

## POLITICS OF LAND REFORMS WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO LAND CEILING IN ASSAM : AN OUTLINE

APURBA KUMAR BARUA

As in most other states in India the basic occupation of a large majority of people of Assam is agriculture. According to 1971 census, Assam with a population of 146 lakhs had a working force of 41 lakhs of which 76.6 per cent were engaged in agriculture and allied activities of the economy<sup>1</sup>. The number of rural workers was 37 lakhs of which 23 lakhs were cultivators and 4 lakhs were agricultural labourers. Thus 27 lakhs persons were dependent directly on agriculture.<sup>2</sup> The share of this sector in the state's domestic product is about 49 per cent.<sup>3</sup> But this predominantly agricultural economy has been infested with concentration of landed property in the hands of a few. An analysis of the individual land holdings in Assam shows that 12,60,581 small holdings with areas of 1 hectare or less occupy 5,54,598 thousand hectares of land. The average size of holdings in this category is about 0.44 hectares. While 48 holdings with areas of 50 hectares or more occupy 4313 thousand hectare of land. The average size of holdings in this category is about 91.96 hectares.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as is evident from the number of agricultural labourers Assam has a large number of landless peasants. Tables 1 and 2 give a clear picture of the situation.

Such grossly unequal distribution of land not only per-

petuates the existing disparities of wealth but also generates a process of progressive concentration of landed property in the hands of a small section of population and tends to aggravate the situation of rural poverty by pushing an increasingly larger section of the small and marginal farmers to the status of landless peasants. The extent of rural poverty in Assam can be gauged from the fact that 52.65 per cent of the rural population live below the poverty line. This figure is 1.83 per cent higher than the national average. Nothing less than a complete remodelling of the agrarian structure can ameliorate this situation. It is obvious that given the existing power relations in the country such a restructuring is not possible. However, if the situation is to be improved even in a modest way land ceiling legislations will have to be implemented in an effective manner. It is desirable that no cultivating family should be allowed to retain more land than what it can cultivate by its own labour. The Government of Assam has been taking some steps in this direction by adopting some legislation to provide a ceiling on land holdings. The history of land ceiling legislation in Assam dates back to 1956 when ceiling on land holdings was fixed at 150 bighas. This Act has since been amended by the state legislature to limit the amount of agricultural land that can be held by a family to 50 bighas. It has been a declared policy of the Government of Assam to reduce disparities in wealth and income, eliminate exploitation and provide security to tenants and workers.<sup>5</sup> But despite such declarations implementation of land ceiling legislation has been absolutely unsatisfactory. In 1966 itself the Joint Secretary, Planning Commission stated in a report on implementation of land reforms in Assam that though the land ceiling legislation was enforced some six years ago little progress in implementation had been made. He showed that though the estimated total area likely to be available for redistribution at that time was about 4.08 lakh bighas only 61,822 bighas had been declared surplus.<sup>6</sup> He did not comment on the process of redistribution. But the performance of the Government in this field is worse than acquisition of surplus land. This aspect of the problem was discussed recently in the Assam Assembly. While participating in the debates on the Assam Fixation of Ceiling of Land Holdings (Amendment) Bill 1984 a leader of the opposition

pointed out that Government had failed to distribute the lands which were already acquired under the existing laws. He said that the Government had so far acquired 5 lakh hectares of land of which only 3 lakh hectares had been distributed. He complained that in many cases even acquired and distributed land had been taken over again by the landlords. Another member pointed out that peasants who were allotted land as early as 1976 had not been able to take possession of those lands.<sup>7</sup> The figures quoted by the members appear to be inaccurate but the point they made was valid. The efforts of the Government of Assam to acquire and redistribute 'surplus' land have been half hearted.

TABLE 3

**Acquisition and Distribution of land In Assam**

Year	Acquisition of land (area in hectares)	Distribution of land (area in hectares)
1976-77	1,64,327	58,423*
1977-78	68,371	1,23,479
1978-79	2,29,629	1,36,984
1979-80	2,30,531	1,25,329
<b>Total :</b>	<b>6,92,858</b>	<b>4,44,215</b>

\*Since inception.

*Source :* Directorate of Land Acquisition, Requisition and Reforms, Government of Assam.

Figures in Table III show that upto 1980 the Government of Assam had acquired a total of 6,92,858 hectares of land of which only 4,44,205 hectares were distributed. Thus up to 1980 over 2 lakhs hectares of acquired land remained undistributed.

Land reforms including ceiling on land holdings, acquisition and distribution of land are not merely economic measures. It has wide social and political implications because it affects income and employment of a very large section of the population. It is capable of bringing major changes in power relations in any society. Consequences of such changes may be far reaching. Warriner rightly says that redistribution of property in land is a very difficult change to carry through. Because it requires some degree of compulsion in expropriation, it is inevitably a political

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question involving a conflict of interest the "haves" and the "have nots".<sup>8</sup> Therefore the failure of the Government of Assam to carry out acquisition and distribution of surplus land in a serious manner will have to be analysed in terms of the class interest of those who wield political power, the class which owns the bulk of the landed property and the sections which are supposed to gain from redistribution of landed property.

The Congress Party which has ruled Assam almost continuously after independence (except for the brief period of Janata rule) has an all India character. Because of obvious reasons the class character of the Congress Party in Assam could not be different from the class character of the all India Congress Party. Biplab Das Gupta has shown that the Congress Party "has always been the vehicle through which the interests of Indian big business and feudal elements were served".<sup>9</sup>

Immediately after independence, Congress, under the influence of the anti-imperialist forces released during the national movement took some real steps towards land reform, but vested interest of the land-owning classes began to exercise steady pressure on the party and succeeded in frustrating those early moves. Warriner clearly shows that all over the country the Congress Party has failed to undertake land reform for the sake of relieving poverty.<sup>10</sup> Unless and until a political party representing the class interest of the poor and landless peasant comes into power in states and also in the centre no effective implementation of land ceiling legislation can be expected. The rural poor and their allies will have to direct all their energy in this direction. Such an effort will, of course, be opposed tooth and nail by the Congress Party and also by other parties which represent the interest of the classes opposed to genuine land reforms aimed at removing inequalities in rural India. The vested interests in the Indian country side has formed an alliance with the vested interests in other sectors of the society. It is this alliance which rules India today. The entire state of India, with all its socio-political ramifications, to-day serves the interest of this alliance. The demand for genuine land reforms is in fact a call for an all-out struggle against this alliance. This rural poor in India cannot hope to successfully challenge this alliance on their own. They will have to forge a unity with the other oppressed sections

of Indian society not merely to demand reforms but to snatch political power from the ruling classes.

In this connection it should be noted that the Assamese peasantry has a tradition of fighting against ruling classes. During the British rule in Assam they had fought against the anti-peasant policies of the imperialist power. In postindependence period they have been supporting the struggles of the middle classes against the process of internal colonization. Therefore if this peasantry is organized it may be able to launch a successful struggle for a complete restructuring of existing power relations which may in turn bring about a remodelling of the agrarian structure, which would among other things make possible the genuine implementation of land reform measures.

#### REFERENCES

1. *Economic Survey, Assam 1980-81* (Government of Assam, Gauhati 1891) p. 4.
2. These figures are computed from Table No. 1.11 of the *Statistical Hand Book Assam 1980* (Government of Assam, Gauhati 1980) p. 44.
3. *Economic Survey, op. cit.*, p. 7.
4. Computed from *Statistical Hand Book, op. cit.*, Table No. 16.1.
5. See., *Draft Outline Fifth Five Year Plan Assam, Vol. II.* (Government of Assam, Shillong, 1973) p. 25.
6. *Implementation of Land Reforms* (Planning Commission, New Delhi, 1966) p. 37.
7. See, News item on Assam Fixation of Ceiling on Land Holdings Bill 1984, published in the *Dainik Assam*, April 5 1984.
8. Dorren Warriner, *Land Reform in Principle and Practice* (Lxford, 1969) P. XV.
9. Diplab Das Gupta, "Class Character of Ruling Classes in India" in K. Mathew Kurian (ed.) *India State and Society* (March, 1975), p. 112.
10. Warriner, *op. cit.*, pp. 136-218.