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LAND REFORM



India – A Teacher’s Guide – LAND REFORM

We’ve seen a bit about the history of India, now let’s take a closer look at some of the cultural factors that have created the current situation of mass poverty (836 million people are forced to exist on just 50 cents per day) in India.

Caste System:

The ‘caste’ system is not unique to India, though it is usually associated with Indian culture. It has existed for more than 3000 years and basically means the structure of social organisation through birth. People are born into one of 4 ‘castes’, or classes. This organisation of society meant everybody knew their place, but it also meant that people were confined to live and marry within their own caste, and there was no possibility of social mobility. The ‘caste’ system is usually associated with Hinduism, though it has been observed by some people of other religions in India too, including Muslims and Christians.

There are 4 ‘castes’ (otherwise known as ‘varnas’). They are:

- Brahmins (priests)
- Kshatriya (warriors and rulers)
- Vaisya (traders and agriculturalists), and
- Sudra (manual workers)

Unsurprisingly, the system was developed by the Brahmin (priests) who ruled India, in order to maintain their superiority.

The people who fell outside the four main ‘varna’ (castes) included people of the lowest social class, who were called the ‘Untouchables’. The ‘Untouchables’ – sometimes known as ‘Dalits’ – were told by the upper castes that they are less than human, and are forced to perform the most menial and degrading jobs. The traditionally strict rules of the caste system meant that even if the shadow of a ‘Dalit’ fell on an upper caste person, they would be polluted by it, and would need to undergo a series of cleansing rituals. It is a system that degrades people and keeps them repressed, with no access to education, decent jobs, land ownership or the possibility of self-improvement.

When India gained independence in 1947, it declared itself to be a secular state, with no official state religion. The first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was committed to the secular, socialist and democratic principles on which the nation was founded, and which makes it the world’s largest democracy. Caste-based discrimination has been outlawed, and though caste barriers have mostly broken down in large cities, they still exist in rural areas. The caste system does continue to play a major role in Indian society and politics.

Dalits are socially, religiously, economically and politically oppressed, deprived and exploited. They are poor, and have no political power or representation, and became known as ‘Untouchables’ because they are not allowed to touch ‘caste’ Hindus. This social system and injustice has meant that millions of Indians today live in poverty.

Poverty in India:

Many people in India have benefited from the country’s economic successes, though these people are almost exclusively from ‘castes’. But India still suffers from terrible levels of poverty, and all the problems associated with it (oppression, malnutrition, starvation, disease, death).

Estimates suggest that 27.5% of the Indian population live in poverty. Almost all of these people are Dalits.

Though there is terrible overcrowding in India's big cities, and people are forced to live in large, sprawling slums because they cannot afford to own property, the majority of the poor people in India (as many as 75%) live in rural areas. A 2007 report by the state-run National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) found that 77% of Indians, or 836 million people, lived on less than 20 rupees per day (approximately 50 cents) with most working in "informal labour sector with no job or social security, living in abject poverty." India has the highest rate of malnutrition for children under the age of 3 of any country in the world.

Land Reform

As the basis of all economic activity, land can either serve as an essential asset for a country to achieve economic growth and social equity, or it could be used as a tool in the hands of a few to control a country's economic independence and subvert its social processes. The introduction of land as private property destroyed the community ownership systems of tribal societies, and makes a few powerful, rather than sharing the wealth from the land.

During British colonization, land ownership and land use patterns were changed to make it easier for the British to buy land at low prices for mines, plantations etc. The British did not introduce this system to India, but they popularised it. With the introduction of the land tax under the Permanent Settlement Act 1793, the British popularized the 'zamindari' system (where landowners collect tax from the peasants) at the cost of the 'jajmani' system (where everybody shares the land).

When the British ruled India, there existed 17 provinces and a large number of princely states. After independence, the princely states were offered to join the nation, or remain independent. Old states were dissolved and new states created on the lines of shared linguistic and ethnic demographics. For example, the separation of Kerala and the Telugu-speaking regions of Madras State enabled the creation of an exclusively Tamil-speaking state of Tamil Nadu, in southern India.

At independence, ownership and control of land was highly concentrated in a few landlords whose main intention was to get maximum rent from their tenants. Under this arrangement, the tenant farmer had little economic motivation to develop farmland for increased production (because they would not make any money out of it). At the same time, the landlord wasn't particularly concerned about improving the economic condition of the farmers (because the landowner would lose money). As a result, agricultural productivity suffered and the tenants' situation deteriorated.

In the years immediately following India's independence, land ownership was recognised as crucially important. India was extremely poor, and in order to try and abolish poverty, progress was needed on two fronts: high productivity and sharing equally. Land reforms were to be an important pillar for a strong and prosperous country. A lot of money was dedicated to this, with a degree of success in certain regions and states: the abolition of intermediaries, protection to tenants, and a restriction on how much land could be owned by any individual. This improved the situation for many middle class people, but has not benefited the poor who actually work on the land. Sixty years down the line, a number of problems are still far from resolved.

Most studies indicate that inequalities have increased, rather than decreased. The number of people who do not own any land has gone up and the top ten percent of the population monopolizes more land now than in 1951. Meanwhile, the issue of land reforms has over the years, either unconsciously faded from public mind or deliberately been glossed over.

Rich landowners often have powerful political friends, whereas the powerless poor often cannot get their voices heard. As a result, we are today at a juncture where land, mostly for the urban, educated elite, has become more a matter for housing, investment and building infrastructure. The idea of land as a basis of livelihood – for subsistence, survival, social justice and human dignity has largely been lost, so the poor become even poorer.

So what can be done?

Under the Indian Constitution, land reform is the responsibility of individual states so while the federal government provides broad policy guidelines, the nature of land reform legislation, the support for land reform and the degree of success in implementing it have varied considerably from state to state.

Indian officialdom acknowledges its failure to implement land reforms. Dr. K. Venkatasubramanian, member of India's Planning Commission, says "In India everyone was talking about land reforms but this vital area has taken a back seat with nothing being done."

He lists some of the key factors behind the mis-management of land reform:

- land reforms have excluded the farmers themselves, who till the soil, and have only benefited the middle classes
- tenants have been kicked off the ground that they have been working on, leaving them completely helpless
- land-grabbing (i.e. - stealing and taking over tracts of land) by the unscrupulous
- fair rents are not uniform across the country, and are not even implemented in some states because of the acute land hunger existing in the country
- ownership rights could not be conferred on a large body of tenants (a collective of individual farmers, who would share the land) because of the high rates of compensation that need to be paid to the tenants, according to legislation

Today, land reform in rural India is at the cross-roads. Despite the injustice of the current system, the campaigns of people who seek land reform are getting weaker. There are those who argue that 'ceilings' on land ownership (i.e. a restriction on how much land one person can own) are a bad idea, and that it would be more profitable for the Indian economy if people could own as much land as they wanted, and could afford, which would develop India's 'agrobusiness' (i.e. large-scale farming of goods for export). The implication of this would spell disaster for the poor.

Increasingly, there is a demand for re-examination of the land reform issue, through campaigners for social justice and social economics. It is also being argued that liberalization of land ownership would not only increase the availability of land in the lease market but would also increase the poor people's access to land.

There are land reform projects, which seek to:

- 1) raise awareness of the issue of land ownership, especially amongst the poor, who do not own land
- 2) monitor specific projects (being funded by international financial institutions) to assess how it affects the communities involved
- 3) monitor economic trends that might affect land and agriculture
- 4) consider alternative systems, whereby poor people, if they were able to own land, might be more productive if they were directly benefiting
- 5) take indirect action and recommend alternative land-ownership policies to politicians

While talking on this issue is easy, action is difficult. To redress the imbalance and introduce a fairer system is very hard because those who have power, wealth, land and status do not want to give it up, even if it means a fairer world. Also, loopholes in legislation have meant that people

can avoid their responsibilities. Furthermore, bureaucracy and political stalling (the landowners often have powerful political friends, remember!) present even more obstacles to reform. This is particularly serious in India, where 58% of the population relies on farming for their livelihood. Only 2% of these farmers own more than 10 hectares of land.

Though not all of the social problems in India come down to the failure of land reforms, poverty, violence and extremism are linked to lack of access to land. Ten years of economic liberalization have not made any significant difference to the extremely poor people in India: they lack education, awareness and are overwhelmingly from the bottom of India's caste hierarchy (i.e. Dalits). Poverty-stricken farmers from rural areas flock to the large cities in India, in desperate search of a livelihood. But they don't find it, and end up living in slums, exposing themselves and their families to disease, malnutrition and crime.

Land reforms alone will not rid India of its vast number of the abject poor. Education and awareness among those at the bottom of the social ladder (mostly Dalits) in the countryside is crucial. In order to pull people out of poverty, a national consensus on the caste system and a real end to the ritual discrimination of low-castes is vital. Credit reform to enable the poor to get out of the clutches of the money lenders will also help, and projects such as Microcredit are starting to help in these areas. But without the effective implementation of land reform, it is difficult to see how the lot of the rural poor can be changed. In the final analysis, land reform is not a sufficient but a necessary condition for putting a stop to poverty once and for all.