three types of tenure: the zamindari, the ryotwari and the mahalwari. These have been cemented into the economic pattern of the country and exist today.

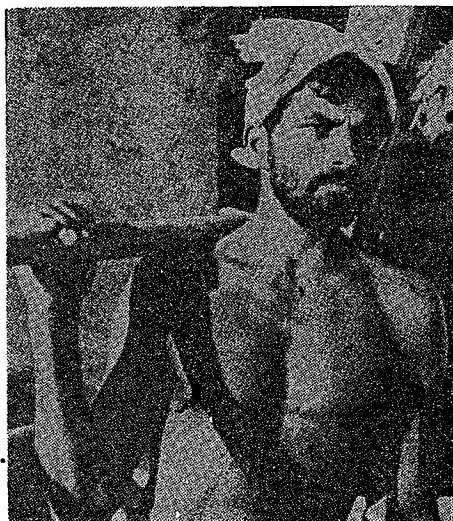
The zamindars, originally tax collectors, became, under British rule, full proprietors of the area over which their collections gave them power. They are responsible to the government for the taxes, and are free to rack-rent the cultivators as much as they are able.

Under the ryotwari, the ryot, or peasant, retains his status as proprietor and pays his taxes direct. But in many sections the ryots have lost the ownership of their lands becoming, instead, lessees or tenants. Under both systems, and especially under the zamindari, a complicated sub-leasing arrangement has grown up, with, in some cases, as many as thirty middlemen queued up between the actual owner and the cultivator, each collecting rent from the man below him in the line. Thus the worker gets at best, no more than thirty or forty per cent of his crop each year.

Under the third system, the mahalwari, village communities are counted as units in themselves, and property is in joint or communal ownership.

Efforts on the part of the National Government to institute land reform measures have been consistently blocked by the zamindars. However, action taken by the Supreme Court of India in October, 1951, has paved the way for state confiscation of large holdings with "proper compensation," and redistribution of the land to the peasants. It remains to be seen whether these measures will be carried out, and how they will benefit the Indian masses.

In Egypt, where nineteen million people crowd the narrow valley of the Nile, and where three-quarters of them depend on agriculture, there are some 2,662,000 landowners. Yet of this number, a mere handful—a half of one per



Farmer of southern India. Less than a third own the soil they till. —Courtesy County Officer

cent — owns a third of the whole fertile area. The rest work on plots so small that despite the productivity of the soil, they can wrest but a meager living from it. The diet of these poor people consists mainly of beans and corn, with very little milk or meat. They are physically wretched and little better off than slaves.

The Egyptian pashas are the cotton barons and businessmen, and have great influence in government circles. As would be expected, they have bitterly opposed all efforts at reform.

In Iraq, in those regions where pump irrigation is practiced, the land is mainly the property of the pump owners, who take three-quarters or more of the crop. In the districts of flood irrigation, the sheikh and sirkal together take up to eighty per cent, which places them in a rather better position than their fellow-plunderers, the zamindars of India.

In Syria the greater part of the land is owned by city notables, who are also the ruling class, and it is cultivated by small share-tenants. The share-tenant brings his corn to the village threshing floor and when the grain has been threshed the landlord or his agent takes half. Towards this share he has made no contribution. All the labor, all the seed, all the livestock, etc., has been supplied by the tenant. Nor does the tenant enjoy security of tenure. He may be dispossessed without notice and without compensation.

Statistics do not exist to prove exactly how much of the land of Syria is owned by large proprietors, but it is estimated to be about sixty per cent, and may be as high as seventy or eighty per cent. In northern Syria, in the district of Hama, for instance, out of a hundred and fourteen villages, a total of eighty-six are owned by four landlords.

Under the circumstances, it is easy to see why long-term investments are not made in Syrian

agriculture, why the land resources are allowed to waste, and why the share-cropper has so little incentive to improve fertility. He has no security of tenure, so why invest in the future? His landlord will take half of any increase, so why enlarge the yield? As for the landlords, as a class they are not farmers, but city-dwellers, so they have little interest in the land, except as a source of income.

In Japan, prior to World War II, tenants and part-tenants accounted for seventy per cent of the farm families. Landlords extracted as much as half the annual crop and by the time the Japanese farmer had paid this and purchased his chemical fertilizer, he had as little as thirty per cent left for his labors. Like his Syrian counterpart, he, too, lacked security of tenure. Landlords could, and did, terminate leases at will. Similar conditions prevailed in China in pre-Communist times.

The land reform directive issued by General Douglas MacArthur in December, 1945, ordered the Japanese government to "take measures to insure that those who till the soil of Japan shall have a more equal opportunity to enjoy the fruits of their labor." As a result, five million acres, involving thirty million plots, were purchased and sold separately—sixty million transactions requiring a work-force of some three hundred thousand to carry out the job. According to Wolf I. Ladejinsky, writing in *Foreign Agriculture* in September, 1951, "Widespread land ownership makes the Japanese countryside almost impervious to communism . . . Communist promises of 'land to the landless' do not entice farmers any longer. On the contrary, the new owners enlarged measurably the class of staunchest opponents of Communist economics and politics . . . The agrarian reform has not only undermined that creed, but also strengthened the forces that make for a middle-of-the-road stable rural society, based on individual ownership of land."

But the problem of land reform is not confined to the East.

Serious land problems have existed in Mexico since the days of the Spanish conquest when whole Indian communities—and sometimes more than one—were given into the custody of a single conquistador with the right to collect tribute from the inhabitants and to extract certain services from them. Allegedly, the reason for this system of "stewardship," the "encomienda system," was to protect the Indians from exploitation. Actually, it produced a state of Indian servitude. And although the system was abolished by law in 1720, the new landlords were so well entrenched by that time that few of them suffered by the change.

By means of Article 27 of the Constitution of 1917, and subsequent legislation, Mexico is trying to break the stranglehold of its ancient land system. Article 27 provides for (1) the restoration of land to villages, (2) the outright grant of lands to villages in cases where they

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are needed even though previous ownership cannot be proved, (3) the recovery of public lands and waters that were previously alienated illegally in opposition to the public welfare, and (4) the destruction of the large landed estates by limiting legally the size of private holdings. It also states that the nation is declared the "owner of waters, mineral deposits, and subsoil . . . although private parties may be granted right of exploitation under certain specified conditions."

Between 1917 and 1946 more than thirty million hectares of land were redistributed to the Mexican peasants; but the program moved too rapidly. Workers had not been educated for the shift and many of them made poor proprietors. The economy of large areas was therefore disrupted; meantime boundary disputes arose and insecurity of tenure became widespread. Since 1946, the government has proceeded cautiously, buttressing its actions with educational techniques aimed at bringing modern methods into practice and at safeguarding existing soil resources.

In Latin America half of the agricultural

land is in individual holdings that exceed fifteen thousand acres, the other half being portioned out among small holders who do subsistence farming on a few acres. In the last ten years or so, efforts at land reform have been undertaken in some of these countries, but only sporadically. For instance, laws have been passed requiring landowners to rent idle land or sell it; requiring plantation owners to provide rent-free plots to their laborers for raising subsistence crops, and, in a few instances, to provide the workers with credit and technical assistance. Nowhere, however, has the real core of the problem been touched.

To continue would be to retrace a pattern already clear. As Isadore Lubin pointed out in a recent issue of *The New York Times*, "It would be difficult to set up deliberately an economy that would more effectively suppress individual initiative." Yet "individual initiative" is what is most sorely needed in these underdeveloped countries if they are to progress along the lines of our free enterprise system. The United Nations, anxious to beat the Communists to the draw, is looking for the answer.