

Land Reforms (I): Colonial Impact and the Legacy of the National and Peasant Movements

Indian Agriculture at Independence: The Colonial Impact

Colonialism had a devastating effect on Indian agriculture. This when Indian agriculture, like in any other pre-industrial society, accounted for the preponderant share of the country's total output.

Colonialism shattered the basis of traditional Indian agriculture without bringing in any dynamic new forces. Commercialization of agriculture and differentiation within the peasantry occurred on an unprecedented scale. However, unlike independent societies undergoing transition from pre-industrial and pre-capitalist to capitalist mode of production, in India commercialization and differentiation did not mark the shift towards capitalist commodity production and the rise of the rich peasant/capitalist farmer.

Commercialization of agriculture in colonial India facilitated the extraction of surplus from the peasantry (through land revenue demand in cash) and the transfer of this surplus from India to Britain by bringing agricultural produce to the export market. The 'unrequited' export surplus being the size of the surplus extraction or 'drain' from India.

Similarly, differentiation of the peasantry in India by and large did not lead to the rise of the rich peasant/capitalist farmer but to the creation of a rentier landlord class. Thus, while Indian agriculture was transformed, it was done in a 'colonial' manner which had a long-term enervating effect on it.

The typical features that emerged in Indian agriculture under colonialism put an unbearable burden on the bulk of the Indian peasantry. First, the colonial state made a very high tax demand on agriculture. In the early colonial period the state made permanent settlements with zamindars (the zamindari or Permanent Settlement) fixing the land revenue rates at a very high level. The zamindar was the intermediary between the state and the direct cultivator. He committed to pay fixed land revenue to the state while he collected rent from the actual producers. However, since land revenue was fixed, the colonial state discovered that it was not able to mop up the rise in agricultural income caused by the rise in agricultural prices that occurred over time. The surplus or the increase in income was being largely appropriated by the intermediaries.

Consequently, all subsequent land tax or revenue settlements made by the colonial rulers were temporary settlements made directly with the peasant, or 'ryot' (e.g., the ryotwari settlements). In ryotwari areas and other areas under very similar tenurial system comprising over 40 per cent of British territories, the land revenue rates were periodically enhanced pushing them up to the maximum limit the economy or polity could bear. Contrary to British claims the actual land revenue collections under the British were generally much higher than those under the traditional indigenous rulers. Being rigid and inflexible in crisis years of low production or low income due to crash in prices, such as during the Great Depression of the 1930s, the land revenue collections

could equal 75 per cent of the whole of the net produce of the peasant! Till the turn of the twentieth century land revenue constituted more than half of the total revenue raised by the colonial state.

Second, under colonialism Indian agriculture experienced the growth of landlordism and rack renting on a very wide scale. In the zamindari areas absentee landlordism and subinfeudation was rampant. So high were the rents and other exactions from the peasant that the gap between what was collected from the peasant and the land revenue paid to the state was in some areas able to sustain scores of layers of intermediaries between the state and the direct cultivator!

In the ryotwari areas, too, despite the direct settlements between the state and the peasant producer, landlordism and tenancy became widespread over time. By one estimate the landlord holdings in ryotwari areas covered 40 to 50 per cent of the total land. On the eve of independence roughly 60 to 70 per cent of the total cultivable land in British India (including zamindari areas) was owned by landlords.

The colonial situation created ideal conditions for tenancy and rack-renting. The destruction of traditional handicrafts and artisanal industry and the absence of a rapid growth of modern industry created an enormous population pressure on agriculture and an adverse land-man ratio of about 0.92 acre per capita at independence. Further, the growing differentiation of the peasantry and the consequent concentration in landownership was adding rapidly to the number of landless hungering for land in the context of unavailability of virtually any alternative employment. Such was the concentration of landownership at independence that over 60 per cent of rural households either owned no land or were semi-proletarian in the sense that they owned small fragments of less than an acre or uneconomic and marginal holdings of a hectare or less. The total land owned by them was only 8 per cent of the total area. Another estimate has it that nearly 75 per cent of the rural population was landless, consisting of landless tenants and agricultural labour.

No wonder then that levels of rent in cash or kind were generally higher than 50 per cent of the crop and in some areas such as in Punjab and in Tanjore in Tamil Nadu it went up to 80 to 85 per cent of the crop respectively! In fact in Punjab in the late 1930s the peasant movement demanded a rate of 50 per cent for tenants and in Tanjore an ordinance of 1952 lowered the landlord's share to 60 per cent of the crop.¹ Further, the landlord mostly paid only the land revenue making the tenant bear the entire cost of production. Also, the level of rents tended to move upwards much faster than the price increases.

In addition to the rent demand the landlords resorted to numerous illegal exactions in cash, kind or labour (begar), which put a severe burden on the peasant. The report of the U.P. Zamindari Abolition Committee pointed out, for example, that in parts of U.P. the number of such illegal exactions added up to as many as fifty in number! In fact a common and persistent feature of peasant movements all over the country in the colonial period was the struggle against such 'semi-feudal' illegal exactions.²

Given the above situation it made much more economic sense for the large landowners to give out either their entire land, or the lands in excess of that which could be cultivated by their family,

on tenancy, extracting very high rents and other illegal dues from landless peasants competing for land, rather than go in for large-scale capitalist agriculture using hired wage labour under their direct supervision. It was not because of any allegedly inherent 'feudal' mentality of the Indian peasants or landlords that capitalist agriculture did not emerge. Typically, therefore, the large landowners in zamindari and ryotwari areas leased out their lands in small pieces to tenants who continued to cultivate them with traditional techniques. Despite high concentration in landownership the operated holdings in India remained by and large small and often very tiny. Petty commodity production with traditional techniques rather than large-scale modern capitalist farming was the typical production pattern in colonial India.

Studies conducted shortly after independence estimated that about 60 per cent of the family holdings in India were less than 5 acres each and about 40 per cent of the holdings were less than 2.5 acres each.

The problem of small holdings was further accentuated by their fragmentation, that is, these being held in dispersed small plots. One estimate is that the average holding in the country had approximately 6 plots of 1.1 acres each. The average hides the extreme cases of fragmentation. The Royal Commission of Agriculture, 1928, for example, reported cases in Ratnagiri where plots were as small as $\frac{1}{160}$ of an acre or in Punjab where mile-long strips which were only a few yards wide were held as plots. When subdivision of family holdings occurred among the successors, each fragment was further subdivided as they varied in quality and productivity. The efforts of the colonial state to handle this problem of subdivision and fragmentation proved very meagre.

The heavy demands on the cultivator made by the colonial state and the dominant sections in rural society led to a third major feature of colonial agriculture: extreme indebtedness of the peasantry. Bonded labour or debt bondage became a common feature in large parts of the country. The overwhelming bulk of the peasants' debt was contracted at usurious rates from private moneylenders. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI)-commissioned Rural Credit Survey Committee reported in 1954 that 93 per cent of the credit needs of agriculturists were supplied privately with the government accounting for 3 per cent, cooperative societies for another 3 per cent and commercial banks for a mere 1 per cent. S.J. Patel using data from the All India Rural Credit Survey made a rough estimate for 1950–51 that about Rs 6,500 million was the interest paid by cultivators on their debt. The total burden on the peasant of interest payments on debt and rent on land could be estimated at a staggering Rs 14,200 million or about \$5 billion per year towards about the end of the colonial period.³

Given the above conditions where the bulk of the Indian peasantry was drained of any resources, living close to or below subsistence level, and where the upper sections of rural society found rent and usury more profitable than capitalist agriculture as a source of income, very little agricultural investment and improvement actually took place. The colonial state too did not put back a fraction of what it extorted from agriculture. Indian agriculture therefore remained at a very backward level. Nearly 97 per cent of the ploughs used in India as late as 1951 were still wooden ploughs; only 3 per cent were iron ploughs! Use of improved seeds, artificial fertilizers,

etc. remained extremely low and scanty .

It is not surprising, therefore, that Indian agriculture, which was facing long-term stagnation, began to show clear signs of decline during the last decades of colonialism. Yields per acre of principal crops showed a significant decline between 1936–38 and 1950. Similarly, between 1901 and 1941 per capita agricultural output *declined* by 14 per cent and foodgrain output by 24 per cent.

No wonder, at independence India was faced with an acute food shortage which created near-famine conditions in many areas. Between 1946 and 1953 about 14 million tonnes of foodgrains worth Rs 10,000 million had to be imported, seriously affecting India's planned development effort. After all, the value of food imports was nearly half of the total capital investment in the First Five Year Plan (1951–56).

The challenge before the independent regime in 1947 was to try to reverse the long-term distortions in Indian agriculture which had emerged during the colonial period and to put Indian agriculture on a high-growth path. A multi-pronged attempt was made to reduce the various kinds of legal and illegal burdens on the peasant producer, remove the large 'semi-feudal' intermediaries, improve the terms of tenancy, provide cheap credit, step up investment in agriculture and necessary infrastructure, generate scientific agricultural research and so on. An attempt, in other words, to bring about comprehensive institutional and technological reform in Indian agriculture. Also, attainment of food self-sufficiency was to be a matter of 'first concern so as to put an end to dependence on foreign aid in this respect'.⁴

The main thrust of and the parameters within which the reform initiatives were to be taken after independence were understandably to a considerable extent laid down by the ideas and practice generated during the Indian national movement. It is this legacy of the national movement we shall now briefly turn to.

Legacy of the National and Peasant Movements and Agricultural Transformation

Since the late nineteenth century the early nationalists had been highlighting the backwardness of Indian agriculture under colonialism, 'its overcrowding due to de-industrialisation, its failure to modernise and use modern techniques of production, the declining trend in productivity and the vast unemployment and underemployment in the rural sector'.⁵

They saw the link between excessive competition for land caused by colonialism and rack-renting of tenants, the subdivision of land and so on. They were particularly critical of the high land revenue collected by the colonial state which not only deprived the peasant of any capacity to save and invest in agricultural operations but even cut into his very subsistence. The Indian National Congress, virtually since its inception in 1885, demanded year after year that there should be a low permanently fixed land tax and permanent settlement of land revenue demand even in the temporary settled areas so that periodic enhancement of revenue demand could not occur.⁶

While generally the early nationalists focussed on state exploitation of agriculture, some among them criticized the oppressive landlord–tenant relationship and the problem of usury and argued for change. G.V. Joshi, for example, argued for the establishing of small peasant farming which would be maintained through vigorous tenancy legislation in both the ryotwari and the zamindari areas, giving protection and permanent tenure for the actual cultivator, availability of cheap credit, and a permanent and low land tax.

Justice Ranade, rather precociously, went a step further and was among the first to argue for a structural change which would replace the existing semi-feudal agriculture with capitalist agriculture. Showing remarkable prescience, to some extent anticipating the actual developments that were to occur after independence, more than half a century later, he argued for a mixed model of capitalist agriculture. He envisaged on the one hand a class of wealthy large-scale Junker-style farmers who were to be created by the transformation of the existing rentier landlords into capitalist landlords and by transforming the upper strata of the peasantry or the rich peasants into capitalist farmers. On the other hand he envisaged a vast mass of independent peasant proprietors free from landlord oppression, with access to cheap credit, and subject only to a low fixed land tax. In Ranade's words, 'A complete divorce from land of those who cultivate it is a national evil, and no less an evil is it to find one dead level of small farmers all over the land. High and petty farming . . . this mixed constitution of rural society is necessary to secure the stability and progress of the country.'⁷ In fact 'this policy of replacing landlordism by rich and middle peasants (and capitalist landlords), while keeping the small, subsistence farmer-cum-commodity producer intact so that there was no proletarianization and disintegration of the peasantry' proved to be the most viable one given the political and economic context at independence and was by and large 'accepted by the Congress Party and Government of India after 1947',⁸ though a number of alternative strategies were also advocated, as we shall see later.

At the level of active agitation at the national level, on the whole, the national movement continued till about the turn of the twentieth century to focus on curtailment of the colonial state's demand on agriculture and to some extent on some ameliorative measures for tenants and the indebted peasantry. There were, however, peasant and tenant movements emerging in various parts of the country fighting for their specific demands without directly confronting colonialism and the colonial state. In Bengal, for example, in the 1870s 'agrarian leagues' or 'combinations' were formed which organized rent strikes against enhanced rents demanded by zamindars. Again in the 1880s, during the discussions on the Bengal Tenancy Bill, peasants were mobilized on a large scale demanding occupancy rights, permanent fixation of rents, etc. Similarly in Maharashtra a powerful movement emerged in the 1870s against money lenders. In both cases nationalist organizations like the Indian Association and Poona Sarvajanic Sabha extended support to the peasants.⁹

The twentieth century saw the emergence of a much firmer linkage between the peasant movements and the wider anti-imperialist movement, each deriving and giving strength to the other. The national movement got more broad based and began to take up wider agrarian issues and the peasant movements now emerged through modern, and over time, national-level

organizations articulating their class demands more effectively.

The 1920s saw peasant movements emerging in Uttar Pradesh and Malabar in close association with the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat movements raising demands like security of tenure for tenants, decrease in rent, abolition of illegal exactions in cash, kind or labour and so on. The Bardoli Satyagraha (1928) in Gujarat of course marked the coalescence of the peasant movement and the national movement to an unprecedented level with leaders like Sardar Patel and Mahatma Gandhi playing a direct and active role in it.¹⁰

The 1930s and 1940s saw the rapid radicalization of the Indian national movement and the growing influence of the left within it. The peasantry moved further centre stage in the nationalist agenda and the peasant movement now grew as an integral part of the national movement.¹¹ The Civil Disobedience movement, the most powerful mass movement launched by the Indian National Congress, took on the form of no-tax and no-rent campaigns in many parts of the country such as Uttar Pradesh and Andhra. Gandhiji himself issued a manifesto to the Uttar Pradesh kisans (peasants) asking them to pay only 50 per cent of the legal rent.

Taking a bold and clear stand, the Indian National Congress at its famous Karachi session in 1931, included in the list of 'Fundamental Rights and Economic Programme' that it wanted to be provided for in any future constitution of independent India, the following:¹²

- (a) Substantial reduction in agricultural rent or revenue paid by the peasantry and in case of uneconomic holdings, exemption for rent for such periods as may be necessary.
- (b) Relief of agricultural indebtedness and control of usury—direct and indirect.
- (c) Labour to be freed from serfdom or conditions bordering on serfdom.
- (d) Peasants and workers shall have the right to form unions to protect their interests.
- (e) Imposition of a progressive income tax on agricultural income above a fixed minimum.

In the meantime a Kisan Conference in Allahabad in 1935, presided over by Sardar Patel, passed a resolution which in unequivocal terms called for the abolition of zamindari. A system of peasant proprietorship without the intervention of any intermediaries was advocated. The Bihar Kisan Sabha also adopted the slogan of zamindari abolition the same year. The Communists and Socialists joined the kisan organizations and strengthened them considerably. The culmination of the efforts of such peasant bodies was the formation of the All India Kisan Congress (later renamed All India Kisan Sabha) in 1936. Jawaharlal Nehru was one of the participants in the first session of the Kisan Congress.

A kisan manifesto was issued by the Kisan Congress and the influence of this manifesto was seen in the agrarian programme adopted by the Indian National Congress at its Faizpur session in Maharashtra in December 1936. The second session of the Kisan Congress presided over by N.G. Ranga was held along with the Indian National Congress session at Faizpur. The Faizpur Agrarian Programme reiterated the demand made at Karachi for substantial reduction in both rent and

revenue. It further demanded: a substantial decrease in canal and irrigation rates, all feudal dues and levies and forced labour be made illegal, fixity of tenure with heritable rights, a moratorium on debts and steps to provide cheap credit, a living wage and suitable working conditions for agricultural labour. Quite significantly, it also recommended that an effort be made to introduce cooperative farming—an issue which was to raise a strong debate in the years to come.¹³

The Congress election manifesto for the 1937 provincial elections described 'the appalling poverty, unemployment and indebtedness of the peasantry' as the '*most important and urgent problem of the country*', which it argued was 'fundamentally due to antiquated and repressive land tenure and revenue systems'. While it was understood that 'the final solution of this problem inevitably involved the removal of British imperialistic exploitation' and a thorough structural reform of the land tenure, rent and revenue systems the manifesto also saw the need for immediate relief with regard to the revenue, rent and debt burden.¹⁴

During the twenty eight months between 1937–39, when the Congress formed ministries in most of the provinces of British India, valiant efforts were made to implement the agrarian programme and the election pledge.¹⁵ The task was difficult given the limited powers available to the ministries in the colonial context and the constraint of time as the ministries were short-lived and also the need to maintain anti-imperialist unity by carefully balancing mutually clashing interests of classes which were allies in the struggle against imperialism. Yet much was achieved. A series of legislations were passed by the various ministries on issues concerning tenancy rights and indebtedness. For example, in Bihar tenancy legislations were passed in 1937 and 1938 which abolished all increases in rent since 1911, effectively reducing rent by about 25 per cent, gave under-ryots occupancy rights after twelve years of cultivating the land, prohibited all illegal exactions and so on. Similar laws improving the condition of the tenants were passed in United Provinces, Bombay, Central Provinces, NWFP, Orissa, Madras and so on. In Orissa the British governor refused assent to a bill which would have effectively reduced the zamindar's income by 50 to 60 per cent. In Madras a committee headed by the Revenue Minister T. Prakasam made a recommendation which would have reduced rents by about two thirds and virtually ended the zamindari system. The Madras assembly and the chief minister, C. Rajagopalachari, supported the report, with the latter rejecting any question of compensating the zamindars. However, before a bill could be drafted on the basis of this report, the ministry resigned. Most provinces passed laws regulating the activity of the money lenders and providing debt relief. In Bombay 40,000 tied serfs or bonded labour were liberated. In a sense this brief interlude of Congress rule served as a mirror of the future for both the dominant classes in rural India and the oppressed and both learnt their lessons though perhaps somewhat unevenly.

The radicalization of Mahatma Gandhi in the 1930s and 1940s, particularly on the agrarian question was of great importance as he, more than anyone else, both created and reflected accurately the balance of class forces in the Indian political scene and at the ground level. In 1937 he said, 'land and all property is his who will work it', not too far from the notion of land to the tiller. In June 1942, in his famous interview with Louis Fischer, Gandhiji predicted that the peasants would seize the zamindar's lands and, while there could be some violence, but the

zamindars could also 'cooperate by fleeing'. He added that it would be fiscally impossible to compensate the landlords. Again, he told Mira behn in jail (he was arrested in August 1942) that after independence the zamindars' land would be taken by the state either through their voluntary surrender or through legislation and then distributed to the cultivators.¹⁶

After the war ended in 1945, the peasant movements, which had subsided during the war, emerged with renewed vigour, in anticipation of freedom and a new social order. The demand for zamindari abolition was now pressed with greater urgency. Militant anti-landlord movements sprang up in various parts of the country like the Telangana movement in Hyderabad state and the Tebhaga movement in Bengal. As has been argued, 'perhaps the most important contribution of the peasant movements that covered large areas of the subcontinent in the 30s and 40s was that ... they created the climate which necessitated the post-independence agrarian reforms'.¹⁷

The critical link between the long history of the national and peasant movements in India and the nature and intensity of the land reform initiatives taken after independence has to be underlined. The failure to fully appreciate this link has led no less a person than the eminent economist and among the most cited scholars of India's land reforms, A.M. Khusro, to make the astounding argument that 'the elaborately conceived and many-sided programme of land reform launched in the country during the 1950s could be said in a considerable degree to be a *gift of the administration* to the peasantry', and not the product of a national or peasant movement!¹⁸

In fact in the immediate years preceding independence, reflecting the long history of the national and peasant movements, a consensus on the agrarian question seemed to have emerged among a broad spectrum of Indian political opinion and on some issues among a wide section of the peasantry. For example, the National Planning Committee (formed in 1938 with Jawaharlal Nehru as chairman and deliberated through the 1940s) which was deeply influenced by left opinion, the Bombay Plan (a plan of Economic Development for India 1944-45, prepared by the leading representatives of the Indian capitalist class) and the election manifesto issued by the Congress Working Committee in 1945 were more or less agreed on the following basic issues:¹⁹

An urgent reform of the land system to be undertaken which involved the abolition of intermediaries between the peasant and the state i.e., the Zamindars and Talukdars, they could be paid compensation that was considered necessary and desirable; problem of rural indebtedness had to be addressed and cheap credit made available; while individual farming or peasant proprietorship was to continue in large parts of the country cooperative farming on privately owned lands and collective farming on state lands was to be encouraged.

While on zamindari abolition the consensus in the countryside (barring, naturally, the zamindars) was clear, it was not so on the issue of cooperativization. Sufficient mobilization among the peasantry had not occurred on this issue and this idea had not taken root among them. The National Planning Committee, the capitalists and the Congress showed awareness of this question. The careful wording of the Congress election (1946) manifesto on this issue is significant: 'while individualist farming or peasant proprietorship should continue, progressive agriculture as well as

the creation of new social values and incentives require some system of cooperative farming suited to Indian conditions. *Any such change can however be made only with the goodwill and agreement of the peasantry concerned.*²⁰ A certain disjunction between the agrarian programme put out by the political leadership or the Congress and the preparedness of the peasantry at whom it was aimed, which was to emerge shortly, was as yet absent.

After the 1946 provincial elections once again the Congress swept the polls. An interim government headed by Nehru was formed at the Centre and the Congress governments in the provinces set up committees to draw up bills for abolition of the zamindari system.

Shortly after independence, in November 1947, the AICC appointed a special committee to draw up an economic programme for the Congress. The programme was to be based on the December 1945 election manifesto and a set of stated principles which, *inter alia*, would meet the great challenge of building 'real democracy in the country . . . based on equality and social justice', enable central planning along with decentralization of political and economic power; provide 'an alternative to the acquisitive economy of private capitalism and the regimentation of a Totalitarian state'.²¹ This was indeed a complex agenda without any pre-existing model to follow. The committee which was to draw up such a programme was headed by Jawaharlal Nehru and had as members other stalwarts like Maulana Azad, N.G. Ranga, G.L. Nanda, Jayaprakash Narayan, J.C. Kumarappa, Achyut Patwardhan and Shankarrao Deo—a fair mix of 'Gandhians' and socialists.

The committee (also called the Economic Programme Committee) made a twenty-point recommendation for agriculture.²² Some of the points may be highlighted here. Clause 2 of the recommendations read: 'All intermediaries between the tiller and the state should be eliminated and all middlemen should be replaced by non-profit making agencies, such as cooperatives.' While the first part of the clause clearly referred to abolition of zamindari, the second part about middlemen was a bit ambiguous. Some have read it to mean 'elimination of all private money lenders and traders'.²³

While this strand of argument was perhaps present among some Congressmen, the Economic Programme Committee did not seem to be taking such an extreme position. All that was agreed to at this stage was setting up of multi-purpose cooperatives, which would 'cut down the costs of agricultural credit, processing and marketing' and presumably thus replace the money lender and trader.

As for cooperative farming or production cooperatives the committee recommended that 'the state should organise *pilot schemes for experimenting* with cooperative farming among small holders and should set up cooperative colonies on *Government unoccupied . . . lands*, and should also directly own and run farms for purposes of *experiment and demonstration*'. No compulsion was visualized as yet either for production or even service cooperatives.²⁴

The committee also introduced the notion of land ceiling, it seems for the first time as an official Congress position. It argued: 'The maximum size of holding should be fixed. The surplus land over such a maximum should be acquired and placed at the disposal of the village

cooperatives.’ Apart from this some of the other recommendations were: present land revenue system to be replaced by progressive agricultural income tax, remunerative prices for agricultural produce and equitable terms of trade between agriculture and industry, and the consolidation of small holdings and the prevention of further fragmentation. It was also recommended that: ‘Statutory Village Panchayats should be organised . . . for self governing purposes with well defined powers and adequate financial resources, and with supervisory jurisdiction over all other institutions in the locality.’²⁵ An effort to properly implement this recommendation required an amendment to the constitution (73rd Amendment in 1993) nearly half a century later.

As we shall see, many of the other clauses especially those regarding cooperatives, ceilings, agricultural income tax, etc., did not have an easy passage either. Key subjects relating to the rural sector such as land reforms, agricultural credit, land revenue assessment, taxation of agricultural income, etc., were all included in the State List, that is, it was not the central government but the provincial governments which could act on these issues and implement them. This meant that the nature of the programme legislated at the state level and especially the manner of its implementation was a function of the nature of provincial politics, the strength of peasant mobilization, that is, the balance of class forces at the level of the provincial political parties and at the grassroots level, the nature of the administration especially at the lower levels and of course the role of the judiciary.

A dichotomy soon began to emerge between the recommendations made by the central government and what the states and the various administrative apparatuses were willing or able to implement. This occurred particularly when recommendations emanating from the Centre, for example, those made by the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee (Kumarappa Committee) in July 1949 or by the 1959 Nagpur Congress, on many issues went way beyond what was acceptable to the states, the peasantry or the people as a whole. These were issues such as the introduction of a degree of compulsion for promoting cooperative farming and for replacing private trade and moneylending with state or cooperative organizations, implementing land ceilings and so on. Resistance to such programmes occurred in various ways, some overt and others subterranean but equally effective.

It is keeping in mind this tension—the stuff of any democracy—as a backdrop that we shall examine the actual success and failures of the land reform effort in post-independence India—a historically unique effort at transformation of agrarian relations within a democratic framework.