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BACKGROUND PAPERS FOR DISCUSSION

AT

THE INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR

ON

"COMPARATIVE EXPERIENCE OF AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES SINCE WORLD WAR II"

NEW DELHI

25th, 26th, 27th and 28th OCTOBER. 1971

THE INDIAN SOCIETY OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS
46-48, Esplanade Mansions, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Fort,
BOMBAY-1.

AGRARIAN REFORM IN ASIA

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From the experience of Japan and Taiwan and from that of India one may learn why so few reforms in Asia have suceeded and so many have not. Neither success nor failure can be attributed primarily to the presence or absence of experts or to a special reform mystique. The usefulness of facts, figures and preparatory work no one can deny; but reforms cannot be "researched" or "studied" into existence. Of far greater importance is the acceptance of the reform idea, to begin with, in such a manner that technical problems are not an excuse for inaction but something to be resolved. There is no country in Asia, however underdeveloped, which does not know how to write a reform law, or what its implications might be. They have written them, and many have not been carried out--precisely because the political decision-makers understood their implications and their inevitable repercussions.

The politicians make or unmake agrarian reforms. It is they who provide the impetus or lack of impetus, who decide between reform and "reform". They alone can create a condition "when the economic sails are filled with political wind".[1] There is no gainsaying the fact that the economic environment, population pressure on the land, and customary

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* Extract. Wolf Ladejinsky, "Agrarian Reform in Asia, Foreign Affairs - An American Quarterly Review, Vol. 42, Nos. 1-4, October 1963 - April 1964, New York, Sections V and VI, pp. 455-460.

1 Doreen Warriner, "Land Reform and Development in the Middle East". London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1957, p.9.

@ Sections I-IV have been dropped.

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relationships sanctioned by a long history of social and religious traditions exert great influence on what happens to legislation designed to break old institutional molds. But this does not invalidate the main premise--that the content and implementation of agrarian reform are a reflection of a particular political balance of forces in a country. This premise assumes even greater significance in Asia because the peasants themselves, while discontented, have not developed a movement, whether in the form of tenant-unions like those of Japan before the reforms, or peasant political parties like those of East Europe after the First World War. For a time, the Communists in Hyderabad, Tanjore and Kerala exploited the peasant grievances for their own ends; the Communist Huks in Central Luzon played a similar role. For the most part, however, the peasants behaved as if any change in their condition depended upon somebody else. By their apathy they have disproved the reasonable assumption that in an agricultural country a government must have peasant support. The fact is that national and state legislatures in Asia do not represent the interests of the peasantry; if they did, reform might have taken on a different character altogether. The reality is that even where voting is free, the peasantry in Asia is not yet voting its own interests. Except in Japan, the peasants do not yet know that they can be bearers <u>and</u> recipients of political gifts; the idea that "we support those who support us" has yet to take root. More important, then, is the role of the articulate and politically powerful pro-reform groups.

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In Japan and in Taiwan both the forces which were indigenous and those which were created as a result of the war favored a drastic agrarian reform and a redistribution of income and social and political power. In the case of Japan, the defeat by the United States and the American influence as an occupying power were crucial in the timing of the reform but were of only limited importance in giving it a radical character. Other factors were also the memories of peasant rebellions; the numerous, if unsuccessful, prewar reform measures; the strong tenant-unions; the windfall of the Communist opposition to the "MacArthur reform"; the emergence of large groups of Japanese who were disillusioned with the old oligarchy; and an eager and active pro-reform leadership in the Ministry of Agriculture which drafted the enabling legislation. This "political wind" found expression in the firm proposition that "those who cultivate the soil of Japan shall enjoy the fruits of their labor". This meant clearly defined provisions, a minimum of half-measures and a minimum of loopholes. Similarly on the enforcement side, the reformers recognized not only that the cultivators had to be made aware of the essence of the main provisions, but that they--and only they--had to be the true implementors of the reform if it were to succeed. This attitude led to the creation of a practical enforcement agency, the local land commissions--so far shunned by all other countries engaged in reform save Taiwan.

The situation in Taiwan on the eve of the reforms was not the same as in Japan, but here, too, special circumstances--primarily non-economic or sociological--created the setting for action. The final decision rested with the politicians or, more specifically, with a political

and military leader. The Communist victory on the mainland and the subsequent prevalent belief among the Nationalist politicians that the Communists won because of the promise of land to the tillers played a crucial role in creating the favourable climate. Certain elements in the Nationalist ideology worked to the same end, especially when the beleaguered government realized it needed greater social stability as a means to military security. But none of these factors might have sufficed were it not for the fact that General Chen-Cheng, then Governor of Taiwan and an influential member of the Nationalist Party, had resolved that rural Taiwan was to undergo a thorough change. The tone having been set, the technicians played their important role, fully conscious for whose benefit the reforms were meant. It was the good fortune of Taiwan that the Joint (Chinese-American) Commission on Rural Reconstruction was on the scene to help provide invaluable social, economic and technological advice. The result was a program of lasting agricultural development, as well as of a redistribution of income. The combination of the two prevented the redistribution of income from degenerating into a mere passing phase of peasant welfare.

To return to India : while the need for reform there is surely as great as in any country in Asia, the difficulties in the way are incomparably greater. Among them are the sheer size of the subcontinent; the administrative decentralization, with each state a law unto itself; the paucity of good land records; the fact that a third of the tenanted land belongs to owners with five acres or less; the fierce competition for any tillable plot of land on almost any terms; the lack of peasant initiative and

his inability to comprehend the complex laws; the poor prospects for alternative occupations despite the country's progress of industrialization; and the millions more people added annually to the already overcrowded land.

All these are sufficient to give one pause before rendering any hasty judgment about the tortuous and far from successful path of Indian reforms (other, that is, than the elimination of the zamindari). And yet the handicaps, especially the technical handicaps, do not quite explain why so much of the intent of the reforms is still unrealized. There are States in India which have demonstrated that, given strong leadership, many of the problems can be overcome. What is significant is that most of the handicaps, including the principal one--poor enforcement or nonenforcement--are not always causes but in a large measure consequences of attitudes displayed by state politicians and legislatures. This anti-reform sentiment has proved to be a crucial element in thwarting India's expectations.

By extension, and with variations, the same is true of most Asian countries. In the Asian political milieu, vague and complicated measures generously seeded with loopholes naturally become the rule, and so do evasions resulting from great delays in legislative enactments. It also is natural that little effort is made to explain to the peasants the ABCs of the enactments or to propagate the idea that they are the beneficiaries of the reforms. The assertion is sometimes heard that the tenancy problem need not be taken too seriously; this is not surprising either. It is understandable, too, that enforcement officers mostly behave as if reforms are not meant to be enforced, and with the same impunity as that enjoyed by those whom they are supposed to police. Nor is it surprising

that they do not seek the assistance of the peasants in implementing measures that affect them so directly. And yet they are the authentic experts who know who is who in the village, who owns what, and who is entitled to what once the nature of the reform is clear to them.

Clearly, the key to successful reform in Asia is the degree to which the controlling political forces of a country are willing to support reform and their readiness to use all instruments of government to attain their goals. Those against whom the reforms are directed will not divest themselves of their property and of political and economic power simply because a government wrote out a decree. Besides, despite the threat of Communism, the great fears generated by the French Revolution or by the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 are not immediately in evidence in Asia. The conclusion is inescapable: if the peasantry is to get what is promised, peaceful and democratically managed reforms are not going to fill the bill. Government coercion, whether practiced or clearly threatened, is virtually unavoidable.

It is generally supposed that the Japanese and Taiwanese reforms and the abolition of the zamindari system in India were peaceful affairs. A closer look will reveal that they were peaceful because the landlords in the first two countries knew that overt opposition would have met with drastic punishment. In India, the zamindars knew that public opinion was overwhelmingly against them; and as the British went, they went. The Taiwanese reform took place under the aegis of a military-authoritarian government. It is unlikely that General Chen-Cheng, the activist of the reform, had ever read Theodore Mommsen's comment on how,

having killed Tiberius Gracchus for his land-reform efforts, his murderers later on went about enforcing his project. "Loud and often well-founded as were the complaints", Mommsen wrote, "the Senate let the (land) commission have its way; for it was clear that if the land question was to be settled at all, some such unceremonious vigor was necessary".[2] General Chen-Cheng left no doubt in the mind of the opposition that he was ready to proceed with a good deal of "unceremonious vigor".

The story of why few agrarian reforms in Asia have succeeded and why many more are in the doldrums is not a cheerful one, but the end is not yet. For a number of reasons the reform movement will continue to demand attention. Most of the countries in Asia are greatly in need of increasing agricultural production, and they all recognize the role agriculture could and should play as a source of developmental funds. There is a rising awareness of how much the success of this depends on incentives which the existing land-tenure system does not provide. This is now particularly recognized in India. But there are other considerations which augur well for the eventual liberation of the Asian peasantry.

Regardless of the meagre results so far, any preoccupation with agrarian reform represents an advance. It serves notice that the issue will not just go away. The mere writing and passing of reform laws is a good thing,

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2 Theodore Mommsen, "The History of Rome". New York: Meridian Books, 1958, p.54.

even if they are deficient and their execution is obstructed. Their very existence is a promise to the tenants and a threat to the landlord, even though it often is not immediately perceptible. For even though the cards are still stacked in their favor, many landlords are in a troubled state of mind, nor about the plight of their tenants but about their own future. They know that this is not the last round in their tug of war with the tenants. Some of the provisions most damaging to them are still on the statute books, and some day someone may venture to apply them. They recognize that the old order in the countryside is not what it used to be and wonder whether their best days may not be over. This uneasiness is not widespread but on the other hand it is not rare.

These are significant straws in the wind, but if they are to be capitalized upon, if agrarian reform is to be attained sooner rather than later, pressure will have to be applied by a dominating political group willing to face the issue squarely, willing to bring into play all the institutional resources of a country, and willing, if need be, to act with "unceremonious vigor". This is the only road of progress until the day when the peasantry becomes a source of authority and a mainspring of change. But in whatever way it comes, in most instances the realization of agrarian reform is a precondition of the economic, social, political and technological changes without which democracy in Asia has no bright future.