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Whatever Happened To ‘Land Reform’? One Big Question and Four Naive Little Answers

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Abstract

The paper traces Indian policy towards land use and ownership from pre-independence times till today. It notes that ‘land reform’ – an ill-defined term – began to disappear from political platforms and policy agendas from the 1970s and offers, as a heuristic device, four naive explanations. In dealing with each explanation, the paper exposes its inadequacy and analyzes essential features of land questions in India. The paper concludes that by the first decade of the 21st century ‘land’ for various socio-economic groups had become ‘real estate’ – a platform for people to buy, sell and build on, not a place on which to live and grow food.

Naive Little Answer No. 1: ‘Land Reform’ Succeeded

Naive Little Answer No. 2: Demands for ‘Land Reform’ Were Extirpated

Naive Little Answer No. 3: ‘Land Reform’ Was Defused

*Naive Little Answer No. 4: Socio-Economic Forces Made ‘Land Reform’ Obsolete
‘Land Reform Becomes Real Estate: The Developer Ate My Homestead’?*

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‘The single biggest reason for the kind of money visible in rural India is the skyrocketing price of land.’ – *India Today*, 15 February 2010, p. 37.

When I first lived in India in 1967, ‘land reform’ was a topic of conversation as prevalent as the weather or the state of Indian hockey. Today, the weather remains, but ‘land reform’ and Indian hockey have faded away like the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*. If you google ‘land reform in India’ in 2012, you get about 55,000 hits; if you limit the search to the past year, you get about 200. On the other hand, if you google ‘real estate in India’, you get 1,050,000 hits – within the past year alone.

This paper originates from my own puzzlement: ‘Whatever happened to land reform?’

At one level, the question is naive, as some friends have told me. ‘Land reform’ stopped being an issue with the beginning of ‘economic liberalisation’ in 1991, some will say. Others argue that it effectively went off the agenda once the CPI (M) government of West Bengal completed Operation Barga in the 1980s.

Yet India in 2012 still has a ‘land question’. The 2011 census enumerated 69 per cent of the population as living in rural settings, even though only about 15 per cent of gross domestic product now comes from agriculture. Those numbers in themselves suggest a ‘land problem’: 69 per cent of the population generating, and in a sense depending on, only 15 per cent of the annual production of wealth. If we can formulate a convincing answer to the question of ‘What happened to land reform?’, we may learn something about the political and social dynamics of rural India and the degree to which changes that improve people’s lives are possible and what those changes might be.

In 1969, a ‘peasant war’ raged in Vietnam. Eric Wolf published *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*. E.M.S. Namboodiripad’s second stint as Chief Minister of a Communist government in Kerala came to an abrupt end, but left a significant land-reform bill for its successors to pass and implement. Naxalbari and Naxalite had become part of the national vocabulary since 1967, and scholars wrote books with titles that drew on Mao’s strategy in China in the 1930s: *Kerala: Yenan of India*.²

Settling and taxing the land in an orderly, efficient and thorough way had been central to British rule. It was, after all, the foundation of the finances that paid for the Indian empire. ‘Land’ therefore was a challenge and an invitation to the early nationalists. ‘The concept of land reforms was a part and parcel of our freedom struggle,’ a key West Bengal land-reform official, D. Bandyopadhyay, wrote in 2008 as he wrestled with the question that I am trying

² Victor M. Fic, *Kerala: Yenan of India. Rise of Communist Power, 1937-69* (Bombay: Nachiketa, 1970).

to address now.³ In the late 1960s, ‘land reform’ burned as hotly as an issue as it had at any time in the previous 100 years.

It is fairly simple to divide the unfolding of land policy in India after independence into periods.⁴ The first might be called ‘the long 1950s’ from independence to the China war in 1962 when so much of the *azadi* dream seemed to be going wrong. There was a lot of legislation and some notable changes, though none attempting to transfer ‘land to the tiller’.

The second period marks a time when the food shortages of the mid-1960s led governments to turn their attention to agricultural production and to make the ‘green revolution’ happen. Simultaneously, peasant insurgency, driven by local conditions and inspired by the Chinese revolution, led to the oft-quoted remark of Y. B. Chavan that there was a danger that the green revolution could become red. The third period represented a response to those conditions and a reflection of Mrs Indira Gandhi’s ‘socialist’ phase. A meeting of Chief Ministers in 1972, in the glow of the successful Bangladesh War, the 1971 election victory and Naxalite insurgencies, generated a wave of legislation addressing inequity in the countryside. The attempts to end bonded labour during the ‘emergency’ were part of such measures, though they were rarely implemented with persistence.

The fourth period begins in the early 1980s with Mrs Gandhi’s return to power, the rise of a post-freedom struggle middle class, embodied in Rajiv Gandhi, and a growing belief within that class that the ‘socialist experiment’ (or ‘Nehruvian experiment’) had failed. Tentative steps towards deregulating the economy began in the 1980s and accelerated with the financial crisis of 1991 and the new government of P. V. Narasimha Rao (1921-2004). ‘Productivity’, ‘urbanisation’ and ‘land acquisition policy’ supplanted ‘land to the tiller’ as discussion topics in policy-making conclaves.

Periodisation helps to organise facts and locate milestones, but seems to me less useful for getting to the root of my puzzlement: ‘What *happened* to land reform?’ How did its slippery meaning change? What did people at particular moments mean by ‘land reform’? And why did those meanings – and the actions of politicians, policy-makers and cultivators – change? To organise thoughts around a vast topic that has affected all of India across generations, I have tried to reply to the Big Question – ‘What happened to land reform?’ – with Four Naive Little Answers. None of them, of course, is ‘right’, but working through them may provide a

³ D. Bandyopadhyay, ‘Does Land Still Matter?’, *Economic and Political Weekly* [hereafter *EPW*], vol. 43, no. 10 (8 March 2008), p. 37.

⁴ In a recent important essay, R. Vijay suggests three periods that capture the post-independence experience of rural India: land reform, green revolution and industrialisation-urbanisation . R. Vijay, ‘Structural Retrogression and Rise of “New Landlords” in Indian Agriculture: an Empirical Exercise,’ *EPW*, 4 February 2012, p. 37.

pinata to break open, help to tell a story and begin to isolate key events, policies and social changes.⁵

Naive Little Answer No. 1: Land Reform Succeeded

This response is akin to one of the nostrums for wars in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan: ‘Declare Victory and go home’ regardless of what conditions might look like on the ground. Indian state governments from the 1960s produced materials and legislation, that suggested ‘land reform’ was succeeding – had succeeded – in their jurisdictions. What was the record of ‘land reform’ after 1947? In north India, Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar provided a striking contrast to Punjab. UP was a particularly noteworthy example since it produced not only a significant change in agrarian relations but also a body of literature analysing and sometimes celebrating ‘success’.⁶

Big landlords – zamindars – characterised land holding in much of UP and Bihar under the British,⁷ and some of the legendary struggles of the Gandhian Congress had occurred there. If we accept the conventional wisdom, the Congress mobilised substantial tenants, who had benefited from expanding cash crops and a monetised economy, against the British and their landlord allies.⁸ G. B. Pant (1887-1961) and Rafi Ahmed Kidwai (1894-1954), two of the most influential leaders of the post-independence Congress Party, were named as authors of *Agrarian Distress in the United Provinces*, a report commissioned by the UP Provincial Congress Committee in 1931.⁹ The report slammed British governments for accentuating rural distress and criticised zamindars for incidents where they had behaved badly, but it stopped short of discussion, much less advocacy, of land reform or redistribution.¹⁰ The Mass Contacts Committee of the Congress generated the *Agrarian Enquiry Committee Report*, published in 1936. Again, it had to tread carefully to maintain a broad social coalition

⁵ P. C. Joshi, *Land Reforms in India* (Bombay: Allied, 1975), p. 87, suggests another way to think about ‘changes in agrarian structure’: those that happen in response to ‘socio-economic forces’ and those that happen through the intervention of governments.

⁶ Charan Singh, *Land Reforms in UP and the Kulaks* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1986). Paul Brass, *An Indian Political Life: Charan Singh and Congress Politics, 1937-61* (New Delhi: Sage, 2011).

⁷ Peter Reeves, *Landlords and Governments in Uttar Pradesh: a study of their relations until zamindari abolition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991). Stephen Henningham, *Peasant Movements in Colonial India : North Bihar 1917-1942* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1982).

⁸ Peter Reeves, *Landlords and governments in Uttar Pradesh: a study of their relations until zamindari abolition* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991). Gyanendra Pandey, *The ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, 1926-34 : a study in imperfect mobilization* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978).

⁹ *Agrarian Distress in the United Provinces, Being the Report of the Committee appointed by the Council of the U.P. Provincial Congress Committee to enquire into the Agrarian Situation in the Province* (New Delhi: Prabhu Publications, 1982; First published 1931). I am indebted to Maxine Loynd of the Australian National University for help with the discussion of UP.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

opposed to the British government and capable of neutralising possible Indian adversaries.¹¹ Rajendra Prasad (1884-1963), member of the Mass Contacts Committee and later President of India, explained the requirements: ‘The Congress is not a class organisation...the ideal of national independence is spacious enough for all...’¹²

After 1947, Congress governments had the delicate task of balancing the expectations of substantial tenants against the existing power and connections of the old landlord classes. The outcome in UP brought more fundamental change than in Bihar. The ‘land reforms’ in UP, for which Charan Singh (1902-87) took credit, broke up many of the old estates. Some of the landlord families lacked the skills and connections in law and administration to match the new rulers.¹³ In UP, wealthy tenants became substantial landowners; but the actual tillers of the soil – landless labourers – found no change to their position. That position may have worsened in that the people they worked for were more secure now than ever before and more confident in their position than they had ever been; there was no possibility of appealing over them to the *noblesse oblige* of an old aristocracy.

The Uttar Pradesh Zamindari Abolition Act of 1952 and the Imposition of Ceiling on Land Holdings Act of 1960 pruned the old landlord class, though many families were able to preserve wealth and land through various stratagems. But large numbers of substantial tenant-farmer families became outright owners and employers of landless agricultural workers. In *Land Reforms in UP and the Kulaks*, Charan Singh presented himself as a key driver of the legislation enacted by the governments of Sampurnanand (1891-1969) (but always, one suspects, with G. B. Pant looking down from the Home Ministry in New Delhi).¹⁴ ‘Landlords,’ Charan Singh wrote, ‘performed no economic functions...and rendered no service in return for the rent they received and were...parasites...and thus contributed to lowering of the national character.’ In the sense that such landlords were dispossessed to the satisfaction of Charan Singh – a lawyer from a Jat peasant family – and his followers, ‘land reform’ in Uttar Pradesh could be declared accomplished. However, if land reform meant a wider distribution of holdings, little had happened. National Sample Survey data showed the bottom 40 per cent of rural households in UP holding 2.5 per cent of land in 1954 and 2.9 per cent in 1982.¹⁵

¹¹ D. A. Low, ‘Congress and Mass Contacts 1936-1937’, in Low, *Rearguard Action: Selected Essays on Late Colonial History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 141.

¹² Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 150.

¹³ Brass on Charan Singh.

¹⁴ Charan Singh, *Land Reforms in UP and the Kulaks* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1986), p. v. I am grateful to Maxine Loynd for this and other UP references.

¹⁵ H. R. Sharma, ‘Distribution of Landholdings in Rural India, 1953-54 to 1981-82: Implications for Land Reforms,’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24 September 1994, Table 3, p. A-120.

In Bihar, similar public enthusiasm for land reform in the 1950s produced legislation that gave an appearance of commitment to agrarian change. The Bihar Land Reforms (Fixation of Ceiling Areas of Acquisition of Surplus Land) Act of 1961 was typical of the period, but its long parentheses suggested the legal tangles and political obstacles that stood in the way of wide and deep changes in land ownership. When the Communist Party of India held its 21st Congress in Patna in March 2012, it concluded that Bihar governments had ‘scrapped the previous land reform legislations’ and that ‘landlords are committing atrocities on the rural poor’.¹⁶ A Land Reforms Commission, which reported in 2008, found 75 per cent of the rural population was landless or ‘near landless’.¹⁷

The states of Punjab and Haryana presented a contrast and perhaps the closest thing to comprehensive land reform that post-1947 India experienced. Indian Punjab had a land reform imposed on it by the partition. The incoming refugees from Pakistan had left 6.7 million acres in West Punjab. The Muslim refugees driven from East Punjab abandoned only 4.7 million acres.

How to resettle so many people on substantially less land? A carefully calibrated solution imposed a class-based level. Great landlords of West Punjab might have had their holdings reduced by 95 per cent, but they were allowed to remain larger than anyone else; someone with four hectares in the West got three in the East; someone with 60 hectares in the old place might have got six hectares in the new. At the same time, the post-partition upheaval allowed plots to be consolidated; land was precious and thereby conserved; such consolidation laid the foundations for increased productivity. The Punjab ‘land reform’ was unintended, but it was as profound and as acceptable as any in India.¹⁸ And of course it did not mean ‘land to the tiller’ nor did it give land to the previously landless.

Definition, of course, is crucial. If ‘land reform’ means adjustment in patterns of ownership, India of the 1950s nibbled round the edges. Enough legislation, bearing the right sorts of titles, was passed in most of the states to give an impression that change was in the wind. However, as the UP and Bihar examples suggest, the large majority of rural people living on the land did not acquire land or rights to land. Whatever happened to land reform was *not* that it succeeded and everyone, having got a prize, went home happy.

¹⁶ <http://cpixxicongress.blogspot.com/#!/2012/03/resolution-on-land-reform-in-bihar.html> (downloaded 6 April 2012).

¹⁷ *Mainstream*, 1 August 2009, <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article1547.html> (downloaded 6 April 2012). The account published by *Mainstream* was extracted from ‘ML Update, a CPI-ML (Liberation) weekly news magazine.’

¹⁸ M. S. Randhawa, *Out of the Ashes* (Chandigarh: Public Relations Department, Punjab, 1954), p. 97.

Naive Little Answer No. 2: Demands for Land Reform Were Extirpated

Could demands for land reform have simply been crushed by the forces of the state, their advocates jailed or killed and their supporters cowed into submission?

Independent India in its early years dealt sternly with two insurgencies founded on peasant grievance and resistance – the *tebhaga* movement in West Bengal and the Telengana movement in the old princely state of Hyderabad. The *tebhaga* movement grew out of share-cropper demands for two-thirds of the harvest from the land they cultivated. ‘The movement failed,’ wrote D. Bandyopadhyay, a Land Reforms Commissioner of West Bengal (and in 2012 a Trinamool member of the Rajya Sabha), ‘after tremendous sacrifices by sharecroppers and their allies, the landless labourers and petty artisans.’¹⁹ When the Naxalbari movement erupted in West Bengal in 1967, based in part on poor-peasant outrage at the inequity of land relationships, the Indian state crushed it in five years.

A similar timeline might be discerned in Telengana and Andhra Pradesh. The Communist Party of India (CPI) found a safe haven in Telengana during and after the Second World War and leading up to independence. The government of the Nizam of Hyderabad, never particularly rigorous or effective, was losing both legitimacy and control, and the British, themselves about to decamp from India, were in no position to interfere in the domain of their longtime friend and ally, His Exalted Highness, the Nizam. By 1947, when the Nizam attempted to declare himself a sovereign ruler, areas of Telengana were being run as ‘soviets’ or ‘liberated areas’ where the CPI called the shots and rough-and-ready local land reforms were undertaken. The Indian army was sent to Hyderabad in September 1948, within days of the death of Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876-1948) in Pakistan. As well as overthrowing the Nizam, the army suppressed the Telengana revolt over the next two years. In 1951, the CPI dropped its ideological support for peasant insurgency when it abandoned the so-called Ranadive Line, which had called for Communist revolt because India was ripe for revolution.

As in West Bengal, agrarian discontent remained. A ‘Naxalite movement’ bobbed up in districts like Srikakulam in the late 1960s, and, as in West Bengal, police and para-military units suppressed these attempts to effect agrarian change through violence. Naxalite or ‘Maoist’ supporters retreated to the dry, underdeveloped Telengana districts and built bases that troubled landowners and distracted state governments until largely suppressed in the first years of the 21st century. Leaving Telengana, Maoist ideologues found refuge and followings, not in the agricultural plains of India, but in the hills and forests of the east among tribal people under pressure from mining, logging and dam-building.

¹⁹ D. Bandyopadhyay, ‘Tebhaga Movement in Bengal: a Retrospect,’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, 13 October 2001, p. 3901.

Peasant-based insurgencies, led by people deriving inspiration from Marx, Lenin and Mao, never vanished. They emerged in eastern India – Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh – through the 1980s and gathered support, under growing pressure from the extractive industries of a liberalised economy, in the 21st century. By 2006, the insurgency led by the Communist Party of India (Maoist) was often identified as the most serious threat faced by the Indian state. Control, ownership and use of land were at the heart of the insurgency. State governments replied in some cases with brutal and clumsy suppression, but rarely with effective measures to change patterns of rural power. The central government attempted to put into operation legislation like the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) of 1996. PESA was a well-intentioned attempt of the Union government to give local governments at the level of villages, rights to decide on land use and development. The act depended, however, on state governments for its implementation, and state governments were often cool to the point of refrigeration.

The Indian state and its components lurched between amelioration and suppression, and the Communist Party of India (Maoist) continued to lead a bloody resistance, ambushing armed police (more than 70 killed in a single trap in April 2010) and having their own leaders killed by the police or vigilantes (Azad in July 2010; Kishenji in 2011).²⁰ The grassroots support of the ‘Maoist insurgency’ was based on grievance and fear about the control and use of land.

Ideas about ‘land reform’ had not therefore been exterminated – driven underground and made unmentionable like religion in Soviet Russia. Ideas about what land reform would look like were canvassed in legislatures, proposed by inquiry commissions, published in newspapers and discussed by insurgents in jungle camps. Issues of ‘land reform’ flowed like hot lava just beneath the surface in many of India’s states. They erupted occasionally like little volcanoes, and revolutionaries inspired by Mao pondered about how to produce a Krakatoa.

Naive Little Answer No. 3: Land Reform Was Defused and Dismantled

Could Congress governments, which had often confronted the British over questions of agrarian justice, totally abandon a cause that had been part of their rhetoric for more than 30 years? The Congress could not. But as the UP and Bihar examples showed, what constituted ‘land reform’ for the Congress after 1947 was a far cry from the slogan of ‘land to the tiller’. The sorts of ‘land reform’ carried out in UP and Bihar installed a broad base of wealthier peasants across a swathe of north India, and in the 1950s, they were expected to support, and

²⁰ See the introduction to *More than Maoism*, eds. Robin Jeffrey, Ronojoy Sen and Pratima Singh (New Delhi: Manohar for the Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore, 2012).

be part of, the Congress Party. If you were such a peasant, you might have endorsed Naive Little Answer No. 1: Land reform had succeeded.

However, it was in Kerala, and perhaps West Bengal, that land reform as an issue may be seen to have been ‘defused’ in a particularly obvious and distinctive way. Communist parties did it, and in some ways, blunted the class-consciousness that had been their strength from the 1940s.

The most ambitious attempt at comprehensive land reform in the 1950s was Kerala’s abortive Agrarian Relations Bill of 1957, which (along with challenges to Christian and caste-Hindu educational institutions) led to the dismissal of the Communist government and the declaration of President’s Rule in 1959. The agrarian legislation would have turned tenants, particularly in northern Kerala (the old Malabar District of the British-ruled Madras Presidency) into owners of the land they tenanted and all agricultural labourers into owners of the land on which their huts stood. After the dismissal of the Kerala government, the Congress-led coalition elected in 1960 followed an all-India pattern by enacting a weakened version of the Communist bill and then doing little to implement it. Landed supporters of the Congress smiled in 1963 when the Kerala High Court declared the Act unconstitutional.²¹

The legislative and legal contests of 1957-63 gave landowners warning of what might be coming. ‘Hectic sales and transfers occurred,’²² and by the time a Communist-led coalition government came to power in Kerala in 1967, many landholders had taken precautions to protect their assets and positions. Nevertheless, in the next two years, the CPI (M)-led coalition and then its successor, led by the CPI and the resourceful Chief Minister, C. Achutha Menon (1913-91), carried through the Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act of 1969, which gave large numbers of people ownership of land. Tenants were transformed into landowners, but more importantly, landless labourers were given ownership of one-tenth of an acre of land on which their huts stood. This device – bestowing ownership rights on a tiny occupied house and small plot around it – became a favoured nostrum of other state governments thereafter. The West Bengal reforms that began in 1978 adopted it, and the Land Reform Commission in Bihar, which reported in 2008, recommended it.

In West Bengal, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) government elected in 1977, pursued Operation Barga to record share-croppers and to ensure that they received fair treatment. The programme followed the Kerala model and granted ownership of huts and 0.8 of an acre around a hut to agricultural labourers, who previously had been landless and without any entitlement. Left-wing critics asked why a Communist government should try to

²¹ Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being* [hereafter *PWWB*] (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 173-4.

²² *Land Reforms Survey in Kerala, 1966-67: report* (Trivandrum: Bureau of Economics and Statistics, 1968), p. 95

renovate what looked like a ‘feudal’ system of land control. Biplab Dasgupta, an intellectual leader of the CPI (M), replied that grinding poverty did not necessarily produce revolution and that the CPI (M) lived in a world of real politics in which *bargadars* were ‘a significant proportion of the rural population’.²³ In the mid-1980s, Atul Kohli noted that ‘concrete achievements have been made’ and that ‘programmes for sharecroppers are especially noteworthy’.²⁴ A large section of rural people in West Bengal were receiving tangible benefits.

Neither Kerala nor West Bengal became places of agrarian equality. In 1977, as a decade of agrarian legislation and dispute subsided in Kerala, 96 per cent of all landholders cultivated less than two hectares; they accounted for only two-thirds of cultivated land. The other one-third of cultivated land was controlled by four per cent of landholders.²⁵ Complete landlessness in Kerala, however, largely disappeared. In West Bengal, *bargadars* and small landholders appear to have stayed loyal in their support for the Communist Party of India (Marxist) party for more than 30 years until the state elections of 2011.

The political influence of rural landowners, even though they were far from being a majority of the rural population in any state, was too tough in most states to tangle with successfully. Legislation got challenged in the highest courts, which were often sympathetic to owners. Even when legislation was enacted and validated, governments could choose simply to ignore it and not implement it, as Dasgupta argued Congress governments had done in West Bengal in the 1970s. ‘It is not easy to explain the dual character of the (Congress) regime of the period,’ he mused. ‘What motivated them to pass these progressive laws? And why, despite the passing of these laws, was their implementation blocked?’²⁶ It was perhaps, he concluded, to enable Congress to play a double game: to claim to be the friend of the poor while protecting the class interests that were the essence of the party. In short, to defuse demand for agrarian change.

One can interpret these ‘land reforms’ as examples of such defusing. In turning tens of thousands of landless households into tiny landowners, Kerala had, in the words of an old peasant leader, turned ‘slaves into owners’. He called his autobiography *Atimakal Enngane Utamakal Aayi* – How slaves became owners.²⁷ By the 1980s, more than 90 per cent of rural labouring households owned the sites of their dwellings.²⁸ Scholars and politicians debated

²³ Biplab Dasgupta, ‘Sharecropping in West Bengal. From Independence to Operation Barga,’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, Review of Agriculture, June 1984, p. A-90.

²⁴ Atul Kohli, *The State and Politics in India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 143.

²⁵ Jeffrey, *PWWB*, p. 175.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. A-86.

²⁷ V. M. Vishnu Bharatheeyan, *Atimakal Enngane Utamakal Aayi* (Trivandrum: Prabath Book House, 1980).

²⁸ *Report of the Survey on Socio-Economic Conditions of Agricultural and Other Rural Labourers in Kerala, 1983-4* (Trivandrum: Bureau of Economics and Statistics, 1985), p. 13.

whether the acquisition of ownership rights had turned potential supporters of radical political change into very-petty *bourgeois* whose political loyalties were far less radical and predictable.²⁹

There was another facet to arguments about defusing demands for land reform. It relates to the campaigns of Vinoba Bhave (1895-1982), a follower of Mahatma Gandhi who acquired a following in the 1950s and 1960s by walking the countryside appealing to landowners to surrender land to the landless. Bhave's claims to be carrying on a Gandhian tradition of appeals to the better instincts of humanity secured perhaps four million acres of not-very-good land and put him on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1953.³⁰ The Bhave phenomenon can be seen as a diversion which directed energy and attention into efforts that had little effect on patterns of landholding, security of the landless or the productivity of land. But in absorbing the time of officials and the fascination of journalists, Bhave's campaigns suited those who had no wish to see repetition in other states of the bitter class conflict generated by the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill of 1957.

Naive Little Answer No. 4: Socio-Economic Forces Made Land Reform Obsolete

A fourth category of answers to the Big Question comes from what I might innocently call 'an economist's perspective'. A key measurement would be the declining share of agriculture in India's gross domestic product. Agriculture made up 50 per cent of GDP in 1960. The countryside was where the action was – where voters lived and where most wealth came from. No politician or official could ignore such facts. By 2010, agriculture's share had fallen to less than 15 per cent of GDP (Table 1). Though 69 per cent of people still lived in the countryside, the major sources of wealth had shifted elsewhere.

²⁹ Jeffrey, *PWWB*, p. pp. 183-4.

³⁰ *Time*, 11 May 1953, http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://img.timeinc.net/time/magazine/archive/covers/1953/1101530511_400.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.tim.com/time/covers/0,16641,19530511,00.html&h=527&w=400&sz=45&tbnid=KiwkSsrgAl_GGM:&tbnh=90&tbnw=68&zoom=1&docid=0XG4PP0TbHf5KM&sa=X&ei=OpptT5rKOM2HrAeGr7igDg&ved=0CFQQ9QEwBg&dur=94 (downloaded 24 March 2012). <http://www.mkgandhi.org/vinoba/bio.htm> (downloaded 6 April 2012).

Table 1: Share of GDP, 1950-2010

Year	Agriculture	Industry	Services
1950-1	55.8	15.2	29.0
1960-1	45.8	20.7	33.5
1970-1	45.2	21.9	32.9
1980-1	38.1	25.9	36.0
1990-1	31.0	29.3	39.7
2000-01	25.8	23.8	50.4
2008-09	20.0	26.3	53.7
2010-11	14.4	n.a.	n.a.

Sources: *Statistical Outline of India, 1999-2000* [hereafter *SOI*] (Mumbai: Tata Services, 1999), p. 15 and *SOI, 2008-09*, p. 14. CA Club India, 11 December 2011, <http://www.caclubindia.com/forum/share-of-agriculture-sector-in-gdp-179511.asp>, quoting Central Statistics Office (downloaded 25 March 2012).

Government investment in public infrastructure for agriculture shifted from the 1990s. A rough indicator lies in the record of land irrigated by public resources. It reached a modest 17 million hectares in 1991, but had fallen to 15.3 million hectares by 2006. In the same period, land irrigated by private tube wells doubled from 17.7 million hectares to 35.4 million hectares.³¹

Prosperous landowners deepened and diversified their links to town and cities and to relatives and connections in politics, the police and administration. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the discrediting of ‘socialism’ and socialist parties in the West contributed to a decline in class-based rhetoric in Indian politics. Caste and religion, always factors in Indian elections, assumed great influence in the late 1980s, illustrated in part by the intense emotions generated by the Mandal Commission and the implementation of some of its recommendations.

It had not always been this way. In Kerala in the 1950s and 1960s, and West Bengal from the 1970s, landless and land-poor people had to be taken note of because they consistently voted for Communist and Left parties that advocated land reform. Similarly, the Congress Party until the end of the ‘emergency’ in 1977 supported a ‘left wing’, including ex-Communists like Mohan Kumaramangalam (1916-73), who kept the rhetoric of land reform in the party’s platform. Until the 1970s, too, there were ‘socialist’ parties drawing on the inspiration of people like the UP politician Narendra Dev (1889-1956), Ram Manohar Lohia (1910-67) and Jayaprakash Narayan (1902-79). The leaders of such parties were close to rural issues. They were reinforced in their beliefs about redistributive justice by the vitality of Western socialist parties and the existence of a Soviet bloc that in their eyes retained some virtue and achievements. Dev died in 1956, Lohia in 1967 and Jayaprakash in 1979, each death

³¹ *SOI, 2008-09*, p. 49.

sounding a gong that signalled the progressive dilution of redistribution as an important component of Indian political argument.

‘Agricultural’ voices, never mind voices advocating land reform, had not been particularly strong among the elites of Jawaharlal Nehru’s India. Under Nehru, the Rudolphs concluded in 1987, ‘agricultural interests and values were poorly represented in New Delhi’. They argued that from Lal Bahadur Shastri’s prime ministership (1964-6), ‘agricultural producers have become increasingly visible and audible in national policy and politics’.³² But these producers were, at the very least ‘rich peasants’, beneficiaries of Green Revolution incentives. Many were on the way to becoming ‘farmers’ – people who sold what they grew and were keenly aware of markets and the politics that affect markets. If conditions were right, such people would be interested in ways to acquire land, not redistribute it.

The growth of advocacy for rural capitalism from the 1960s, and the coming of the ‘green revolution’, led to the expansion of markets for land – to ‘land reform’ being replaced by ‘real estate’ as a discussion topic for Indian political elites. We get some sense of this shift from examination of the development of real-estate advertisements in Indian-language newspapers. It was only in 1992 that *Eenadu*, the king of Telugu dailies, launched a concerted programme to transform Telugu readers into ‘real estate’ advertisers. ‘We had absolutely nothing,’ an *Eenadu* executive said in 1993. ‘Zero real estate ads. Then we...started off an ad campaign...and a real estate page.’ Within a year, they had generated enough real-estate advertising to make it worthwhile to create ‘an entire new segment’ – a weekly supplement devoted to real estate.³³ By 2012, daily newspapers in all languages carried weekly real estate supplements that made hefty contributions to a newspaper’s advertising revenue. Twenty years earlier, there had been almost nothing from this source.

Such evidence indicates that substantial change flowed from the ‘liberalisation’ of the economy that began in 1991. Comparisons of the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980-5) and the Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2007-12) illustrate the change. The Sixth Plan, drafted after Indira Gandhi returned to power in 1980 and with Manmohan Singh as the Member-Secretary, aimed to implement land reform policies, including enforcement of ceilings, ‘on a time-bound basis’. States that lacked appropriate legislation were to do so by 1982; acquisition of land that exceeded the ceilings was to be completed by 1983; land records were to be compiled and updated by 1985; consolidation of holdings was to be completed within 10 years; and house sites for the landless – Kerala-1970 style – were to be provided within five

³² Lloyd I. and Susanne H. Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi. The Political Economy of the Indian State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 312.

³³ Interview, Piush Bahl, Assistant Manager (Advertising), *Eenadu*, Hyderabad, 1 March 1993.

years.³⁴ By 1986, 'these tasks still remain unachieved', as Bandyopadhyay, tireless recorder of land-reform events, wrote.³⁵ The statements of the Sixth Plan did not accord with either the political pressures as understood by Indira Gandhi or her son and successor, Rajiv Gandhi.

The perceived popularity of 'land reform' as a rallying cry seems to have begun a long slow death about the same time as the deaths of two populists, Sanjay Gandhi in 1981 and Indira Gandhi in 1984. Indeed, Indira Gandhi herself had begun to move away from the 'socialism' espoused in the 1970s when 1982 was declared 'productivity year'. By the time the 11th Five-Year Plan (2007-12) was produced in 2007 little more than lip-service was paid to 'land reform':

The poor are geographically concentrated in India...without effective (i) land reforms and (ii) agricultural services, none of these regions are likely to be able to reduce poverty.³⁶

Land reform, moreover, was portrayed as a way to increase productivity:

Small-sized farms...have an advantage in using surplus family labour and saving monitoring costs, and this is the main argument for land reforms.³⁷

And jostling with 'land reform' for a place in the mind of the planners and the Plan were the growing pressures of 'real estate':

We have to evolve a National Land Policy which will allow both public and private developers to legally purchase land for conversion into urban habitats and townships through transparent rules and regulations. Inadequate availability of serviced land in the urban areas is a major constraining factor in taking up housing projects for the poor.

From a focus in the early 1980s that still took as a starting point a vision of a Village India, the planners, representing an influential section of elite India, visualised a future India that by 2007 was proudly urban.

Yet the drift to the towns and cities was not dramatic in percentage terms. Absolute numbers were immense by world standards: An additional 90 million Indians moved from the country to the city between 2001 and 2011 (Table 2). But still only 31 per cent of India was urban,

³⁴ *Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-5)*, para 9.100, <http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/6th/6planch9.html> (downloaded 25 March 2012).

³⁵ D Bandyopadhyay, 'Land Reforms in India: An Analysis,' *EPW*, Review of Agriculture, 21-28 June 1986, p. A-50.

³⁶ *Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-2012)*, vol. 3, *Agriculture, Rural Development, Industry, Services and Physical Infrastructure* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press for the Planning Commission, 2008), p. 85.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

and the annual urban growth rate averaged about 2.5 per cent for 30 years, only slightly greater than the overall rate of population growth. India was not yet a country of deserted villages. One cannot, therefore, argue that widespread migration from the countryside accounts for the diminution of interest in land reform in politics or in social movements.

Table 2: Urban Growth, 1951-2011

<i>Census Year</i>	<i>Urban %</i>	<i>Number Urban (millions)</i>	<i>Number of urbanites added in the decade</i>	<i>Decadal % of urban growth</i>
1951	17.3	62.4		
1961	18.0	78.9	16.5	21
1971	19.9	109.1	30.2	28
1981	23.3	156.2	47.1	30
1991	25.7	217.6	61.4	28
2001	27.8	286.1	68.5	24
2011	31.2	377.1	91.0	24

Sources: *SOI* and Census of India, http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data_files/india/paper2_at_a_glance.pdf (downloaded 25 March 2011)

R. Vijay in an impressive recent essay presents data that suggests that ‘non-cultivating peasant households...witnessed a phenomenal increase from 23.7 per cent (of rural households) in 1981 to 40.3 per cent by 2002’.³⁸ These figures masked various possibilities, but one of them was a growth of tenancy: landowners choosing not to cultivate land themselves but putting it out to others – even though tenancy was, as a result of earlier land reform laws, illegal in many states. Vijay’s findings, based on National Sample Survey data, also showed little change since 1981 in the proportion of landless labourer families which remained at about 11 per cent of rural households. Vijay’s conclusions were sombre. The landless still needed access to land; they got it through (often illegal) leases from non-cultivating peasant households which had little interest in improving productivity once they had a guaranteed rent. If this analysis were correct, Vijay concluded, ‘a different approach to dealing with the agrarian crisis’ was needed – ‘either going back to land reform kind of measures’ or finding ways to displace non-cultivating peasant households ‘through market interventions like corporate farming’.³⁹

³⁸ Vijay, ‘Structural Retrogression’, p. 40.

³⁹ Ibid., p.45.

Land Reform Becomes Real Estate: ‘The Developer Ate My Homestead’?

The zeitgeist of the 1980s was marked by the despair of elites at the chaotic dissolution of the Janata Party government and the return to power of a shrewd, self-serving Mrs Gandhi. Rajiv Gandhi, an outward-looking airline pilot, aware of middle-class frustration, represented the first generation of adult Indians with no memory of the national struggle and British rule. Internationally, Margaret Thatcher rolled back ‘socialism’ and Ronald Reagan reduced regulation of financial institutions, airlines and telecommunications. India’s ‘year of productivity’ and the arrival of widespread colour television for the Asian Games in 1982, signalled that Mrs Gandhi too was leaving ‘socialism’ behind. Rajiv Gandhi ‘brought with him’, according to the author of *Moguls of Real Estate*, ‘an entirely new perspective for the economic development of the country’ and was convinced by K. P. Singh of DLF, one of India’s largest property developers, that ‘archaic laws that came in the way of private sector townships needed to be scrapped’.⁴⁰

‘The real estate industry is at the core of India’s growth story,’ runs the first sentence of *Moguls of Real Estate*, published in 2007 to celebrate five leaders of the industry. ‘The sector is booming with huge unmet demands, accelerating prices and increasing foreign investments. Growth, expansion, buy-outs and deals are the buzzwords.’⁴¹ To be sure, the words are part of the Foreword, written by someone from the ‘India Real Estate Practice’ at Ernst and Young. And they were written just before the financial crisis of 2008 began. Nevertheless they portray a very different spirit from that embodied in titles like Daniel Thorner’s *Agrarian Prospect in India* or P. C. Joshi’s *Land Reforms in India* two generations earlier.⁴²

A further marker of changing concepts about land and its uses was a conference in 2003 while the BJP-led government of A. B. Vajpayee was in power. Held in Seattle, Washington, ‘Reforms in Land Policy for Accelerated Agricultural Growth and Rural Development’ was a collaboration of two departments of the Government of India and the University of Washington.⁴³ The chief bureaucrat of the Department of Rural Development opened the conference with a statement that would have seemed glaringly inappropriate 30 years earlier. ‘In the past,’ he said, ‘we have achieved very limited success in land reforms and poverty alleviation.’ Emphasis ought therefore to shift to ‘new reform approaches such as contract farming, land leasing and home-stead-cum-garden plots’. His opposite number from the

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 26.

⁴¹ Manoj Namburu, *Moguls of Real Estate* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2007), p. ix.

⁴² Daniel Thorner Daniel, *Agrarian Prospect in India* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1976) and P. C. Joshi, *Land Reforms in India: trends and perspectives* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1975).

⁴³ The Government of India’s Department of Agriculture and Cooperation and Department of Rural Development, and the Rural Development Institute at the University of Washington.

Department of Agriculture 'highlighted the need for a paradigm shift from subsistence farming to market-oriented commercial agriculture'.⁴⁴

Senior officials from a number of states echoed the need for change, including a new attitude to leasing and tenancy. Representatives from Andhra Pradesh told the conference that the ban on leasing out of agricultural land was probably relevant in the period immediately after independence when there was a demand and need for abolition of intermediaries/ zamindari. But in the present context, it was essential to liberalise land leasing in order to enable the large farmers to lease out land and take up non-farm activities, while allowing the marginal and small farmers to lease in land and improve their size of holding.⁴⁵

From when do we date, and how do we explain, these changes in elite conceptions of what 'land' ought to be doing? As the halting discussion up to here may have indicated, I would suggest that change begins to become evident from the 1980s. In 1981, DLF, which by 2012 was India's largest real estate company, 'was given permission...to undertake a residential development...in Gurgaon' where DLF had 'managed to acquire 150 acres of land...from farmers'.⁴⁶ The Ansals started their development of gated communities at Gurgaon a few years later.⁴⁷ Another of the 'Moguls', Niranjan Hiranandani of Mumbai, also got out of the textile business and into real estate in Mumbai in 1980-1, and Irfan Razack, 'Bangalore's leading developer, sold his first piece of property in 1980'.⁴⁸

At the 2003 conference in Seattle, the highest ranking official in the Department of Agriculture argued that 'very limited success in land reforms' in close to 60 years of independence dictated that 'new reform approaches...should be properly examined and exploited'.⁴⁹ 'New reform approaches' included

- contract farming
- land leasing
- land share company in agriculture
- allotment of homestead-cum-garden plots

⁴⁴ T. Haque, 'Reforms for Agricultural Growth and Rural Development,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29 November 2003, p. 5031.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 5032.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 24, 26.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 151.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 69-70, 213.

⁴⁹ Haque, 'Reforms', p. 5031.

Vijay's 2012 essay echoed one of these possibilities: 'market interventions like corporate farming' seemed one way out of rural distress. (This essay has not attempted to analyse the extent of such distress or one of its markers, rural suicide).⁵⁰

Contract farming would involve cultivators in agreeing to plant particular crops, achieve a satisfactory crop quality and sell crops at a pre-agreed price to the company with whom they had made the deal. The advantages to the cultivator were said to be improved seeds and technology and guaranteed sale; the country would benefit from reduced spoilage and efficient movement of crops to markets. *Land leasing* proposed a retreat from one of the tenets of 'land reform' as understood in the past. Laws would be changed to allow agriculturalists to lease out land or lease it in. The idea, of course, was that knowledgeable cultivators would make the most sensible deal for themselves and their land, depending on market prices and their personal needs.

The *land-share company* had echoes of the old cooperative: farmers would become shareholders in a company, run on modern business lines, which would pay dividends, based on harvests and prices, in proportion to the land farmers had committed. The *homestead-cum-garden plots proposal* was the old Kerala programme, repeated in West Bengal, of granting every hut dweller ownership rights to their hut and a tiny plot around it.⁵¹ This measure seemed to bring increased independence and confidence to the poorest people in the countryside; but even it was not easy. The Bihar government of Nitish Kumar received a report of its Land Reforms Commission in April 2008 which recommended the homestead initiative. Four years later the report appears to have been buried.⁵²

'Reverse tenancy' has also become a common practice. Capital-rich interests, either individual farmers or agricultural businesses, rent land from marginal holders and put the owners back to work to grow a particular crop on their own land.⁵³ Montek Singh Ahluwalia alluded to this shift nearly 20 years ago when he pointed out that 'the rights of the tenant may need redesigning in a situation where the landlord is actually the weaker party'.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ See, for example, P. Sainath in the *Hindu*, 29 October 2011, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/columns/sainath/article2577635.ece> (downloaded 9 April 2012) and the accompanying table of rural suicide 1995-2010.

⁵¹ Haque, 'Reforms', pp. 5032-3.

⁵² *Mainstream*, 1 August 2009.

⁵³ N. C. Saxena, 'Land for landed,' *Frontline*, 21 October 2011, p. 21, for discussion of 'reverse tenancy' in the Approach Paper to the 12th Five Year Plan.

⁵⁴ Paraphrased in G. Parthasarathy, 'The New Economic Policy, Rural Development and Land Reform', in B. K. Sinha and Pushpendra (eds), *Land Reforms in India*, vol. 5, *An Unfinished Agenda* (New Delhi: Sage, 2000), p. 66.

Transition from agricultural societies to urban, industrial life has been painful in every country for 300 years. In 1770, Oliver Goldsmith lamented in 'The Deserted Village', the destruction of the English peasantry and the drive to the cities, which then was only beginning:

If to the city sped – what waits him there?
To see profusion that he must not share;
To see ten thousand baneful arts combined
To pamper luxury and thin mankind;
To see each joy the sons of pleasure know
Extorted from his fellow-creature's woe.

One of the 'Moguls of Indian real estate' could count himself fortunate to have come from a family that anticipated rural agony. The grandfather of Sushil Ansal of the property developers Ansal API, noted for its 'ability to "see and seize" opportunities in the real estate field', had been 'a sugarcane farmer' of Jalandhar.⁵⁵

In the past 30 years, land in India has steadily become as important for what you *put* on it as what you *grow* on it. Legislative energies have gone into drafting bills to facilitate the acquisition of land for 'development' and to mitigate the disadvantage and distress of rural people whose land is acquired.⁵⁶ Confrontation between agriculturalists and developers, with governments taking sides, erupted in West Bengal over the car factory planned by Tata at Singur (and moved to Gujarat in 2008) and at NOIDA (New Okhla Industrial Development Authority) on the eastern borders of New Delhi in the state of Uttar Pradesh in 2011.⁵⁷ The NOIDA dispute highlighted the difficulties, pressures and temptations. It appeared that the land in question was originally acquired by the state government for 'industrial purposes' but later reclassified for residential use and sold at great profit to developers. The original owners received a fraction of what the 'open market' now deemed the land to be worth.⁵⁸ Such collisions were not unique to India, but they were made even more difficult by widespread lack of trust. Harrowing stories of tribal people displaced by the Sardar Sarovar and other dam projects were well known. Promises of 'rehabilitation and resettlement' were often scoffed at. Moreover, India's transition from a system in which well defined 'markets' for land were rare to one in which 'market value' was made a key feature of mechanisms for

⁵⁵ Namburu, *Moguls*, pp. 127-8, 133.

⁵⁶ For example, Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996, Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 and Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (LARR) Bill, 2011. Sanjoy Chakravorty, 'A Lot of Scepticism and Some Hope', *EPW*, 8 October 2011, pp. 29-31, for a discussion of the LARR bill.

⁵⁷ *India Today*, 11 May 2011, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/land-acquisition-stir-rahul-gandhi-meets-farmers-in-greater-noida/1/137749.html> (downloaded 11 April 2012).

⁵⁸ *Frontline*, 17 June 2011, pp. 4-11.

protecting land-losers was, most scholars agreed, unprecedented.⁵⁹ Understanding and influencing such change poses a worthy and urgent challenge to activists, scholars, politicians and policy-makers.

Appendix – The Beginnings of a List of Legislation related to Land

Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885
Land Acquisition Act of 1894
U.P. Zamindari Abolition Act of 1952
West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act, 1953
West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955
Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill, 1957
U. P. Imposition of Ceiling on Land Holdings Act, 1960
Bihar Land Reforms (Fixation of Ceiling Areas of Acquisition of Surplus Land) Act, 1961
Kerala Land Reforms Act, 1963.
Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1969
Gujarat Agriculture Lands Ceiling Act, 1972
Haryana Ceiling on Land Holding Act, 1972
Himachal Pradesh Ceiling of Land Holding Act, 1972
Jammu and Kashmir Agrarian Reforms Act, 1972
Punjab Land Reforms Act, 1972
Rajasthan Imposition of Ceiling on Holding Act, 1973
Forest Conservation Act, 1980
Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996
Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006
Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Bill, 2011

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⁵⁹ Ashwin Mahalingham and Aditi Vyas, 'Comparative Evaluation of Land Acquisition and Compensation Processes across the World', *EPW*, 6 August 2011, pp. 94-102.