

Land Tenure, Farming Constraints, and Rural Livelihoods in India: An Integrated Assessment

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Abstract

Land remains the central asset shaping agricultural productivity, socio-economic security, and rural development in India. However, the complex interaction between land tenure systems, farming challenges, and livelihood patterns continues to hinder sustainable agricultural growth. This review provides an integrated assessment of the key issues influencing land use dynamics, including ownership inequalities, insecure tenancy arrangements, land fragmentation, and the slow implementation of land reforms. These structural limitations restrict farmers' access to credit, technology, and institutional support, thereby reinforcing vulnerability among small and marginal cultivators. Alongside tenure-related constraints, Indian farmers face additional pressures from climate variability, declining soil health, groundwater depletion, and inadequate irrigation infrastructure. Traditional farming practices, limited mechanisation, and dependence on erratic monsoons further intensify risk exposure, affecting crop yields and income stability. Social factors such as migration, rural indebtedness, and the growing commodification of agricultural land also shape livelihood strategies, compelling many households to diversify their income sources beyond farming.

Keywords: Land Reform, agricultural productivity, land tenure, rural development, and sustainable agriculture

INTRODUCTION

Land is the basis of farming, and farming is the basis of life in the country, but land concerns are still a hot topic of public debate in India. varied groups have varied ideas about land, and its many responsibilities and meanings raise a lot of important problems. What do land and ownership mean? Who owns land, and what rights do farmers and other people have? What kinds of water and irrigation systems are there, and what kinds of technology are being used? What new rules or changes, if any, should be made? And what's going on with the weather? These topics are all connected to ownership, rights, and policies, which might be hard to understand [1]. Learning about them helps us understand how land influences farms, villages, and people's lives.

Land has both farmland and places that aren't farmed, but farmland is its most important agricultural asset. If you own land, you have the right to share in its benefits and value, give it away or sell it, and use it as collateral to get credit. The type of ownership affects these rights. For example, they can be private (individual or joint), state (national, state, or other public authority), forest (reserved for forest or wildlife), or community (given to a group with specified, limited rights). Tenancy is a big problem because most farmers don't own the land they farm, which makes it harder for them to get credit and feel safe. Part of the solution is sharecropping, but it also makes things riskier and more likely to be taken advantage of [2].

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THE HISTORY OF LAND LEGISLATION

Land laws in India have determined who can go to farmland and how farming works. From 1880 to

1970, the focus was on landlords, tenants, and workers who didn't own land. The goal was to get money and provide people the right to rent land back to farmers where possible. Before the central government established the Land Ceiling Act (1972), West Bengal (1977) and Kerala (1964) made changes to their land laws to try to stop absentee landlordism [1].

The British ruled India from 1857 to 1947. The Land Revenue System of British India outlined the rules for land ownership. After that came the Land Acquisition Act, the Land Tenure Regulation Act, the Rent Restriction Act, and the Eviction Act.

1947–1967: After gaining independence, the Land Ceiling Regulation, Security of Tenure, and Constant Rental Laws were put into effect. The Land Ceiling Regulation let the government buy extra land and give it to anyone who needed it. The Security of Tenure Rule made sure that renters couldn't be kicked off their land, and the constant rental rule made sure that tenants' rent didn't go up.

1967–2010: After independence, the first land ceiling act was passed in 1972. This act set limits on how much land a person may own. This sparked a fresh theoretical discussion about land tenure that is affecting the socio-economic transformation in the agriculture sector. The Land Survival Act lets people who don't own land stay on the land they live on for more than twelve years. Most of the tenants used the money they made from farming for things other than farming. During this time, the landowners and tenants were encouraged to rent the land, which drove up the prices. The second Land Ceiling Act went into effect in 1994. The two Land Ceiling Acts have been passed in most states.

RIGHTS AND OWNERSHIP OF LAND

In India, land ownership is split into two separate groups. Many pieces of land in India belong to a single person, but many others belong to the state or other public entities. In this system, the most important question is who owns the property and how it might be shared or transferred in different ways. There are four main types of land ownership: private, state, community, and forested. Farmers might own land, rent it, or share it with others. Farmers can also have rights to or possession of a piece of land even if they don't own it. The rights that come with land depend on who owns it or what kind of business is going on there, and these things have changed over time.

A farmer who owns a piece of land can use it, give it away, lend it, or leave it to someone else as an inheritance, unless there is a restriction at any level. Tenants and sharecroppers also have legally recognised verified rights, but most of the time they rely on social, customary, and local norms. The right certificates might either let you get credit from official institutions or get permission from local authorities. So, a farmer's basic right is to use that land, no matter who owns it. Farmers decide if they should rent or share land based on whether they can get loans or borrow money from family members to get to the land; whether they can get credit through formal channels when they need it; or whether they can't pass the land on to the next generation [2].

MODERN FARMING METHODS

In any given year, around half of India's land that can be farmed is planted with crops [1]. Farmers usually grow two harvests a year, but they can't grow a lot of different types of crops. In dryland locations, the pattern of rainfall mostly decides what season and crop to plant. More than 70% of India's gross cultivated area was made up of food grains in the past. But the percentage of food grains has gone down and is presently about 62 percent [2]. Floods, droughts, and hurricanes happen all the time, and soil deterioration is a big problem. Climate change has not only made droughts, floods, soil degradation, and other extreme occurrences more common, but it has also affected when monsoons, winter rains, and rainy days happen.

Farmers still utilise a lot of old-fashioned ways to plant seeds, water their crops, deal with pests, and rotate their crops since they can't afford to buy new tools. Most farmers simply employ basic hand

equipment, such sickles and wooden ploughs. Some farmers employ chemical fertilisers and bio-fertilizers depending on the crop, how many workers they have, and how much money they have. Even if a chemical-pesticide-based method is incredibly expensive, some pest management is still not happening because farmers can't afford the chemicals. To meet market demand and get higher prices, organic farming is done on a smaller scale. Most farmers rely on rain to water their crops, but some have made ponds on their farms. Most small farms, which make up approximately 80% of all farms, don't get much help from other sources. Crop production is still low, yields haven't gone up much, and there is a lot of danger, especially with dryland crops. Most farmers don't have access to safe credit and have to borrow money from people they know.

FARMING PROBLEMS

There are a lot of challenges that farmers in India are dealing with right now. People still have trouble getting land, credit, materials, and markets. Even when farmers can get to these resources, they often have trouble since prices are low, risks are high, and they don't have enough information about which crops to sow. Crop failures, debt, and bad weather often cause farmers to go bankrupt, which means that many of them have to sell their land and move to cities each year [1]. A lot of small farmers can't marry off their daughters or make their homes better without going into debt to moneylenders. Families have to move to other states for work when they can't get land or make enough money from farming. A little one-acre property is usually a greater safety net than not knowing what will happen.

Even though rural development has become a lot better, a lot of small farmers and tenants still can't get higher credit or weather insurance. Water allocation mechanisms are still not changing, even though groundwater depletion and pollution are getting worse in many places.

PLANS BY THE GOVERNMENT TO HELP FARMERS

The Indian government gives farmers a lot of money, loans, insurance, and other help to help them make more money and improve their lives. There are several different programs that farmers can use. The Prime Minister's Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana (PM-KISAN) gives all farmers who own land direct monetary help. The total amount of money granted is ₹6,000 a year, divided into three payments. The Pradhan Mantri Crop Insurance Scheme (PMFBY) helps a lot of farmers by giving them subsidised crop insurance to help them deal with losses caused by bad weather, pests, natural disasters, and other things. The Kisan Credit Card (KCC) Scheme lets farmers get short-term loans of up to ₹3,00,000 to buy seeds and other things they need. Some subsidy programs are only for small farmers. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) guarantees 100 days of work per year to everyone in rural regions, with a focus on work that improves agricultural land. The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) helps people in rural areas get housing by giving them loans to build latrines [3].

Different schemes have different rules for who can join. Some schemes do not allow tenants or farmers who do not have official rights to land. Many other groups want to help farm families, but the definition of a household can be different in different states and programs. This makes it hard to figure out which farmers should get help [4].

PROBLEMS WITH WATER AND IRRIGATION

Water and irrigation are important for farming. It is very important for farming since farmers would be worse off without it. Even though it's important, there are still a lot of problems with water and irrigation, especially in an economy where farming is the main way to make a living.

Because monsoons don't happen all the time in India, irrigation is very important for farming. Monsoon rains make up roughly 75% of the year's rain. In some places, they cause water shortages, which can lead to crop failure [5]. The farmer digs wells in a semi-arid area to get rid of groundwater so that pumps don't have to rely on monsoons as much. The government supports tube wells because

they have immediate benefits and help agriculture grow, but they also make it more likely that water tables will drop and depletion will happen much faster. Before you can collect rainwater, you need to have irrigation and water storage systems in place to keep people from overusing them [6].

The government pays for canals and lakes to store things, but they have lost a lot of money since they haven't been kept up. For instance, in the 1980s, it was thought that 160 million hectares of land could be irrigated, but only 90 million hectares were being used. By 1990, however, 138.5 million hectares had already been used, and there was still a huge demand for the existing infrastructure without adding any new canals or lakes. The entire area of irrigated land is now 144 million hectares, but the government is cutting back on spending on canals. This is causing a growing supply gap, which could hurt agricultural development.

LIVING IN THE COUNTRY

Life in India is shaped in many ways by land and farming. A lot of individuals depend on farming to get money. Land tenure has an effect on how stable that revenue is. Farmers who have significant rights can put money into making things better. People who don't have rights may feel less safe and put less money into things. Farming is simply one way for many people to get money, but it is nevertheless essential since it affects many other parts of life. Farmers can work on pieces of land if they can get to them. property tenure affects the kind and size of houses that are erected, as well as whether houses are built on the same property as farming. Land is also important for social aspects of living. Some individuals may move to cities to find better jobs, but many continue live in their villages even then. The decision to migrate may be influenced by agricultural revenue, property ownership, and community growth. People desire to stay in villages as much as possible since many social events, such festivals and religious meetings, happen there.

Land is important for a lot of things that aren't farming. There are also jobs that pay cash, such as dairy farming, poultry farming, weaving, carpentry, and sericulture. Collecting firewood, fodder, fruit, and medicinal herbs from forests are all examples of in-kind land-use activities that provide a lot of help. Land is important for social services. Many community irrigation systems rely on land tenure arrangements, like how common-pool land is divided up. The availability of grazing land impacts cow ownership, which has significant consequences for agricultural production [2, 3].

CHANGES IN THE WEATHER AND SOIL

Climate change is changing the way water and soil behave, which is affecting how farmers in India do their jobs [7]. Droughts, floods, and poor soil health are happening more and more often [8]. Adverse climatic conditions—excess and unpredictable rainfall, late arrival of monsoon, protracted dry spells, rising mean temperature above ideal level for crops—determine the choice of agricultural patterns and techniques. Loss of soil organic carbon (SOC), chemical nutrient imbalances, higher soil salinity in areas that are watered, and soil erosion are all big problems that make it harder to boost agricultural production. Dryland areas are facing even more problems, such as not enough moisture in the soil, the soil structure getting worse, more sandiness, and the health of the soil getting worse, all of which need to be fixed right away. People are trying to change how they farm and grow crops to fit new scenarios. Technologies and management solutions exist, although existing land-use patterns, socio-economic factors, and insufficient awareness hinder prompt implementation [9].

FARMING USING TECHNOLOGY

New technologies could make farming easier, give better yields, and lower risk. Some examples of this kind of technology are smart irrigation systems, soil sensors, digital advice services, and better crop varieties [10]. Farmers can make better choices with these tools, but they often can't afford them, don't know about them, or don't get enough training. Farmers with larger plots are more likely to get their money back and get training, which makes it easier for them to use technology [11].

Many farmers in India still use traditional farming methods today, and many of them also work in other jobs or do side jobs to get money. After investment, there are several kinds of problems that come up because farming is risky and unpredictable, and you can't know how the weather or the market will turn out.

EXAMPLES OF LAND REFORM

Land reform in India has taught us a lot about how to do it right and has shown that land reforms are still needed in the agricultural sector, especially when it comes to land limitations. Since the mid-1950s, land reform legislation have tried to get rid of zamindari and intermediary tenures, set limits on land holdings, give more land to people who don't own any, and improve the status of tenants. The end of zamindari in 1970 was a major change in the history of land reform in India [1]. Before zamindari was abolished, sharecroppers were rarely mentioned in land-tenure documents. After it was abolished, sharecroppers started to gain legally enforceable rights. The Government of India's national policy statement on land reforms said that "co-operative farming, tenant-purchase schemes, and regulations on rents and eviction of agricultural labourers from occupied land" were still on the table for land reform. Land reforms started to gather traction in the 1970s and 1980s, and then they got a lot of attention again in the early 1990s when the New Economic Reforms were announced.

Even after the zamindari system was ended and new land-reform laws were passed, there is still a lot of variety in the social structure, land ownership patterns, cropping patterns, and the socio-economic conditions of farmers in India. This is true in all of India's states and even in some regions within those states. It's clear that there isn't a single, one-size-fits-all solution for land reform problems across the country. In fact, the ceiling laws don't even set clear boundaries. There are many various types of ceilings on land-holding limitations that are appropriate for different types of farming, such as the types of crops grown, the availability of irrigation, and the amount of technology used.

CONCLUSION

India faces multiple land-related challenges that directly affect agricultural growth and farmer livelihoods. Although agriculture contributes significantly to the national economy and employs most of the rural population, issues such as incomplete land reforms, insecure tenancy, shrinking landholdings, and rising land degradation continue to limit progress. These long-standing problems weaken farmers' access to credit, technology, and infrastructure, and also influence policy decisions that often fail to address the needs of small and marginal farmers.

Land tenure remains central to improving agricultural productivity and building rural infrastructure. However, the increasing commercialisation of land and slow policy implementation have created inequalities that vary across regions and farming communities. In some areas, better land management and the adoption of practices such as double cropping have made farming more viable, but many rural regions still struggle with environmental stress, climate-related disasters, and limited resources.

Alternative farming strategies, better land-use planning, and climate-resilient methods can help vulnerable rural areas, especially those affected by floods, droughts, or monsoon failures. To move forward, focused research, stronger policies, and on-ground implementation are needed. A more integrated approach to land management and agricultural planning will help improve productivity, strengthen rural livelihoods, and create a more sustainable future for Indian agriculture.

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