

BOOK REVIEW

Land Reform in Kashmir

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Iqbal, Sehar (2021), *A Strategic Myth: 'Underdevelopment' in Jammu and Kashmir*, Tulika Books, New Delhi, 190 pages.

In the literature on agrarian reform, the case of Jammu and Kashmir is cited but rarely discussed in detail. This book is a valuable contribution to the field in that it documents features of land reform in the region by drawing on a variety of sources. These range from the Naya Kashmir manifesto of the National Conference, the basis for development policy after 1947, to land records data and fieldwork conducted in three villages.

The Naya Kashmir manifesto was adopted by the National Conference in 1945. Sheikh Abdullah initiated the preparation of this document though its authorship is unclear. One view is that it was drafted by the couple Pyare Lal Singh Bedi and Freda Bedi, political journalists in Lahore, who were strongly influenced by the Soviet Union. The Manifesto became a “unifying force for the anti-monarchical movement in the state.”

In the debates around the writing of the Naya Kashmir manifesto, underdevelopment was clearly linked to the nature of the agrarian economy, to “common peasants suffering in the clutches of landlordism,” leading to the demand for a change in “social relations of production in the agrarian sector by giving ownership rights to tenant farmers.” Sehar Iqbal argues that the Naya Kashmir manifesto, which drew heavily on the All India Kisan Sabha manifesto, with its charter for the rights of workers, peasants and women, could be read as a policy for the state promotion of basic human capabilities. A remarkable archival document in the book is the Peasant’s Charter from Naya Kashmir. The Charter guarantees the peasantry land, the abolition of forced labour and the reduction of rural indebtedness. It states that

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the peasantry must be the beneficiaries of scientific research, and are entitled to good housing, health care, education and recreational facilities.

Chapter 3 describes each of the three main components of land reform in Kashmir, namely, the abolition of landlordism, the distribution of waste land among the landless, and the distribution of land to the tiller. A notable feature of land reform legislation in Kashmir was that it did not provide compensation to *jagirdars* or big landowners. The only exemption made for legislation on land ceiling was for Buddhist monasteries in Ladakh. Initially, tillers who were given land acquired by the state through the implementation of land ceiling had to continue to pay rent for 20 years. In 1976, this law was amended, and tillers were no longer required to pay rent. Another notable feature of Kashmir's land reform programme was "large-scale debt reconciliation...to prevent indebted farmers from selling their newly acquired land." As elsewhere in India, the land reform measures were modified and implemented in phases. For example, the first measure taken in 1950 was the Big Landed Estates Abolition Act. The Jammu and Kashmir Agrarian Reforms Act I was passed in 1972. This Act legalised the idea of "land to the tiller." The Act was modified in 1976 (with erstwhile tenants exempted from payment of rent). Further, Iqbal emphasises, the process of land reform was relatively rapid, free of violence and involved almost no litigation.

A measure of the success of land reform in Kashmir is that by 2017, of 5.5 million *kanals* of land under erstwhile zamindars or *jagirdars*, about 4.96 million *kanals* were confiscated and transferred to tillers (eight *kanals* equal one acre).

The author complements this literature review with evidence from primary data collected using participatory rural appraisal methods in two villages, one in Budgam district and the other in Poonch district (Chapters 5 and 6). Unfortunately, the year or time when the survey was taken has not been mentioned. It appears to have been done between 2013 and 2017. This lack of clarity creates problems in interpreting some of the data, such as on the incidence of poverty. The districts were selected for survey because Budgam (Kashmir) saw the largest redistribution of land, and Poonch district of Jammu the smallest. This effort is especially commendable given the enormous problems of conducting fieldwork in a region of civil unrest.

The uniqueness of this book lies in the insightful village-level accounts of the extent of land distribution, the number and type of beneficiaries, and the process of land reform. In Peth Kanihama village of Budgam district, for example, land records data from 1975 show that of 571 *kanals* of agricultural land in the village, 506 *kanals* were resumed by the government under land ceiling legislation. Of this, 394 *kanals* were redistributed to 100 households (of 121 resident households), mainly under the Agrarian Reforms Act but partly under the Evacuee Properties Act. The remaining land was used by the government for building a school, and for other activities. Interviews with key informants suggest there was very little corruption among officials implementing

land reform and that the process had been a fair one. In Sehpora village of Budgam district, though a substantial percentage of land was resumed by the government, redistribution was much less than in Peth Kanihama, largely because of a *fatwa* (religious decree) issued by the local Aga Saheb that forbade taking another person's property without paying compensation. In Nangali village of Poonch district, the local Gurudwara was the largest landowner. The Gurudwara provided free food to the officials in the land reform camp, even though 299 of 330 *kanals* of land owned by it were resumed by the government.

Importantly, the comparative evidence from the three villages shows that the village with the highest extent of land redistribution (Peth Kanihama) also had the highest levels of household income, and lowest levels of poverty. To illustrate, 15 per cent of households in Peth Kanihama were classified as poor (having Below Poverty Line or Antyodaya Anna Yojana cards), whereas the proportion was around 50 per cent in the other two villages.

A drawback of the book lies in the author's understanding of social change in Kerala, a state she has chosen to contrast with the experience of land reform in a multi-lingual region like Kashmir. She argues that it was Malayali "subnationalism," that "enhanced the willingness of upper castes and classes ... to work for the good of the subnational community as a whole." Ignoring the foundational role of the Communist and national movements in bringing together the demand for Aikya Keralam (United Kerala) is a serious oversight.

As the title indicates, the author argues that Jammu and Kashmir's performance in respect of a range of basic indicators of human development, including the status of women, far exceeded that of many other States of India, making the argument for central interventions on account of the relative "underdevelopment" of the State entirely misleading.

Sehar Iqbal has done an excellent job of documenting the unique path of development followed in Jammu and Kashmir and its experience in carrying out a successful land reform programme. I strongly recommend this slim volume to all development scholars and interested readers.