The Kashmir Land Reforms
Some Personal Impressions

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Towards the end of April, 1953, I went up to Kashmir. I looked forward to the visit with more than the normal eagerness of one who had never before seen the celebrated valley. How many times over the course of the previous winter I had been told that if I wanted to find real land reforms in India I should go to Kashmir. As described in Delhi, Bombay, and Madras, the measures taken by the Kashmir Government sounded most impressive. Jagirs and similar special grants had been abolished. Debt conciliation boards had been set up and were operating so vigorously, I was informed, that they amounted to debt cancellation boards. Rents had been lowered. Security of tenure had been provided for the tillers. A ceiling, on all landholdings, had been set at 22¾ acres. All arable land above that figure had been taken away from the owners and redistributed.

I was lucky enough to meet a young Kashmiri schoolmaster who knew something of village life and was willing to accompany me on my explorations. We began by simply walking down the back lanes leading out of Srinagar. Before long we had cleared the last of the suburban villas, and were walking across open fields. The first village we reached was a hamlet of a few dozen houses. Here, with the help of some children, we were able to collect a group of cultivators who had just returned from the fields for their late-morning meal. Only when ten of these fellows had gathered together did they begin to speak freely to us. Land reform had come to their village only three months before. It appeared that an absentee landlord had owned a large tract of land in another village nearby. He was legally stripped of this land, most of which went to the peasants of that village. There was, however, some poor quality land left over. This marshy land had been given free to the men to whom we were speaking. Each one had got a small plot (from one-quarter to one-half acre in size) on condition that he make it productive. In order to make this soggy waste yield crops, each of these previously landless labourers said he had had to borrow something like Rs 100, for implements, seed, hire of bullocks, etc. (This figure may well have: been an exaggeration.) They did not hope to earn enough money to pay off these debts but planned to work them out by doing day’s labour on fields belonging to the moneylender.

Our informants felt that they were better off than before the land reform. But they complained bitterly that while they gained only a fraction of an acre apiece, people in the neighbouring village who already owned land had been able to get additional land and of much better quality. I told them I would go to the neighbouring village and check this for myself. Just before I left, they told me that out of 1800 people in their village (several hamlets taken together) only ten families had enough land to grow the food necessary to feed themselves throughout the year. The rest do what work they can or try to pick up casual jobs in Srinagar, where there has been for some years a serious unemployment problem!

Different Versions

The next day we went to the neighbouring village to see if we could find some of the local landholders about whom we had heard so much complaint. We soon met one of the chief of these, who presented his side of the story clearly and forcefully. Before the land reform, he said, there had been two kinds of land in the village: 300 acres of maruši (ancestral) land which the peasants owned and tilled themselves, and about 650 acres which were held by an absentee landlord living in Srinagar. As a result of the reforms the landlord had lost almost all of these 650 acres. About 500 acres had been under cultivation by tenants. These acres had been turned over to the tenants who were cultivating them. About 120 acres had been under water since the floods of 1950. This land the Government had bunched so that cultivation was once again possible. These 120 acres were distributed in February and March of 1953 to landless labourers, of nearby villages, in patches of one-quarter to one-half of an acre in some cases, and as much as two acres in other cases.

According to the spokesman for the local landholders, the principle of the division was to give the drained land to those peasants who had cultivated it before the floods. He explained to me one point about which the recipients of the chained land had expressed their grievances the day before. The limit on land-owning under the Abolition of Large Holdings Act of 1950 was set at 22¾ acres. No peasant in the village at that time had been cultivating or holding this amount of land whether as patwari, as a tenant of the absentee landlord, or as a combination of the two. No peasant, in fact, had held more than fourteen acres of maruši land before the reform, and none had gained more than eight acres from the former holdings of the absentee landlord. So, although it was true that peasants who already held land had been given more land, everything that had been done was altogether proper and legal under the terms of the land reform act, which simply provided that the lands taken away from absentee owners should be turned over to the cultivating tenants so long as each peasant’s total did not exceed the stipulated 22¾ acres (182 kanals).

The Official Story

Curious to see how this version of the operation of the land reforms would stand up to investigation, I returned to the first village. As my Kashmiri companion and I walked into the main village lane, we saw two men on a bicycle turn off and go to the house of the numberdar (the local official in charge of collecting land revenue). While we stood there, curious as to who these men might be, the numberdar threw open an upstairs window, saw us down in the lane, and beckoned to us to come in also. He then directed us to the two men who had already entered. One turned out to be the patwari (keeper of village records) of a nearby hamlet; the other, to our great pleasure, was the Halqa President of the whole area. The Halqa is the local organization of the
GUARDS AT POWER STATIONS

Outwitting the thunderbolt is a task achieved by G-E Engineers. When a few million volts of lightning hit a transmission line, a high-voltage wave goes galloping along the wire. If it were allowed to surge into the power station or into the transformer at the end of the line, sparks would fly and expensive apparatus would be damaged. So G-E Engineers have built traps for this extra surge. They are called LIGHTNING ARRESTORS. They don't stop lightning, but merely shunt it out of the way to ground and harmlessly dispose of it.

G-E's THYRITE Station Type LIGHTNING ARRESTORS are on guard duty at most of the large power systems in India, namely, Tata Hydro, Mysore Government, the Madras Grid, Punjab Government, Damodar Valley Corporation and at several new projects under construction.

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This is General Electric's 50th Anniversary of Service in India.
Kashmir National Conference, the political group which, under the leadership of Sheikh Abdullah, had carried on a long agitation against the old Maharaja's regime, had taken over power in 1947, and had held it ever since. When we told the Halqa President what kind of an inquiry we were making, and how we had got two quite different stories as to what had been done with the absentee landlord's confiscated acres, he readily agreed to give us his own version of the affair.

He began by telling us that there were dozen villages in his Halqa. In one dozen there had been land redistribution. Conditions in these villages, he said, were now much better than before. Everyone got two square meals a day. In the remaining villages of his Halqa, things remained much as they always had been. Now as to the 650-acre holding, that had been the biggest in his Halqa. The sarmayadars (moneyed ones), the village officials, and the khadpanches (people, who hang around the village officials in the hope of gaining influence or wealth) had in these 650 acres a substantial prize and an unprecedented opportunity for rewarding themselves and their friends. Under the circumstances people with money and connections had been able to acquire more land than was due them under the terms of the Act. Those who already were the larger village landholders were in the best position to receive additional allotments. It was of course true that some of the sarmayadars and khadpanches had been cultivating portions of the absentee landlord's holding as tenants. In other cases, however, this simply had not been true. The result the Halqa President described as "a new kind of Jagirdari."

What should have been done, the Halqa President said, was to give some land to the better-off peasants (those with bullocks, ploughs, money, etc.) and much land to the poor and the landless. They should not have been given the worst land to the poor and the best land to those with the most resources. He was not satisfied either with the way the land reforms had been manipulated or with the principle on which the 1950 Abolition of Large Holdings Act was based. The land taken from landlords should be handed over to the tenants in the amounts which they held as tenants up to a maximum per capita holding of 22¾ acres. He was particularly disturbed by the knowledge that one of the Halqa officials under him had managed to hold on to more than the prescribed 22¾ acres, despite the fact that he was not really a cultivator but a contractor, a brick kiln owner, and a trader. We ended up with the impression that the Halqa President was a well-meaning but weak man, who, by remaining honest, had remained poor.

EVADE THE LAW

After hearing the Halqa President's version, we decided to return to the sarmayadar's village and ask a few questions. This time we met the numberdar (people of the larger village, who invited us to sit down in a shady spot inside his sizable compound). When asked about the progress of the land reforms, he began by repeating what we had previously heard from the sarmayadar. Everything had been fair and equitable. The land of the former landlord had been given only to the former tenant cultivators. The sole exceptions were the landless labourers who had been given the small bits formerly under water. Under questioning, however, he conceded that there had been some irregularities. Some of the well-off families in the village, when they got wind of the impending land reforms, had gone through the legal forms of breaking up their joint families. Thus they were entitled to 22¾ acres per adult male. He gave us the names of three or four families which had adopted this procedure, although all members of the family still lived under a common roof and took their meals together.

We asked the numberdar how many families in his village earned enough from farming to meet their expenses. There were about 200 families in all, he replied, of which about twenty now held enough land to maintain themselves. He further added that there were about twenty-five families who found it exceedingly difficult to pay the land revenue due to the Government. Since it was his duty to collect this revenue (or else make up the difference out of his own pocket), he nevertheless took it from them.

At this point in the discussion it started to rain, so the numberdar invited us to come indoors and sit in the small detached building he used as a reception room and guest house. Here we were soon joined by a handsome youngster who was introduced as the sarpanch of this and half-a-dozen nearby villages. He had been elected to the post two years previously, and his principal duty was village reformation and development. Entering into the discussion with us, the sarpanch quickly conceded that three or four Lurnnies had acquired more land than the 22¾ acres maximum, and that they had achieved this by ostensibly dividing up their families. As for himself and his three brothers, they held a total of less than twenty acres, he said.

The sarpanch expressed the view that the arrangements for land redistribution were unjust. He did not himself feel that a peasant who already held thirteen acres of marusi land should have obtained six or seven additional acres from the dispossessed landlord, just because he happened to be the tenant of that landlord. This, of course, had been the view expressed the day before by the Halqa President. The sarpanch went on to some more general comments. In China, lie observed, land reforms had started at the bottom. Every village had its own land reform committee. They had redistributed the land in the best interests of the people. They were not under the thumb of the old bureaucracy, which had been abolished. In "New Kashmir", by contrast, the old bureaucracy still functioned. The same tehsildars, deputed as officers on special duty, had performed the actual work of redistribution of land. It had not been done by the peasants themselves. There were no peasant committees set up, as envisaged in the "New Kashmir" Constitution drawn up by the National Conference as a statement of social and economic goals in 1944. The result of retaining the old officials and entrusting the land reforms to them was a triumph for corruption and favouritism.

It was a most curious sensation to hear this from the lips of the sarpanch. We had already been told by several persons, including the Halqa President, that in the land reforms the sarpanch had managed to do very well for himself and for the other members of his family. Yet here he was criticizing the land reforms sharply from a left-wing position, while continuing to hold the office of sarpanch, and to function as a member of the National Conference. We later found out that he had been the Halqa President before the present one. It also turned out that he was the son of the numberdar, in whose guest room we were sitting, the walls of which were
decorated with large portraits of Lenin and Stalin. The numberdar, it may be noted, let all of the sarpanch’s remarks pass without dissent.

No general statement about the Kashmir land reforms could be based only on what occurred in one tract near Srinagar. In going to other villages in different parts of the valley, however, I found a similar pattern. In a village near a famous Muslim shrine I met the largest local landholder who greeted me most cordially. It appeared that he was well-known for his hospitality, particularly to Government officials on tour. Of his former holding of 500 acres, he had somehow managed to retain 125.

GRIEVANCES REMAIN

I had started out asking questions primarily about who got land under the reforms. I soon discovered that while there were grievances on this score which the poorer peasants were willing to voice, their bitterest complaints were about the Government’s food procurement policy and the malfunctioning of the co-operatives. The Government took from each producer 40 per cent, 50 per cent or more of his paddy, the amount depending upon the area. For this the Government paid the peasant Rs 9 per khirwar (1 khirwar equals 2 maunds plus 3 seers, or 170 pounds). This paddy was then sold in the Government ration shops in the cities at low controlled prices. If, after Government procurement, the peasant did not have enough left over to feed his family, then he would have to buy what he needed in the free market. Here the price of paddy ranged from about Rs 20 to Rs 32 per khirwar. Either the Government should change its procurement policy, the peasants said, or it should open low-price ration shops in the villages.

The co-operatives, which distribute all the imported necessities such as salt, sugar, kerosene, and cloth, were thoroughly unpopular. At the time of my visit to Srinagar both the former manager and the former cashier of the Central Co-operative Bank were in jail, charged with embezzling very substantial sums of money. In the rural areas, I was told, the co-operative officers often followed after the Government procurement officials. They would go to the homes of the peasants, and declare part or all of the remaining foodgrains “surplus”. They would then request the peasants to sell the “surplus” to the co-operatives at the same price of Rs 9 per khirwar. Peasants who refused were likely to get into trouble. In practice the peasants had to yield the additional quantities. Ostensibly the aim of the co-operatives was to make more food available at low prices for the poorest peasants. Far from doing this, I was told, many of the co-operative officials simply sold the “surplus” foodstuffs in the free market and made a handsome profit for themselves. Apparently, here as with the land distribution, the important thing was how much influence each peasant was able to bring to bear on the appropriate official. To some of the poorer folk it seemed as though the sarmayadars, the khadpanches, the halqa office-bearers, the Government officials, and the co-operatives had all joined hands to fleece them. In some areas it looked as though the ordinary peasant was confronted with a more formidable combination than he had faced under the rather ramshackle regime of the Maharaja.

THEY COME IN CARS

On one occasion my young Kashmiri companion and I met a couple of peasants on the road. “As we walked along together they were telling us how a small group in their village had twisted the land reforms to their own advantage. The details they gave were so vivid that we asked them: “How do you know that we an not Government officials from Srinagar, and that we will not report you?” “They replied, laughing, “Government officials don’t walk down the road in the hot sun. They come in cars or jeeps.” So we put another question: “Suppose we had come in a jeep and had asked you about the land reforms—then what would you have said?” “Oh, we would have told you everything was wonderful.” Land reform in Kashmir has clearly done away with the jagirs, and has weakened the position of all the great landlords. It has distinctly benefited those individuals who, at the village level, were already the more important and substantial people. It has done the least for petty tenants and landless labourers, these two categories being the largest in the countryside. By not paying compensation to the dispossessed absentee landlords, Kashmir has escaped the financial burden which several of the States of India have found so onerous.