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**AGRARIAN REFORM FOR A LIBERAL PATTERN OF
SOCIETY? KARNATAKA'S LAND POLICY AND THE NEW
DISPENSATION**

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Abstract

It is puzzling how much the discourse of development has backed away from the seemingly central question of rural poverty: land. Elaborate rules concerning its distribution, rights, regulation, protection, utilities have multiple development objectives, but poverty alleviation, individual liberty and community revitalization have long been on the stated agenda throughout India -- with radically varying levels of effort and effect. The Karnataka Land Reforms Act [Amended] that came into force on March 1, 1974, is in line with the vision of the founders. Its pattern reflects -- more so than in West Bengal, which is widely lauded for its agrarian reforms -- the conclusions of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee of 1949 and promoted over time with variable enthusiasm by Union governments. Such agrarian reforms have been considered among the most important mechanisms for achieving a socialist pattern of society as indicated in the Preamble and Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV) of the Constitution. Elaborate and careful policy thinking by the founders connected classic agrarian reforms with poverty alleviation. What happens to land policy as liberal economic policy replaces "socialism" as directive principle? There are widespread claims -- both normative and empirical -- of "reversal of land reforms" in various parts of India under pressure of new export strategies, globalization, and multiplication of sub-subsistence holdings over time. What are the implications of reforming the reforms for poverty alleviation under new conditions?

PEASANTS TO FARMERS: LOGICS OF LAND REFORM

Critiques of the Karnataka Land Reforms Act of 1974 implicitly center its irrelevance to a liberal pattern of society. At Independence, the agrarian prospect was clouded by the symbolic centrality of the *zamindar* – a figure Nehru in particular held to be not only irrelevant but a drag on economic development. Though Indian land systems in fact varied as much as the continental size and varied local histories would suggest, the policy model assumed that democracy and market capitalism were both hindered by remnants of feudal control of terrain and people. Walter C. Neale’s justifiably iconic chapter was entitled: **Land is to Rule**. The extent to which agrarian reforms on the model of the 1931 Karachi Resolution of the Indian National Congress – “Land to the tiller and power to the people “ – and the more specific *Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee* of Independent India varied significantly.¹ These variations mattered greatly in determining – in a clearly path-dependent way -- variations in what John Harriss calls “the balance of caste-class power,” which in turn is a major driver of poverty alleviation performance variance across states [2003].²

In the policy logic of Delhi, and in intellectual discourse generally, farmers are replacing peasants. This is as it should be, in the normative logic of land reforms from both contemporary right and left. The “peasantry” suggests a social estate, politically subordinate, only marginally involved with markets, subject to numerous non-market forms of extraction and dominance. In Barrington Moore, Jr.’s important challenge to Indologists – why none of his normative “paths to the modern world” were followed by India -- “the peasantry” figured centrally. **Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy** was subtitled “Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World.” As in many nations newly freed from colonial domination, agrarian reforms in India were calculated to address dependency relations antithetical to freedom and

¹ Neale in Frykenburg 1969, pp 3-13; On Congress and land reforms generally, Herring 1988; in addition to CARC, see Malaviya 1954.

² In Delhi’s scheme for the states – which are the major arenas for land reform – the symbolically central but analytically amorphous “abolition of intermediaries” came first, from the beginning of the 1950s, followed by ceilings in the mid-1950s, and a lowering of ceilings in 1972. At the time of the 78th amendment to the Constitution, 277 land laws had been incorporated into the Ninth Schedule. The power of central ministries in land reform is limited, except during imposition of President’s Rule on a State.

democratic practice via mechanism operating at both ends of the agrarian spectrum [Herring 1983 Ch 8-9]. This logic was widely shared – and quite consonant with the American occupation forces’ land reforms in Japan: classes at the top rungs of the agrarian hierarchy are diminished via ceiling legislation, and their social control of specific individuals and classes is extirpated via abolition of tenancy.³ This is the logic of land to the tiller. The assumption is that land is scarce, and thus to be rationed; that dependency is socially dysfunction – or at least inconsistent with citizenship; and finally that extensive land holdings are farmed too extensively to meet the needs of an impoverished agriculture to grow and generate jobs just as uninterested landlords and impoverished tenants combine to depress agricultural investment. Land reforms could be a lever for creating an agrarian capitalism that was dynamic and consonant with democracy. The historical phasing of land reforms thus becomes critical to their logic.

This temporal interpretation is reflected in contemporary calls for reversal of land reforms in Karnataka. Essentially, the critiques imply that the transformative roles of land reforms have been accomplished – the hoary “abolition of intermediaries.” In this case, new reforms for a new pattern of society make sense. Just as the problematic of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee was creating a rural India with agricultural growth and social empowerment, current regimes worry more about the place of India in a global hierarchy of market economies. There are no limits to accumulation in industry: how quaint it seems to have a ceiling on landed property. As the “socialist pattern of society” hortatory is replaced by acceptance of a liberal pattern of society, the logic of agrarian reform from the Nehruvian consensus is challenged. Thus G. Thimmaiah [1997: 77] writes in his commentary on land reforms in Karnataka:

“Caste politics and Marxian ideology have lost their relevance and hence their strength. They are politically impotent and socially irrelevant.... But a more fundamental ideological issue is that tenancy

³ This is more or less exactly what the author of those reforms in Japan, Wolf Ladejinsky, told me in Delhi, where

abolition and impositions of ceilings on landholdings have no justification when such restrictions have been scrapped in the industrial sector... Farmers should demand abolition of land ceilings.”

This comment on the irrelevance and impotence of the left, widely shared by analysts, was made before the left turned in its best performance ever in the Lok Sabha elections of 2004. Nevertheless, the stance is common, and diagnostic. But there is an irony in Thimmaiah’s attribution of radical reform to Marxian ideology. Elsewhere he notes, quite correctly (1997:62):

“Though this reform measure was vehemently advocated by the Marxists, it received both moral and intellectual support even from those espousing capitalist ideology. This was a curious case of a convergence of ideologies.”

The convergence is not so curious, really; there is nothing particularly Marxist about reforming agrarian systems in favour of small-farmer proprietorships. Some of the most radical reforms in the 20th century were backed by American foreign policy as an antidote to leftist agrarian threats of communism. The pro-small property view is one endorsed by Thomas Jefferson. It is consistent with Nehru’s comment that the *zamindars* were like the fifth wheel of a carriage – not only unnecessary but a hindrance on social progress. Similar views were behind Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s “anti-feudal” land reforms in Pakistan [Herring 1979]. It has been widely understood that agrarian reform may be an essential component of the agrarian bourgeois revolution [Herring 1983: Ch 4]. Specifically, unencumbering lands of their “feudal” properties – their embeddedness in Polanyi’s terms – is a necessary condition for land to function as a commodity subject to market dynamics. Indeed, lowering the friction of land transactions has been a major component of globally funded initiatives in poor countries for land titling. Better titles, it is held, lower transaction costs and make rural development more vigorous.⁴ In

he was less successful.

⁴ The extreme of this position, though not centered on rural dynamics, is taken in Hernando Desoto’s important book *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else*.

short, land reform for a socialistic pattern of society produces many of the same economic desiderata as reform for a liberal pattern of society, with two caveats: the abolition of tenancy as a possible relation of production is held in liberal market views to be unnecessarily restrictive and the imposition of ceilings on the amount of agrarian capital that can be legally owned is held to be contrary to the logic of accumulation.

Karnataka's land reforms in most ways mirror the pattern of agrarian policy of the Centre, with lapses familiar from practices in other States. We have a rough sense of where there have been effective reforms, where there have been somewhat effective reforms and where reform is not really on the agenda. How can one assess these common sensical perceptions and where does Karnataka fall?

Land reforms in India are typically analyzed in legal-rational bureaucratic terms: percentage of cases "disposed of." This metric reflects the way records are kept, and it is a reasonable enough measure given the costs of alternatives. But it does not yield an agronomically or economically useful data base.⁵ For these critical pieces of information, we rely on smaller studies that face the problem of scaling up: how representative is the area of study? It is well known that landowners seek to discard the worst land of their holdings, that some tenants are locally wealthy farmers leasing in land to achieve economies of scale for new capital purchases, that not all tenants know of tenancy provisions or apply for benefits and some applicants are fraudulent, and so on.⁶ The legal categories are confounded in the villages and much is instrumentally obscured. I know of no study of land reform that finds otherwise.

Nevertheless, by the criterion of "cases resolved," Karnataka's reforms have on the whole been well administered in comparative perspective. The slippages are remarkably similar to those in other States that have tried

⁵ For an argument that much of what we know of the world is driven by convenience of indicators, as opposed to metrics of reality, see Herring, *Data As Social Product* [2003a].

⁶ For concrete cases and discussion of means of evading the ceiling in the Karnataka reforms, see Iyer 1997a.

reform seriously. By 1997, over 90 percent of the applications for settlement of tenants had been resolved. Former tenants had received land in the aggregate amounting to 644, 000 [6.44 *lakh*] acres. Under ceiling provisions, the State has declared 275,000 acres surplus – though only 160,000 acres have been vested in the state, and 115, 000 acres distributed to landless families [2.75 > 1.6 > 1.15 *lakh* acres]. Distribution among scheduled castes constituted well over half of all land distributed by 1993.⁷ According to NSS data for 1982, almost a decade after the reforms, large holders [20 ha and above] constituted 3.7% of landholders but held 24.1% of the area; small holders [below 2 ha] constituted 60.5 % of landholders but held only 29% of total area.⁸ This skew is of course quite minimal in comparison with the norms of corporate capitalism, and is less than the inequality in many agrarian societies, including some in India. The comparative problem is that with 60.5 percent of landholders owning below 2 ha, poverty alleviation via land redistribution is quite limited in potential – which invariably falls below actual -- impact. Depending on the type of land, such small holdings are going to be a weak basis for family prosperity, especially over time as holdings are divided and re-divided by generation. Moreover, this skew is much less important to the level of poverty than the factors driving the welfare of the most awkward class, the landless agricultural workers.⁹

In assessing the effect of the ceiling reforms, K. Gopal Iyer [1997a: 115] concludes:

“... allotment of land has increased the social and psychological status of the allottees, and has also partially raised their income. However, they continue to live below the poverty line and continue to work as agricultural labourers. One of the weakest elements is the lack of linkage of financial assistance with anti-poverty programs.”

⁷ Table 4.2 p 55 of Aziz 1997. More aggregate data from Krishna 1997.

⁸ Aziz 1997 p 57-58.

⁹ For expansion, even in the context of very radical reforms, see Herring 1980. Consider in parallel the very different scenarios painted by Krishnaji 1979 and Lerche 1998, in Kerala and Uttar Pradesh respectively, though the analysis of both would support the text.

Iyer describes the economic effects of ceilings on beneficiaries he studied as “marginal” [p 116]. His finding is a common one in the literature on agrarian reform. Recipients who lack credit or – in Iyer’s case of Belwatigi village in Uttara Kannada – even implements to work the land effectively, sell or rent out land they cannot afford to convert to a livelihood.

Ceiling reforms are universally meant to alleviate the poverty of the landless agrarian workers, but just as universally fail to acquire enough land to make a large dent in the ranks of rural workers. There is strong political pressure for a minimax compromise: to minimize the pain inflicted on landed elites by making exemptions to the ceiling, then by maximizing the number of beneficiaries by dividing up the total land available into very small parcels, often subviable parcels, or ones needing extensive investment to be viable [Herring 1983: Ch 8]. Help for landless workers in securing house-sites – an important thrust politically of the successful Kerala reforms – came through Section 38 of the 1974 Act in Karnataka, which became operative only in 1979. According to the data of Gowda [1997: 128], about 61 percent of the cases decided went in favor of the landless, accounting for 15, 530 cases over 2, 103 acres. Again, the impulse behind the legislation is radical: giving house-sites confers both opportunities for social standing and kitchen gardens for better nutrition or some cash cropping, but the extent is remarkably small.¹⁰

The extent of direct poverty reduction in ceiling reforms is a function of the aggregate land appropriated, and thus the level of the ceiling, and the quality of the land distributed, assuming viable parcels. In the legislation that preceded the 1974 Act, ceilings were set at 27 standard acres per family. Setting ceilings in terms of families always allows for significant manipulation to avoid ceilings, and this loophole is seldom accidental. Standard acres were calculated in terms of rough productivity equivalents: eg, one acre of the best irrigated land was counted as equivalent to 8 acres of *barani* land in an area receiving less than 25 inches of rain annually. This ceiling from the Land

¹⁰ The comparable legislation in Kerala in theory allowed somewhat larger house-sites for *kuddikidappukar*. These plots in my experience are very intensively and creatively used, clearly enhancing the autonomy of laborers as well as their cash income and nutrition, depending on choices of use of the land.

Reforms Act of 1961 was decreased in 1974 after urgings from the Centre in 1972 for the States to find more land for redistribution. Of course, a ceiling that temporally follows a previously generous ceiling will net less land; families have had a chance to rearrange their holdings and they know what is coming. The 1974 Act defined the one standard acre of irrigated land as one unit; a family of five could hold up to 10 units: ie, ten acres of the best land, or more of inferior land.¹¹

Though agrarian reforms have been rather extensive in Karnataka – as indicated by Thimmaiah's urgent recommendation for abolishing them – Karnataka has not ranked high in poverty alleviation among the Indian states. Atul Kohli's [1987] early work contrasted Karnataka with West Bengal to illustrate how a committed and disciplined left-of-center party could effect poverty alleviation on the ground in ways not possible in states lacking this political resource.¹² John Harriss follows Kohli explicitly in investigating poverty reduction in Karnataka. He uses the Mihhas, Jain and Tendulkar rankings from 1991 and the Datt and Ravallion rankings from 1998 to confirm Karnataka's extent of poverty alleviation as somewhere below the middle for Indian states: 12th of 17 or 11th of 15, depending on data set. In yield performance, Karnataka ranks 5th of 14 states by the calculation of Bhalla and Singh [1997], yet does not do well in poverty reduction. Harriss [2003:211] concludes:

“Karnataka is ... a middle income state, generally with slightly higher levels of development expenditure and middling agricultural infrastructure [in comparison to other States] ... [and] has had a comparatively high rate of growth of farm yields. Yet by all accounts it appears to have been one of the states that has been least successful in reducing poverty.”

Harriss writes this conclusion in the 1990s, a period during which poverty measures and realities have been – in the words of a prominent protagonist,

¹¹ See Iyer 1997a for a lucid description of the technicalities involved in the legislation.

Angus Deaton, “fiercely debated, politically and statistically.” This outcome, if not a statistical artefact, raises a genuine puzzle: if extensive land reforms and fairly rapid agricultural growth do not produce poverty reduction above the Indian mean for States, why not?

One answer is that the reforms followed an archetypal path of redistributive reform in general: from radical to compromised to selectively and partially implemented [Herring 1983: Ch 8]. Abdul Aziz traces the compromises made in legislation to provide comfort to more conservative forces [1997: 54-55] – for example, the familiar exempting of plantation lands, which had been part of agricultural land in an earlier draft, and deletion of strong prohibitions against *de facto* absentee “cultivation.” Moreover, because of differences in land quality and the small aggregate amount of land available, distributions have *per force* come in plot sizes that may be too small in many agro-ecologies to yield a livelihood. In these cases, the rational beneficiary may well try to find a way to sell the land as soon as possible.¹³ Aziz reports on two small-scale studies, one showing substantial success from reforms, the other a lack of success. Not surprisingly, the difference was the quantity and quality of land. In George’s study of beneficiaries in Bijapur and Dharwad districts, occupational mobility increased and parcels were adequate. In Patil’s study of Gulbarga, on the other hand, the size of farms distributed was not adequate for a livelihood by local agronomic conditions. Moreover, echoing much of the literature on agrarian reform, the non-land components, especially credit for bunding, levelling and irrigation, as well as extension services for new farmers, were often insufficient. Much land taken in reforms is readied for cultivation only after extensive capital improvements. In George’s study, cropping intensity among land reform beneficiaries was only 102.7 percent,

¹² What seems politically rational about the West Bengal reforms is that the politically risky move of making independent landowners of tenants was avoided in favor of making tenants remain tenants, but with privileges dependent on who rules locally and in Kolkata – ie the CPI-M. See Herring, 1988.

¹³ Or lease it out; see Iyer 1997a: 115. Aziz argues that at least the SC/ST beneficiaries did not receive on average less land than other beneficiaries, in fact a bit more, but the 3.64 acre average plot may or may not be economically viable.

compared to an already low 117.4% in the case of farmers who did not receive new land.¹⁴

We would expect such variation as a function of normal dispersion in a State as large as Karnataka. Moreover, in all land reform efforts, existing institutions on the ground matter greatly. In this regard, Karnataka, like Kerala, has significant variation across historical institutional residues and arrangements on the land. Like Kerala, the State was formed in 1956, on November 1. Karnataka was a combination of Coorg and Mysore, along with pieces of the erstwhile Madras, Bombay and Hyderabad. Uniform land law applied to such a varied institutional and agro-ecological landscape is certain to encounter what one might call the Africa problem of spatial and legal incongruities.

Because ceilings seldom yield sufficient land to make very many new farms, tenancy reform has pride of place in poverty alleviation where tenants are poor and the rental exactions constitute a very steep tax on production. In theory, the 1974 Karnataka Land Reforms Act entailed a two stage process to confer land to the tiller. First, land held by tenants was vested in the State, with compensation to owners; then, land rights were devolved to the actual cultivator, who may or may not be the tenant of record. Thus in theory, the myriad of sub-tenancies and share-cropping arrangements created by sub-infeudation were resolved in favor of the lowest rung on the agrarian ladder: whoever was the actual cultivator, title notwithstanding, received the land.¹⁵ This is a radical move on tenancy, particularly in comparison with West Bengal, a State often praised for its redistributive land reforms. Rather than implementing land to the tiller, West Bengal stopped at institutionalizing sharecropping by regulating rents and tenure, thus preserving landlordism. In regard to tenancy, Karnataka is closer to Kerala than to West Bengal. Yet conditions vary greatly in regard to tenancy. The State as unit of analysis for something as complex as agrarian reform is problematic.

¹⁴ The logical conclusion, drawn by Aziz, is that irrigation made the difference, and absence of credit was a major obstacle for the new beneficiaries in terms of developing irrigation.

In tenancy reform, the extent of poverty impact will vary with the percentage of tenanted farms to total and the terms of rental contracts as a reflection of land-labor bargaining power. It is the coastal region of Karnataka [Uttara Kannada, Dakshina Kannada] that comes closest to the model of the world presented in the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee's view of the agrarian problems of the new nation. Tenanted holdings ranged from 54.4 to 68.2 percent of all holdings. Here the terms were settled very much on behalf of the tenants: 77.7 to 81.8 percent of the applications for tenancy rights were granted. At the other end of the continuum, the Southern Maidaan section of Karnataka (Bellary, Tumkur, Mandya, Bangalore, etc.) ranged from 1.5 to 6.2 percent. In these cases, tenancy rates were almost as high as current rates of concealed tenancy [see below]. Northern Maidaan [Belgaum, Bijapur, Dharwad, Bidar, etc.] was an intermediate region for extent of tenancy. Malnad was mostly on the low end, but with Shimoga registering 21.5 percent of all holdings tenanted.¹⁶

To give some sense of variation, consider G. V. Joshi's study of Uttara Kannada district. This was a high-land-pressure, landlord-dominated district before the reforms; a majority of the holdings were tenanted. He finds a peasant movement to have been a "vital force" in effective implementation of the tenancy provisions. This force was a function of strong path dependency: the *Bombay Tenancy Act of 1946* had "intensified class conflict" as the legislation was so blatantly pro-landlord. He concludes: "The experiences in this district thus show that half-hearted and defective tenancy legislation intensifies class conflict and reinforces tenants' movement." I think it fair to say that this perspective parallels the difference between Malabar and other parts of Kerala in the long struggle to abolish landlordism: the Malabar Tenancy Act of 1929 gave those tenants who benefited a toe-hold that mattered for political efficacy and leadership and furthered the mobilization of tenants further down the hierarchy who received no benefits and faced pressure for eviction because of the limited reform [Herring 1988]. Yet it is

¹⁵ On the complexity of these distinctions, on the ground and in law, see Jannuzi's classic 1974 volume on Bihar, *Agrarian Crisis in India*.

¹⁶ All data from Table 6.1, Rajan 1997.

important to remember that the Bombay act applied only to those areas of Karnataka that came from Bombay in the reorganization of States by Delhi. These historical legacies contribute to the uneven development of social forces on the ground that separate effective reforms from dead letters.

A less sanguine view of reforms is given in Chandrashekhara Damle's study of Dakshina Kannada district. In that district, Damle argues that "even the land reforms and the developmental measures taken by the government had the effect of shaking up rural society but scarcely that of reshaping it on egalitarian lines." In concert with studies of Karnataka and other states, Damle finds that landless laborers are left in need of the most attention. Access to institutional credit, differentiated levels of agricultural modernization and "the failure of governmental reform and legislative measures" have meant the persistence of a concentration of land ownership in the hands upper caste/dominant class landowners" though such domination rests on somewhat different bases in the modernization of agriculture.¹⁷ Superior access to credit again drives reproduction of inequalities from top to bottom of rural society.

Central tendencies are misleading. One could multiply examples of variance within Karnataka, as illustrated above, but it is difficult to come to a summary conclusion based on secondary data. Indeed, one of the most difficult parts of serious assessment of land reforms is that local data are difficult to access, hard to verify, and intensive studies adequate to this task do not easily add up to aggregate pictures. Aggregate data are of dubious validity and lose variance. Nevertheless, generalizations by scholars close to micro-level studies suggest as varied an impact as one would expect. K. Gopal Iyer (1997b: 198, *passim*) summarizes the tenancy provisions of the land reform act as an "even keel of success/failure... as nearly half the tenants who had filed applications were conferred occupancy/ownership rights and the remaining cases were rejected." Yet in agreement with other studies of similar laws, Iyer found great variance geographically and substantial concealment of

¹⁷ All direct quotes from Damle 1997: 175.

tenancy, shifting of plots of *de facto* tenants, and continued debt dependency.¹⁸ The ceilings provisions covered only 3.8 percent of the land investigated for reform and only 1.1 percent of Karnataka's net sown area. One does not, then expect remarkable results on the poverty front.

AGRARIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY AS DISMAL SCIENCE: THE POLITICAL IMPOSSIBILITY THEOREM

Karnataka's outcome on the land reform and poverty question settles no issues. The reforms had positive effects on poverty, but clearly such effects are likely to be swamped by changes in commodity prices or other exogenous forces. Yet the case does raise the question of the place of land reforms in developmental logic for the poor. Despite what seems a clear case in logic and history, agrarian reform has been slighted of late in discussions of pro-poor policy. The political impossibility theorem carries some, but not all, of the explanatory burden. The theorem states that despite demonstrated merits of agrarian reform in terms of growth and social justice, it is politically impossible, thus not a policy choice. The developmental paths of South Korea, Japan and Taiwan are widely held to have been enabled by fairly radical agrarian reform [Herring 2000]. The failure of promised agrarian reforms after the abolition of slavery in the American South during "Reconstruction" clearly contributed to concentrations of poverty by race that have proved persistent and self-reinforcing [Herring 2003b: 70-79]. Despite historical evidence of the costs of failure and the benefits of success, recommendations of agrarian reform are often met with the response that beneficial policies are, alas, politically impossible -- thus unworthy of further consideration. Added to this pessimism is now the seeming conflicts of ceilings and elimination of tenancy with the basic premises of a liberal pattern of society.

The impossibility theorem rests on good political economy. Land confers power in agrarian systems; reform policy must work through that very system

¹⁸ Concealed tenancy rates varied fairly dramatically by region; Iyer estimates from 2 to 8 percent of holdings. Yet it is certain that the full extent of concealment is, for obvious reasons, partly hidden even from investigators who set out to find it.

of power if it is to restructure its base (Herring 1983). Conceptualization of agrarian systems as integrated nets of multi-dimensional social and economic control would predict not only compromised policy, but, as important, faulty implementation: power is expressed at all levels of the political system, from agenda setting to administration. The theorem is buttressed by the long history of failed agrarian reforms; some examples from Karnataka in the previous section illustrate a generalizable pattern. Exceptions prove the rule; these have occurred through rare historical conjunctures -- communist revolution (China), external intervention (Japan) or effective social democratic mobilization of the poor majority (Kerala State). When the landless are economically dependent and politically powerless, and sometimes consequently ideologically incorporated, the theorem is robust. Limited redistribution continually creates veto blocks opposed to further redistribution - - an unvirtuous ratchet. Having moved up, substantial farmers want to pull up the ladder after them: a dependent workforce is in their interest, and their own limited prosperity seems paltry in comparison with urban extravagances of wealth. Their power vis-a-vis governments is structural if not directly political: "the nation" needs ever increasing production from agriculture; uncertainty about changes in property systems may suppress investment (Herring 1983: Chapter 8). Moreover, a political coalition for pro-poor reform is unlikely, and for well known reasons: problems of collective action among dispersed actors without resources, economic dependency, multiple cross-cutting political interests among the poor, diffusion of interests by entrepreneurial political parties, hostility of powerful classes with privileged access to state operatives.

But theorems do not drive politics. The waning, then end, of the Cold War reduced political motivation for removing the agrarian base of communist movements. The proponent, patron and architect of many agrarian reforms in poor countries, the United States, moved in its development-assistance agenda from fighting local communisms to a confused and often contradictory set of nominal objectives: human rights, gender equity, empowerment, humanitarian assistance and democratization and then to nation-building, marketization and suppression of terrorism. Market solutions to poverty largely replaced concern with redistributive policy in the 1980s. In the 1990s,

discussion moved away from large-scale political organizations and institutions in general to decentralization, disaggregated empowerment and institutions of civil society. The impossibility theorem is consonant with worldviews of powerful actors on the international stage. Governments that fund multilateral assistance and international financial institutions -- and their clients -- seldom depend on a power base that favors redistribution of assets.

The impossibility theorem then explains only partly the decline of agrarian reform in poverty discourse, and is itself part of a larger silence on redistribution. Yet, even if the analytical core of the theorem rings true, its very rootedness in a specifically agrarian political economy suggests reasons for rethinking. Perhaps most obviously, the declining importance of agriculture throughout the poor world reduces the political power of landed oligarchs nationally. Educated youth abandon agriculture in droves. Urbanization and economic diversification simultaneously reduce the political salience of agricultural land ownership. The necessity of political control of land -- and thus suppression of citizenship rights of the landless -- was rooted in the absence of economic alternatives for landed elites. Political controversies surrounding agrarian reform and overhanging residues of un-enforced legislation combine with economic change to shift the political salience of land control; it is increasingly prudent, and possible, for agrarian elites to diversify or divest.

From the other side of the class structure, technological change in agriculture, with or without the promised miracle seeds of biotechnology, should in principle continually lower the subsistence threshold size of holding while expanding options for small farmers. One result is that the scale of necessary redistribution is reduced and therefore more politically feasible. The extent to which new technologies, including transgenics, benefit the poor will depend heavily on property systems -- in land, water and patents -- as well as supportive institutional reforms in credit, marketing and other ancillary services. Reforms in the property structure of agriculture then become more complex, and compelling, even as traditional obstacles decline in importance. How does the Karnataka case reflect on this proposition?

MOVING TARGETS AND SPREADING THE POLICY BURDEN

The Karnataka case suggests reinforcement for the notion of fairly tight conditions for land reform to have a transformative effect for the bottom of agrarian society, as I believe it has had in Kerala [Herring 2000, 2001]. Kohli's comparison with West Bengal indicates the limits created by absence of a disciplined left party [1987] – and the class mobilization implied thereby. John Harriss's emphasis on a decisive break with upper class/caste dominance places Karnataka just outside the range of States with stronger probabilities of State-level regime production of poverty alleviation. He classifies Karnataka in a category with Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and perhaps Punjab as (2003: 215):

States with middle-caste/class-dominated regimes, where Congress has been effectively challenged but has not collapsed and there is a fairly stable and mainly two-party competition (the politics of accommodation vis-à-vis lower-class interests have continued to work effectively, especially in Maharashtra and Karnataka, and least so in Gujarat).

For Harriss, the regimes that have been enabled by a decisive challenge of the dominant class/caste social coalition are Kerala, Tamilnadu, and West Bengal; here the umbrella accommodationist Congress lost its dominance at an early period. The Congress umbrella was replaced by populism in Tamilnadu, but aggressive left coalitions in Kerala and West Bengal, though in Kerala the Congress and its permutations have acceded to competition with the left forces, making it the least conservative Congress in India.

Karnataka has exhibited neither of these paths. Following Manor [1989], Harriss [2003: 219 *et passim*] argues that Karnataka is a State with a "conservative social order" in which class/caste divisions have not been sufficiently severe as to raise the kind of upheaval one witnesses just to the South, in Malabar and eventually Kerala. He argues, on the basis of evidence

from Crook and Manor, that decentralization has not “been particularly responsive to ‘vulnerable groups,’ the poor or marginalized. Parties have been weak and factionalized,” with no cohesive left. Even populism as an electoral strategy – which is sometimes helpful for the poor, as in both Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu – is not developed in the party system. Though Harriss does not make this connection, it seems that the party system and resultant regimes then explain the uneven character of the reform and its limited redistributive effects.

Land reforms are typically driven by the conditions Harriss finds missing in Karnataka: coalitions of disadvantaged classes and class fractions under the leadership of a strong redistributive party [Kohli 1987; Herring 1983: Ch 8]. But land reform is only one of the many policies that could conceivably help the poor. In some ways, too much and too little have been made the burden of land reform. Michael Lipton remains right about the normative reasons for continuing redistributive land reforms after their heyday – “the evidence against stopping [1993]” is persuasive. Moreover, looking ahead, with technological advances in agriculture and increasing incomes in the larger society, the size threshold for viable farms for family livelihoods will almost certainly fall as well.¹⁹ As the population demands and can afford more specialized, often labor-intensive, farm products – including “organic” – returns to small holders can be improved even as the need for non-agricultural jobs remains compelling. Moreover, reforms can be tightened to avoid the *de facto* rentier-ism that now characterizes much land use in India – absentee “cultivators” holding land for speculation, family footholds, hobby or tax dodge [e.g. Aziz 1997]. The problem with the original vision of land reforms in India was one of static visions of agrarian society beyond a very accurate portrayal of the transformative task necessitated by the historical period and social structure. Much like the problem with import substitution industrialization, the difficulty in land reform is to know when to shift strategies – or having the political power to do so. Rapid technological change in

¹⁹ Biotechnology is certainly one source, and a source much embattled in Karnataka in particular. On the potential, see Herring forthcoming. On the battles of the KRRS and what it implies about representation of farmers by NGOs, see Herring 2005.

agriculture and changing terms of trade for various crops, and agriculture as a whole, mean that agrarian systems produce moving targets for policy.

The moving-target nature of optimal agrarian institutions is of course aggravated by globalization: the pace of change and the range of options multiply rapidly [Mehta and Ghosh, forthcoming]. The role of institutions is to make sure that individuals are not crushed in the gears of change. The first conclusion is that agrarian reforms are not nearly so impossible as those who wish to write them off claim. The second conclusion is that panaceas are rare: land reforms cannot carry the burden assigned them by the founders of independent India into the current period. Certainly breaking the back of exploitative and backward relations of production was necessary for laying the base of democracy and productivity [Heller 1999: 237-248]. John Stuart Mill worried that tenants could not be autonomous to vote, as they were in dependency relations with landlords. Even the barest notion of a liberal pattern of society presumes autonomy on the part of political actors. Agrarian reforms can break long-established patterns of dominance, and in this way create conditions for a liberal society – whether more like Sweden or more like the United States in terms of how the poor are treated. But agrarian reforms cannot shield the rural poor from insecurity or episodic poverty.²⁰ Other institutions will have to play this role. What agrarian reform can do is improve the probability of labor-intensive high value crops being grown with high yields by farmers with social standing to participate politically. Then the question of whether the Swedish or American path suits better can be established on the basis of democratic politics in the full sense.

This perspective does not write off agrarian reform – far from it – but does suggest limits. As one considers ancillary policies for the rural poor, it is important to survey the agrarian system by criteria suggested by original thinking about land reform in India as suggested by the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee. Though there are other roads to purposive poverty

²⁰ Anirudh Krishna's current work [e.g. 2005] focuses on instability of poor-non-poor status, the volatility of poverty. In his work, many factors contribute to not-poor becoming poor, and poor becoming not poor; medical

alleviation, all are subject to distortions induced by social inequality, a major component of which is skewed distribution of landed property. In Karnataka, regional variations loom large in this logic. The coastal areas of the state conform more closely to the landlord-dominance model conjured by the CARC and early models of rural India in the minds of the founding generation. By criteria of directness of results, restructuring of the field of power within which bureaucracies function, positive externalities for governance, fine-tuned targeting potential and others, agrarian reform looks better than many of the more fashionable prescriptions, despite its fall from favor. Offering immediate and direct benefit to the rural poor, agrarian reform more importantly can serve both as symbol for mobilization of powerless people and a means of furthering political development. Agrarian reform is therefore sturdier and more enduring than many alternatives; it takes a longer view. This argument is buttressed by comparative consideration of the historical experience of the United States. Promised land reforms to rehabilitate former slaves as citizens after civil war in the nineteenth century were abandoned; the result was an agrarian structure, and attendant political economy, which perpetuated abject dependency. Poverty not only persisted in the population of former slaves over generations, but remains disproportionate. In contrast, Kerala State abolished agrestic serfdom and slavery in a compressed historical time, with notably salubrious effects on human welfare despite experiencing growth rates below the Indian mean [Herring 2003b].

Whether pro-poor policy promotes more or less state intervention – whether the path is more social democratic or more liberal, in Esping-Andersen's [1990] classification scheme -- agrarian reform remains one means of restructuring the field of power to which local state functionaries respond, and therefore enables a more effective and responsive state, without which all other anti-poverty options -- including growth -- are reduced in efficacy. These questions remain of special importance to the most awkward class of all – peasants without land. Here the turn from the otherwise dominant discourse of farmers replacing peasants is appropriate: those stuck at the bottom on

emergencies figure prominently in rural India as they do in the United States. See Echeverri-Gent, 1993, on the

agrarian systems in India are likely to suffer the multiple disabilities that historically marked off peasants from the rest of society: social denigration, absence of education and other forms of human capital, political marginalization [cp Dube 1998].

The dual contributions of agrarian reform to direct relief of poverty among the landless and democratization among the oppressed remain potentials worthy of consideration. As Abdul Aziz stresses for Karnataka [1997: 59], reforms are especially critical for those at the very bottom of society, where growth has had the least effects: scheduled castes and tribes. These goals were present at the founding. Yet the historical unfolding of the process Corbridge and Harriss [2003] call “Reinventing India” has entailed a rejection of many strands of Nehruvian thinking – some cheered by the international community -- for example, state planning and autarky -- others more ambiguous in their external reception – for example, political formations of left and right rejection of Enlightenment values of secularism and science [Nanda 2003]. Where rethinking the Nehruvian state may be most needed is in sheltering the rural poor from forces beyond their control, by providing a base line of basic human needs whatever happens to agriculture on tiny plots. These forces account for the evidently increasing volatility of rural poverty: being non-poor or poor is less a permanent condition, more a function of vectors of change under the control of no one local. Pranab Bardhan’s “anarcho-communitarians” believe that the village is the appropriate level for social protection. Looking to real forces in agriculture -- shifts in the terms of trade, climatic disasters, infestations of uncontrollable pests or global market rigging by more powerful nations catering to richer farmers²¹ -- one imagines a re-inventing of the Nehruvian state under globalization along lines of accountability and strength, not a withering away. Universalism would have to replace embedded particularism for this outcome to be feasible [Herring 1999]. De-linking basic human needs from market outcomes – the core of the modern welfare state – is bigger than land reform, nor can owning a patch of soil produce a reliably

prospects and problems in alternative methods of reducing vulnerability via rural public works.

²¹ In the case of cotton, see my introduction to the major issues in Ronald J. Herring, *Is There a Case for Growing Cotton in India?*

sufficient livelihood under current conditions, whatever its effects on human dignity and reservation wage rates.

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