

## **Dynamics of Agrarian Relations in India: Analysing the Regional Patterns of Tenancy System**

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### **Abstract**

The patterns of distribution of land and the system of tenancy are the two significant aspects of the agrarian relations. In a developing agrarian economy like India, land plays an important role in determining the social and economic (well) being of the people, the unbalanced man-land ratio and the unequal distribution of land and the (social) value loaded rigid land market, the land tenancy system plays an important role in the process of re-distribution of land across various social and economic groups. Therefore, the policy makers have been recognised the role of tenancy system in enforcing the redistribution process of land. By critically analysing the regional pattern of tenancy system in India, the paper argues that the measures to legalise the land leasing and land tenure system are in a way is a status-quo position by neglecting the historic oppressions and exploitation the tenants has undergone over years and continues even today. Tenancy involves unequal power relationship between the lessor-lease in combination with caste system, the terms of tenancy under any conditions more disadvantageous to the lease. Thus, the paper concludes that land reforms and redistribution of land to the real cultivators not just transferring a temporary right to cultivate is not going to bring productivity to Indian agriculture.

**Keywords:** Tenancy System, Agrarian Relation, Land Reforms, India.

### **Introduction**

“The term agrarian relation has complex historical, social, political and economic dimensions”, though it has been usually understood in a narrow technical sense “as the tenurial arrangements under which land owned by one person and is leased out to the other”(Sharma 1991). Therefore, it has to be clarified that, “agrarian relations prevailing in an economy at a (any) point of time bear the traces of its specific agrarian history and which is a manifestations of prevailing customs, rural institutions, local class configuration and a host of other such factors”. Though these question of agrarian relations represents the economic question of accumulation and unequal distribution, but it has to be understood that which is not existing as an entity in itself rather they are constructed around the prevailing dominant socio-political power structure, which in turn helps to reproduce and reinforce the same. According to Sharma, “these relations in turn governs not only the patterns of accumulation, resource utilization and adoption of technological innovations but also the distribution of developmental gains among different sections of the society”. Therefore, questioning the prevailing agrarian relations is one of the primary objectives

for realising an inclusive developmental strategy. As such it became a central theme of debate in social science in general and economics in particular for quiet long period of time.

The patterns of distribution of land and the system of tenancy are the two significant aspects of the agrarian relations. The significance of land as a basic production unit in a developing agrarian society like India (better to say transforming), has been widely recognized. And the ownership of land (or the entitlement to land) is not just a matter of economic prospect and opportunity alone, as a poor agrarian economy like India, it is a symbol of social legitimacy, power and the privilege, moreover it is also a sign of (political) voice in the processes of decision making. Therefore, denial of certain group from accessing this basic right (to land) is not just an economic question alone but at large it is a matter of denial of their basic social and political rights and existence. Thus the denial of this basic rights for survival will of course triggers off the contradictions in the societies and which may/may not lead to a drastic revision and subsequent changes in it. These can be a top-down reforms by the government as in the case of Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and Egypt or as result of the grass root struggles and movements as in the case of Bolivia, Ethiopia and Peru (Sharma, 1991 and Griffin, et. al, 2002).

Though the most humanist and radical scholars have consistently argued that, “agrarian reform is not an end in itself nor its objective are strictly economic. The long-run objective must be towards creating all round development of the rural sectors..... Land reform occupies the central stage in poverty removal policy. It is not a mere instrument- of technology- driven, target group oriented productivity improvement programme” (Bandyopadhyay, 1996, p. 690). But in a developing agrarian economy like India, land plays an important role in determining the social and economic (well) being of the people, the unbalanced man-land ratio and the unequal distribution of land and the (social) value loaded rigid land market, the land tenancy system plays an important role in the process of re-distribution of land across various social and economic groups. Therefore the policy makers have been recognised the role of tenancy system in enforcing the redistribution process of land. That is what the 12<sup>th</sup> FYP approach paper is asserting that, “there is need to give a fresh look at tenancy legislations. These need to permit leasing of land where small farmers, who would otherwise be unviable, are able to lease out their lands to others and bring in the inputs that are needed to increase productivity. The small or marginal land owner may even be employed on the land by the new tenant farmer. There is also need to record small and marginal tenants so that they can access credit without threatening future rights of the landowner. The key to both these is that leasing should be possible without jeopardizing the property rights of the original land owner”. But this paper is aimed to look at the regional pattern of tenancy system not as an alternative to the land reform, but as a dimension of agrarian relations which is supposedly ensure the access to land for certain sections of the society ‘they are not entitled to land by birth’ (!).

However, it has to be noted that the tenancy system as a distributive mechanism has been widely debated in academic discourse even as an another modes of exploitation, since the “landlords in the agrarian relations constitute a class in itself but also a class for itself; highly conscious of

their powers and privileges, they are quite well organised to articulate the political and administrative decisions in their favour” (Sharma, 1991).

## Review of Literature

There is no dearth for literatures looking at the agrarian relations and thus the tenancy system in the rural areas of the world in general and India in particular. It has been a major area of discussion from the periods of classical economist like Adam Smith, Ricardo, and Marshall etc. The spectrum of literature encompasses those theorising the historical evolution of the land system and agrarian relation in the rural areas to those looking at the empiricism of their transformation over time as a result of the land reform and land struggles, through different perspectives.

Haque, argues that the legalization of land leasing and the subsequent development of active land lease market can help in improving agricultural efficiency as well as equity by improving the tenure security of the tenants and incentivizing them for invest in land development, optimum utilization of land, labour and other resources on one hand and by increasing the access to land on lease by the landless and semi-landless poor for livelihood and upward growth and the occupational mobility of the rural people, thereby reducing the pressure of population on agriculture and paving the way for non-farm development, on the other. Thus according to him since the “legal restriction on land leasing could neither eliminate the system of lease cultivation nor provide security of tenure to the tenants at will”, what we needed is a progressive reforms of the tenancy system. Because otherwise the tenancy moves to be concealed and would be involving high degree of exploitation.

Sharma (1991) looking at the tenancy system across the states of India in a way by analyzing the ‘changing agrarian relations in the country’. According to him in a nearly frozen land market like India, the institution of tenancy is an economic response to the unequal distribution of land by “facilitating the access to it for those who need it the most from those who own surplus of it”. However it cannot be blindly accepted as an equalizing mechanism, because “the institution of tenancy accompanied by, inter alia, insecure tenancies, exorbitant rent, share cropping with inter linkage of land, labour and credit markets have serious implications for agricultural development on the one hand and the general wellbeing of the tenants on the other”.

Sen (2011) tried to theoretically compare the share cropping tenancy with the fixed rental contracts and argued that the introduction of a competent third agent who collect the output directly from the tenant generates a “Pareto-improving subset” of sharecontracts out of the multiple contracts. Thusthismodel suggests that “if there are entities that cancredibly assure the tenant of a high price, then share contracts are likely to be replaced by fixed rents”. Thus therole of marketing institutions such as peasantcooperatives are highlighted here. Because as per this model the presence of the institutions whichcould ensure a high price ofproduce for thefarmers results in to a negative correlation between the presence of peasant cooperatives and the

prevalence of sharecropping. Accordingly, “the share contracts are more likely to be observed in situations where crops have higher degree of price fluctuations, small farmers have limited marketing opportunities and the primary product market is dominated by few sellers”.

According to Bhaduri, in a semi-feudalist system “the economic and political power of the landowner is largely based on his being able to keep the kishan constantly indebted to him”, because it in a way ensures the two modes of exploitation-exploitation based on the landowner's traditional property right to land as well as that based on usury (the two major sources of income to the land owner). As such any movement for technological advancement and subsequent improvement in the productivity will be refuted by the land owner on the ground that it will result in “loss in his income from usury due to a reduction (or complete elimination) in the level of consumption-loan required by the kishan”. Thus he argue that, “the semi-feudal production relations operate as a barrier to the introduction of improved technology that results in higher output per kishan”. But still there can be changes within the system but that would be in the service of the land owning class itself.

Sharma (1994) has categorically stated that, “the rigorous implementation of tenancy law is preferred to ceiling on land holding”, since it “does not pose political difficulties to moderate the glaring inequalities in the distribution of land by increasing the agricultural production without adversely affecting generally large productive holdings”. Bandyopadhyay (1996) is questioning the notion of economic arguments on land reforms which proposes exploitation of scale economies through large size farms and thus improve productivity. She states that, “the logic of land reform is more fundamental and has to be judged in the perceived fulfilment of aspirations of land reform beneficiaries. Changes of production relationships and class structure are desirable in transforming rural power structure in egalitarian directions. These are desirable goals in themselves”. Thus land reform has been perceived as a driver for the rural development and the eradication of poverty.

Griffin and others (2002) has critically looked at the land tenure system vis-a-vis the land reforms and argued that the land tenure system is essentially irrelevant to production and distribution outcomes, what matters in rural poverty and income distribution and distress is the degree of land concentration, because which facilitate the process of monopolization of the land and which in turn transforms large land owners in to ‘price makers’ in the labour market. It will adversely affect the rural employment situation and thus deepen poverty and distress driven migration towards city. Therefore, according to them a well-conceived and implemented land reform would increase the production and productivity in the rural areas and thus bring down the rural as well as the urban poverty. Though this has been well proved mathematically, the total ignorance of the nature of tenure system in production and distribution outcomes has to be seen as an attempt to over simplify the problem. Because at least in the context of India, “the land relations were structured on social relations based on interests” (Bandyopadhyay, 1993) and therefore the issues of land concentration cannot be seen separately since the existing land tenure system act as the

mechanisms of reinforcing this inequality in land distribution and thus results in a more class and caste divided social structure.

Therefore, the present study aims to contribute to these series of literatures not by justifying the land tenure system as an alternative to the “socially unacceptable” and “politically reactionary” and “economically irrational” land reform, but to critically look at the regional patterns of land tenure system and to interpret the nature of changes it has undergone over time. With a greater concerns on ‘its’ capacity to serves the interest of the landless and the poor, by questioning whether this itself is creating another form of inequality and exploitation. Thus this study looks at the land tenure system/land leasing system through the historic as well as the regional framework. Thus we tries to answer some of the key **questions**.

### **Research Question**

1. What happened to the incidence of tenancy over time? Have there exist any regional dimensions for it?
2. How the terms of tenancy have changed over time? Does it showing any regional dynamics: like between erstwhile Zamindari and the Ryotwari regions and the green revolution and non-green revolution states?
3. What are the major determinants of this spatial as well as the temporal changes in the tenancy system?

### **Data source and Methodology**

The National Samples Survey Organization’s surveys on the Landholdings in India is the major source of comparatively reliable source of data on land holdings, which extends from 1953-54 (8<sup>th</sup> round) to the 2003 59<sup>th</sup> round (recent available). For this work, in order to analyse the temporal profiles of land distribution pattern, the two NSS Reports of 48<sup>th</sup> round (1992) and 59<sup>th</sup> report (2003) are used.

Quantitative techniques are used to analyse the empirical data on the temporal changes in the land distribution across the social groups among the states. While the historical-frame works are employed to contextualize the empirical evidence and explain the patterns and results. The methods of time series analysis has been employed to analyse the changing patterns of land lease and the terms under which it has been taking place over time. Latter the methods of correlation has been used to interpret the emerging regional patterns in the tenancy system and testing the existing theories on tenancy system.

### **Results and Discussions**

Changing Leasing-in pattern of operational holdings in rural India (1992 to 2003)

The analysis of the data (on the patterns of leasing-in of area to the total operational holding) shows that the incidence of reported tenancy system has been declined over time at the all India

level during 1971-72 to 2002-03. As per the records the percentage of area leased out to the total area owned has recorded a sharpest decline as compared to the percentage of area leased into total area owned and percentage of households leasing in land. There is a sharp mismatch between the area leased in to total area owned and percentage of households reported leasing in land. Which shows that though 12% of the rural households are still depended on the leasing in of land while its share to the total area owned has been declining. That can be explained by the decline in the percentage of area leased out to the total area owned, and which in a way substantiate the increasing tendency towards own cultivation.

<b>Estimates of reported incidence of leasing out and leasing in of land by households from various rounds of NSS- All India (Rural)</b>					
Sl. No	Characteristic	1971-72 (26 <sup>th</sup> rd)	1982 (37 <sup>th</sup> rd)	1992 (48 <sup>th</sup> rd)	2003 (59 <sup>th</sup> rd)
1	Percentage of households leasing in land	25%	18%	15%	12%
2	Percentage of area leased in to total area owned	12%	7%	9%	7%
3	Percentage of area leased out to total area owned	6%	4%	5%	3%
Estimates for 26 <sup>th</sup> , 37 <sup>th</sup> and 48 <sup>th</sup> rounds are taken from NSS Report Nos. 215, 330 and 399 respectively.					
Source: NSS Report No. 491: Household Ownership Holdings in India, 2003: 27. (Table:1)					

The data on tenancy pattern (see appendix-II) across the states tells an interesting story. Which shows that, all states except few followed this macro-trend, these few include Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat along with the erstwhile Zamindari states of Bihar and Orissa. Of these, for the states of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat, it has to be noted that, the rise in the tenancy system has been driven by a drastic rise in the incidence of tenancy among the larger categories of holdings. The states of Tamil Nadu, UP and Karnataka also showed a drastic rise in the area

leased in among the larger categories of holdings. But the state of Kerala and Tamil Nadu ranks the top in it (99.46 and 99.95% of the total operational holdings of the state respectively). Thus it can be argued that those states recorded a dramatic increase in the incidence of tenancy is moving towards more concentration of land in the hands of a few, through reverse tenancy, rather ensuring an equitable distribution of it. It has more significant to note that such a tenancy is happening in the states where the tenancy system has been restricted legally. But it can also be noted from the data that, the incidence of reverse tenancy has started decline in the states of Assam, Haryana and Punjab, these are the states ranked at the top in terms of percentage of leased in area to the total operated area in the 1990's. In the case of Punjab the tenancy has been increased among the semi-medium holdings while in the case of Haryana it has been increased for the case of marginal holdings (See table:2 and Appendix 1).

Summery Table: Patterns of Tenancy (Table: 2)		
	States: Tenancy Increased	States: Tenancy Decreased
among large holdings	AP, Gujarat, Kerala	Assam, Haryana, Punjab
among marginal and small holdings	Orissa, Bihar	West Bengal, Rajasthan, MP, J&K

Interestingly, though the states of Himachal Pradesh has showed a fall in the incidence of tenancy system but it has been increased at a higher rate among the marginal holdings. There is no such a general trend to delineate who supply the land and who lease it in. Because for the state of UP, Kerala etc. the incidence tenancy has been increased among the marginal as well as among the large categories of holders. Though the earlier studies of 90's has showed the incidence of reverse tenancy in the case of the "green revolution states" of Punjab and Haryana, and it has been termed as the "horizontal nature of tenancy" as against the notion of hierarchy and verticality. But the picture is changing and these states were replaced by the states of Gujarat, AP and Kerala. Therefore we have to seriously consider the major factors responsible for such a regional patterns of tenancy system. The validity of the generally perceived factors affecting the nature and magnitude of the tenancy system such as the technology, nature of land and proportion of area under irrigation, incidence of landlessness, alternative employment opportunities, area under labour intensive crops, average family size has to be tested properly. In his remarkable work, Sharma (1991) has empirically proven the significant role of cultivation of labour-intensive crops and the proportion of irrigated area in deciding the magnitude and patterns of tenancy.

Therefore, as a further steps to look in to the causalities, we will look at the role of these factors along with the role of technology and availability of alternative employment in the region. Here we take the yield of major crops as a proxy of spread of new technology, proportion of cropped

area under irrigation as proxy for land quality, proportion of net cultivated area under the most labour-intensive crops like rice(Sharma, 1991).

The statistical analysis shows that, out of the three variables tested only the percentage of net sown area under irrigation has showing a positive relationship with the incidence of tenancy, that is higher the net sown area under irrigation, higher will be the proportion of leased-in area. But it has to be noted that even its significance has been declined over time.

Correlation between % of reported land Leased-in			
Year	Irrigation	Landless	Agri_Growth
1992	0.715	-0.338	0.081
2003	0.666	-0.146	-0.398

Therefore, more studies based on field surveys has to be required to detect the core reasons behind these specific patterns of tenancy across the states. Because though the historically semi-feudalistic Zamindari states were continued to record higher incidence of tenancy but at the same time, even the tenancy banned states of Kerala and modern developmental states of Gujarat are also showing a tendency of increasing incidence of tenancy.

Terms of tenancy: the changes and patterns

The analysis of tenancy become incomplete unless and until we are not looking at the terms under which the act of leasing is taking place. Though some scholars has strictly argued that the exploitation is the rule of any forms of tenancy and hence what we have to think more of a system without exploitation and thus the land reform and re-distribution of land is the way for that. Though the author also has fundamental doubts on the capacity of the tenurial reforms in ensuring the justice in the agrarian production relations, but in the present conjuncture while thinking for a better tomorrows and way for that it is equally important to analyse the todays inadequacies and how it has been changed over time and across space and also at whose interests. Thus this section deal with how the terms of tenancy has been changed over time (with respect to two points of time) and across different states of India.

The empirical analysis shows that at all India level share cropping continued be the dominant forms of terms of lease followed by terms of fixed money and fixed produce. But among the 'economically modernised states' of Punjab, Haryana, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Maharashtra, the incidence of lease-in under the terms of fixed money has been prevalent across all size holdings during the year 1992. But it has undergone changes over time, and by 2003, the terms of fixed money lost its share to fixed produce and share produce in Gujarat and Maharashtra respectively. There is no specific regional pattern in the distribution of terms of tenancy across different size class holdings. In Punjab and Haryana tenancy under the terms of fixed money was dominant across all the size holdings, and even its share has been increased between 1992 and 2003. But in



the case of Tamil Nadu, by 2003 share cropping got an absolute dominance among the larger holdings and also among the semi-medium holdings as compared to 1992. But among the medium holdings the leasing in from relatives without any specific terms became significant. But it has to be noted that the tenancy under the terms of usufructury mortgage were reported among the marginal and small holdings and it shows the unfavourable nature of tenancy towards the lower size class households.

The stories of erstwhile Zamindari states are different and the tenancy under share produce terms are continued to dominate throughout the years. In the states of West Bengal though the tenancy was not reported among the larger holdings, share cropping was dominant among majority of holdings but by 2003 the system of tenancy under fixed money became dominant among the medium holdings. During 1992 the leasing-in from relatives were dominant among the larger holdings of Orissa, but it has to be noted that there has no tenancy has been reported among the larger and medium holding by 2003. Is it really a result of the fall in the incidence of tenancy or as a result of the under reporting requires further studies. But one thing make us to worry is the incidence of tenancy under the terms of usufructury mortgage and service contract among the marginal and small holdings and it was not the case in 1990's. This is the case with Bihar as well and which also showed a rising share of tenancy under share produce across all the size holdings. But the fixed money became dominant among the medium holdings. During 1992 more than fifty percentage of the reported leased-in among this category was under the category of terms are not properly defined, but it has been replaced by more specified terms of share produce.

The states of Assam also followed this trend in favour of share produce, but leasing-in under the terms which are not clearly defined were still reported among the marginal and the semi-medium holdings. By 2003 the share cropping was replaced among the medium holdings with the tenancy under fixed money terms, a tendency towards more monetisation of rural economy has been taking place. But it is very interesting to note that by the year 2003 there was no tenancy has been reported among the larger holdings. Even among the states of UP and MP the tenancy was under the terms of share produce became dominant. But in UP the tenancy reported among the larger holdings were reported under the category of from relatives without any terms and the larger holding were emerging as the major lessors' of land over time. But in the case of MP, fixed money terms was dominant among the larger holdings for both the years of surveys. The leasing-in from the relatives were dominant among the marginal holding in 1990's but it has been replaced by share produce over time. Interestingly in the states of Rajasthan though the share produce was the dominant terms of lease for both the years, but the incidence of usufructury mortgage has been reported among the medium and larger holdings.

For the southern states, fixed produce became dominant terms of lease by 2003 except for Tamil Nadu, which is dominated by the terms of fixed money. In AP, share cropping was one of the significant terms of lease among the larger holdings during 1990's, though the terms of fixed money has been practiced among the marginal and semi-medium holdings. But by 2003 the share cropping continued to be the dominant terms of lease among the larger holdings while the

marginal, small and semi-medium holdings were moved into fixed produce. It has to be noted that the tenancy under the most unfavourable terms, like usufructury mortgage, was continued to be reported among the marginal holdings. In Karnataka also, the share cropping was dominant in 1990's while the leasing in from the relatives were dominant forms of tenancy in Kerala. In the case of Karnataka, most of the leasing-in reported among the larger holdings were reported to be as the terms are not defined properly and it has got replaced by fixed produce by 2003. By the time among the small and medium holdings the share produce has been replaced by fixed money. In Kerala, there was no leasing in reported among the medium holdings and the 100% of the reported leasing in among the larger holdings was under the terms of fixed money. While the leasing in from the relatives were dominant among the semi-medium holdings. And among both these states the tenancy has been increased among the larger size holdings showing a tendency towards reverse tenancy.

It can be summarised that, the tenancy under the terms of fixed money is continued to dominant among the green revolution states of Punjab, Haryana and also in Tamil Nadu. While in the erstwhile Zamindari and the other states of north India the share cropping became a dominant form of tenancy. On the contrary, among the southern states except Tamil Nadu, fixed produce became the significant terms of lease.

## Conclusion

This discussion can be concluded by quoting some interesting remarks made by Saxena, the secretary of planning commission, "it is thus clear that the institution of tenancy, particularly in the wake of the spread of commercial agriculture based on improved technologies, has undergone many changes. It is now more in the nature of a risk-sharing mechanism, which also reduces transactions costs...Lifting the ban on leasing and making tenancy to be controlled by market forces would be to the advantage of small operators who would be able to lease-in more land. It will also facilitate labour mobility, as small owners would be able to lease out without fear. The hard reality is that the dependence on land of 65 per cent of the total population is likely to continue in the present century also, unless economic growth in urban areas is predominantly labour intensive. Thus the argument that 'if people are deprived of their tiny holdings they would find other meaningful jobs' makes no sense.... Our policy should be to tie the rural people to their tiny holdings in the villages and keep them busy there rather than make them landless and push them to towns through proletarianisation. However, it is not the intention to legalise reverse tenancies. Only agricultural labour, marginal and small farmers are being proposed to be permitted leasing-in of land from both small and big farmers, as the basic purpose of legislation is to improve their control over land" (Saxena)<sup>1</sup>.

The concerns showed by Saxena is highly remarkable and equally acceptable, but the question arises of its implementation, that he himself submits. Though he is arguing for a control of the

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<sup>1</sup> See the link: [planningcommission.nic.in/reports/articles/ncsxna/index.php?repts=leasing.htm](http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/articles/ncsxna/index.php?repts=leasing.htm)

reverse tenancy but what we have been see is the rising incidence of reverse tenancy in the agriculturally developed states of Punjab, Haryana (though it showing a tendency of decline during the recent years) along with the rising of such a tendency in the emerging states of Tamil Nadu and Gujarat along with Kerala, make us to argue that the more commercialization in a way incentivise the larger holdings to enter into the leasing market as the lessors and thus in away denies the land to the real cultivator and they might be thrown away to the urban areas. Since the existence of jobless growth that Saxena himself was talking about will worsen the situation since the reverse tenancy and induced mechanization will results in the further unemployment in the farm sector as well.

Therefore, it can be argued here that the measures to legalise the land leasing and land tenure system, as glorified by some academicians, politicians and policy makers, are in a way is a status-quo position by neglecting the historic oppressions and exploitation that these so-called tenants has undergone over years and still even now, under whichever form of tenancy system has been followed due to the social dimension of it. Which is characterised by unequal power relationship between the lessor-leasecomplain with caste system, can make the terms of tenancy under any conditions more disadvantageous to the lease. Because the tenancy system has been used as a mode of exploiting the labour and rent from the tenants. That is what stated in the literature that “from leasing as a means of rental appropriation, landlords have moved to leasing as a means of control over labour power, the appropriation of its produce, and as a means of further accumulation” (Srivastava, 1989 as quoted in Saxena). Therefore if we are talking about a productive agrarian reform it could be nothing less than the land reforms and thus the redistribution of land to the real cultivators not just transferring a temporary right to cultivate under somebody’s mercy.

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