

All Rural Landless Households Must Get Some Farmland. India as an Example

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A very important and much needed rural reform is getting increasingly neglected. This relates to the need for all rural households to have at least some farmland.

While this is being written here mainly in the context of what I have seen in the context of my visits to villages of India over several decades, this is likely to be relevant for several other countries as well.

What I have seen over the decades in many villages is that while there is clearly urgent need for all rural poor landless families to have some land, the number of landless families has been increasing. While partly this is due to division of family land over generations, it is also to a significant extent due to loss of land by indebted farmers due to distress sale of land, or due to land grab by the powerful persons using various legal and illegal methods. More vulnerable households, such as single woman households, can face increasing difficulty in retaining their small land holding.

As following the spread of green revolution expensive inputs, machinery and technologies were imposed on farmers, these high expenses and the resulting debts became a big cause of loss of land.

In several cases landlessness is also caused in addition by displacement related to various projects and inability to provide alternative land in place of this.

Land loss caused by river erosion, floods, landslides or more gradual degradation over a number of years has also been increasing.

On the other hand rich and powerful persons in many villages own or control increasing tracts of land, using various devices to get over any legal limits.

Sometimes the poorest farmers are also evicted by government agencies claiming that the land being cultivated belongs to them and has been illegally encroached upon. At the same time encroachments by some powerful persons remain in place.

According to the available data, there were 127.3 million landowning farmers in India in 2001 and this number decreased to 118.7 million in 2011. In other words, within ten years this number fell by about 8.6 million, which works out to about 72,000 farmers becoming landless in one month, or about 2400 in a day, or about 100 small farmers becoming landless every hour, or about two every minute.

There are two aspects of land security which are very important for the poorer or weaker households in rural areas. One is that the land on which their house is located should clearly belong to them. Due to linkages to feudal past, in several villages the most powerful landowners sometimes claim that the land on which some of the poorest households are settled belongs to them and were given to those working for them in old times temporarily. The government is supposed to have settled this matter a long time back by settling such land in favor of those actually living here, but visiting some villages even in very recent times this writer has come across cases of members or agents of powerful landowners asserting ownership of such land and forcibly collecting payments from the poorest under the threat of evicting them.

So one aspect of the problem that should be clearly settled beyond doubt is that all inhabitants of a village should have housing rights (with proper rights to a land holding of a certain size) and there cannot be any eviction from a place where any family has been staying traditionally, or where there is a settlement of several poor families living together. While no one can be removed by a private party, if the government for urgent development needs requires anyone to be displaced for a house, then better living place will have to be arranged and resettlement expenses provided before any eviction is caused.

In India there is an ongoing nationwide scheme of the government which can be used further to improve the housing of the poor, but the implementation of the scheme, which has substantial budgetary support and is conceptually a very good scheme, should be improved to ensure that the new houses are in keeping with local needs and secondly, that these do not lead to further indebtedness of these households, which often happens in the process of arranging their share of the expenses as well as the payments made to corrupt officials.

Secondly there is the question of farmland. In a rural area, it is extremely important for a family to have at least some farmland for economic security, for food security and to have a base in the village.

The authorities often say that there is no land available to be given to the landless so from where can we give land. However if the same authorities are asked to find several hundred acres for a big industrialist or some other big project then they readily do so. When it is a question of finding much lesser land for the landless, then they say there is no land. If there is no land for the landless, how is there so much more land in the hands of the richest and most powerful persons of villages, or increasingly also in the hands of many rich persons based in cities who are keen to buy farmland in addition to their urban property?

If there is a will there will be ways to find at least some minimum land for the landless in most villages. Even in areas where finding land is really difficult, this writer has been suggesting alternatives like regeneration of unused land lying vacant close to villages with afforestation schemes and then providing sustainable, ecologically friendly livelihoods, with land ownership, on the basis of non-timber produce of these trees, supplemented with some inter-cropping, kitchen gardens, dairying etc. In a single such settlement, about 50 or more landless households can get sustainable livelihoods based on ownership rights of land, with active government support. This also helps in the objective of increasing tree cover of indigenous species.

So a very important objective of rural development in the next decade should be to provide farmland to all rural landless persons, along with extending other necessary support like

minor irrigation to them.

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