

Re-distribution of Land

ACHARYA VINOBA BHAVE'S presence in Delhi this week served to focus the attention of the Central Government officials and the leading members of the public of this city to certain fundamental aspects of our economy. At a Press Conference held here on Tuesday he explained the genesis, object and progress of his campaign since September 12 to obtain land gifts for distribution among landless peasants. Inequalities of wealth, he pointed out, are the basic malady of our society and unless these are removed, there cannot be economic welfare, social contentment or political stability in the country. The recent agrarian troubles in Telangana districts, inspired by the Communists, had shown Shri Vinoba Bhave that unless the problem of land distribution is urgently tackled and solved, this country would soon face serious agrarian discontent and might even have to face a bloody revolution. At present cultivable land is unequally distributed, and increasingly profits go to absentee landlords.

Shri Bhave has undertaken a walking tour with a view to appealing to the zamindars, big landlords and absentee owners to make land gifts so that they could be transferred to the landless labour. He has already covered 800 miles on foot during the past 61 days. He has carried his message through Madhya Bharat, Vindhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Over 15,000 acres of land gift were received in Telangana districts and nearly a third of this land had already been distributed to the landless. During his tour in North India he has received gifts to the extent of 21,000 acres. Acharya Bhave has fixed an all-India target of 50 million acres to be obtained in the course of the next five years. He proposes to continue his walking tour through UP and other States till his target is reached and the importance of the land problem properly appreciated by the public.

Though Acharya Bhave's campaign has now attracted considerable attention there are many who believe that, though most commendable, his personal appeals and efforts cannot yield substantial results to correct the inequality of

land distribution in India. They think that the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer, both in our agricultural and industrial sector, is an inevitable development. Is it so? Should the "expropriators" be expropriated violently through a bloody uprising? Can it not be effected otherwise, non-violently and through love? Mahatma Gandhi believed in the principle of property being considered as a sacred trust to be utilised for the public benefit. He believed, and tried to demonstrate, that the class warfare as the socialists understand it, can be avoided and that the employer and the employee, the zamindar and the tenant and the rich and the poor can be made to co-operate for the country's economic betterment and political stability. He appealed to the "Haves" for "a change of heart" and certainly produced remarkable results on certain occasions. He appealed to the mighty British imperialists to quit India peacefully and started non-violent satyagraha campaign; the British did quit peacefully. Perhaps such great revolutionary changes can still be effected in our agricultural and industrial sectors through a correct application of Gandhiji's methods and principles.

At any rate, it is the firm belief of Acharya Bhave and his followers. They have a faith that the people of this country understand and react to Gandhian technique in a way which outsiders may not understand. The land gifts obtained by Shri Vinoba Bhave are by no means insignificant and if public response continues as hitherto, he would have done something to help landless peasants at least in a few areas in the country. Even if he fails to achieve his target, his tours will have served to demonstrate to the Government, the upper classes and others the explosive possibilities of the widespread land hunger in the country. He will have at least created a favourable atmosphere for the popular Ministries to initiate drastic agrarian reforms.

The importance of the land distribution problem can be correctly appreciated only if one remembers certain basic data about our economy. All statistical data during

the past four decades show: (1) that the dependence on agriculture is increasing, (2) that the ratio of landless labourers to total agricultural population is continually moving upward, and (3) agricultural holdings are fast becoming smaller and smaller, broken down to uneconomic strips.

The number of landless labourers in India was estimated at 7½ million in 1882. It increased to 21.5 million in 1921 and 33 million in 1931. By 1944 it had risen to 68 million. The number of cultivators owning 5 acres and less is fast increasing and owing to indebtedness, natural calamities like floods, draught, and other reasons the poorer landholders are being obliged to sell out their lands just to eke out a living. Further, with the comparative prosperity of the bigger landholders while the smaller ones are faced with economic distress, the process of land passing from the poorer to the richer sections of the rural population appears to have been accelerated.

Another factor which contributed to the growth of landless labour is the aborigines taking to civilised life in the villages instead of remaining in jungles. In the nineteenth century, emigration afforded scope for reducing the number of landless proletariat. But now the situation has changed. Indians who had gone abroad are being oppressed and are eager to come back.

Not only is the number of the landless increasing; the available land is also getting concentrated in the hands of non-agriculturists, absentees and the urban interests. In Bombay State, for instance, there were about 27 million acres under cultivation in 1942-43. Out of this over 30 million acres were composed of holdings of 5 acres and less. It has also been shown that between 1916 and 1942 the percentage of non-agriculturists to all holders of land increased from 9.3 to 22 and land in their possession rose from 12 to 30.8 per cent of the total cultivated land. The position was very much similar in other Provinces, if not worse. Over two-thirds of the land in the country are today cultivated by people who do not own it. In several States 5 per cent of the holders have more than 25 per cent of the cultivated area.

Whether it is socially and politically wise to allow this concentration of wealth and economic power in our agricultural sector needs

careful examination. Land is in short, supply and should be well distributed. Agricultural output can increase only if peasant proprietors or co-operative farms take the place of absentee landlords and urban owners. In India the scope for big size farms is limited. The financial resources and managerial talent available do not permit of big farms. Redistribution, therefore, is justified. The Government may try to effect a more equitable distribution by legislation. Shri Vinoba Bhave tries to do the same by appealing to the good sense of the landlords.

It is, however, wrong to think that the Government in India are doing nothing about this question. In fact zamindari abolition acts in UP, Bihar, Madras and other States are meant to prepare the ground for a peaceful transfer of land to the actual cultivators. The move on the part of the States to fix a ceiling to holdings can also contribute to a better distribution of land removing the intermediaries between the cultivator and the owner. It may be recalled that in 1946 a Conference of the Provincial Labour Ministers was held to examine the condition of landless labour and evolve proposals for their improvement. In accordance with the recommendations of this Conference, the Government have instituted economic enquiries (in about 600 chosen centres) to collect data pertaining to landless labour. The minimum Wages Act of 1948 seeks to fix minimum rates of wages for agricultural labour and is expected to be implemented by 1953. Shri Vinoba Bhave's campaign should serve to warn the Government that agrarian reforms and fixation of fair wages to agricultural labour should be hurried up. Communism is spreading in the territories adjacent to India: a "World War between Communism and Democracy" appears to be quite probable. It is therefore prudent for India not to permit large-scale land hunger and agrarian distress.

Establishment of panchayats, decentralisation of production and distribution, peasant proprietor system, fair wages to labour—these are powerful weapons for democracy. The Planning Commission, it is to be hoped, will take due note of the agrarian situation emphasised by Shri Bhave. Proposals to withdraw idle rural population into industrial occupations and giving highest prio-

riety to small scale and cottage industries alone can mitigate the growing demographic pressure on land. The framers of the Draft Five-year

Plan do not appear to have realised this. Shri Vinoba's visit to the Capital should help them to review their development schemes suitably.

Socialism and Nationalisation

A MEETING of a new Socialist International was held at Frankfurt this summer. At this meeting a strange trend in Socialist thought emerged: A declaration stated that "Socialist Planning does not presuppose the ownership of all the means of production".

This diametrically opposes the principal generalizations of the Marxian philosophy. It is a trend that at the first sight seems to be curious.

A French economist has put this development more sarcastically. He wrote, "Times have apparently changed, and no one would deny today that socialism is the right to exploit at a loss monopolies which were previously profitable".

This change of attitude among Socialists is beginning to appear in different countries of Europe and notably in France where the number of State enterprises are the highest in number. In New Zealand the Conservatives have returned to the saddle after a long spell of Socialist rule due to its policies that burdened the Government finances of the nationalized industries. That forced the New Zealand Labour Party to drop its plans for state ownership from its programs.

Asad plight faces the French nationalized industries. Excepting a few industries like potash mines, shipping and banking, where management is largely independent of the Government, all other industries recorded a sharp fall in their income. "The railways have lost 226 billion francs in five periods. Electricity has lost seven billion francs since 1946. Gas lost 37 billion francs in 1948 and 1949. Coal mines lost 7.5 billion francs between 1946 and 1948. And the airplane industry lost 3.5 billion francs by the end of 1949. The two Government organizations concerned with the Cinema business lost 53 million francs by the end of 1948; the radio system nine million; the press organization 1200 million, and Agence France Presse lost a

billion francs in 1949". A rough estimate for 1950 gives the total losses on state enterprises at 200 billion francs at least.

The picture in Britain, where nationalisation is more recent, is not too rosy. Though a few nationalised industries recorded profits accompanied with a steep rise in selling prices, the nationalised civil airlines lost 38 million sterling between 1946 and March 1950 and the nationalised transport industry has lost another 38 million sterling.

The causes for this decreasing returns are not far to seek. Poor management is the most important factor in this bottleneck. "As bottlenecks are found at the top of the bottle, the nationalized industry also faces difficulties at the top." Socialist parties, according to their political belief cannot pay high salaries to top executives and their appointments are made on party basis.

When the salary is low, profit motive is eliminated, free competition is unjustified, it is impossible to get the best man at the top. And when the disease could settle at the top it could spread easily right down through all levels of the organization.

And now, when they had that the nationalisation has this "Midas-touch-in-reverse", the Socialist economists are trying to find alternative asylum. The appearance of losses almost immediately on nationalisation has thoroughly discredited their nationalisation policy and it is doubtful whether they would be able to recoup their lost ground. One of the important factors that led the victory of the Conservative Party in the recent election in England was made possible by the Labour Government's failure in its nationalisation policy. It is now heard that R. A. Butler, the policy-maker of the Conservative Party and one of its most powerful men, has come out for the denationalization of railways. It is yet to be seen whether there would be businessmen ready to buy these loosing concerns.