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The New Land Reform of Andhra Pradesh

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Andhra Pradesh has taken a significant decision to give formal ownership titles to the holders (mainly Dalit farmers) of lands assigned to them decades ago.

The Andhra Pradesh government's decision to grant ownership titles to lakhs of poor cultivators has been hailed as "revolutionary and path-breaking" by supporters of the ruling YSR Congress Party. Critics have dubbed it as a vote consolidating move with assembly elections just a few months away.

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy handed over the ownership titles to more than 20.24 lakh farmers for an area of 35.45 lakh acres at a rally at Nuzvid in Eluru district on [17 November 2023](#). A major chunk of this included handing over title deeds to 15.12 lakh farmers who had held 27.41 lakh acres of assigned land for more than 20 years. The number of those who would be benefitting is stupendous and the scale of this kind of land reform is the first of its kind in the state.

Soon after the launch, Reddy tweeted in Telugu:

"Today our government has given full rights to farmers who have been holding the lands they have been cultivating for decades. We have also given new Darakastu pattas [title rights] to many. For the first time after Independence, our government has undertaken a land resurvey programme."

Apart from title deeds, assigned lands were [distributed](#) afresh to 42,307 farmers for over 46,463 acres, freehold rights were granted to 1,61,584 farmers over 1,58,113 acres of village service inam (gift) lands after removing these lands from the list prohibited under Section 22-A of the Registration Act, 1908, and titles to 22,346 farmers who purchased lands taking loans from the Scheduled Caste Corporation under the Loan Purchase Scheme. The ownership titles are to lands which had been assigned to the landless for farming. These assigned lands, of up to five acres each, were given decades earlier by the government to the landless, mainly Dalits, for cultivation but without ownership titles. They could not be easily used as collateral for farm loans.

Some of the assigned lands were on rocky terrain and remained unused. Cultivation was confined to places where the land was suitable for farming and where the small and marginal cultivators could pool resources. (There are examples though, as this author had come across in 2006, when through MGNREGA-linked work on farm ponds and soil improvement, such dry lands had been brought into cultivation in the perennially drought-prone Anantapur district)

Though such assigned lands are legally non-transferable, they have at times been taken over by non-Dalits. Several instances of resource-poor farmers entering into informal deals with large farmers for cultivation of assigned lands had forced the government in the 1970s to take steps to arrest the trend. The Andhra Pradesh Assigned Lands (Prohibition of Transfers) Act, 1977 was brought about to prohibit this kind of informal and illegal alienation. The aim was to provide the small and marginal farmers with an asset that would sustain them on a long-term basis and dissuade them from distress transfers, even informally. The 1977 act was applied with retrospective effect rendering all transactions of sale prior to its commencement ineffective. The cultivation rights were made heritable to ensure that the land remained with the family but were not alienable.

Yet, the Koneru Ranga Rao committee on land issues of the poor appointed by the Y S Rajasekhara Reddy government in 2006 (in the former undivided Andhra Pradesh) observed that there was no effective implementation machinery at the field level to ensure that the 1977 law was being implemented and the poor did not lose their lands. The Land Committee Report, as it came to be known, also observed that the Scheduled Castes, constituting 16% of the of the population controlled only 7.5% of operated area in Andhra Pradesh. It was clear that despite 50 years of efforts of government efforts and numerous legislations on land reforms, the socially marginalised's access to land had not improved much.

According to the Agricultural Census of 2015–16, the small and marginal holdings taken together (0–2 ha.) constituted 86.08% of the total holdings in 2015–16, compared with 85.01% in 2010–11. Their share in the operated area stood at 46.94% and 44.58% respectively. A sizeable chunk could be assigned lands.

In another major land administration step, the chief minister launched a resurvey of all lands in the state. The resurvey programme is being implemented in five phases. It was completed in 5,000 of 17, 595 villages by November 2023. Land records are being provided in digital format and it is claimed that tamper-proof documents will be created. “All illegalities, land grabbing, encroachments and civil disputes relating to land ownership will come to an end permanently with the completion of resurvey,” Jagan Mohan Reddy [asserted](#) in late November while handing over land title deeds to property owners at Narsannapeta where the resurvey was completed.

Notwithstanding all the problems with the quality of the assigned lands, these plots did help the poor in generating a fair income. The question now is: will conferment of formal ownership not trigger sale of these lands thus affecting what was a permanent source of income for the small and marginal farmers ? Will it not turn them into landless labourers?

The counter is that grant of ownership titles will provide the poor farmer with self-esteem and dignity, as well as a greater sense of financial security, enabling them to mortgage the land and secure loans. This apart, the 2006 Land Committee Report had noted that 60% to 70% of the petitions that come to the district collectors pertain to land disputes and that a majority of the criminal cases in districts were linked to land issues. Another dimension, is that the assignees of land in hilly areas, which was lying idle because of the very challenging nature of cultivation in such tracts, could now sell their holdings.

Those arguing in favour of granting full ownership titles to the assignees cite the situation of farmers not having the wherewithal and the capital to cultivate the lands assigned to them, of larger farmers virtually taking over these assigned lands to cultivate it themselves and reducing the poor farmers to work as farm labourers. The conferment of an ownership title is expected to reduce this exploitation as the small cultivator, usually a Dalit, can now sell his or her land legally or bargain for a better leasing price.

Impressive as these land-related policy changes may appear, the coming months of implementation will decide whether they are well-intentioned or only 'populist' and aimed at garnering votes. At a time when not many chief ministers show any interest in implementing land reforms, Reddy has taken a significant step of empowering the poor by handing over the title deeds, setting aside the debate over the issue. While the Andhra government's decision is not ownership land reform per se in the sense of fresh redistribution of land over and above the land ceilings, the significance of conferment of ownership titles on those cultivating assigned lands should not be underestimated.

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