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AN APPROACH TO AGRARIAN REFORM

D. G. KARVE

SUSTAINED and integrated action in the field of agrarian reconstruction and development represents an outlook which has to take in the whole social and economic structure of the community. Concepts of property, equality and community have to be uniform in a society if their application is to be assured of widespread and continued acceptance by the people. Area-wise action taken in the rural sector has its repercussions on the life of urban areas, and programmes of rural reconstitution cannot be planned with any assurance of success unless appropriate movements of a supporting nature are expected to take place in the urban sector as well. Subjects like pattern of a unit of production, or the maximum size of private possession of means of production, or of the responsibility of the state to ensure by its action any of the economic and social objectives of welfare and progress have to be common to the whole nation. The affairs of a small select colony may perhaps be ordered in a manner which is special to itself, without entailing issues of overall policy. But the consistent pursuit of an agrarian programme for the nation as a whole, or for large tracts of it, is not possible unless it conforms in essence to the generally accepted social and economic policy of the state.

Not only have reform and resettlement projects in the rural and agricultural spheres to conform to overall objectives and policy, but in particular the role of agriculture and other rural pursuits in the total programme of national welfare has to be at least broadly enunciated before specific action affecting possession and use of land on a long-term basis can be taken. Whether it is by effective action on the part of concerned groups of rural interests, or by an overall national effort

at deliberate planning the role of the agricultural sector in national economy has to be specifically defined. In the unplanned economies of individualist enterprise, and even in reputedly planned communities it has often happened that, for organization as well as for welfare, the fortunes of the rural sector have been allowed to fluctuate in the interest of what was expected to prove an overall achievement. Such incomplete integration of agricultural economy into the main current of national economic development has produced conditions of instability and comparative backwardness in the life of the rural people which is common to many countries. Where special efforts are made to reorganize the basic conditions of the occupational and social life of the villagers, as in land reform and settlements, it is seen to be difficult and in fact risky to move without ensuring some degree of harmony between the programmes chalked out for agriculture and those designed for national economy as a whole. For the individual farmer or settler, as well as for the nation, the whole economic calculus of a programme for reformation would be upset by its failure to conform to the implications of the overall economic programmes of the community. It is not possible to decide merits of proposals like subsidies to farmers, or assuring a price for their products, without knowing what the position of agriculture is intended to be in the general plan of national economic development. That decisions in such matters have in many cases to be taken in advance of their actual implementation makes a basic integration of policy all the more essential to the success of any programme of major reconstitution of agricultural economy.

At least as important as the material and economic balance between objectives of the agricultural plan on the one hand and the non-agricultural and total national plan on the other is the institutional pattern through which these objectives are sought to be realized. In such a pattern of institutionalization it is not only the relationship of the individual to the state which is to be specifically determined. The whole series of individual and corporate patterns of operation has to be judged for their suitability as aids to programmes of development. For the large part of the world lying outside the socialist group of countries it may be said that state responsibility for ensuring equal opportunities of realizing individual welfare by individual effort is generally recognized. In these countries the broad assumption is in favour of free individual action in support of choices voluntarily made by citizens. The variety and extent of state action needed to create overall conditions of success for the working of a free economy constitute by themselves a fairly large and growing volume of governmental measures which have become synonymous with the welfare state. But under the promotional and protective influence of the welfare policies of the state a variety of patterns of individual action have grown. Single individuals, small associations of individuals, big corporations, and co-operative groups are the different forms in which in non-socialist states welfare policies have been utilized by people for their own betterment. While a general preference for individual and corporate action has been in evidence, the claims of co-operative action, or of state action in support of co-operatives, have been differently assessed in different countries.

For the success of land reform and settlement measures in the older and under-developed economies this difference in approach is very significant. The beneficiaries of these programmes are in most cases individuals possessed of limited resources. The condition out of which they are sought to be freed is one of de-

pendence on better equipped individuals, whose immediate interests are in many cases adversely affected by reform measures. A legislative reform even when it is accompanied by some financial and administrative support is ineffective unless a sufficiently vigorous effort at creating alternative institutions which would supply the needs of the newly emancipated people are set up. In the absence of such action reform measures are not only ineffective, but in fact they ultimately strengthen the very groups from whose unchecked action it is sought to release the dependent people. Some alternative institutions have, therefore, to be thought of as accompaniments to agrarian reform measures, especially in the older economies.

Of the three alternatives, state, private trade and co-operatives, reformist governments have in the initial stages tended to emphasize state action. This is only natural. Apart from the protective urge of a zealous benefactor a reformist government would be led to take extensive action in view of comparative resourcelessness of the individual beneficiaries and of unhelpfulness on the part of older agencies. State action on this scale is, however, out of keeping with the overall policy of individual freedom. In any case, and especially with governments of under-developed countries, demands of an actively welfare and developmental state get beyond the resources of government. If this stage has been foreseen from the commencement of the reformist programme some alternative choice has presumably been made. Where reform measures have been taken without much foresight or planning a check is put on the progress of reform by exhaustion of resources, and old institutions either of ownership, or of trade, or of finance tend to re-establish themselves. In a few cases making the beneficiaries of reformist measures strong enough to be able to bargain with possessors, suppliers and dealers is an object of deliberate policy. But in the majority of cases a state of re-dependence is reached by sheer exhaustion of public resources, and by the absence of any planned programme of setting up another non-governmental agency which can be trusted to act in conformity with the declared objectives of social policy.

In the sphere of institutionalization accompanying land reform and settlement co-operative institutions play an important role. Self-help, freedom of choice, associated action among persons having common interests, and the democratic value of self-management are best promoted by co-operative action. It is, therefore, not surprising that in most reformist programmes, co-operatives play an important role. But the extent to which the effort at building co-operatives is backed by comprehensive and sustained action varies from state to state. A part of general resourcelessness from which dependent people suffer is the lack of competence for running organized institutions. It is both illogical and unfair to expect that once the serfs or small tenants, or landless workers are endowed with a tenure status they will be able by themselves to run co-operative institutions. They have to be helped and trained to be good farmers, and they have to be equally assisted and educated to be good co-operative businessmen. Such a firm attitude on co-operative development pre-supposes a strong faith in the social and economic merits of co-operative action among people who form the base of the national structure. This faith is a variable feature from country to country. It is, therefore, natural that the land reform and settlement programmes round the world are unevenly supported by co-operative action among their beneficiaries.

With land reforms and settlements, but especially with land reforms, it is well-nigh impossible to attribute changes exclusively or specifically to their operation. Incentives, opportunities and institutional aids which may have their origin in factors unconnected, or only partially connected, with the reform measures may come to play a decisive part in shaping the nature and extent of change. It would be most unusual that a land reform measure will not bring about any change at all, though such situations are not altogether absent. Legislative measures which are not followed by sufficient emphasis on enforcement have been known to leave the situation almost unchanged. Leaving out of consideration such cases of abortive efforts at reform, as a rule land reforms would initiate some real change of status, incentive and opportunities from which tangible results should follow. These results in production effort as well as in levels of living should be capable of measurement. But the effort at measuring these changes and of isolating such amongst them as can be traced mainly to land reform measures would constitute a programme of survey and research which can be undertaken only by a research team, preferably one organised as an institution which would keep in continuous touch with the movement of change. This is especially true of the identification and measurement of long-term changes for which the proper mechanism of a base-line survey, followed by a periodic series of resurveys would have to be provided. If social policy in the sphere of land reform is to be properly evaluated and deliberately guided such surveys would appear to be desirable and necessary. These could most appropriately be provided by national agencies, though expert organizations at international level can use them for an overall assessment.

At present material which can be considered to be either suitable or adequate for the study of land reform and colonization measures exists in only a few cases. For the rest existing sources supply only a general background against which an observer can only hesitantly present his own impressions. That these impressions are, in the individual cases which have been observed, substantiated by some quantitative data and by personal interviews makes them a little more realistic. But in the best of circumstances they must be treated as offering no more than a hypothesis for analysis and judgment, which needs further verification by more intensive study before any programme of action can be based on them. Unless this caution is observed it would appear to be presumptuous on the part of a visiting student, howsoever trained, experienced and careful he would be, to pronounce judgments and offer suggestions on matters which have been the subject of sustained national and international effort for decades. What is offered here is in the nature of a qualitative appreciation of the experiments and experiences observed in several countries more as examples of trends in varying circumstances than as sample studies from which any estimates may follow.

Even in the most advanced industrial societies, which derive a large and an increasing part of their employment opportunities and national income from non-agricultural pursuits, agrarian problems constitute a vital part of national policy. In a developed state of industrialization agricultural problems tend to be treated as of strategic significance, inasmuch as the agricultural population offers a market for industrial products and constitutes an important claimant for a share in national welfare. The role of agriculture as supplier of food and raw materials is also of great importance, though the opportunities for obtaining

supplies by international trade tend to diminish its uniqueness. In under-developed or developing economies the position occupied by agriculture is crucial, not only strategic. It is principally by the transformation of agriculture into a system of higher productivity that the ultimate end of building a technologically progressive economy can be reached. Even in terms of the welfare of the population engaged in agriculture, its share in the nation's sum-total of wealth constitutes the main criterion of overall assessment as the agriculturally-employed population represents a large majority of the whole nation. In course of time industries and industrial populations would attract more attention, but to initiate industrial change and to distribute its advantages widely among the people agrarian progress, technological as well as social, would appear to be essential.

Agrarian reform in this broad sense has always been a significant precursor and accompaniment of industrialization. An assessment of its several forms and stages is, therefore, of great significance in guiding policy. Individual as well as collective action has been the main instrument of change in this sphere. But even in areas where the greatest achievements of private effort are to be seen, the state by its legislative, and often executive, action is seen to have created favourable circumstances for the success of non-governmental agencies. Agrarian legislation and agrarian reform are spheres of public policy which are co-extensive with the whole life of those for whom access to land as a means of cultivation is of prime importance. In all countries, over the centuries, a mass of law and custom has grown which determines the possession and use of land. In communities which for their occupational opportunities have to depend on a decreasing per capita extent of land, agrarian reform naturally tends to emphasize the assured access to land as an important feature. In areas where cultivable land is still abundant agrarian reform takes the form of attempts at settling new communities in agrarian colonies. Land reform and land settlement or colonization are thus the core of a process of agrarian development, which in turn derives its strength and justification as a prelude and accompaniment to the process of overall industrial development.

Historically land reform had its origin in a recognition that important sections of the community earning their living by work on land were specially handicapped by established rights of superior interests. In countries where the pattern of land ownership was of a political or administrative character, giving to the owners a right to farm out their lands for a rental, reform of landholding initially took the shape of protecting the rights of tenants. The content of tenancy reform, as distinguished from the wider concept of land reform, may still be adequately summarised in the form of the famous three F's : fixity of tenure, fairness of rent and free transferability of interest, that is of any permanent improvements made by the tenant with his own resources. For a long time the attention of land reformers was concentrated on this type of protective action, and in countries where the normal course of economic development brought about a fair balance between the agricultural and non-agricultural population social purposes were satisfactorily met without any more fundamental change.

But in countries where the pattern of land ownership was of concentrated farming by big landlords tenancies were not the prevailing pattern of cultivator's interest. Even when some form of share-cropping was permitted the status of

the share-cropper was more akin to that of serfs, who worked directly for and under the landlord and his paid agents, than to that of tenants, who have a position of contractors or enterprisers. The lowly state of the cultivating dependents on large estates could be corrected only by conferring upon them rights of ownership to some specific piece of land. Even in countries where tenancy reform was considered as an adequate first step, it often happened that by the increase in numbers of the agricultural population in excess of what the cultivable portion of land could support the concept of contractual obligations between the very few owners and the vast number of small tenants became less and less realistic. If the pace of industrial development is slow and the rate of population increase is high rights of ownership in land come to possess a contractual value which though high economically is apt to be rated low in terms of social justification. That the area of cultivable land cannot be easily increased, especially in economically less endowed communities, makes the right of private possession look more and more indefensible. With the traditional concept of law or without it, the bargains which are made in these circumstances between owners of land and tenants tend to be of an unfair character. To restore a balance of social and economic advantages it becomes necessary to think of a more fundamental measure than one of mere tenancy legislation.

Thus improving the status of the actual cultivator by conferring upon him title of ownership, so that he would have access to a definite area without having to share the product of his labour with one who makes no physical contribution towards the farming effort, becomes necessary. By and large, land reform is held to be synonymous with provision of land to the large body of cultivators on an ownership basis. In countries where large tracts of unclaimed land are available for cultivation award of ownership plots to farmers can be brought about without dispossession of existing owners. Such situations are, however, rare and where they exist they call for organized programmes of colonization which have to be thought of in the light of wider social and economic objectives. For the most part land reform has to be thought of in countries where there is heavy concentration of land ownership accompanied by large scale dependence of the population on agriculture. In these circumstances land reform almost necessarily takes the form of redistribution of ownership rights.

It should, however, be noted that the redistributive part has its justification in securing better conditions of employment. This has a two-fold significance. By having a proprietorship title the cultivator is freed from having to make those payments to the landlord which had their origin not in any service done by him for improved cultivation, but were more or less a pure rental, a licence payment determined by auction. As a sharer in produce of his effort spent on the given piece of land the new owner would have a better opportunity and this would add to his income, and presumably help to raise his standard of life. This aspect of land reform is obvious. Equally important, though less obvious, are the incentive and the opportunity created by land reform for the cultivating farmer. As he has no longer to surrender a sizeable part of the output to someone who has made no tangible contribution to raising it, it is normal to expect that the cultivator would be encouraged to go all out to increase his output so that he may earn more and live better.

Such a psychological uplift is possible, in any case is materially fruitful, only when opportunities for productive use of labour accompany a measure of land reform. It has been said that the first effect of land reform is in many cases to reduce opportunities for productive use of labour, rather than to increase it. This view is based on the assumption that the dispossessed landlord was making some contribution to cultivation which is discontinued as a result of dispossession, and that where such discontinuance has taken place it has not been counter-balanced by at least an equal additional effort on the part of the new owner either out of his own resources, or out of resources placed at his disposal by some other institution. Indeed there are many instances where such uneconomic results have followed the introduction of land reform measures. On the other hand, supporters of land reform have been quick to realize that the psychological release which new conditions of ownership gives can and must be used to a productive purpose by augmenting the resources and opportunities available to farmers.

In fact in several countries where the pressure on land is by no means heavy, land reform is coming to mean a programme of offering inducements to farmers, especially to small farmers, to remain on land. This is possible only if the productivity of land is raised to a level comparable to that of alternative non-agricultural pursuits. While, therefore, a redistributive and a welfare object is inherent in measures of land reform it is being increasingly recognized that this object can be served on a firm and improving basis only if adequate steps are taken to augment the opportunities for productive use of land and labour available to the new farmers. Not only more equal distribution but also more productive utilization of land is now recognized to be the proper content of land reform designed to maximize the welfare of farmers.

In the process of land reform it is only natural that attention is first attracted by intermediary holders who do not appear to play any essential role in the function of farming. Such holders of ownership rights are easily dispossessed without causing serious social or economic dislocation, though problems of the size and manner of payment of compensation have to be faced. Where the land owners play some part in cultivation, either of a direct or an indirect nature, questions of instituting a ceiling, that is a maximum limit, of ownership arise. The ceiling may be based on the concept of an optimum production unit, or on that of a unit which would provide to the holder a decent living, or it might be based on a purely expedient consideration as to how much can be taken away without causing serious social discontent, or alternatively, how much must be taken away so as to create at least a sizeable pool for distribution among legitimate claimants. According to the circumstances of each country one or the other of these considerations tends to prevail.

There is, however, a balancing social objective which has been in evidence. As the merits of better utilization of land as a constituent of land reform come to be better recognized the breakup of a big farm, estate or plantation which is obviously run on efficient and progressive lines purely on the basis of a quantitative measure is not treated with equanimity. Exceptional treatment of such farms is in some way and in some cases held to be justified. If the farm is left with present owners standards of progressive and efficient cultivation, coupled with safeguarding of the legitimate claims of farm workers, are prescribed as a condi-

tion of tenure. If the land is taken away a breakup of the farm, and lowering of the standards of its cultivation are sought to be avoided by transferring it to a group who may, with suitable assistance, jointly farm it on an efficient level. If the beneficiaries of redistribution are from among the workers on the farm and if their access to the means of efficient cultivation is not disturbed no serious lowering of standards of cultivation observed in big and efficient farms is apprehended. It is, however, interesting that some preventive or ameliorative action in regard to large-sized progressive farms has formed part of measures of land reform.

One direct implication of the process of dispossession at one end and re-conferment or re-institution at the other end is that the concept of land-ownership is treated in a historical, social and functional manner, without paying too great a heed to absolute or legalistic rights of property. The impress of this expedient, as opposed to a fundamental approach to rights of ownership is seen in the tenure under which rights of land use are conferred on the new holders. It is true that in a general manner the rights of the new holders are described as ownership or proprietary rights. But they are hedged by so many special circumstances and conditions that they are no longer a mere replica on a smaller scale of the rights which were expropriated. The very fact that they are the creatures of state action taken in support of a new social policy, and in contravention of established rights, gives to the new holders an essentially beneficiary status, which can only have a social and functional justification. Whether the new rights are to be conferred on individuals or on groups, whether they are to be in respect of specific pieces of land or whether whole areas like villages have to be vested in communities are issues for which the answers are sought more in social than in legal terms. Nor that concepts of legal or prescriptive rights are excluded. But these are more the form than the substance. Expediency in the social interest is the substantial motive force behind most of the land reform measures adopted on a large scale.

The underlying purpose of land reform is both social and economic. That access to the essential means of agricultural occupation should be widely distributed is its starting point. In many cases this urge fulfils or exhausts itself with the mere act of redistribution of ownership or possessory rights in land. In a few cases where the urge to equality is deeply ringed with ideals of corporate life based on a higher concept of non-discriminatory common possession the ideal of land reform has reached its height in the setting up of real co-operative or collective commonwealths, such as the *Kibbutzim* in Israel. But quite obviously in this development much more than mere land reform, or for that matter even more than sharing of material advantages, is involved. But other forms of joint ownership or of joint operation following on land reform measures have occasionally been promoted in the best interests of maximizing welfare.

Insofar as land reform is a means to an end, the end of maximizing total welfare consistently with its equalitarian distribution, it entails several organizational features, without which the mere legislative or redistributive acts have no enduring significance. If the means of efficient production are within reach of an individual farmer his association with others becomes more an act of social choice than of economic necessity. But where conditions of agricultural production

are such that individual operation except on a very large scale cannot be economical or efficient, the formation of associated groups of owning cultivators becomes a part of land reform aiming at maximization of welfare. Group tenures and group operation of land thus become relevant. Occasionally group or community tenures have a historical origin, which strengthens the urge towards vesting reconstituted rights more in the collective group than in the participating individuals.

Whether possession and use are joint or several, there are many aspects of successful and progressive utilization of land which have to be deliberately organized if land reform is to yield the positive results expected from it. The advantages of large scale operation are not only technological, but they are also managerial. In the absence of the planning and guidance which comes from a big landlord the newly created small farmers are apt to suffer from a serious deterioration or stagnation of standards of cultivation. The research and extension services which are necessary and desirable even when landholding is on a substantial scale become indispensable aids to efficient cultivation in the context of smallholders. Extension has to take in a wide variety of technical as well as operative and organizational features, ranging from the small difficulties of farmers in regard to individual crops, to the whole pattern of crops and the system of tillage.

Extension has often been identified as an educative or information service. As an accompaniment of land reform, however, extension has to be supported by more positive services. The most obvious is the need for supplies which as a rule would for quite some time after land reform measures have been initiated have to be supplied on credit. The assessment, provision, supervision and recovery of credit constitute a group of essential services to farmers which have been differently organized in each country. But it would be no exaggeration to say that the measure of success of even a well-designed programme of land reform has varied strictly with the measure of efficient extension and credit. The technical or operational advantage available to small farmers have to keep pace with the progress of science and industry. Only an organized scheme of extension, which is well served at one end by applied research and at the other by an adequate service of supply, can ensure this.

Under modern conditions production on the farm is mostly for the purpose of sale in the market. Successful agriculture, therefore, depends as much on strong bargaining position as on access to technically efficient means. In a few instances action by the state by way of price supports, procurement and protective legislation has ensured the advantages of a favourable market to small growers. Even when such measures have proved effective, they can amount to no more than an act of protection. But if the full advantage of these measures to enhance the productivity and profitableness of agriculture is to be reaped by farmers, they must be organized on a more self-reliant, co-operative and enterprising basis. In fact in many states, where the unit of cultivation is not too small, it is for maximization of bargaining power that farmers have co-operated to build marketing organizations. With the best of protective policy on the part of the state unless farmers are well organized to hold their own in a balance of social forces their share in collective welfare would tend to be less than what is deserved by the measure and quality of their effort. Insofar as land reform aims at maximizing the welfare of farmers these aspects have also to be kept in view.

All these effects, distributive no less than productive, have to be kept in view while evaluating land reform measures. It is not quite an uncommon experience to have a recurrence of a new set of intermediaries, after one set has been removed. Functionless privileges or excessive earnings by intermediaries tend to relodge in the social structure from which they have once been removed. A close study of the actual situation, as it changes from stage to stage, can alone reveal the existence of these undesirable trends. The conditions of employment of the farmer, his real earnings and the level of his living must be studied together to ascertain how far a land reform programme has succeeded in its purpose. Even where anything like a realistic appraisal of these effects is feasible it would still be incomplete without reference to the employment opportunities of persons who are either left out or have been displaced. A qualitative success which is earned at the cost of leaving a large part of the affected group without adequate measure of attention, is only a partial achievement. It would pose a further problem which would need urgent solution.

Conditions of acute unemployment and under-employment in rural areas have often caused a large and continuous exodus to towns. Wherever there is heavy pressure on land, this is an almost universal phenomenon. Such exodus takes place without much reference to employment opportunities in the urban areas. Conditions of widespread unemployment only partially relieved by some form of social assistance characterize the metropolitan areas of many under-developed countries. Agrarian reform has, therefore, to be judged as part of the total programme of economic development of the whole country. Curiously enough not only total under-development, but even unbalanced development yields the same conditions of rural unsettlement. In many developed countries conditions of employment and earning in the rural sector compare unfavourably with those obtaining in cities. Levels and standards of living offer even more striking divergences. The techniques of production are undergoing such rapid changes that nowhere can the present arrangements in agriculture be treated as static. Capital formation, progressive technical change and suitable organizational methods are continuing requirements of a sound rural economy. In the current context of science and integrated economic life land reform measures have to be judged from the standpoint of their efficacy as aids to the realization of the maximum rate of growth for the community as well as for the individual.

The merits of a pattern of land reform are not always primarily or exclusively traceable to physical or organizational factors. The clear enunciation of the values, social, moral or economic, in support of which a reform measure is being undertaken is necessary for its success. Even more essential is a faith and a determination to realize these values. Reform measures entail so much destruction and reconstruction that unless the depth of appreciation and the vigour of promotional effort are strong and sustained, there is an ever present risk of surrender to half-measures and to half-way stops. The realization of the claims of a changed order has to be so strong and sustained as to overcome these natural moods and stages of weakness, which have attended many land reform measures.

A very significant factor in the practical success of land reform is the effect which it has on the attitude and incentives of those who are favourably affected by it. For the new possessors of land and of the means to cultivate it on a higher

standard of efficiency the reform should mean a veritable renaissance. With the best of material and organizational incentives a reform measure would fail if it does not promote a feeling of self-reliant and progressive living on the part of the individual. How to recreate and maximize the urge of individual initiative and economic incentive as part of a social system in which conscious community action plays an increasing role is a problem which faces society as a whole. This problem of reconciling social sponsoring with individual initiative and responsibility is not peculiar to the agrarian sector. Its special acuteness in the context of land reforms arises from the fact that a number of new individual units are created by an act of social reorganization which can, however, realize its best purposes only through self-reliant and progressive action taken by them, both individually and jointly. Experience in this regard is, naturally, not always as happy as authors of land reform measures would desire.